

Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford

Address: 1716 Bannockburn-Shelford Road, Shelford

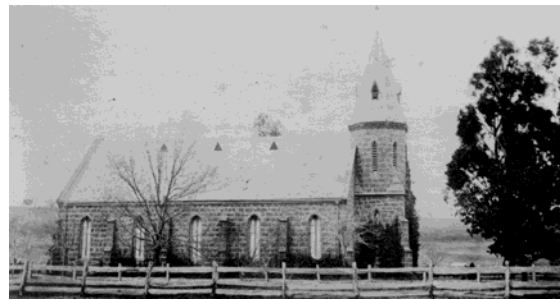
Construction Date/s: 1859

Level of Significance: Local

Heritage Overlay No: HO62



Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, 2012.



Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, c.1888. Source: G. Seaton, *Gold Reef & Silver Tussock*, p.159.

Statement of Significance¹

What is Significant?

The Leigh Presbyterian Church, 1716 Bannockburn-Shelford Road, Shelford, has significance as a tangible legacy of the development and life of the Presbyterian Church in the Leigh district since the mid 19th century, and as a predominantly intact example of a Victorian Early English Gothic style, the tower and steeple being a landmark in the town. Built in 1859 to a design by the Geelong architect, Joseph Lowe Shaw, the establishment of the church was the culmination of a collective effort by a number of wealthy pastoralists in the district, notably George Russell of Golf Hill, James Kinninmont, Alexander Armstrong of Warrambeen, the Russells of Barunah Plains, R.L. Bell, of Mt. Mercer, John and James Bell and H.M. Wilson, of Shelford. Significant fabric includes the steeply-pitched gabled and parapeted roof form, coursed random rubble bluestone wall construction, five-bayed composition defined by the projecting buttresses and two-lighted pointed-arched windows, rear Italian-pointed openings and particularly the landmark tower having a square base surmounted by an octagonal belfry and steeple. Projecting from the steeple are four ventilation gablets. The church is accessed by a central pointed-arched door opening with vertically-boarded timber doors into an entrance porch with a timber-lined ceiling. Internally, the virtues of 19th century Presbyterian austerity are also reflected in the unornamented windows (apart from the Christian Waller-designed stained glass memorial window to Captain John Biddlecombe, introduced in 1931), plain hard plastered walls, timber floor and central aisle flanked by timber pews. Decorative effect is largely confined to the slender timber ceiling trusses and the several marble, brass and bronze memorial tablets and plaques affixed to the walls.

¹ The heritage assessment criteria and format of this statement of significance accord with the VPP Practice Note 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay, revised September 2012, Department of Planning & Community Development.

How is it Significant?

The Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, is architecturally, historically and socially significant at a local level.

Why is it Significant?

The Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, is historically significant (Practice Note Criteria A & H) for its associations with the development and witness of the Presbyterian Church in the Leigh Charge since its construction in 1859. The Leigh Presbyterian Church also has important associations with key figures in the evolution of the church, including the Rev. Archibald Simpson (first incumbent), and prominent pastoralists and businessmen of the district, including George Russell of Golf Hill, James Kinninmont, Alexander Armstrong, of Warrambeen, the Russells of Barunah Plains, R.L. Bell, of Mt. Mercer, John and James Bell and H.M. Wilson, of Shelford. The church is also associated with the Geelong architect, Joseph Lowe Shaw, and it represents one of his earliest Presbyterian Church designs. The stained glass memorial window to Captain John Biddlecombe of Golf Hill, and donated in 1931 by his wife, Janet Biddlecombe, (nee Russell) is the work of one of Australia's leading early 20th century stained glass artists, Christian Waller.

The Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, is architecturally significant (Practice Note Criteria D & E) as one of the earliest and contextually substantial examples of Presbyterian Church building in the Shire. It is also a predominantly intact and notable example of the Victorian Early English Gothic style. The squat square tower with octagonal belfry and steeple is a local landmark in the town. The rudimentary interior has importance as a physical legacy of 19th century Presbyterian austerity, and while the original pulpit and canopy have been removed, the original character survives in the ceiling, wall and window fabric, and in the central aisle flanked by the timber pews. Although introduced, the stained glass memorial window depicting the patron saints of the sea, Ss. Andrew and Nicholas, also contributes to the aesthetic significance of the church.

The Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford, is socially significant (Practice Note Criterion G) as it is recognised and valued by sections of the local community for religious reasons, as a symbol of their faith and their history of local participation in faith education. The church interior includes a number of memorials to former members of the congregation. These memorials therefore have commemorative value.

Description

The Leigh Presbyterian Church is set on a contextually large site surrounded by open grassed areas with perimeter trees along the property boundaries. The site is bound by a post and wire fence, with centrally-located gates fronting the Bannockburn-Shelford Road. A gravel path leads to the church building. At the rear of the church on the east side is an introduced gabled hall of concrete block construction.

The coursed random rubble bluestone Victorian Early English Gothic styled church building is characterised by a steeply-pitched and parapeted gable roof form with a squat tower and steeple at the front. The gable roof is clad in introduced galvanised corrugated steel. The east and west roof faces are punctuated by original projecting ventilation gablets. The parapet copings have introduced galvanised cappings. On the east and west elevations, the church has a five bayed composition defined by the projecting bluestone buttresses and the pointed-arched two-lighted five paned timber framed windows. Projecting splayed buttresses define the corners of the building.

A landmark feature of the church is the centrally-located front tower and steeple. Of squat proportions, the bluestone tower has a square base that comprises the front church porch. It has a central pointed-arched main entrance doorway with original vertically-boarded timber doors having decorative iron hinges. Surmounting the porch is an octagonal belfry with lancet ventilators above which is the octagonal steeple clad in pressed flat galvanised steel sheets. It is crowned by an iron finial and has ventilation dormers projecting from four roof faces.

At the rear is an original pointed-arched door opening on the west side with a vertically-boarded timber door. There is a bluestone step outside the door which features an original iron boot scrape. The rear gable end also features early Italian-pointed openings, the upper opening comprising a ventilator and the two lower openings being windows with what appears to be introduced circular glazing.

Internally, the church features an exposed timber-lined ceiling with slender timber roof trusses having iron ties. Overall, the interior is austere in character, reflecting its original design intent. The walls are hard-plastered and there are timber floor boards that have been carpeted along the central aisle and at the front. The timber pews flanking the central aisle appear to be original, but the timber pulpit, communion table, lectern, reading desk and platform (on which the liturgical furniture is located) have been introduced. The interior is lit by the pointed-arched windows on the east and west walls. They are sharply recessed and are decorated only by coloured blue, red and yellow glass at the top. One exception is the decorative stained glass window in the north-east corner introduced as a memorial to Captain Biddlecombe after 1929. It depicts the patron saints of the sea, St. Andrew and St. Nicholas.

Of particular interest are the 12 other memorials affixed to the walls of the church, reflecting the important historical ties and esteem bestowed to former members of the church and the community. These memorials include marble tablets and brass and bronze plaques. They commemorate: volunteers of the First World War (two timber honour boards and a brass plaque); Euphemia Leslie Carstairs, wife of George Russell of Gold Hill (died 1867); Margaret Carstairs of Golf Hill (1910); Jane Elizabeth Hubback (wife of Rev. Archibald Simpson, died at Woodend, 1905); Phillip Russell of Golf Hill (1898); Janet Biddlecombe of Golf Hill (1954); Alexander Armstrong (first Elder of the church, died 1890); George Russell of Golf Hill (1885); Rev. Archibald Simpson (died 1883) and William James and George Russell of Barunah Plains (undated).

At the rear of the church are introduced partition walls to door head height. A central open passage provides access between the porch and the church, with flanking enclosed spaces accessed by introduced doors. The front entrance porch has an original timber lined ceiling, hard plaster walls and pointed-arched, vertically-boarded timbers that provide access into the church. It is lit by five paned lancet windows at the sides. The tiled porch floor has been introduced.

History

Early Development of Shelford

Initially known as The Leigh, a settlement at Shelford was established in c.1843 as a stopping place on the track leading from Geelong to the pastoral runs in the Grampians area. Situated in the Leigh River Valley, Shelford was centred at the river crossing. First established to the east of the Leigh River, the Leigh settlement was gradually eclipsed by the later government township that was surveyed and proclaimed in 1855 on the west bank of the river. A central landmark in these early years was the imposing Shelford Hotel that had been built before 1854. Shelford has served as a pastoral and agricultural township with close associations with

Golf Hill station, the centre of the vast squatting interests that were owned by the Clyde Company and managed by George Russell.

