



The vision and ministry of Sandhurst's first priest, Henry Backhaus, continues in 2021

By Jackson Saunders

Henry Backhaus was the first priest in Bendigo on the Sandhurst Goldfields and was instrumental in establishing the Sandhurst Diocese. His ministry and achievements continue to be seen today. Sandhurst seminarian, Jackson Saunders, reflects on Backhaus' life.

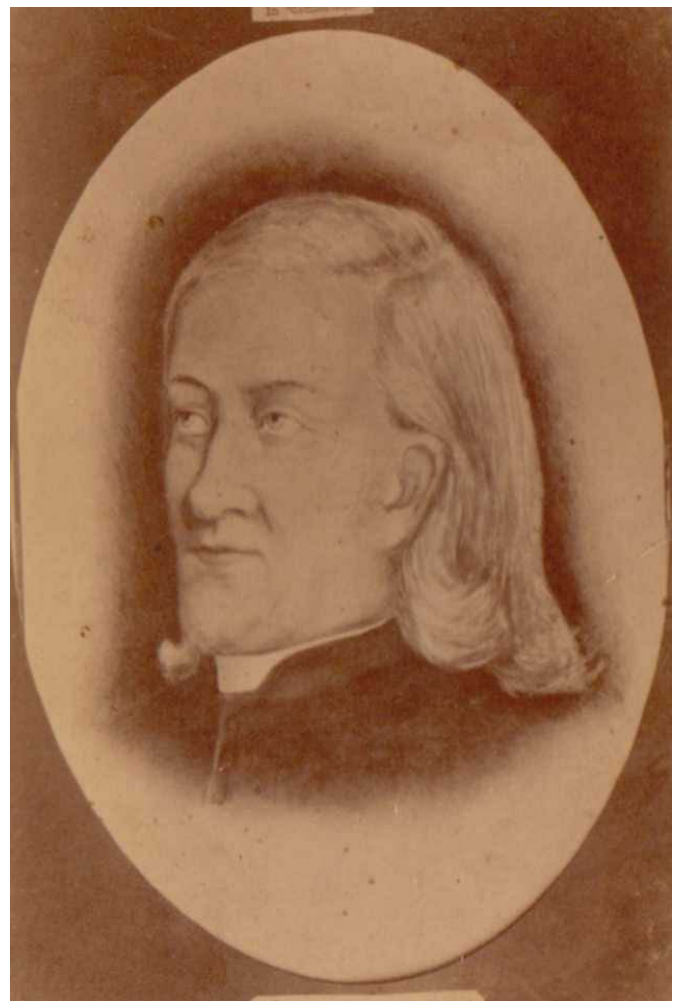
Henry Backhaus made a significant contribution to the development of Australian Catholic life, especially in the Sandhurst Diocese in two stints across three decades (1852-1863 and 1867-1881). Backhaus was a missionary priest from the Archdiocese of Paderborn and was the first priest to be assigned to the Sandhurst Goldfields.

Born in 1812 in Germany, he died in 1882 in Sandhurst, today known as Bendigo. He was educated in Rome and spent 11 years as a missionary in India, before arriving in Australia in 1846.¹ His major achievements in Sandhurst include his tireless Sacramental ministry and his future foresight through the acquisition of land and property, which he placed under perpetual trust in St Kilian's Parish. Almost 130 years after Backhaus' death, this continues to generate income for the mission of the Church today.

Backhaus' foresight also enabled the construction of Sacred Heart Cathedral in Bendigo, as well as schools, churches and other buildings. His pioneering work helped to establish what would later become known as the Diocese of Sandhurst in 1874. In addition, his pastoral outreach included a significant contribution to the development of civil life in Sandhurst.

Although Backhaus is most remembered for his ministry in Sandhurst, his contribution to the development of Australian Catholic life also extends to Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne.

Backhaus' other achievements beyond Sandhurst include bursaries for the education of seminarians and provisions for assistance in caring for the care of retired priests.



