

**THE EARLY HISTORY  
OF ST BRENDAN'S MOOROOKA**

*Joan McGrath*

*On Sunday, 22 March 2009, parishioners gathered in St Brendan's Church, Moorooka, to celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their Church. Bishop Joseph Oudeman concelebrated the 9.00 a.m. Mass with Father John Scarrott, the Parish Priest.*

*Also present were the Sisters of St Joseph with their Provincial Leader, Sr Moya Campbell, and they joined Sr Giuseppe Walsh, the Pastoral Associate, and local and visiting Josephite Sisters in the celebrations.*

*Sr Moya gave the history of the Sisters of St Joseph in the Moorooka district.*

*Joan McGrath, a descendant of the originators of the Catholic Faith in the district, presented the following history of the early days of the parish.*

The story of St Brendan's Church, Moorooka, could be said to have commenced in September 1841 in County Wexford, Ireland.

James Freney, his wife Catherine Murphy, five sons: Thomas - ten, Michael - eight, Martin - six, Matthew - three, and Patrick - one; with James's widowed sister, Anne Margaret, left their little village of Kilmshali, near Bunclody on the River Slaney, to travel to Australia as assisted immigrants on the 560 ton sailing ship *Hope*, carrying 290 bounty immigrants, 6 other passengers, and 28 crew.

James' first wife, Anne Skelton, the mother of the five boys, had died shortly after the birth of their youngest child, Patrick, in April 1841 so Catherine was taking on quite a responsibility as a new wife and step-mother.

They arrived safely in Sydney on 29 January 1842, after a direct voyage of 110 days, during which 12 passengers died and three children were born. The family was initially accommodated at the Immigration Barracks. Sadly, Patrick aged 21 months, died soon after arrival, and was buried from St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney on 11 February 1842.

The family travelled north to the New England district and settled near Armidale, working for a pastoralist Arthur Palmer – later to become Sir Arthur Palmer, President of the Legislative Assembly and first Lieutenant-Governor of the State of Queensland. Thomas later told his grandchildren that he was shepherding sheep, aged 11.

A son, Edward, was born to James and Catherine on June 11, 1844 and was baptised on one of his long country tours by Father Hanley, who was charged with the care of the huge parish of New England and Moreton Bay. In 1848 James' brother Martin with his wife, 4 daughters and 2 sons, arrived in Australia and joined the original family in the Armidale area.

In 1850 James and his family headed north, pausing briefly in Ipswich, and then on down to the newly opened settlement of Brisbane where he purchased 56 acres of land at Coopers Plains in January 1851.

Thomas, the eldest son, married in 1855 and brought his bride back to the family property. Two daughters were born to them at Coopers Plains, but by the time their first son and third child, James, was born on 26 January 1860 Thomas was a teacher at the school established at St Stephen's. Their address at that time was given as Charlotte Street, Brisbane, so possibly the house was provided by the school.

Thomas moved back to the property at Coopers Plains and went on to be registered as a surveyor, a Justice of the Peace and a Councillor of the Yeerongpilly Shire before its incorporation into the Greater Brisbane City Council. All the family were devout Catholics, travelling regularly to Mass at the little Chapel of St Stephen in Elizabeth Street Brisbane.

St Mary's Church at South Brisbane opened in 1865 and St Joseph's Kangaroo Point in 1870, but these still entailed long journeys for the local people. The population in the Coopers Plains area was increasing and with it the number of Catholics travelling long distances to Mass. Thomas decided it was time to do something about this. *The Queenslander* of 11 May 1875 notes: 'a very neat Catholic chapel has been erected on a nice rising site, the gift of T. Freney, Esq. J.P. our district surveyor.'

The little church erected on the Freney land (only the third Catholic church on the south side of Brisbane) was named St Patrick's in honour of Ireland patron saint and in memory of the baby who had died so soon after the family's arrival in Sydney. The site of the church was in Beatty Road, Acacia Ridge, opposite James Freney Park, and where the present Acacia Ridge Primary School now stands.

