

St Mary's South Brisbane History

The current church at St Mary's was blessed and opened on 2nd July 1893. It replaced the first St Mary's - a small wooden church built on the site of the present car park around 1864. The land on which it was built was a grant of land from the NSW government in 1859 (before news of the declaration of the state of Queensland became known). The chapel was expanded in 1868 when two aisles were added almost doubling its size. Sparsely inhabited in 1861, the population was only 1080, South Brisbane was a small but growing residential suburb. By 1871 the number of inhabitants had increased to 4222.

In the 1880s, Brisbane experienced an economic and building boom and South Brisbane's population trebled, reaching 22,849 in 1891. South Brisbane was proclaimed a town, and many fine buildings were built, including a town hall and a library which still stand today.

The expansion of the population meant that the chapel was no longer adequate to the needs of the South Brisbane congregation and a meeting was held in August 1889 to discuss the construction of a new and larger church. The Catholic Church had begun acquiring allotments adjoining the original church reserve in 1884 and by 1889 it had amassed considerable land at the northwest end of the block bounded by Cordelia, Peel and Merivale Streets. Fundraising for the construction of a new church commenced in 1890 and by the end of 1891 half the cost of the building had been collected. Architects Simkin and Ibler produced drawings of the proposed church. An imposing edifice with Italianate and Romanesque revival details, it was designed to accommodate a congregation of 800 people.

George Simkin and John Ibler were architects practising in Brisbane in the 1880s who joined in partnership from 1889 to 1894. One of their early projects, the Breakfast Creek Hotel, is a well-known Brisbane landmark. Much of their work together was for the Roman Catholic Church and included important commissions such as Dara, Archbishop Dunne's residence at Petrie Bight, St Stephen's Roman Catholic Girls School, Charlotte Street, Brisbane and a convent for the Sisters of Mercy, now known as Cloisters, at Warwick. Simkin and Ibler worked in a variety of architectural styles and their designs are noted for an eclectic, sometimes flamboyant, use of ornament.

Cardinal Moran laid the foundation stone of the new church on the 25th September 1892 in a ceremony attended by Archbishop Dunne, Archbishop Carr and other high-ranking clergy. Blessed and opened by Archbishop Dunne on 2nd July 1893, St Mary's cost £2 150 to build. Despite the economic crisis and devastating floods of the early 1890s £1473 had already been raised for the project and a further £400 was collected at the opening. Due to the limited funds only part of the

proposed church was built, the nave and aisles. The concrete rendering was postponed and several parts of the building including the eastern end and the rose window were temporarily constructed from timber. A description of the church as it appeared at its opening, noted the ample provision made for ventilation and the high altar installed in the new church that had previously been used at St Stephen's Cathedral.

From 1866 the original chapel had been a dual-purpose building also functioning as a school. After the opening of the new church it continued to be used as a school until 1909 when substantial new school buildings were built on the southwest portion of the site. The chapel then served as the infant's school until 1926 when extensions to the school incorporated rooms for infants. A substantial bell housed in a timber belfry was erected in 1914 adjacent to the church and in 1915 a convent for the Sisters of Mercy was constructed, diagonally opposite the school on the corner of Cordelia and Peel Streets. The most significant change to the church since its construction in 1893 was the completion of the sanctuary, including vestry and sacristy, in December 1929. Designed by Cavanagh and Cavanagh Architects in a similar manner to the original building, the sanctuary was constructed of reinforced concrete and brick by B Robinson. The third Archbishop of Brisbane, James Duhig, officially opened the additions. The interior of the chancel with its marble wall linings and altar rails, terrazzo floors, domed plaster ceiling and stained glass windows was more ornate than the rest of the church. A new marble altar by sculptor and monumental mason, Frank Williams of Ipswich, who carried out all the marble work, was installed. The original chapel, no longer required for school purposes, was demolished at this time.

With the influx of Catholic immigrants into the area after World War Two, St Mary's became an important gathering place for a number of ethnic groups. Prior to the war the Lebanese community had used the church for Mass, which was said by their own priest, until their church in Ernest Street was constructed. A variety of Catholic communities, who lived initially in South Brisbane after emigrating, were invited to use the church. Italian, Dutch, Polish, Lithuanian and Slovenian people attended St Mary's for services conducted by their own priests. The Dutch Men's Choir performed at the church during the 1950s and 1960s. As late as 1993, the Lithuanian and Slovenian communities regularly met at the church. The Lithuanians conducted a regular Sunday Mass. The Slovenians, whose priest lived in Sydney, used the church less frequently. A plaque in Lithuanian is mounted on a wall at St Mary's. The school closed in 1964 and the school, convent and belfry have since been demolished. The St Vincent de Paul centre now occupies the site of the school. Of the original complex of buildings at St Mary's only the church and presbytery, which has been substantially altered, remain.

The suburb of South Brisbane has changed dramatically since the town of South Brisbane was proclaimed in 1885. The town boundaries then included Kangaroo Point, Woolloongabba, Highgate Hill and West End, and St Mary's was the main catholic church in that area. St Mary's started a fund in 1885 to build a new church at Kangaroo Point and then started another fund in 1889 to build this new St Mary's. Kangaroo Point then became a separate parish, and that reduced the population of South Brisbane. In the 1920's a new church was built in the new parish of West End, reducing once again the population of South Brisbane and St Mary's.

Another factor affecting St Mary's was that the residential nature of South Brisbane declined dramatically in the 1920's, as the railway and wharves contributed to a more industrial nature. Newer outer suburbs were opening up and these were more desirable areas for families.. South Brisbane became an area full of industries rather than full of family homes. People who had had long association with the church no longer lived in the area. By 1964, when the school closed, there was only a small residential area around the church, and by 1980, the church was an island in an industrial area, with a small congregation and no money.

By that time, the church needed painting and a new roof, and the presbytery was in poor condition. With the financial and practical help of devoted parishioner, Gordon Smith, the presbytery was painted and made liveable for Fr Peter Kennedy, the administrator of St Mary's, and south east Qld prison chaplain. In 1985, while still prison chaplain, he had the church painted, inside and out, on a work release program for prisoners.

The church was placed on the State Heritage list in 2004, and that is when efforts were started to apply for funding from Federal and State bodies for maintenance and restoration work to be done on the Church. An architect was engaged to draw up a conservation management plan.

And then in 2006, the Brisbane City Council announced it would build a bridge across the river which would cause traffic to increase along Merivale Street, beside the church. The Council acknowledged that St Mary's church was part of the South Bank Cultural Precinct, and they made an offer to the diocese to finance noise and dust reduction measures for St Mary's - problems that were anticipated with the increased traffic from the new bridge.

Hence the installation of air conditioners and an air flow system, the repair and sealing of the doors and windows, with the restoration of the leadlight and stained glass windows and double glazing. All of this work was/is being overseen by City Council heritage and acoustic consultants, and is managed by the archdiocesan property and building officers.