Establishment of the Leigh Presbyterian Church

A Presbyterian presence at Shelford came as early as 1847 when the Rev. Thomas and Mrs Hastie arrived from Launceston to take up the Buninyong and Leigh Charge. Initially, they stayed at George Russell's Golf Hill Station as a manse had not been built. The *Geelong Advertiser* reported in late November 1847 that the Church at the Leigh was to be opened for public worship on 5 December 1847. It was located on the original eastern location of the Shelford settlement, in the 'church paddock' on the south side of the Bannockburn-Shelford Road, opposite the entrance to Golf Hill station (and the existing church building). This timber church building also served as a school.

With the onset of the gold rush in 1851, the Rev. Hastie was entirely committed to the Buninyong area. In 1854, the Rev. Archibald Simpson commenced a permanent appointment at Shelford as the first incumbent of the newly-formed Leigh Charge, being one of twelve men sent out by the Free Church of Scotland. According to Gladys Seaton in *Gold Reef and Silver Tussock*, Simpson "built up the congregation of the Leigh charge with zeal and faithfulness. The traditions of Scotland were still fresh amongst the people; he had the generous support of George Russell, James Kininmonth, Robert Bell and others ..."

The Building of the Church

In December 1856, elders were elected for the fledgling Leigh Presbyterian Church. George Russell was also appointed treasurer. In October 1858, provision of a new suitable church and manse were considered by the deacons. The Geelong architect, Joseph Lowe Shaw, was engaged to prepare a design with the church to be constructed of bluestone and located at the entrance to Golf Hill Station fronting the Bannockburn-Shelford Road. A tender from Fraser and Robertson for the stonework at a cost of £671 was accepted in June 1859. Economies were made to reduce building costs, with George Russell supervising the works and J.L. Shaw making only occasional visits. The commissioning of Shaw as architect appears to have emanated from his existing connections with Shelford, having surveyed the "Upper Leigh Allotments" of the original settlement on the east side of the river in earlier years.

On 8 December 1859, the Leigh Presbyterian Church opened for worship, complete with tower and steeple in which a bell was hung that had been presented by Scottish friends of Rev. Simpson. It had been designed to accommodate 200 people. An early photograph of the building reveals that it had a five-bayed composition on the side elevations, punctuated by bluestone buttresses and lit by pointed-arched windows. A landmark feature was the front tower, having squat proportions. The tower rose from a square base and incorporated an octagonal belfry and steeple. The main roof was clad in slate. Overall, the church was rudimentary in appearance, reflecting the Presbyterian virtue of austerity.

Such austerity also appears to have been reflected on the interior, apart from a canopy over the central altar that featured ornate ironwork. This single feature accorded with Presbyterian thinking in the 19th century, as Walter Phillips in *Victorian Churches* states that 'Presbyterians built high central pulpits on the south wall; the sermon was the main feature of Presbyterian worship.' The rudimentary design of the interior had its origins in the meeting houses of Protestant Dissenters built in Britain in the eighteenth century. It appears that the contextually elaborate iron canopy was removed in the mid 20th century, when a new timber platform, lectern and other furniture at the front of the church was introduced.

In 1904, the Leigh Presbyterian Church celebrated its 50th jubilee. The celebrations were reported in *The Messenger* as follows:

“The Leigh Presbyterian Church has just celebrated its jubilee, and the festivities throughout have been marked by the greatest enthusiasm. Many who were formerly associated with the church, but are now away from the district, travelled great distances to be present on this memorable occasion.

... The jubilee thanksgiving service was held in the Shelford Church, and one of the largest congregations that ever assembled listened to a very suitable and most powerful sermon from Luke 1: 19 ... On the following Tuesday a public tea meeting was held in the State school. The tables were artistically arranged by the ladies, and a most sumptuous tea was provided. Much credit is due to the ladies for the great success of the gathering. It was estimated that between three and four hundred people sat down to tea. A public meeting took place in the church, which had been beautifully decorated. The Rev. J.V. McNair (Moderator of the Geelong Presbytery) occupied the chair. The speakers were Revs. A. Stewart, H.M. Burns, J.A. Forrest, and J.G. Higginbotham. The Rev. Smith McBain, B.A., who happened to be passing through the village, stayed for the meeting, and opened with prayer. The minister read a brief historical statement of the church since its foundation, in which he referred to the sterling work done by his predecessors. He mentioned also the generosity and devotion to the kirk of such men as Messrs. George Russell, of Golfhill, James Kinninmont, Alexander Armstrong, of Warrambeen, the Russells of Barunah Plains, R.L. Bell, of Mt. Mercer, John and James Bell, H.M. Wilson, of Shelford. These have left names that are revered by all, on account of the deep interest they took in everything relating to the true welfare of the community.”

