

## Church Celebrates 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



The congregation at a special 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary service at Thomastown Lutheran Church

Welcome to a special enlarged tenth birthday edition of the *Friends of Westgarthtown News* dedicated to the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Thomastown Lutheran Church.

Inside you'll find a historical overview of the church, recollections of pastors — past and present — and discussion of the church's special relationship with Trinity and Calvary Lutheran Churches.

We begin with coverage of the events held to mark this momentous occasion.

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In November 2006, the Thomastown Lutheran Church celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This tiny bluestone church, dedicated on 17 November 1856, is now the oldest Lutheran church in Australia to operate as a principal worship centre. The only older Lutheran church building, at Lobethal in South Australia's Adelaide Hills, now serves as a chapel beside a larger, more modern church.

A weekend of thanksgiving and celebrations was held, commencing with a dinner on Friday evening 10 November 2006 at the Calvary Lutheran Church hall, Greensborough. It concluded on Sunday 12 November 2006 with a special worship service at the Thomastown church at 2.00 pm.

A feature of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary dinner was the presentation of informative and entertaining speeches by

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various pastors, church members and friends who shared their knowledge and memories of Thomastown Lutheran Church. After guests had viewed the photographic display, John Noack, Master of Ceremonies, introduced Pastor Brett Kennett, who welcomed over 110 people, including special guests Thomas Kessler, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany and Pastor Stephen Pietsch, Vic/Tas Vice-President of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA).

In his welcome, Pastor Kennett spoke of the twenty-year relationship between Calvary Church at Greensborough and Thomastown. As well as sharing a pastor, quite a few Calvary members had also worshipped at Thomastown during the 1950s and 1960s, prior to marrying and moving to the Diamond Valley area. He then introduced Pastor Pietsch, who congratulated Thomastown on behalf of the LCA Vic/Tas on reaching such a significant milestone and place in both Victoria and Australia's Lutheran history.

Following the main course, Robert Wuchatsch provided an historical overview of Thomastown Lutheran Church. He began by referring to the church's centenary celebrations in 1956, for which Pastor Ewald Steiniger carried out the first historical research into the German and Wendish settlement at Thomastown, known for many years as Westgarthtown.

Although the church was dedicated on 17 November 1856, records indicate it had been substantially completed by October 1855, when a Lutheran school began there. It served as both church and schoolhouse until early 1866, when a separate schoolhouse was erected nearby. The school operated until the mid 1870s.

Herbert Mees, Chairman of Trinity German Lutheran Church's Historical Society and General Editor of that church's 2004 book *A German Church in the Garden of God*, then spoke of the special relationship between Thomastown and Trinity Church, East Melbourne. Herbert's speech was prepared with the assistance of Dieter Steiniger, son of Pastor Steiniger.

For 132 years, services at Thomastown were conducted by pastors from Trinity. Pastor Goethe officiated from 1853-67, followed by Pastors Herman Herlitz (1868-1914), K. E. Gutekunst (1914-23), J. F. T. Frank (1923-34), H. O. E. Steiniger (1935-64), E. Seyler (1964-74), H. Prey (1974), Dr F. M. I. Loehe (1974-75), W. Kostizen (1975-82) and J. Achilles (1982-85).

After the dinner guests had enjoyed their dessert, Pastor

Stephen Pietsch elaborated on the strong relationship which has developed between Thomastown and Calvary Lutheran Churches. He mentioned the help provided by Pastor Zweck and Calvary's members after the Thomastown church was fire-damaged by vandals in November 1985. Then, after Thomastown sold some of its land to the City of Whittlesea in 1993, it provided financial assistance to Calvary towards the debt on the manse at Greensborough.

Pastor Pietsch spoke of the sense of space he felt when preaching at Thomastown.

“ *In this old place, away from the modern world – and yet right on the edge of the modern world – there is a sense of space – not just physical space but spiritual space: part of this is that the modern world's expectations for worship to be right up to the mark technologically and musically are absent...There each time I arrived was a small faithful group of people who had very simple and at the same time profound expectations: they gathered to meet God, and to hear His word and receive the Lord's Supper. Distractions from these simple and all important things are very few at Thomastown.*”

Irma Hatty, Chairman of the Thomastown congregation, thanked guests and speakers for helping them to celebrate the church's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. She also spoke of her memories of Thomastown church over the last sixty years. John Noack then read out greetings from Mike Semmler, President of the LCA; former Trinity pastors Seyler and Achilles in Germany; and Lyall Kupke, the Archivist at LCA Archives in Adelaide, who congratulated Thomastown on being the oldest Lutheran church in Australia still in regular use. John also thanked the organising committee for Thomastown Lutheran Church's 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations, which consisted of Robert Wuchatsch (Chairman), Marita Anders, John Bothe, Irma Hatty, Herbert Mees, John Noack and Dieter Steiniger.

On Sunday 12 November 2006, a special thanksgiving service was held at 2.00 pm, conducted by Pastors Brett Kennett and Joachim von Mitzlaff, the latter from Trinity German Lutheran Church. Pastor Greg Pietsch, President of the LCA Vic/Tas delivered the sermon. Following the service, worshippers enjoyed afternoon tea at Ziebell's Farmhouse, which was provided by the Friends of Westgarthtown.

### Launch of Ziebell Family Book & Exhibits

**O**n Sunday 27 May 2007 at 2.00 pm, Janet Hubbard's long awaited history of the Ziebell family, *The House that Christian Built*, will be launched at Ziebell's farmhouse.

Janet's book will be launched in conjunction with two new permanent exhibitions at Ziebell's farmhouse – a gallery of Ziebell family photographs and a *Pribislaw* display featuring new display panels and several old timbers shipped out to Australia in 2005 from the Shetland Islands. The *Pribislaw* was the ship upon which about half of Westgarthtown's settlers came to Australia, including the Ziebell family.

Copies of Janet's book will be available for sale at the launch and afternoon tea provided by the Friends of Westgarthtown.



### Newsletter Completes its First Decade

**I**n February 2007, this newsletter celebrated its tenth birthday. Starting out in February 1997 as a modest four-page newsletter, it grew to eight pages in March 1998. Although initially intended to be published quarterly, it has always been published half-yearly.

