

PAPER 2

AUGUSTUS WELBY NORTHMORE PUGIN & THE PUGIN CHAPEL, BRISBANE

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Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin

St Stephen's Chapel, or the Pugin Chapel, is so called, because its design is attributed to Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), the 19th century neo-gothic architect, designer of the English Houses of Parliament. Though he never visited our country, the *National Dictionary of Biography* (1909, vol.16, p.452) makes reference to his "various designs for [churches in] Australia and the colonies."

St. Stephen's, Brisbane, is not the only church building to make this claim in mainland Australia. Others are St Benedict's, Broadway, Augustine's, Balmain, St Francis Xavier, Berrima, St Gregory's, Queenbeyan. Of these, St Stephen's, Brisbane, has the least of the original fabric remaining; due to a poor choice of stone in the original construction. (Australian Construction Services Report).

I have chosen to interpret my subject rather broadly and address the various events that were played out on the site of the St Stephen's Cathedral Precinct during the 19th century, rather than restricting my gaze to the Pugin Chapel building itself.

The Land

The land which forms the St Stephen's Cathedral precinct was first applied for in 1845 and was surveyed on that occasion by Assistant Surveyor Burnett. Later, on 12 September 1847, a special survey plan was made by Assistant Surveyor James Warner. This plan marks out 3 blocks on the Elizabeth St frontage for a Church and 3 blocks facing Charlotte St. as the site for a School and Parsonage. (Martin 1988:81-82)

The application was granted and settled around the end of 1848, and it appears in the Surveyor General's Grant Abstract for 1849. (Martin 1988:81-82) Deeds of Title were granted on 26 November, 1849, under the terms of Governor Bourke's *Church Act* of 1836, for N.S.W. Presumably, the school was relocated to a rude slab building behind the Church at about the same time.

Two blocks of land to the east of the original grant of land were subsequently purchased, on 1 November 1851 (Elizabeth St) and on 21 January 1854 (Charlotte St). (Martin 1988: 105 & 113)

When the school was moved to the site, from its original location, in 1849, there were already 56 pupils enrolled. (Tobin vol.1:3)

I might add a note here about school enrolments, which remains true for the whole of our period of study. The 20th century of school enrolment, for an academic year from age six to mid teens, was not the norm in the 19th century. Rather – and this was only after 1875 – primary school attendance was only compulsory for students aged between 6 and 12 for 60 days a year. The rest of the year's attendance was left up to individual discretion. (Tobin vol.3:p.1 & 4) There is an interesting variation in the amount of time pupils spent at school. For some it was their whole school life, while for others it may have been a matter of weeks or months. But, whatever the length, the choice to attend was one which had been deliberately made, and that choice had a lasting impact on them.

The Denominational School Board

On 19 January 1850, *The Moreton Bay Courier* reported the establishment of a Roman Catholic Denominational School Board in Brisbane. Its members were Rev. James Hanly, William Augustine Duncan and W Fitzpatrick. The Government paid the Board £30 for the education of boys and £30 for girls. (Martin 1988:94; Tobin vol.1:3)

Rev. James Hanly was a Tipperary man (born 1815), who signed up for the Australian mission while still a seminarian. Ordained in Sydney by Bishop Polding in September 1843, he found himself appointed to Brisbane as parish priest, three months later. The whole State was his parish; and in jest he used describe himself as "Parish Priest of Queensland". (Hanlon 1997) In 1844, he established his claim as a horseman of note, by riding from Brisbane to Sydney in order to attend the first Catholic Church synod ever held in Australia. The journey took a week. It must surely rank among the best of the authenticated rides in the history of Australia.

Hanly was the driving force behind the construction of the Pugin Chapel, “old St Stephens”. He even lent a hand in with the physical labour when required.

In 1857, he was transferred to Singleton. This was followed by appointments to Yass, Penrith and Manly. He died in office as Chaplain to Rosebank Convent, Five Dock, aged 80, on 3 February 1895. (Hanlon 1997).

William Augustine Duncan (ADB 1, 1966:335-6) is no less colourful a character than his Parish Priest. Born a Presbyterian in Scotland, he had converted to Catholicism at age 16. Subsequently, in 1837, he had come to Sydney as a teacher, in the company of Rev. William Bernard Ullathorne. But, once in the Colony, a different path awaited him. In 1839, he was chosen as editor of Archbishop Polding’s *Australasian Chronicle*, a paper which for a time had a wider circulation than the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He incurred clerical displeasure over his attacks on privilege and espousal of principles of social equality. As a Scotsman, he disliked the “ex-convict Irish parvenu who dominated the Sydney laity” and frequently spoke against them. When he criticised the politics of Daniel O’Connell, it was too much, and he was sacked. He tried to set up his own paper, *The Weekly Register*, but the project failed, leaving him broke.