The early records are poor but Father Enright, parish priest of Beaudesert, recorded 3 baptisms of Freney children at Coopers Plains in 1875 – the earliest on 8 March 1875. Many baptisms and marriages took place there, all entered in the church records at St Mary's Beaudesert. Father Enright rode a horse from Beaudesert to say Mass at St Patrick's at least three or four times a year, staying overnight at the Freney home in the 'priest's room' which was kept exclusively for these occasions. I remember being told stories about these visits – the whole family sat down to midday dinner with the priest and he and Thomas would discuss all manner of things. Out in the back kitchen the pots of water being heated for washing up would be boiling dry but no one would attempt to leave the table until Great-Grandfather and the priest had terminated their talk - no matter how long it lasted.

The population growth was towards the city with the opening and extension of the train line. In 1912 moves commenced to establish a church at Annerley. Two of Thomas Freney's sons, James and Walter, were members of the committee set up for this purpose.

Travelling from Moorooka to Mary Immaculate Church was still quite a journey, so in 1918 a committee was set up at Moorooka to build a church here. Meetings were held at the home of James and Mary Freney in Keats Street, under the presidency of Father T. Moloney of Ipswich Road, Annerley, with James Curly as secretary and treasurer. Other committee members were Mr and Mrs Maloney, Mr and Mrs Steel, Mr and Mrs O'Keeffe, Mr Ryan, Mr James Hannifin, Mr Ryan, Mr Thomas McGrath and Mr Fahy. The committee drew up a proposal which was duly approved by Archbishop Duhig. The proposed site was that of Smith's dairy on the corner of Hawtree Street and Hamilton Road. Mr Smith was strongly anti-Catholic so it was decided that James Curley would conduct all negotiations to purchase without mentioning the intended purpose to which the land would be put.

The Coopers Plains church was demolished, the timber sold and the proceeds contributed towards building the church at Moorooka. As well the altar stone, some of the pews and the christening shell were transferred to Moorooka. The altar stone is still here and the pews are in the choir loft. The christening shell has disappeared. Frank Freney (another of Thomas's sons) donated the statues and stands, as well as the original Stations of the Cross. He also gave to the parish part of the land on which the present-day school now stands. That land became a tennis court which many of us enjoyed over the years.

The archbishop blessed the foundation stone on 15 December 1918 and the church was opened on 16 March 1919 to the great excitement of the people. For the next two years St Brendan's was part of the Ipswich Road parish under the care, at various times, of Fathers Gallagher, Moloney, Lynch, Ahern and Troy. The first wedding in the church was that of James Curley and Muriel Freney on 8 October 1919 and the first baptism was that of their son Denis James Curley on October 1920.

Father Flanagan was appointed parish priest of the newly separated Moorooka parish in 1929. The Catholic children at that time travelled to Ipswich Road to school. The Education Department had commenced the building of a state school at Moorooka to open for the 1929 school year and Father Flanagan determined that none of his flock would be taken by the new school. Archbishop Duhig arranged for Sisters of St Joseph to come to Moorooka – Sisters Imelda, Bernadette and Leonora. School commenced with some 60 pupils and classes were first held in the church. Later the side verandahs of the church were enclosed for schoolrooms.

With no convent the Sisters came daily from Ipswich Road and their meals and morning and afternoon teas were supplied by five ladies of the parish – Mrs McKew, Mrs Stafford, Mrs Kelly, Mrs O'Connor and Mrs Curley. Later a house was rented on the corner of Newman Street and Hamilton Road where they resided until the convent was built.

There have been many changes over the years but some things remain the same. Four out of our five St Vincent de Paul members attended school here and in the congregation here today there are many past pupils of the school. Many of them were baptised and married here, many have attended St Brendan's all their lives, as have their parents before them.

Others came early in their married lives and their children were baptised and attended school here. Others, still, are newcomers. Some of us had grandparents and great-grandparents who were members of the parish. Whatever our time at St Brendan's – all are welcome.

90 years is a long time – but I am sure St Brendan's will go on well into the future to serve the needs of its parishioners.