A major improvement took place in March 2002 when Léon Borrack (Léon Borrack Graphic Designs) took over responsibility for the newsletter's design. A new layout was introduced, with scanned photographs and a new name — *Friends of Westgarthtown News*.

After ten years and twenty issues, Robert Wuchatsch continues to edit the *Friends of Westgarthtown News*, despite now living at Pirron Yallock, in south-west Victoria. Léon Borrack recently completed five years as designer, a task he managed to fit in even while living in London during 2003 and 2004. Thanks also to all those people who have contributed articles over the years. Copies of most past issues can be found on our website [www.westgarthtown.org.au](http://www.westgarthtown.org.au) under Archives.

#### Visiting Ziebell's Farmhouse

Ziebell's Farmhouse is open to the public on the second Sunday of each month between 1-4 pm. For enquiries, call 03 9464 1805 or [nmj1@bigpond.com](mailto:nmj1@bigpond.com)

Tours can be organised for groups of ten or more people. For information and bookings contact Tatiana Joukoff on 03 9464 5062 or [tatianajoukoff@hotmail.com](mailto:tatianajoukoff@hotmail.com)

#### Thomastown Lutheran Church Services

Services are held on the second and fourth Sunday of the month at 11.15 am at the Thomastown Lutheran Church, German Lane, Lalor. For further details, contact Irma Hatty on 03 9338 9064 or see the Calvary Lutheran Church website at [www.calvarychurch.com.au](http://www.calvarychurch.com.au)

# Historical Overview of Thomastown Lutheran Church



BY ROBERT WUCHATSCH

I was only six years old in 1956, but I remember Thomastown Lutheran Church's Centenary Celebrations held that year. Pastor Steiniger, the church trustees and members of the congregation arranged a weekend of celebrations and thanksgiving, commencing with a Reunion and Social Evening on Friday 9 November and concluding with a Jubilee church service on Sunday 11 November 1956. In 2006, for Thomastown's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations, we have sought to repeat the successful formula used in 1956 for that very memorable centenary weekend. It was for the church's centenary that Pastor Steiniger carried out the first historical research into the German settlement at Thomastown, upon which I have been able to build.

## BACKGROUND

In May 1856, Pastor Goethe of Trinity German Lutheran Church at East Melbourne reported to the first synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Victoria, as follows:

*"The substantial German settlement at Kilbundora (10 miles from Melbourne) by some called Neu-Mecklenburg, by others Westgarthtown, was founded in the beginning of 1850 and consists of people from Mecklenburg, Saxony and Silesia. If ever a colony was blessed materially, it is this one – starting from small beginnings, almost without exception, the settlers live in wealth now. Since 1853 Pastor Goethe has been serving the congregation every second Sunday with the Word of God that it stands in need of. The German Protestant School, founded by Mr Gottlieb Renner in 1855, now consists of about 20 children. During the absence of the preacher, Mr Renner is conducting the services and instructing the confirmands. A pretty church of bluestone is presently being built which is said to cost £300. The House of God is excellently situated, in the middle of the settlement on a hill providing a view over many miles. The 2 acres of land on which the church and school are being built has been donated by the congregation itself. Trustees and elders are Leberecht Fiedler, Gottlob Siebel and Johann Wuchatsch."*

The Lutheran reserve at Thomastown was soon enlarged from two to ten acres, which included the nearby cemetery, which dates from 1850.

The Germans and Wends who settled at Thomastown were passengers on the first six Hamburg emigrant ships to arrive in Victoria. These ships were the *Godeffroy*, *Wappaus*, *Dockenbuden* and *Emmy* in 1849 and the *Pribislaw* and *Alfred* in 1850. About half of the sixteen original families to purchase land at Thomastown came on the *Pribislaw*.

In 1857 William Westgarth, after whom the German settlement at Thomastown was named, visited and later wrote:

*"We found considerable progress in the form of a scattered village, with a little Lutheran church, and some show of gardening and cultivation. They seemed delighted to stick to their German speaking, and would not even try to speak English."*

The surnames of the original sixteen land purchasers at Thomastown were Franke, Graff, Groening, Gruenberg, Heyne, Kawerau, Knobloch, Maltzahn, Siebel, Timm, Waehner, Wanke, Winter, Wuchatsch, Ziebell and Zimmer. Other German families to purchase land at Thomastown were Fiedler, Gruedel, Gruetzner, Karsten, Kreitling, Kurtzmann, Nebel, Peters, Rosel and Seeber.

The Graff, Gruetzner, Rosel, Wuchatsch and Zimmer families were Wendish, a Slavic race from Lusatia, an area south-east of Berlin which today forms part of Brandenburg and Saxony. Thomastown's Wends came from around Bautzen, about fifty kilometres east of Dresden, in Saxony.

## THOMASTOWN LUTHERAN CHURCH

The church Goethe referred to in May 1856 as being under construction was dedicated on 17 November 1856. Until erection of this building, Thomastown's Germans and Wends had worshipped in homes and barns, although sometimes they visited the city to attend services at the Independent Church and from 1854 at Trinity, East Melbourne.

The cost of Thomastown's church was at least £320 and possibly £395. The architect is not known but may have been Friedrich Kawerau, a former Thomastown landowner and member of Trinity German Lutheran congregation, who designed the 1854 church at East Melbourne. The stone for Thomastown's church came from a quarry hole about thirty metres away. However, despite the fact that the church building was dedicated on 17 November 1856, newly discovered records suggest it was erected in 1855, about a year before.

On 14 March 1855, Pastor Goethe applied to the Denominational Schools Board for a grant towards the construction of a Lutheran school at Thomastown. Interestingly, in his application, he stated that the school was 'now almost finished'. A grant of £82/10/-

was soon approved, that amount being the difference between the estimated cost of £350 and the £267/10/- which the German settlers had raised themselves. Then, on 16 January 1856, an architect named Bagge inspected the building and wrote 'I hereby certify that the new Evangelical Lutheran School at Neu Mecklenburg has been erected, finished and completed according to the plans and specifications in a sound, satisfactory and workmanlike manner for the sum of four hundred pounds sterling'.