He joined the civil service and, at the urging of his friend Governor Gipps, secured the post of Sub-collector of Customs at Moreton Bay, arriving in Brisbane with his wife and two children in June 1846. For a time, he rented a house from Andrew Petrie, on the corner of Wharf and Queen Streets. But from about 1854 he moved into his own house, “Dara” (later acquired in turn by Patrick Mayne and Bishop James Quinn). Duncan St in Fortitude Valley’s Chinatown is named after him. While Sub-Collector of Customs, he selected the site of the present Old Customs House for that purpose. In Brisbane Church affairs, besides serving on the Denominational School Board, he also served as organist in the Pugin Chapel.

In 1859, he returned to Sydney as Collector of Customs there. He died there in 1885, some 4 years after Bishop Quinn.

Of the third member of the Board, W. Fitzpatrick, I have no knowledge whatsoever. Does anyone?

The School Buildings

Henry Ensor was a pupil at St. Stephen’s School in the early 1850s. Later, he recalled that ‘one half of the school house comprised a bough shed, the other half a bark humpy. On fine days the scholars enjoyed the cool shed, and on wet days they were dry in the humpy.’ (Martin 1988:110) The dimensions of the school

building were 40 feet by 20 feet and 10 feet high. It was intended to accommodate 80 children. (O'Donoghue 1972:33; Tobin vol.1:4)

By 1855, however the enrolment was about 150, of which the average daily attendance was 100. (Tobin vol.1:4)

During the 1850s Fr Hanly erected a stone building behind the Church, on land granted for "the Parsonage". Since Hanly had his own residence already, in Fortitude Valley, at "Castleracket" (on the site of the present St. James' School), one might inquire as to the purpose of this building. It would be reasonable to presume that it had something to do with the school next door. Was it a residence for its teachers? (Martin 1988:110) Or did it have some other purpose as a school building?

When the present cathedral was being built in the 1870s, the stone from this building was used to erect a building to the west of the Pugin Chapel (See illustration from 1870, Martin 1988:151). Mr J.A. Hayes declared in his reminiscences that this occurred in 1871 or 1872. Later it was roofed and floored and became the school's music room. It was finally demolished in 1988 (Martin 1988:110)

The Teaching Staff

The names of some of the teaching staff have come down to us, together with the years during which they taught there. But a degree of confusion exists. An example of this surrounds the career of Mary B[o]urke. Susan Tobin (vol.1:2) records that Michael Bourke and his wife Mary had been with the school since its inception in 1845. Their salary was £30 per year. Fr. Denis Martin says of Mary Burke that she left the staff at the end of 1851, having been married to James Hurly by Fr. Hanly, in Tenterfield on 21 March 1848. (Martin 1988:110) Which is correct?

Other teachers were: Richard Hayes (1849); Joseph Reilly (described by Fr. McEnroe as 'a superior teacher', who remained for only part of the year 1853), Denis Keely [or Kelly] (who replaced Reilly at the end of the year), J.A. Herne (1859), J. Askins (1860), J. Tobin (1861). (Tobin vol.1:3; Martin 1988:110 & 149)

Visit from the Commission of Inquiry into Education

In August 1855, the NSW Legislative Council sent a Commission of Inquiry to inspect St. Stephen's School. Its report read as follows:

“This school is held in a new slab building; without glass or ceiling, and too small; even at the time of our visit (August), it was intolerably hot and close. The furniture is insufficient and badly arranged, the apparatus and books are scanty. The last supply of books was furnished 15 months ago.

“The children read tolerably, have but little comprehension of the subject, and spell fairly. The writing is not good. Tolerable progress has been made in arithmetic, but little is known of grammar or geography. The answers in catechism are good, but they possess only a slight acquaintance with scripture.

“The children are irregular and unpunctual; clean but in bad order.”
(as cited in Martin 1988:121).

The Issue of State Aid

Prior to separation from NSW, education remained largely under the control of church groups and private bodies, who each received a government subsidy to assist them in their work. Following the passage of the Education Act of 1860, the 1870s saw the gradual end of the government subsidy and the movement of lay teachers from Catholic schools. These were replaced in ever increasing numbers by religious teachers. (Tobin vol.1:20)

Some Catholic schools, though not all, took advantage of the provision in the Education Act of 1860, which allowed them to be declared “non-vested” schools. However, there were difficulties in seeking to retain “non-vested” status. Chief among these were requirements that teachers employed by “non-vested” schools were unable to provide religious instruction, and that they should accept a curriculum determined by the government Board of Education.