The death of Captain John Biddlecombe at Golf Hill in 1929 brought about the installation of a stained glass window to his memory in 1931. It depicted the Patron Saints of the sea, St. Andrew and St. Nicholas. The window was donated by the late Captain Biddlecombe's wife, Janet Biddlecombe (nee Russell), daughter of George Russell. Upon Russell's death in 1888, the Golf Hill property was inherited by Mrs Biddlecombe's brother, Philip, who arranged for her and her husband to take over the property before Philip Russell's death in 1898. The window was the work of the artist, Christian Marjory Emily Carlyle Waller (1894-1954) (partner of Napier Waller), who had connections to the Presbyterian Church. According to David Thomas in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Waller designed stained glass windows from about 1928 and she “created stained-glass windows for a number of churches – especially for those designed by Louis Williams – in Melbourne, Geelong, and rural centres in New South Wales.” Thomas also states that Waller became “recognised as among Australia's leading stained-glass artists.”

Comparative Analysis

Other Churches by the Architect, J.L. Shaw

Joseph Lowe Shaw came to Geelong from Dublin, Ireland, with his doctor brothers Foster and William. It is believed he arrived here in 1850, having previously been employed with the Board of Public Works and Railway survey Offices, Ireland. Known as a civil engineer, surveyor and architect, he entered a partnership with H.M. Garrard and they practised under the name of Garrard and Shaw in Yarra Street until 1853 when Shaw again practised alone. In 1856 he took into partnership R.A. Dowden until mid 1858.

In the 1850s, Shaw is known to have designed six churches. The earliest and most substantial was St. Mary of the Angels Roman Catholic Church in Yarra Street, Geelong, in 1854, with R.A. Dowden. They had received first prize in a design competition although it was not until 1872

when an incomplete St. Mary's Church was opened. Other church designs by Shaw during the 1850s included St. Peter's Church of England, Chilwell (1854); Roman Catholic Church, Ballarat (1857); Sutherland's Creek Roman Catholic Church (1858), and the Leigh Presbyterian Church, Shelford. Only St. Peter's Church survives insitu in addition to the Leigh Church at Shelford, with the former Sutherland's Creek Church having been dismantled and relocated as the chapel at the Deakin University Waurn Ponds campus.

Other Churches in the Golden Plains Shire

The Leigh Presbyterian Church represents one of 28 surviving churches in the Golden Plains Shire (see Schedule to the Heritage Overlay). The most comparable with the Leigh Church at Shelford are the Presbyterian churches built of bluestone in the late 1850s and early 1860s. They are:

- Presbyterian Church, 42 Pyke Street, Teesdale, built in 1858 with the front timber porch added in 1934. This modestly-scaled astylar church building is the earliest Presbyterian church in the Golden Plains Shire and its rudimentary design is reflective of Presbyterian philosophy. The Leigh Church is more substantial and externally intact.
- Presbyterian Church, 48 High Street, Inverleigh, built in 1861 and also to a design by J.L. Shaw. This building is a smaller example than the Leigh Presbyterian Church, lacking the landmark tower and steeple of the Shelford building. It is similarly designed in a Victorian Early English Gothic style, with steeply-pitched and parapeted slate roof, being three bayed with projecting buttresses and similar pointed-arched windows. The main gable end at the front has tripartite lancets. There is a side entrance porch that was added in 1885. The Inverleigh Church has been substantially altered internally.
- Presbyterian Church, 60 Ferrars Road, Rokewood, built in 1866 to a design by the eminent architect, Alexander Davidson. This building is more elaborate than the Leigh Presbyterian Church, being of a Victorian Decorated Gothic style featuring a cruciform plan, bluestone wall construction with freestone dressings, tracery windows and a broach spire added in 1905 (also to a design by Alexander Davidson). The spire has projecting gabled ventilators similar to those at Shelford. Internally, the Rokewood Church is of interest for its distinctive trussed ceiling and timber-lined ceiling and timber pews.
- Former Free Presbyterian Church, Midland Highway, Meredith, built in 1868, the church comprises a steeply-pitched gabled roof clad in slate, and front gabled porch. The building is smaller than the Leigh Church, having a three-bayed composition. The church only functioned in 1882. In 1910, it was leased to the Meredith Masonic Lodge No. 161 and the Lodge acquired the site in 1961. There is a cream brick masonic temple at one side of the church (built in 1961) and a hall at the rear.