What's this got to do with the church you might ask? Well, despite Goethe stating four months later in May 1856 that 'a pretty church of bluestone is presently being built', the church and school building were one and the same. By referring to the building as a school in his correspondence with the Denominational Schools Board, Goethe was able to have a church built partly with Government funds which had been allocated for educational rather than church construction purposes. The separate school building which stood nearby the church until the 1950s, which we had previously believed to have been the one erected in 1855, was actually built from October 1865 to March 1866, ten years later. We now know this as a result of the discovery and translation of Johann Friedrich Topp's day book, in which he sets out in great detail his purchases of materials for and labour involved in construction of the schoolhouse. Johann Topp was a son-in-law of Johann Gottlob Schultz of Wollert.

So the Thomastown Lutheran Church building is now almost 151 years old, although it was probably not fully fitted out for worship services until shortly before its dedication in November 1856. The only significant change to the building since then has been the reconstruction of the west wall in 1898, due to cracking. A doorway which was originally located in that wall, probably for entry to a future but never constructed vestry, was not included in the new wall.

#### **THOMASTOWN LUTHERAN SCHOOL**

The Neu Mecklenburg Lutheran School, as we now know, was held in the church building from 1855-1866. Although government funding ceased in the early 1860s, the school continued to operate independently until 1875, for the last ten years in the new schoolhouse, which also contained a teacher's residence. Where the teachers lived from 1855 to 1866 is not known. Teachers at the school included Gottlieb Renner, Johann Stanger and Eduard Meyer. Following the school's closure, children attended the Thomastown National School in High Street.

#### **CEMETERY**

The first burial took place in 1850 and was that of an unknown stillborn child. Altogether about 200 interments have taken place. Each family was allocated a thirty by thirty feet plot. Some monuments, many of which have inscriptions in the German language, bear birth dates reaching back to the late eighteenth century. The cemetery remains a private one, still owned by the Lutheran Church and restricted to members of the congregation and descendants of original settlers.

#### **PASTORS, TRUSTEES ETC**

As Thomastown's Lutheran congregation was not large enough to support its own minister, services were conducted by pastors from

Trinity German Lutheran Church, East Melbourne until 1986. Following Matthias Goethe's departure in 1867, Pastor Herman Herlitz conducted services until his retirement in 1914. It was during Herlitz's long ministry that the last of the original trustees died and in 1885 Louis Maltzahn, Georg Nebel and Ernst Gottlieb Schultz were appointed.

Pastor K.E.Gutekunst served Thomastown from 1914-23, holding monthly services as usual on the fourth Sunday. He was followed by Pastor J.F.T.Franke, who served until his death in 1934. It was during Franke's ministry that the present Esty reed organ was purchased in 1924 for £40. New trustees Ernest Maltzahn, Ben Seeber, John Frederick Siebel and Albert Wuchatsch were appointed in 1931 to replace those appointed in 1885, by then all deceased.

Following Pastor Frank's death in 1934, he was replaced by Pastor E. Steiniger, who served from 1935-1964. During Pastor Steiniger's internment from 1942-44, lay services were conducted by Otto Sengstock from Trinity with occasional visits by UELCA pastors. Sengstock also reintroduced Sunday school classes, after a break of about fifty years. He was supported by Elsie Grosse and other Trinity members. New trustees Norman Young and Henry Ziebell were added in 1945, and later still, Herman Nebel.

Following the arrival at Thomastown and Lalor of German speaking migrants during the late 1940s and early 1950s, German language services were re-introduced, having ceased around 1930. Organists since Mr J.F.Siebel, who served for fifty years until 1935, have included Beatrice Vearing (née Zimmer), Miss E.Finger, Elsie Grosse, Eugenie Fiebig (née Reiter), Sylvia Schultz (née Adams), Ruth Anders (née Fuhlbohm) and Jack Laughlin. Since 1986, organists have included John Bothe, Eric Collyer, Benita Ewings and John Noack. Sunday school teachers since Otto Sengstock and Elsie Grosse have included Ruth Anders (née Fuhlbohm), Valli Bengsston (née Barwald) and Marita Anders (née Drahuszczak) and her mother, Klara Drahuszczak. Sunday school services ceased during the late 1970s.

#### **AFFILIATION WITH CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, GREENSBOROUGH**

From 1964-1986 services were conducted by Pastors E.Seyler, H.Prey, M.Lohe, W.Kostizen and J.Achilles from Trinity. However, following discussions in 1985, Thomastown decided to affiliate with the Lutheran Church of Australia via Calvary Lutheran Church, Greensborough. Thus ended harmoniously the 132 year link with Trinity German Lutheran Church.

Today, with the construction of the ring road, Thomastown is an easy fifteen minute drive from Greensborough, from where Pastors Graeme Zweck, Stephen Pietsch and Brett Kennett have come during the last twenty years to preach. Since the death of the last trustees, Irma Hatty (née Young) has served as Thomastown's Secretary/Treasurer. In 1993, the City of Whittlesea purchased the southern half of the Lutheran Reserve and now maintains the land around the church and cemetery. The Friends of Westgarthtown, which manages the adjacent Ziebell's Farmhouse for the City of Whittlesea, conducts regular tours of the Westgarthtown precinct with the Thomastown Lutheran Church now increasingly performing an important outreach role, hosting many visitors who have never before entered a Lutheran Church.

# Relationship between Thomastown and Trinity



BY HERBERT MEES (AND DIETER STEINIGER)

This talk is based on a variety of sources – Victorian Lutheran Synod reports; Trinity Church Committee and Annual General Meeting minutes; Pastors’ Annual Reports; Pastor Steiniger’s Diary; and Elsie Grosse’s Diary.

## PASTORATE OF MATTHIAS GOETHE (1853-1867)

The list of members of the first synod meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Victoria on 12 May 1856 shows under ‘Kilbundora [Keelbundora] the following names: Gottlieb Renner, school teacher and Johann Wuchatsch, Leberecht Fiedler and Gottlob Siebel, congregation elders. The second synod meeting of 6-7 January 1857 adds the names Johann Graff and Johann Zimmer as delegates from Kilbundora. Pastor Goethe reports that a solid church was built on 2 acres in 1856 and was dedicated by him on 17 November of that year.