*A portrait of Henry Backhaus.
PICTURE: Supplied by Dr. Donna Bailey,
Sandhurst Archives.*

¹ J. A Panton, *Backhaus Bicentenary Commemoration* (Bendigo: Sandhurst Diocesan Archives, 2012), 7.

When Backhaus arrived in Sandhurst, “his first priority was the safeguarding of the faith.”² John Hussey explains that “the faith was being lost because the people seldom saw a priest.”³ Backhaus’ missionary zeal was highlighted through his ministry and emphasis on the Catholic life sacramentally. He performed 1592 baptisms within six years, which was about five a week.⁴ In total, across almost three decades, he performed about 14,000 baptisms.⁵ He presided at 150 funerals and 60 marriages in his first four years.⁶ Mal Nolan notes how records also show that he celebrated more than 95% of baptisms, funerals, and marriages during his first stint on the Sandhurst goldfields.⁷

Backhaus’ Sacramental ministry was mostly exercised at St Kilian’s where he was granted permission to establish a Church in 1854.⁸

He oversaw the construction of the original St Kilian’s Church, which opened in 1857.⁹ While at St Kilian’s, Backhaus acquired land and properties to ensure the future prosperity of Sandhurst, which he bequeathed almost entirely to the parish, known as the Backhaus Estate.

The main features of his will were that his property in Victoria and South Australia was left to three trustees and their successors forever; that the income from this was to accumulate for twenty years after his death and then be paid to ‘the clergyman of St Kilian’s church, provided that he was a secular priest, and it was to be used ‘for religious and useful purposes in connection with that church.’¹⁰



The original St Kilian’s Church in Bendigo.

PICTURE: Supplied by Dr. Donna Bailey, Sandhurst Archives

² John Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D. D* (Bendigo: St Kilian’s Press, 1982), 84.

³ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D. D*, 85.

⁴ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D. D*, 86.

⁵ A. E. Owens, *The Very Reverend Henry Backhaus. D.D.* (Bendigo: Sacred Heart Cathedral, 1952), 26.

⁶ M. J. Nolan, “Henry Backhaus- A Different Type of Pioneer Priest,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 85, no. 2 (January 2008): 60.

⁷ Panton, *Backhaus Bicentenary Commemoration*, 4.

⁸ Walter Ebsworth, *Pioneer Catholic Victoria* (Melbourne: The Polding Press, 1973), 163.

⁹ Ebsworth, *Pioneer Catholic Victoria*, 171.

¹⁰ Malachy J. Nolan, “The Golden Legacy of Dr Henry Backhaus,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 83, n. 1 (January 2006): 155.

At the time of his death, Backhaus' will included "sixty-two allotments in the central business district of Bendigo; twenty-seven allotments in the Bendigo suburban area; forty-eight allotments in small townships within 60 km of Bendigo; forty-two farming properties ... a total of 8,911 acres; and his Brighton residence and land, twenty-three acres."¹¹ There was also land in the will in Adelaide and 1,157 acres in rural South Australia.¹² The future foresight of Backhaus continues to support the mission of the Sandhurst Diocese today. The most recent publicly available figures about the estate valued its commercial premises in the Bendigo area and rural properties at nineteen and four million dollars respectively in 2003.¹³ The continuing income from his estate in 2008 was noted to be almost "three quarters of a million dollars annually."¹⁴ Backhaus' contribution to Catholic life through the estate has meant that major projects, such as the construction of the Sacred Heart Cathedral, have been able to take place.

The funds from the Backhaus Estate, which became available in 1902, allowed the Sandhurst Diocese to enter into a borrowing agreement for the Cathedral with millionaire gold miner, George Lansell, "in March 1896, to borrow 30,000 pounds at 6% interest, to fund the building."¹⁵ The Cathedral was built in two parts and opened in 1901. Further funds from the estate were provided for the Cathedral's completion, which took place between 1954 and 1977.¹⁶ The Cathedral is today regarded as one of the most beautiful in Australian Catholic life.

