

THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN IN ILLAWARRA

(A Missed Centenary?)

The Plymouth Brethren are a relatively small separatist denomination. No men-

tion of them occurs in any published religious history of Illawarra.

My own interest in them stems from the fact that I have lived for 40 years about 100 metres from one of their churches - which is located on the southern corner of High Street and Lawrence Hargrave Drive, Thirroul.

They are the most unobtrusive group of worshippers imaginable and I am certain that very few people actually realize this building is a church.

The *Illawarra Mercury* for 13/51890 records that Thirroul is the home of "nearly all the members of the Plymouth Brethren, generally styled here the saints, who have built for themselves some nice residences."



'Miss Edna Wilson's 'Plymouth Brethern' at right

According to Owen Chadwick's *The Victorian Church*, "They began first as a little extreme evangelical group in Dublin from 1827 and advocated that anyone may

celebrate the Lord's Supper (i.e. administer Holy Communion) or preach. They received their name when an ex-Anglican clergyman, John Nelson Derby went to Plymouth in 1830. In 1847-49 the Brethren divided, through Derby's rigidity, into Open Brethren and Exclusive Brethren - the latter holding no communion with the others.

Both types of Brethren appear to have strongly predeterminist views - particularly the belief that it was the duty of God's chosen to avoid all contact with the ungodly. The dividing line between the practices of the two sects may be somewhat blurred but the Exclusive Brethren appear to be more extremist in this regard and apparently forbid friendship, business or even eating with those outside the Brethren.

According to Allen Sefton (Northern News, 14/10/1987), "Miss Edna Wilson ran the Plymouth Brethren Sunday School from her parents two storey home in the main street opposite the hotel. The adult Thirroul Brethren also began their first meetings in private houses but (according to my mother) by the 1920s they were meeting in a room in the then "Soldier's Hall" at Thirroul (now the former RSL building - the top floor of which houses the Christian City Church). Their present church on the corner of High Street was constructed after World War Two.

Two of the most respected members of the Brethren in Thirroul were Mr and Mrs Crawshaw. They lived on the north western corner of Pass Avenue (formerly known as Stephen Street) and Lachlan Street Thirroul.

Mr Crawshaw owned a confectionery factory in Oxford Street, Sydney and the windows of these premises were stacked high with packets of coconut ice bearing their "White Cygnet" brand-name.

The Crawshaws had four daughters - Faith, Hope, Charity and Joy - and a son named Milton (no doubt in honour of the author of *Paradise Lost*). Mr Crawshaw

sold his confectionery up and down the coast to various corner stores. He also owned property "over the mountain" in the Bowral- Mittagong area where he grew Chinese Gooseberries (now known as Kiwi fruit) and Boysenberries. He was reputedly the first to introduce both these delicacies to the coast.

The whole family wore expensively plain dress and the girls were famous locally for wearing hats that cost 5 pounds (an enormous sum in the pre-WW2 period). But as is characteristic of most Brethren, the family did not mix with outsiders.

Other details are scant and the only way I have been able to glean this amount of information is that my mother worked in the corner store frequented by the family from 1927 until 1950.

I would be delighted if readers could provide other details about the Brethren in Illawarra.

Joseph Davis