

REVIVAL AT DAPTO

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The first white pioneers came to the Illawarra in about 1816. William Bursall and a Mr Robinson, both zealous Methodists, were among the early settlers in the Dapto area. They began praying earnestly in 1831 for a Methodist "local preacher" (layman) to come to their district. *After praying for seven years*, their prayers were answered when John Vidler arrived. As a young man in England he had been involved with a gang of smugglers. But through the Methodist movement there he experienced a profound and joyful conversion to Christ. Like his two praying friends, he first worked as a farm labourer and was employed near Marshall Mount.

Colwell's old official history of Australian Methodism (published in 1904) recorded what soon happened:

"He held his first church service some time before Christmas 1838, in his own hut, built of blankets on a rough frame work. His congregation was his wife, himself and his brother James . . . Next year he took a farm at Dapto, preaching regularly in his own house. A revival soon broke out, when thirty persons were converted."

Thirty may not seem significant. But the total Illawarra white population was just 423 in 1828 and only 3100 by 1851. So there would have been perhaps 200 in the Dapto district in 1838. That means about 15% of them were converted!

Henry Osborne of Marshall Mount, a well-known settler and an Anglican, was so impressed with Vidler that he invited him to preach regularly in his own house. But some other people of influence took offence and prevailed upon Vidler's landlord to evict him from his farm tenancy at Dapto! Osborne then offered him the choice of any part of his large farm, rent-free for life! But Vidler declined.

Instead, he moved to the Campbelltown area for eight years before coming back to settle at Jamberoo. Travelling to remote places including parts of the Shoalhaven, he was often away from home for weeks. He held prayer meetings and preached wherever he could, in homes and under trees, to many people who had never heard the Gospel. There was a steady flow of conversions.

This kind of Spirit-empowered zeal was typical of the many Methodist "local preachers" who were active across pioneering Australia throughout the 1800's. Some were instruments of revivals in several places throughout their lifetimes. They were true heroes that we Aussie Christians should all know about! Even Henry Lawson was deeply impressed by his contact with them. See his short stories "Shall we gather at the river", "His brother's keeper" and "The story of gentleman once", or his challenging five-verse poem "The Christ of the Never", where part of verse two is:

*"God's preacher, of churches unheeded,
God's vineyard though barren the sod,
Plain spokesman where spokesman is needed,
Rough link 'twixt the bushman and God".*

In answer to earnest prayer, God raised up these outstanding Christians and did wonderful things through them in our land. He can do this again, and I believe that He can inspire us through our Australian "spiritual history". Such as praying for seven years and preaching wherever they could, as "plain spokesmen 'twixt the bushman and God". These are the kinds of lives from which revivals are born.

Next I will look at what could be seen as a "model revival". It occurred at Parramatta in 1840.