The Cathedral, which is central to Catholic life in Sandhurst, was developed first by Backhaus. He was a key figure in the establishment of the Diocese in 1874, serving as the Vicar-General for Bishop Crane and as the Administrator of St Kilian's until 1881.¹⁷ He also administered the Diocese and established Echuca parish in 1874 with the appointment of Fr

Daniel O'Connell, before the arrival of Bishop Crane in the Diocese in 1875.¹⁸ Diocesan records show that his contribution to the development of Catholic life also extended to communities including Heathcote, Euroa and Benalla.¹⁹



Bendigo's Sacred Heart Cathedral.

PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.

Backhaus' contribution to Catholic life was also demonstrated through his desire to provide Catholic education. His first opened a school in Bendigo in 1853.²⁰ More schools followed in Back Creek, Epsom, Myers Flat, Axedale and Mosquito Creek.²¹ With limited or no Government funding available, Backhaus "was ready to finance the schools from his own funds, and in nearly every case he donated the

¹¹ Nolan, "The Golden Legacy," 156.

¹² Nolan, "The Golden Legacy," 156.

¹³ M. J. Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr. Henry Backhaus* (Bendigo: M. J. Nolan, 2008), 101.

¹⁴ Nolan, "Henry Backhaus- A Different Type of Pioneer Priest," 56.

¹⁵ Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr. Henry Backhaus*, 93.

¹⁶ Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr. Henry Backhaus*, 102.

¹⁷ Owens, *The Very Reverend Dean Henry Backhaus. D. D.*, 26.

¹⁸ D. F. Bourke, *A History of the Catholic Church in Victoria* (Melbourne: Catholic Bishops of Victoria, 1988), 130.

¹⁹ Donna Bailey, *Backhaus Archives* (Bendigo: Sandhurst Archives, 2015), 3.

²⁰ Ebsworth, *Pioneer Catholic Victoria*, 163.

²¹ Frank Cusack, *Goldfields Shepherd: The Story of Dr. Backhaus* (Bendigo: Diocese of Sandhurst, 1982), 23.

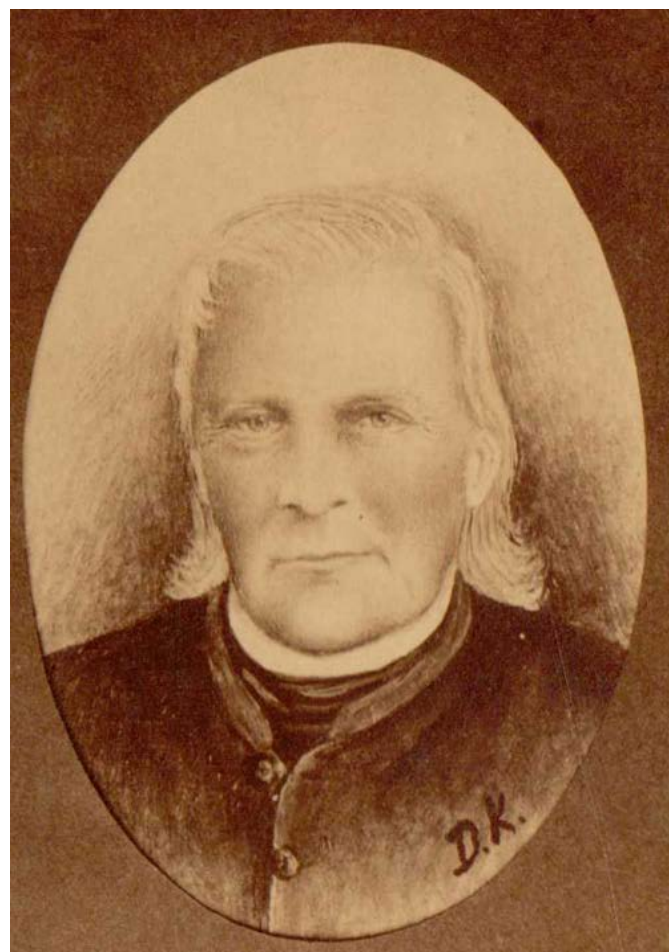
land on which the schools were built.”²² His contribution to education developed Catholic life.