The Trinity Committee minutes of 30 January 1861 mention ‘Westgarthtown’ for the first time, saying that contributions are expected from there towards Pastor Goethe’s salary, together with those from Berwick (Harkaway) and Waldau (Doncaster).

## PASTORATE OF HERMANN HERLITZ (1868-1914)

The Trinity Committee minutes of 9 June 1873 have Pastor Herlitz report that the outlying congregations at Doncaster and Westgarthtown have each agreed to pick him up once a month without reducing their contributions. The minutes of 13 March 1883 show Mr Graff as having collected from Westgarthtown church members £11.11.0 for flood victims in Germany and the 6 January 1885 minutes as Westgarthtown contributing £15 to the debt reduction of Trinity congregation.

The minutes of 10 April 1890 refer to Westgarthtown as the only outlying congregation left in communion with Trinity, now that Harkaway has made other arrangements. The minutes of 25 August 1890 contain a report by the Trinity delegation to the Westgarthtown members reaching agreement that their share will increase from £16 to £30 a year, provided that Pastor Herlitz covers his own transport and that the services are held earlier.

The 1903 annual report says that services are held on the fourth Sunday of each month and alternate between German and English. Attendance is satisfactory, for the latter (English) the church is usually quite full, including English speakers. Holy Communion four times a year always at the last quarterly service. It has not yet been decided whether English services will continue, since the older

congregation members regret that they do not fully understand.

The 1910 annual report mentions ‘a new arrangement on account of dairy business’. This could mean a change in service time to suit dairy farm duties.

## PASTORATE OF KARL EUGEN GUTEKUNST (1914-1923)

In the March 1915 Trinity Committee minutes, appreciation is expressed to Trinity members Mr Schickert and Mr Fliegner for taking turns in driving Pastor Gutekunst once a month to Thomastown.

In his annual report for 1916 Pastor Gutekunst recorded having since May given confirmation lessons in English for the grandchildren of Father Schultz of Thomastown. Pastor Gutekunst reports that services are held once a month; on one occasion there was no service because nobody came due to bad weather. Mr Fliegner jun. is thanked for taking Pastor Gutekunst out to Thomastown ‘every month in sunshine or rain, in heat or cold’.

At the January 1917 Trinity Committee meeting Mr Fliegner reported that the Thomastown congregation presented him with ‘a case of petrol’.

The annual reports from 1917 to 1923 say that in Thomastown things run their normal steady course, with services on the fourth Sunday of the month at 3 pm, alternating between German and English.

## PASTORATE OF JOHANNES FRIEDRICH THEODORE FRANK (1923-1934)

In his annual report for 1924 Pastor Frank stated that the church had been painted and a new harmonium bought for £40; the money for the purchase of the organ was collected by Pastor Frank and Mrs Zimmer among members and friends.

The 1926 and 1927 annual reports say that the services were held regularly once a month on a Sunday afternoon in English and that Holy Communion was celebrated four times in German with between 8 and 20 communicants.

The annual reports from 1929 and 1930 still mention that the services were held once a month in English. They do not specify the language for the celebration of Holy Communion; from 1931 to 1933 there is no longer any reference to the language. The solid financial position of the congregation is mentioned in these reports.

## PASTORATE OF HERMANN OTTO EWALD STEINIGER (1935-1964)

Pastor Steiniger held his first service at Thomastown on 21 March 1935 and he wrote in his diary on 26 May 1935 the following about his first impressions of Thomastown:

“ Beautiful sunshine after a foggy morning. The various farms in Thomastown were bathed in bright sunshine – a picture of peace...

At first we went to the church elder Mr Siebel and organised the hymns. From his farm we went across

*the fields and over a stream and up a small rise to the church. The dark cypress next to the church was very impressive.*

*I put on my robe outside the church. The playing of the harmonium was not the best. However, the loud voices in the congregation seemed to find the right note every now and then. I found the English sermon somewhat difficult — but I managed.*

*The following were present at the service: Mrs Maltzahn with two daughters, her brother Mr Schultz and his wife, Mr Seeber, Mr Siebel jun. with a friend, [Mr A.] Wuchatsch, 3 ladies, Mrs Siebel, Mr [Richard] Dehnel and Marta [Doenhoff].*

*After the service I greeted and spoke to each one of them. The treasurer Mr Wuchatsch had the church bankbook no. 4645 of the State Savings Bank in Regent, N. 19, with a balance of seventeen pounds 12 shillings and nine pence as at the 17 May 1935. A bequest of fifty pounds from Louis Maltzahn is to be added to this account.*

*After the service I went across the stony paddock to the cemetery. Romantic position, quite a distance from the road and surrounded by farms, hills in the background; the cemetery is overgrown, full of cypresses. Interesting old headstones in the German language of Germans from Silesia, Mecklenburg, Wuerttemberg. An idyllic setting in the Australian landscape.*

*Although the outer walls of the original school are still in good order, the interior is very dilapidated. Otherwise it would have been a nice holiday retreat.*

*Mr Siebel said that they used to rent it out but because they had had so much trouble with their tenants, it wasn't worth their while.*

*Of the formerly thriving German community there are only one or two left who still speak German. A few elderly Wendish people speak Wendish. Otherwise everything is in English...*

*At a later date I should write the history of Thomastown and its German population."*

Over the years Pastor Steiniger developed a very close relationship with the Thomastown congregation. He loved this little church with its adjoining cemetery and often made the comment 'I would like to be buried here one day'. Alas, his wish was to be fulfilled much too early in his life.

In the first year of Pastor Steiniger's term of office the Trinity Committee minutes of 12 June, 2 July and 6 August and the annual report of 1935 describe the disquiet and confusion which Trinity's decision to join the German Protestant Church Federation and its subsequent forced departure from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (UELCA) created among members of the Thomastown congregation who in a general meeting on 28 July 1935 voted by a slim margin to stay affiliated with Trinity. That affiliation was to last another fifty years.

The 1939 annual report mentions a special memorial service for Mr E. Maltzahn and also the baptism of baby Henry Michael Ziebell as being the first such pastoral act in Thomastown for many years. 1939 also saw the introduction of the Australian Lutheran Hymn Book.

