

St John's Catholic Church –Riverstone

Laurie Hession

The first Catholic Church at Riverstone was blessed and opened by His Grace, Archbishop Vaughan on 2nd July 1882. Named St John's, the Church was of weatherboard construction with corrugated iron roof and apparently stood where the present Church now stands, being demolished about mid April, 1904, following the ceremony of the blessing and laying of the foundation stone of the present Church on Sunday 10th April 1904, by His Eminence Cardinal Moran. An apology was offered for Dr Sheehy, the old Pastor who had given the five acres of ground upon which the Church stood. Timber from the original Church was bought by Samuel and Sarah Mason and used in the construction of their home at Marsden Park. While the present Church was being built, Services were held in the Oddfellows Hall, Riverstone.

The new Church of St John's cost £950 (\$1,900). It is sixty feet long by twenty eight feet wide and seventeen feet high to the eaves, the Sanctuary is eighteen by twenty feet. The interior of the slate roof is diagonally boarded and varnished making a very ornamental finish, the windows being of coloured glass to add further beauty, with some stained glass work on the windows behind the altar. A wooden altar rail, with a centre gate, separated the Sanctuary from the body of the Church. This communion rail was removed as a result of changes following Vatican II.

The original Stations of The Cross were much larger than the present set, being approximately three feet by two feet, there were coloured pictures in a wooden frame depicting our Lord's journey to His Crucifixion. The present set have the figures attached to a flat board, and painted in contrasting colours giving a three dimensional effect making the figures more pronounced.

A choir stand, three steps high, was built into the left rear comer, with the Confessional in the opposite rear comer. Both these have been removed to gain more space for extra seating, the choir stand mid 1950s and the Confessional about mid 1970s. The original seating in the Church consisted of three rows, two rows hard up against the side walls, with a third row up the middle, this provided two aisles. Father Shiel obtained longer seats making two rows, allowing a narrow aisle up each side and for the first time, a centre aisle. This seating came from St Ives Parish, where Father Shiel's brother, Father Peter Shiel was Parish Priest. Riverstone's old seating was sold to Davidson Parish. Music was supplied by a foot operated organ, this has been replaced with a more modern electronic organ and placed up front near the Altar.

A Plaque on the left gate post at the Garfield Road entrance to the Church grounds reads as follows:-

"Erected by the Parishioners of St John's Riverstone in grateful remembrance of the late Venerable Archpriest. Bryan McDonnell, Parish Priest from 1898 to 1924. R.I.P."

During the early years of St Johns, funds were augmented by the Annual Tea and Social, Bazaars (Fetes) and House Parties which consisted of dancing, card games etc.

Riverstone was administered by the Parish Priest of Windsor until it was made a separate Parish in 1951. Father Thomas Keogh was the first Parish Priest from 1951 to February 1961. The Foundation Stone for the Presbytery was laid on the 9th November 1952, by the then Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Gilroy, with the completed Presbytery, built by W. McNamara, being opened in 1953.

Previous to the opening of St John's School, two Nuns from the Good Samaritan Sisters of Windsor, travelled with the Priest to teach Catechism to the children, following the Sunday Mass. One may presume that as a consequence of this involvement with the Parish, the Good Samaritan Sisters would have established a Convent at Riverstone, but because of some disagreement with Father Michael Coffey, Parish Priest of Windsor, he introduced the Order Of The Poor Clare Sisters to Riverstone.

These Sisters were already established at Richmond having taken over in 1943 & from *the* Good Samaritans who had occupied this Convent since it was built in 1878. The Sisters travelled daily by train to teach at St John's School that opened on 31st January 1950, until their Convent at Riverstone was opened in 1957.

The grounds around the Church were tar sealed about 1962, this was a vast improvement as the soil was mostly clay and a terrible mess during wet weather.

A Church Bell was erected during the 1950s, between the school shelter shed (now Hall) and the Church. This was rung to signify that Mass was about to begin, but was not used for very long. It was dismantled and re erected at the Tyburn Sisters Convent, Garfield Road East in 1988.

A letter dated 27th March 1987 was received from the Heritage Council of New South Wales advising that a Section 130 Order had been placed on the Church to provide for a short term protection. Blacktown City Council announced in June 1987, that a preservation order had been placed on St John's Church, together with many other buildings in the area, by the Heritage Council. The then Parish Priest, Father Anderson, objected to this order, explaining the difficulties the Parish would face in the event of a new Church being required, pointing out among other things, that the foundations of the Church were unsound and the slate roof near the end of its life. The Blacktown City Council supported this objection and subsequently the order was revoked.

Vocations to the Priesthood from Riverstone Parish have been Arthur Bambridge and James Gallen Young women who heeded the call to join the Religious Life include: three sisters, Mary, Elizabeth and Cecilia Daley, their cousin Ariel Frances Daley, sisters Annie and Angela Hession, Mary Mason, Carmel Bambridge, Monica McNamara, Marie Manchie, Patricia Gallen.

Priests who have served Riverstone include Fathers Thomas Keogh, Munday, Bert Callose, Joseph Croal, Brendan Shiel, Robert Anderson Eugene Stockton, Kevin Walsh.