At first, Mother Vincent Whitty was unwilling to seek “non-vested” status for her schools, but, having come under pressure from Bishop Quinn, some priests and lay people of the diocese, she decided she could resist no longer and applied for this classification in 1866. (Tobin vol.6:4) A stratagem was adopted to get around the requirement that teachers in “non-vested” schools not teach religion. Sisters from All Hallows School would attend St. Stephen’s to conduct religious instruction. In this way, a provision of the Act, which resulted in the closure of many Anglican schools, was circumvented by the Catholic Church, for the time being.

It is of significance that the other group of religious sisters present in Brisbane at the time – the Sisters of St Joseph, led by Mother Mary MacKillop – steadfastly refused to act in a similar way to Mother Vincent Whitty and the Sisters of Mercy.

She preferred the idea of a purely Catholic school in which the Board of Education would have no influence. In a circular letter, written on 19 March 1870, she declared: "Even granted that a free use of our religious principles might be allowed, we must be left with our own system." When faced with pressure, from diocesan authorities, to conform as Mother Vincent had done she refused to do so, even when threatened with the withdrawal of financial assistance by those authorities. Under such circumstances, she retorted, she would beg if necessary to support her schools. (Tobin vol.6:4)

It was the beginning of a rift with Bishop Quinn which was to develop further. The administration of St Stephen's School, on the other hand, represented the bishop's preferred way of proceeding.

In 1875 a secular Education Act withdrew government aid to church schools but its introduction was a phased one which meant some subsidies remained until 1880. (Moran:627; O'Farrell 1968:121).

It is surely one of the ironies of history that the Pugin Chapel and the site of St Stephen's School is today a shrine dedicated to the now *Blessed* Mary MacKillop. The victory has gone to the vanquished, as is so often the case in the history of Christianity.

But we have strayed from our path. Let's return to the tale of St Stephen's School under the care of the Sisters of Mercy.

The Sisters of Mercy

In May 1861, six nuns, under the leadership of Mother Vincent Whitty arrived to take charge of the school. (Martin 1988:152). They moved into little house next door to St. Stephen's Church, which became their convent. (The building had originally been built to accommodate Dean Rigney in 1859.) (Martin 1988:154).

The day the Sisters commenced at the school, some 80 children turned up. Books and equipment were as scanty as they had been when the parliamentary commissioners visited the school in 1855. Fresh material had to be obtained from Ireland as none was available locally (O' Donoghue 1972:33; Tobin vol.1:8-9).

Amongst the pieces of equipment the first Sisters of Mercy brought with them were a piano and a harmonium. The former did not survive the voyage unscathed, but, when restrung in Brisbane, it went into operation in the classroom at St Stephen's where it was used to accompany the children as they learned singing and the rudiments of music.

Indeed, Mother Vincent Whitty subscribed to the notion that a piano was as essential to any school as a blackboard, and within two years the original piano had been joined by at least 3 others (O'Donoghue 1972:33; Tobin vol.5:1). Such a proliferation saw the foundation of the idea of music as a fundamental part of a convent school education. In fact, once State funding had been withdrawn from Catholic schools, the income generated by the conducting of music lessons became a most important source of convent income.

Post-primary classes and boarding students also became part of the scene at St Stephen's. The school register shows that on 15 December 1861, Annie Tighe, of Drayton, enrolled as a boarding student, thereby making her the first such student at a Catholic school in Queensland. She remained a pupil of the Sisters until 31 March 1864. (Tobin vol.3:1 & 3; vol.4:1). The tradition which was to blossom in the years ahead, with the creation of boarding schools for both boys and girls, had begun. In November 1863 the older students and boarders were moved to the newly established All Hallows School at Duncan's Hill, Fortitude Valley.

While the school was still at St Stephen's, daughters of squatters, farmers and businessmen came for their education from as far afield as Cardwell, Surat and Sydney as well as closer districts. They were not all daughters of the rich, but their parents were aware of the benefits that a convent education by the sisters would provide. (O'Donoghue 1972:59)

Two little cottages near St Stephen's School were quickly filled with boarding students. The girls provided their own bedsteads, bedding and mosquito nets, as well as the usual personal requirements. Distances from home and the length of time needed to travel there and back to Brisbane, even during the Christmas break, meant that some girls spent the entire period of their schooling away from home.