In 1940 the Second World War cast its shadow over the Trinity-Thomastown relationship: in the Trinity Committee minutes of

2 July Pastor Steiniger advises that members of the Thomastown congregation had asked him not to conduct services in view of the critical situation. The annual report states that eight services were held in Thomastown which seems to indicate that the disruption was only of short duration.

In 1941 Pastor Steiniger's diary of 28 December records him taking a taxi to Clifton Hill, then the train to Reservoir where he is picked up by Mr Norman Young with his jinker to take him to Thomastown for the Christmas service.

1942 marks a momentous upheaval when, with the internment of Pastor Steiniger, the Thomastown congregation along with Trinity finds itself without its minister for the next two and a half years. The Trinity Committee minutes of 2 May 1942 record that after Mr Otto Sengstock and Mr Ferdinand Finger reported having conducted an English lay reading service in Thomastown the committee resolves '...to do its utmost that this small congregation may be preserved by us.'

The annual report for 1942 says that '...in the small outlying Thomastown congregation...' no big changes have taken place. Mr Otto Sengstock took English reading services every fourth Sunday of the month at 2.20 pm with an average attendance of 10 worshippers. Appreciation is expressed to the Trustees Messrs Albert Wuchatsch and Ben Seeber, to the Ziebell family for decorating and looking after the church, to Miss Erika Finger for playing the organ and Mr F. Finger for making his motor car available. A Christmas celebration was held under a tree supplied by Mr F. Finger where the children received presents. This was to become a tradition at Thomastown.

Following Pastor Steiniger's release from internment in October 1944 the annual report for 1945 sees things in Thomastown again running on an even keel. Two new trustees are installed: Mr Henry Ziebell and Mr Norman Young. The old school building has served as a shelter for a homeless family with several children.

Things continued on their normal way for the next few years, until the 1954 annual report says that due to the arrival of many new Lutheran immigrants there is a need also for worship services in German. The annual report for 1955 foreshadows the historic milestone of the Thomastown church's centenary in November 1956. It goes on to say that:

“ *Due to many new immigrants there are now English and German worship services held in Thomastown. The old members continue to decline in numbers. The new ones are increasing. This small Thomastown congregation is not in a position to stage this celebration [meaning the centenary] by itself. Our congregation [Trinity] must continue to demonstrate its great interest in this old church.*

Right through 1956 the minutes of Trinity's Committee, the *Gemeinde Bote* [newsletter] and the annual report testify to the involvement of Trinity members in the planning and stages of the centenary celebrations. The March newsletter mentions that Messrs Otto Sengstock and Friedrich Winzler have agreed to join the

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## Thomastown and Trinity Churches

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planning committee. The Trinity Committee minutes of 2 October 1956 mention that young people have worked in Thomastown on several Saturdays, that two painters have plastered the walls and that master painter Pollack is prepared to lend a scaffold. It is suggested that Trinity congregation should either buy a carpet for the church to replace the existing one or cover the cost of the church's renovation. The *Gemeinde Bote* of November 1956 devotes four pages to the anniversary describing the events and outlining a brief history of the congregation. The printed order of service for the anniversary worship on 11 November includes the dedication of the renovated church. The service is in the English language. In the Trinity Committee meeting minutes of 6 November 1956 mention is made of a congratulatory message received from the president of the office of external affairs of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* [Protestant Church Federation in Germany]. The *Gemeinde Bote* of December 1956 brings a full report on the centenary celebrations. There is a separate report in the minute book on the social evening on 9 November in the Thomastown Mechanics Institute under Mr Sengstock's chairmanship. The annual report for 1956 describes the celebrations as unforgettable and states that the Thomastown congregation had never before seen so many people at its events.

The Trinity Committee minutes and annual reports for the years 1957 to 1963 reflect the concern felt by the Trinity elders and in particular by Pastor Steiniger, regarding the difficulties and tensions which the continuing decline in the original Thomastown membership and the growth in the new arrivals create. The annual report for 1957 states that each month two services are held in Thomastown: on the second Sunday in German and on the fourth Sunday in English. In 1958 Pastor Steiniger expresses regret at the disappearance of the old school building.

The sudden death of Pastor Steiniger on 16 April 1964 called for concerted efforts by representatives of Trinity, St John's Springvale and Thomastown congregations at a meeting on 28 April 1964 to maintain pastoral services during the vacancy. Trustees Young and Ziebell represented Thomastown at the meeting. Mr Young expressed the desire of Thomastown congregation to continue to be in the care of the pastor of Trinity congregation and to have a say in his appointment.

### **PASTORATE OF ERNST SEYLER (1964-1974)**

The Trinity Committee minutes of 1966 and 1967 reflect discussions between representatives of Trinity and the Thomastown trustees and congregation about making a piece of [church] land available in Thomastown for the building of a home for the aged.

In 1969 several Trinity Committee minutes and the annual report deal with discussions with the Thomastown Trustees about the desirability of a constitution for the Thomastown congregation in which the relationship with Trinity is formalised, and its eventual acceptance by the congregation. To strengthen the ties between Trinity and Thomastown Mr Bruno Gerlach sen. is elected to join the Thomastown Committee.

The changing demographic and language situation in Thomastown

is reflected in the Trinity Committee minutes of 6 June 1972 where Pastor Seyler raises the question as to whether German-language services should be discontinued and suggests that a second monthly service in English be held. The annual report for 1972 mentions the introduction of an English language service on the third Sunday of the month at 9.00 am. In his 1973 annual report Pastor Seyler declares the introduction of a second English service in Thomastown a success, and puts the continuation of German-language services in question.

### **PASTORATE OF HORST PREY (1974) & LOCUM OF PASTOR DR FRIEDRICH MAX IMMANUEL LOEHE (1974-75)**

The Trinity Committee minutes of 6 August 1974 express concern about the burden which three worship services a month at Thomastown add to the workload of Trinity's pastor. While no sudden change in the situation is envisaged, discussions about future changes are sought with the Thomastown trustees.

### **PASTORATE OF WALDEMAR KOSTIZEN (1975-1982)**

The annual reports for the years 1976 to 1981 contain no mention of Thomastown, however, in 1985 Pastor Achilles mentions in a letter to the LCA's Victorian District that there have not been any German-language services there since around 1976.

