

# Methodism in the Heathcote Valley

*By Melville Opie*

The several references to the Valley's Methodist church and its community, mentioned in the Paul Corliss book 'In the Shadow of the Rock. 150 Years of the Heathcote Valley School and Community', raised the question: 'how could such a small Valley settlement (329 residents in 1881) in the 1880's build and support a 150 seat church, built in 1886?' Especially when there was already, although somewhat inconveniently afar, the small St Mary's Anglican church at the foot of the valley at Ferrymead. No other religions set up churches in the Valley (the settling of Christchurch and surrounding districts was, by way of Canterbury Association design, hugely Anglican).

The answer to the question lies in the building of the railway tunnel, 1861 -1868. Crucial to the tunnel's contracted budget and time frame was that properly skilled miners be



*Rollin St., Heathcote Wesleyan Methodist Church, built 1886.*

*Christchurch Star, 20 June 1973*

employed and to that end, Cornish miners, at the time of the collapse of the Cornish mining industry, were recruited, assisted to Canterbury by the Canterbury Provincial Council.

## **Why Cornish Miners?**

The miners in Cornwall's copper and tin mines were known for their deep shaft, hard rock, mining skills. They were among the best in the world and were highly sought after globally.

Their skills and experience included:

- working in underground tunnels and drifts in cramped, often wet, conditions;
- voiding water from tunnels and drifts
- creating ventilation shafts;
- drilling
- blasting
- heavy timber construction
- familiarity with machinery

## **From copper to gold**

On the Tuapeka goldfields today can be found 'Cornishman's dam', named after one of the many Cornish gold miners. Faced with the collapse of the Cornish copper-mining industry, some of them had come originally to the South Australian copper mines, while others had been assisted to Canterbury to dig the Lyttelton-Christchurch railway tunnel.

*From: Miners – Te Ara Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. [Miners too, shifted to the West Coast for gold mining].*

## **So Why Cornish Methodism?**

In 1851 in Cornwall, 60% of people attending religious services were Methodists. This was a higher percentage of the population than anywhere else in Britain<sup>1</sup> ... ..

... .. "The Methodist message of hope through faith resonated deeply with the Cornish people, especially the miners, who were drawn to the inclusive message of salvation for everyone regardless of social status, which appealed to the working class. Teachings addressed issues like poverty,

hard labour, and social injustice which were prevalent in Cornish mining communities, making the message feel personally relevant". (Google *AI Overview*).

### Statistics

Suffice to say that a good proportion of the estimated 340 men who worked on the tunnel were Cornish and that approximately half of their numbers worked at each end.

Not to lose sight of the fact that censuses included children, in the 1881 NZ Census, although seven years after the tunnel was finally completed and three years after the Rollin Street church was built, the **Heathcote Valley** had a population of just 329, of which 175 were males, presumably a significant number of whom were Cornish miners.

	Total	Male	Female
Heathcote Valley	329	175	154

In 1886, when the new Rollin Street church opened, the population of **Christchurch** was just 30,478:

	Male	Female
Christchurch, with a population of	15,213	15,256

Interestingly, in 1864, so three years into the tunnel build, the number of tents in the Heathcote **electoral** area<sup>2</sup> compared with other local districts, was significantly high:

### Statistics of New Zealand for 1864

The following were the Numbers of Tents in the several Electoral Districts:-  
Kaiapoi, 2; Avon, 1; Heathcote, 26; Ellesmere, 9; Town of Lyttelton, 4; Akaroa, 1

A reason for this is reflected in the following extract:

**Robert Dawson** arrived Lyttelton, by Chariot of Fame, 28 January 1863<sup>3</sup>. This was the year that tunnelling began. Whether this was co-incident or a part of the planned recruitment for a mining community, is not clear.

He was a Wesleyan Methodist, attached to the Durham Street Wesleyan Church. He was

One of the earliest local preachers, Mr R. Dawson, spoke from a boulder pulpit, the tents of workmen on one side, and the Lyttelton rail tunnel works on the other.

*Heathcote Methodists to Celebrate Centenary  
Press, 25 September 1963*

a local preacher (lay preacher) and is listed as 'Rev' in the Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, although not listed at all in [A Register of Ministers of the Methodist Church of New Zealand.](#)

The church was sold in 1973 to become a private residence.

<sup>1</sup>*Cornwall For Ever!*

<https://www.cornwallforever.co.uk/history/methodis...>

<sup>2</sup>(viz. not only the valley, but a vast area bounded on the west by the Halswell and Spreydon Districts; on the east by Ferrymead, inclusive of settlements the likes of Woolston (then called Lower Heathcote); on the north by the then, Christchurch City and the Avon River from city to its outlet at the estuary).

<sup>3</sup>*The G. R. Macdonald Dictionary of Canterbury Biographies*