For these girls Mother Vincent Whitty and her Sisters had to fill the role of mother as well as teacher. The cathedral precincts were the scenes of picnic and birthday celebrations; while evening entertainment included playing the piano and singing. A special treat for the girls was a trip by steamer up to Ipswich to visit the nuns and girls at St Mary's school there. (Tobin vol.4:2).

The select school, as it was known, catered for basic education in reading, writing, grammar arithmetic and geography for girls aged from 5 to late teens. These lessons were taken with the children in the general classes. In this way, each group was able to benefit from the presence of the other; it tended to provide a levelling-up process very much needed in early Brisbane society. Furthermore,

the practicality of numbers of available teachers would have made any separation an impossibility.

Mother Vincent Whitty was the only certificated teacher among the first group of teachers, but in the teaching of select subjects she was ably assisted by sisters highly talented in the fine arts. They trained the girls in the refinements appropriate for a well-educated 19th century lady: music, singing, painting and needlework, plus English and Irish history. (Tobin vol.3:3)

Where the education of boys was concerned, the regulations of the Board of Education prevented convent schools from taking boys over the age of 8. If they wished to attend a select school, they would have to wait until the arrival of the Christian Brothers in 1875. (Tobin vol.3:6).

Structurally, the Pugin Chapel also changed. About 1870 a makeshift wooden annex was attached to one side of the building and doors were cut in the stone wall to allow access to the main building. The Sisters of Mercy used the annex as a classroom. (Australian Construction Services Report).

The Christian Brothers

In May 1874, the present St. Stephen's Cathedral was opened; and when the Christian Brothers arrived in Brisbane on 5 July 1875 the old sandstone church, with its attached wooden shed was converted into their school building. Bishop Quinn blessed it for this purpose. (Martin 1988:166; Tobin vol.3:14) On commencement, the number of boys enrolled with the Brothers was 26 (Tobin vol.3:14) This had risen to 84 a year later; and the figure kept increasing. (Australian Construction Services Report).

Pioneering brothers on the staff at St. Stephens were Joseph Barrett, Brendan Nugent, and Stanislaus Nunan (Tobin vol.3:14)

Brother Barrett, in striving to prepare his pupils to be able to sit for the University of Sydney exams, tackled a curriculum that included English, French, Latin, Algebra, Geometry, English History, Geology and Geography; a formidable task in anybody's language. This was made all the more difficult by the variety of subjects the boys chose. Success was slow in coming; but he accepted that. What he found difficult to cope with was the very young age of the boys in the senior school. In 1879, the average age of the boys was under 14 years; and in the first years the Brothers were at Gregory Terrace, this average would fall even lower. (Tobin vol.3:15-16).

The first boarders with the Brothers were boys who lived with the priests in their house at Leichardt St, Spring Hill. From there, they went out daily to class at either St Stephen's or Gregory Tce. Their homework was supervised by some of the teachers from St. James's. (Tobin vol.4:6)

The secondary school boys remained at St Stephen's until 1876, when a classroom was built attached to the Brothers' residence on Gregory Terrace. The primary boys stayed even longer: until 1879, when the first school building was completed at Gregory Terrace. (Tobin vol.3:14). From that time onward the building became part of the Sisters of Mercy school. (Martin 1988:166)

Postscript

Instead of collapsing with the withdrawal of State Aid in 1880, the Catholic schools appeared to grow. By way of example, the archdiocesan returns for 1881 show 170 enrolments for the senior school at St. Stephens and 204 for the infant grades. (Moran 629)

In 1892 the slab school building was replaced by a solid brick building (the present Cathedral offices), which were blessed and opened by Cardinal Moran. (Martin 1988:126, n.16).

From this time onward, St Stephen's School simply took its place within the network of parochial schools scattered throughout the archdiocese.

In 1965, St Stephen's School closed. Urban development and the changing face of Queensland Catholic Education meant that it was no longer a viable proposition. Thenceforth its buildings would be used for other purposes.

In 1995, the Archdiocese of Brisbane commissioned Australian Construction Services to prepare a *Conservation Management Plan* for the building. Its conclusion can also serve as a fitting closure for this paper: "Above all other considerations, St. Stephen's Chapel is significant to the Roman Catholic Community as a tangible reminder of the pioneering efforts of their early priests, brothers, sisters and parishioners in Queensland. St Stephen's represents a living evolving church."

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