### **PASTORATE OF JOHANNES ACHILLES (1982-1985)**

The minutes of the years 1983 to 1985 point increasingly to a desire by all parties concerned to find an equitable way of satisfying their increasingly diverging plans and requirements for the future, particularly since German-language services in Thomastown have been discontinued for quite some time and the LCA is expanding its pastoral care from its Calvary congregation at Greensborough.

The minutes of the Trinity Committee meeting of 6 August 1985 report on meetings between Pastor Achilles and the leadership of the Victorian LCA and between the Thomastown trustees Ziebell and Young, the LCA and Pastor Achilles which result in a formal approach by the Thomastown congregation to the LCA in a letter dated 28 July 1985 seeking the LCA's pastoral services but reserving the option, offered by Trinity, of Thomastown returning to Trinity's care after a trial period of two years.

The Trinity Committee minutes of 5 November 1985 report on satisfactory progress towards affiliation of the Thomastown congregation with the LCA. Details of the extent of the LCA's pastoral care have been agreed at a meeting on 30 October 1985. The new arrangement will come into force on 1 January 1986 for a trial period of two years. On 27 October 1985 a worship service was held in Thomastown with Pastor Morris Jordan, the president of the LCA's Victorian District participating. The service was followed by the launch of the book *Westgarthtown: The German Settlement at Thomastown* written by Robert Wuchatsch.

Shortly before the end of the year the Trinity Committee minutes of 3 December 1985 report a break-in and deliberately lit fire in the Thomastown church which brought offers of help both from Calvary congregation in Greensborough and Trinity in East Melbourne.

The 1st of January 1986 saw the new arrangement between the Thomastown congregation and the Lutheran Church of Australia come into effect, thus ending 132 years of pastoral care by Trinity congregation's pastors and officials.



# Thomastown and Calvary Church's Association



BY PASTOR STEPHEN PIETSCH

It is my job tonight to speak about Thomastown congregation's association with this congregation, Calvary, Greensborough, which began formally in January 1986 and continues today, with Thomastown functioning as a preaching place of the Greensborough congregation. While the other speakers tonight are focusing on the historical details, I would like to look back and reflect pastorally on the Thomastown Lutheran Church and congregation, and its people.

The realignment of Thomastown with Calvary came about during the ministry of Pastor Johannes Achilles, and was negotiated through the Victorian District of the LCA. The Greensborough congregation was approached as a potential partner congregation, who could share the ministry of their pastor, and give the necessary support and co-operation needed.

During the ministry of my predecessor, Pastor Graham Zweck, who was the first LCA pastor to serve the Thomastown congregation, a very strong and co-operative partnership between the two congregations developed. There was a considerable reaching out from members of the two communities toward one another, and a sharing of resources that was a great witness and encouragement to all involved.

A couple of examples come quickly to mind. In the early months of this relationship, during the time when the Thomastown Church was still fire-damaged from an attack by vandals in 1985, the Greensborough congregation organized a working bee to help repair the church and make it serviceable again. Furniture was repaired or replaced, repainting undertaken etc., all by Thomastown and Greensborough volunteers working together. And, likewise, at the point where Thomastown sold half its land to the City of Whittlesea in 1993, some of the proceeds of that sale were shared with Greensborough to pay off the existing debt on the manse and so ease the financial burden on the Greensborough congregation. So there was and continues to be a good relationship, based on good will, co-operation and Christian sharing.

The arrangement for many years was (and I think still is) that Thomastown holds services fortnightly. Greensborough's service is at 9.30 am and Thomastown's at 11.15 am. I remember the Sunday morning routine well. This core worship time was the sole gathering of the congregation at Thomastown in my time, apart perhaps from the annual Christmas community luncheon and the inclusion of Thomastown's ladies in the Frauenkreis of Trinity congregation.

During Pastor Graham's ministry, he worked very hard to visit

and care for the predominantly elderly folk at Thomastown. There was great affection toward him for his faithfulness in this regard and I know he is still remembered with fondness. He also was involved to a huge degree in negotiating between the Thomastown congregation and City of Whittlesea the land settlement that was reached in 1993.

When I arrived in 1994 I inherited the good fruit of Pastor Graham's work. I was met by a small, mostly elderly but warmly welcoming group at Thomastown – wonderful, sincere, humble but strong Christian people, notably Irma, the first of whose many gifts to me in my time at Thomastown was a Melways, so I could find my way around in this huge city! I still own that Melways and although it's an old edition now we still keep it with our phone books. Whenever Irma sees me today, she often still gives me a present which she knows I like a lot – a packet of Tim Tams!

So what does a pastor think when he arrives to a small and very elderly congregation like Thomastown; a tiny church in a patch of undeveloped land in the middle of suburbia? Well, I quite literally felt like I had stepped into Dr Who's Tardis and time-travelled back a century: No electricity. No toilets (just a thick patch of briars on one side of the church). The smallest vestry I have ever seen! It was an eye-opener. But it was also a heart-opener. What do I mean by that?

In this old place, away from the modern world - and yet right on the edge of the modern world - there is a sense of space – not just physical space but spiritual space: part of this is that the modern's world expectations for worship to be right up to the mark technologically and musically are absent from Thomastown. There each time I arrived was a small faithful group of people who had very simple and at the same time profound expectations: they gathered to meet God, and to hear His word and receive the Lord's Supper. Distractions from these central and all important things are very few at Thomastown.

It was probably because of this that I came to feel that Thomastown was in a special way the congregation where I could personally be free worship. I often had the feeling that I walked, quite literally in the steps of other pastors who had been in this place many years before me, and that, apart from the matter of language, I was experiencing the worship of the church much as they might have done. At times I felt the almost palpable presence of these men, especially Ewald Steiniger, 'whose hand I felt on my shoulder' very much at times.

And there of course, just a short walk away, was the cemetery, where the saints and one pastor of those earlier times were buried. Many of you here tonight are here because your own personal history is intertwined with these saints. As I met and slowly got to know the long and complex history of this congregation, I began to understand the people to whom I was ministering. By 1994 most - not all but most - of the historic families who had founded and built this church were no longer represented among regular faces at

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## Thomastown and Calvary Churches

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worship. Many of these surviving family representatives were either very elderly or lived elsewhere. And perhaps the majority of people who made up the Sunday congregations were Germans and Eastern Europeans who had made Thomastown their Spiritual home when they arrived here in the early to mid 1950s. They mostly lived in that series of streets that I came to know very well, running between Mount View Road and High Street – Howell, Richard, Dickens and Robert Streets - with a few living nearby. Those streets and that area are deeply etched in my memory and my mind's eye.