Overall, the Leigh Presbyterian Church represents one of the earliest and more intact Victorian Early English Gothic Presbyterian Church designs in the Golden Plains Shire. Like Rokewood, its tower and steeple form a local heritage landmark in the town.

Condition

Overall, the Leigh Presbyterian Church is in fair condition. The roof cladding to the steeple is showing signs of rusting and all the ventilation gablets have deteriorated due to weathering. There is evidence of previous lateral movement in the cement-rich patching in the cracks to the front corner buttresses, rear buttress and rear wall, front wall above the west window, and above the rear door.

Integrity

Predominantly intact, apart from the introduced galvanised corrugated steel roof cladding that has replaced the original slate roof. Internally, the church is moderately intact and while there have been changes at the front (with the replacement of the original pulpit) and rear internal subdivision, the original austere character and some original furniture survives. The introduced wall partitions at the rear of the church are reversible.

Recommendations

Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls

External Paint Controls:	Yes (church building only)
Internal Alteration Controls:	Yes (church building only)
Tree Controls:	No
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	No
Prohibited Uses May Be Permitted:	Yes

Extent of Heritage Overlay

It is recommended that the heritage overlay apply to the whole site.

References

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Current Photographs



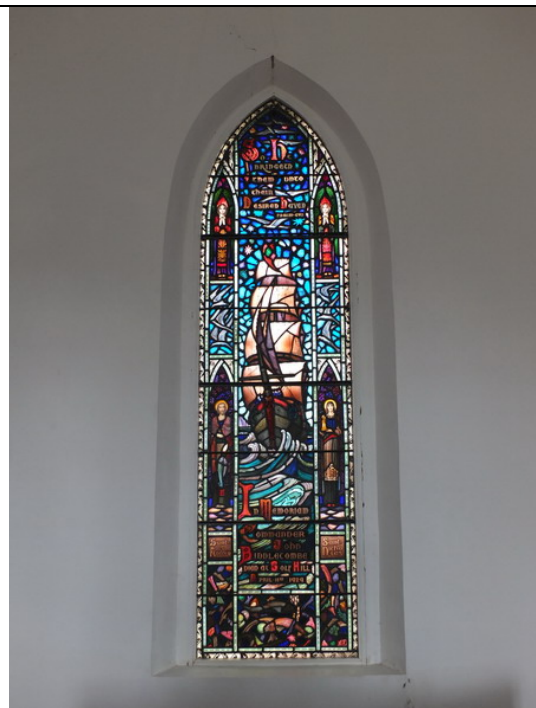
Leigh Presbyterian Church, rear elevation.



Interior of the Leigh Presbyterian Church, looking towards the lectern.



Interior of the Leigh Presbyterian Church looking towards the entrance porch.



Detail of memorial window to Captain Biddlecombe.



Timber Honour Board to volunteers of the First World War.



Timber Honour Board to volunteers of the First World War.



Plaque in memory of Marget Carstairs of Golf Hill, 1910.



Plaque in memory of Jane Elizabeth Hubback, wife of Rev. Archibald Simpson, 1905.



Plaque in memory of Janet Biddlecombe of Golf Hill, 1954.



Plaque in memory of Phillip Russell of Golf Hill, 1898.



Brass Honour Board to those who fought in the First World War.



Tablet in memory of Alexander Armstrong, first Elder of the Leigh Church, 1890.



Tablet in Memory of George Russell of Golf Hill, 1886.



Tablet in memory of Rev. Archibald Simpson, 1883.



Tablet in memory of Euphemia Leslie Carstairs, wife of George Russell of Golf Hill, 1867.



Tablet in memory of William James and George Russell of Barunah Plains, n.d.