Backhaus’ involvement within the civic community would also have helped the profile of Australian Catholic life. In Sandhurst he helped to establish a water supply, the hospital, the benevolent asylum, the mechanics institute, banks, insurance companies and the Melbourne-Murray railway. He was also proactive in addressing social issues.²³ His pastoral presence among gold miners was also positive. He fought for the abolition of taxes.²⁴ In addition, he campaigned against anti-Chinese attitudes.²⁵ The respect for Backhaus supported the development of Catholic life in Sandhurst. “The people loved him and, as proof, they loaded him with gold ... He used the money to buy land for future church purposes.”²⁶ Buildings which received significant financial support for their establishment from the Backhaus Estate included the Mercy Convent, St Mary’s College, the Marist Brothers School and monastery, St Joseph’s School at Quarry Hill, Bethlehem Home for the Aged, the Poor Clare Sisters Convent and St John of God Hospital.²⁷ Bishop McCarthy was also “reported as saying in 1926 that most of the Churches in Bendigo were built using Backhaus funds.”²⁸ While Backhaus’ contribution to the development of Catholic life is mostly remembered in Sandhurst, his achievements stretch beyond the goldfields.

When Backhaus first arrived in Australia, he spent 11 months in Sydney. There he looked after music at the Cathedral and re-established the Solemn High Mass.²⁹ Australia’s oldest church choir still honours his musicianship, as does incidentally the Cathedral in Bendigo. From Sydney, Backhaus went to Adelaide where he ministered to German migrants for four years.³⁰ While in Adelaide, he also served as the Vicar-General to Bishop Shiel in 1866.³¹ Upon his return to Australia in 1866 after two-and-a-half years travelling overseas, Shiel also spent a month

ministering in Melbourne, including at Pentridge prison.³²

Other significant achievements to the development of Catholic life in Australia included the bursaries he established for the education of seminarians in Rome from Sandhurst, Melbourne and his native Paderborn.³³ There were even two seminarians from Bathurst, who benefited from these bursaries, albeit by mistake.³⁴ His care for the formation of future priests extended to elderly priests, so his property and land at Brighton was left for the care of retired priests from Melbourne, Ballarat and Sandhurst.³⁵



Henry Backhaus. PICTURE: Supplied by Dr. Donna Bailey, Sandhurst Archives.

²² Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, 74.

²³ Nolan, “Henry Backhaus- A Different Type of Pioneer Priest,” 62.

²⁴ Cusack, *Goldfields Shepherd*, 15.

²⁵ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, 128.

²⁶ Edmund Campion, *Great Australian Catholics* (Ringwood: David Lovell Publishing, 1997), 34.

²⁷ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, 193.

²⁸ Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*, 103.

²⁹ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, 42.

³⁰ Campion, *Great Australian Catholics*, 33.

³¹ Owens, *The Very Reverend Dean Henry Backhaus. D.D.*, 20.

³² Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*, 68.

³³ Owens, *The Very Reverend Dean Henry Backhaus. D.D.*, 29.

³⁴ Hussey, *Henry Backhaus, D.D.*, 184.

³⁵ Owens, *The Very Reverend Dean Henry Backhaus. D.D.*, 31.

In conclusion, the priestly ministry of Backhaus made a significant contribution to the development of Catholic life in Australia, especially in the Sandhurst Diocese. His funeral, which attracted 30,000 people and was bigger than the population of Sandhurst at the time, stands as testimony to the impact he had.³⁶ His achievements include his tireless Sacramental ministry and his pioneering work in establishing the Sandhurst Diocese, among his pastoral presence in the wider community. After his death, the Backhaus Estate and the availability of funds to begin construction of the Sandhurst Cathedral, as well as other churches and significant buildings demonstrate his contribution to the development of Catholic life.

The support of seminarians and retired priests, as well as his ministry in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne are other significant achievements.

The Catholic Education Sandhurst Library Learning Centre has books on the life of Henry Backhaus, which can be borrowed by any parishioner in the Sandhurst Diocese.

For details, visit www.ceosand.catholic.edu.au/our-community/library-learning-centre-llc

or phone 03 5445 9942.

³⁶ Nolan, *The Enterprising Life of Dr Henry Backhaus*, 85.