These people welcomed me into their homes very warmly and I experienced their wonderful hospitality in the form of food: lots of food. There was one day I went visiting at Thomastown, where I arrived for morning tea at one home and found a three course meal waiting to be eaten. I then had to go to lunch in another home and somehow eat another wonderful elaborate meal.

These were people who carried their faith very deeply and had lived through terrible and dangerous times in Europe during the closing years of the Second World War and had started again in a new land with nothing, and worked hard to establish a new life, raise families and create some financial security for themselves. They had lived hard lives – first living in bungalows on the ½ acre blocks they bought, while they built their houses, beam by beam, as they could afford it. They had wonderful gardens – full of vegetables and flowers, and had learned how to live very frugally.

What struck me so often about these people was their wonderful Christian hope and joy – despite the fact they had lived through terrible times and had worked very hard, they were full of gratitude and thankfulness to God, and were able to be generous and caring towards others, even though in many cases the world had not been very generous to them. During my ten years as pastor at Thomastown, I conducted the funerals of many of these dear people, and still remember many of those occasions very vividly.

I also found during my time at Thomastown that this little bluestone church had become a landmark and symbol to the surrounding neighbourhood and community. I performed many weddings of people who had grown up in the neighbourhood and had played in the church grounds as children. These contacts were wonderful opportunities to explain the Christian Faith and to open the doors of the church to them, both literally and spiritually. Many of these couples kept contact with me during the following years, until I left the parish.

One of the tasks that fell often into my hands at Thomastown was to perform funerals of people belonging to the historic families. These were usually huge occasions, with hundreds of people – real gatherings of the clan. At one of these funerals on a stinking hot Summer day, as I was conducting the graveside service in the cemetery at Thomastown, I was praying when a large blow-fly flew down my throat. I finished the service in a kind of choked falsetto voice and then retreated behind a large pine tree to try to extract the invader!

Of these large family funerals, I recall chiefly the funerals of the last of the Ziebell sisters, ladies I knew as Auntie Rona, Auntie

Linda and lastly, Auntie Dec. The last of these Aunties, Auntie Dec I knew well and had visited several times. She was a lady I consider to be very representative of the spirit of her generation and in a way the spirit of the Thomastown congregation. A story that was told at her funeral which I want to share with you briefly was of her experience with a handbag snatcher. She was walking home along the road one Sunday, carrying a large heavy aluminium saucepan in one hand (which had been returned to her after she had taken it to her brother, Henry, with soup in it) and carrying her handbag over the other shoulder. A young lad on a bike rode past, trying to snatch the bag from her arm, and collected instead a good whack on the skull with Auntie Dec's saucepan. He apparently rode off in a very wobbly fashion, without the handbag!

In my memory, I carry most of all the sense that during my time with this community I was intertwined with the lives and in the history of this remarkable place with its remarkable people, and had the privilege of sharing in and becoming part of their story. This is a great gift of God, full of joy for me.

I hope for each of you that God will give you joy too in your memories of Thomastown.



**A MESSAGE FROM PASTOR JOHANNES ACHILLES**

**D**ear members of the Thomastown Lutheran Church  
When the considerable effort is being made to bring an academically trained minister out from Germany half way around the globe to the 'down under' continent of Australia in order to serve a German-speaking Lutheran community as their Pastor and pastoral 'carer', then there must be a good reason why he should also serve a small English-speaking Lutheran community on the outskirts of 'Greater Melbourne', called Thomastown.

This had been so for generations from its inception in 1856 right through the restless decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which saw the horrors of World War 1 and World War 2, to the end of 1985, that is over 130 years.

In this regard the Thomastown congregation has been distinctly different from similar satellite congregations of the East Melbourne Trinity church, like Grovedale, Doncaster, Harkaway or Scoresby which for various reasons and at different times, but definitely much much earlier, made the decision to become independent from Trinity or to join other congregations.

A serious crisis between Trinity and Thomastown evolved in the first half of the 1930s due to the rise of Nazism and the Hitler regime in Germany, but the rift was able to be mended and the



**A MESSAGE FROM PASTOR ERNST SEYLER**

*O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God,  
Happy are those who dwell in thy house;  
They never cease from praising Thee,  
Happy the men whose refuge is in Thee,  
Whose hearts are set on the pilgrim ways!  
As they pass through the thirsty valley  
They find water from a spring.  
Psalm 84, 3-6*

Dear Friends of Westgarthtown and members of the Lutheran Church  
With the above words of Psalm 84 I send you my heartiest

relationship retained, however, by a small margin of only 4 votes (18 for, 14 against).

However, the Thomastown congregation since that time had been in a unique situation which lasted until 1985: After the expulsion of Trinity from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (UELCA) as a result of the abovementioned political situation in Germany and the entry of Trinity into what became the DEK (German Protestant Church), Thomastown also lost the link with the UELCA. On the other hand to my knowledge Thomastown never joined the German Protestant Church, which existed until 1945 or the EKD (Protestant Church in Germany) since then. This meant that Thomastown for more than half a century was a parish without being part of a church. The link was solely guaranteed by the pastoral services of the Trinity ministers. To explain this phenomenon it is probably not sufficient to mention tradition. I ascribe this unique phenomenon to two factors: one being the longtime isolated geographical position of the Thomastown community, and the other being the cemetery.

Looking at photos of Thomastown in the 1950s, one is surprised how little post-war settlement had reached this suburb in comparison to others. Only the 1960s and 1970s saw a tremendous change until, in the early 1980s, the church with cemetery and some of the family homes of the Ziebell and others of the Wendish families looked like odd and out-of-place remnants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, surrounded by a dense pattern of single storey brick-veneer family homes of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I admit that I was absolutely fascinated when I visited the two Ziebell sisters for the first time in 1982 and, upon entering the front gate, found myself as if in a time warp, beamed back by a full century. The house was like a living museum. And suddenly I understood why these people found it hard to accept changes.

greetings and best wishes for your 150th anniversary celebrations of ‘our little church on the hill.’

As the successor of Pastor Ewald Steiniger I was pastor of the Lutheran Trinity Church in Melbourne as well as pastor of the Thomastown Lutheran congregation for a period of ten years, from 1964 to 1974. These were very blessed years for me and my family. It was a privilege for me to worship in this historic church. I experienced the spirit of the pioneer generation who 150 years ago built this simple — but very nice church in the midst of their settlement.

Through the open hearts and minds of the old and ‘New Australians’ at my time the bilingual congregation grew together in a fine way. Mrs Seyler, I and our three Australian-born children were richly blessed by the wonderful fellowship we experienced in your midst at Thomastown.

In thoughts and prayers we are with you and wish you from all our hearts God’s good guidance for the present time and the years to come.

In great thankfulness from the Seyler family,

**Ernst and Susanne with our children, Ruth, Berni and Christopher and their families**

When the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works made the ecologically questionable decision to concrete the creek bed around the property, and one Sunday morning a trolley from the supermarket in the creek presented a rather ugly view, one of the sisters said to me: “Isn’t it terrible, Pastor, how it has all changed here? I still remember when as children we were swimming in this lovely creek, and look what has become of it today!” This says it all and is one explanation for the lasting connection between Trinity and Thomastown.”

The other and in my view even stronger factor is the cemetery which in a certain way is the focal point and the integrating factor for this community. One of the first things my predecessor Rev. Waldemar Kostizen with a twinkle in his eye told me after my arrival in Melbourne was that in all probability the Thomastown church council would offer me the right to be buried in the Thomastown cemetery. And surely they did! It may sound strange, but to this day I regard this as one of the greatest privileges I ever received because it is an extraordinary gesture of hospitality which reaches far beyond any material gift. Because it means: You are part of the community, you are a member of our family. The fact that the Trinity ministers gained the right to be buried here formed a very strong bond between this congregation and Trinity which cannot be easily severed.

I had this ‘family feeling’ each time I went to Thomastown for the church services on the second Sunday at 9.00 am and on the fourth Sunday at 3.00 pm each month, the elderly ladies in their big hats on the left and the gents on the right (as seen from the back).

For the post-war immigrants on the other hand it was not easy to be fully integrated and accepted by the ‘old ones’ and thus really become family members. So these mostly German-speaking immigrants formed their own little community within

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## A Message from Pastor Johannes Achilles

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the community and for many years the Thomastown 'Ladies Guild' met in a private home, the last years of my time at Lydia Luczakowski's place. Old Mr Young still referred to these post-war immigrants of the 1950s as the 'newcomers' in the mid 1980s. He did not realise that this was perhaps hurtful to these members of the community.

But in the 1980s the 'biological clock' of the old Thomastown 'family congregation' without a 'mother' church started to tick very loudly and fast. Mr Young, despite his name and his youthful heart ('Life is too short to worry' was his philosophy), passed away aged over 90. Mr Ziebell [had] also passed away, and within a very short time Thomastown had lost most of her Trustees which accelerated the crisis.

Two independent events symbolically described the situation of the congregation and made a radical change inevitable in order to make the parish fit for the 21st century: One Sunday morning, after 58mm of rain had come down within 24 hours, the telephone rang in the manse between 7.30 and 8.00 in the morning. It was Mrs Protz, the youngest of the Ziebell sisters. She said: "Pastor, we can't have the service this morning because the creek is flooded. We don't have access across the bridge to the church.

The following year a similar situation: The phone rang, this time it was a voice filled with agony: Satanists had desecrated the little church, put three sixes from the hymn numbers box on the altar, put paper around the altar and lit a fire. It destroyed the altar, charred some of the pews and blackened the formerly white ceiling of the church. It was simply awful! In this situation it helped that this little bluestone church was under the National Trust, and with the help of the Trust and the insurance it was possible to restore the church. First the water and then the fire started a process of reflection and action.

At this time negotiations with the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) were initiated with the aim to achieve three goals: Firstly, to find alternative pastoral care for the Thomastown congregation because the workload of the Trinity Pastor had considerably grown due to the expansion of the Martin Luther Homes Boronia; secondly, to re-integrate the Thomastown congregation into a church, now the LCA; and thirdly, through these achievements to expand the pastoral care within the Thomastown community in order to enter a new phase of growth after more than 20 years of slow decline due to the fact that the Trinity minister did not have the time and capacity to lead the congregation onto a path of growth.

The LCA had clearly indicated its willingness to help and offered Thomastown the services of the minister of the Greensborough congregation. Despite some reservation on the part of the Thomastown people the decision turned out to be the right one in the long term.

This year, three years after Trinity's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Thomastown congregation can look back on its 150 years of worship and fellowship in a small family church and over 150 years of the Thomastown cemetery. I am grateful that for the last twenty years Thomastown has been part of the LCA because without this kind of affiliation the congregation would be doomed. And I am grateful that pastoral care is guaranteed as a prerequisite for growth.

May God bless the Thomastown Lutheran Church and all its members and may HE lead this little congregation safely through the 21st century.

**Rev. Johannes Achilles**

Chairman of the Hildesheim Mission to the Blind

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**W**estgarthtown is the oldest and most intact German/ Wendish settlement in Victoria. Established in March 1850, it celebrated its 150th Anniversary in the year 2000.

**T**he Thomastown Lutheran Church at Westgarthtown is the second oldest surviving Lutheran Church building in Australia and the oldest still used as the principal worship centre of a Lutheran congregation.

**H**eritage Victoria has included the Lutheran Church, Cemetery and Reserve; and Graff's, Siebel's, Wuchatsch's and Ziebell's houses on its Heritage Register, recognising their outstanding heritage value and providing legislative protection for the future.

**Z**iebell's Farmhouse is Victoria's oldest German immigrant building.

**S**iebel's Farmhouse, erected in 1860, is the birthplace of Albert Siebel, who in 1934 established the Pura Dairy at Preston, to retail Westgarthtown's milk. Pura has now developed into a leading national Australian brandname.

**W**uchatsch's Farmhouse is believed to be the oldest house in Melbourne to have been constructed, owned and continually occupied by the same family.