



**St James' and St John's Church Clifton**

## **THE HISTORY OF ST JAMES' AND ST JOHN'S CHURCH CLIFTON**

*15 February, 2011*

*Mrs Leona Murphy*

I have lived in the Clifton area for fifty-one years. For the first forty-one years, my husband Reg and I lived on agricultural land belonging to his family since 1872. Our five children and twelve grandchildren are the fifth and sixth generations of Murphys living on that land.

Because I wanted to record the family history for our children, I wrote a small book titled *From Cork to Clifton*. It was the researching of family genealogy that sparked my interest in recording local history. Later, I volunteered to write the history of the Leyburn Catholic church and then various brief histories of local schools and churches followed.

In 2001, Reg and I retired to the township of Clifton, population nearly 1000. For those who haven't yet visited our town, it lies about halfway between the cities of Toowoomba and Warwick in an agricultural area producing wheat, barley, corn, sunflowers, peanuts, sheep and cattle, and probably soon, coal.

I was asked by our parish priest to compile a history of our Catholic church. This sounded fairly straight forward. I quickly found that one of the difficulties of writing a history of this kind is deciding how the information should be grouped. How do you assemble a history of a parish with four small but distinct communities?

The contribution from the people of Back Plains, Pilton, Leyburn and Nobby needed to be recorded and three of these areas had Catholic churches. I thought about this for a long time as, although I wanted the history to be chronological, it was difficult to insert information without breaking the thread of the narrative.

My eventual solution was to create separate sections for parish priests of Clifton, parish buildings and parish organizations. What was left evolved into five chapters of the various epochs in our parish history.

Clifton had its beginnings in 1869 when the railway line split the vast holding named *Clifton Downs Run*. Half of this Run was made available by the Government of the day for selection.

With the railway line came James Mowen. He had made a living by following its construction, supplying food and liquid refreshments to the rail gangs. James, as you will see, is significant in our early Church History.

The building of a Catholic church in Clifton was mooted in 1884, when the population was thought to be around 270 people. These were mainly of Irish and German descent and included a goodly percentage of Catholics. Money for the building of churches in those early days usually came from subscription lists circulated among the people. This list from 1888 has survived.

By this time James Mowen was well on the way to financial stability. He had established the first store-cum-shanty inn, obtained a publican's licence and built the first hotel in the town. Jim, as he was known, owned many parcels of Clifton land and helped church finances considerably by the donation of a one-acre block of ground for the place of worship to be built.

By 1888 sufficient money was subscribed and the Catholic church was erected in February of that year. It was in fact, the first church in the town of Clifton.

Some thousands of acres of land in the Clifton area had been subdivided. The expansion of the settled area was so rapid, that before the church was six months old, the finance committee was discussing the enlargement of it. The 36 500 acres of excellent farming land of *Headington Hill Station* was resumed for resettlement and became available for re-selection in 1896.

The rush to obtain this prime agricultural land caused such an influx of settlers that the church committee took the decision that, instead of adding to the church, they would build a new one.

So began anew the daunting task of raising money for another church.

Jim Mowan passed away in 1897. He left no direct descendants and was duly buried in the Clifton Cemetery. His will provided £100 for the Catholic church and also set aside the substantial amount of £93.17s for a memorial to be built over his grave. In 1899, the executors of the Will, John Logan, John Gillam and William Dalton, came up with a grand idea. With the approval of the parish priest, Father James Horan, they decided that the proposed new church would be the memorial to James Mowen. Father Horan called a meeting and announced that Jim's body would be exhumed and finally laid to rest on the site of the new church. I wonder if this was what Jim Mowen had in mind when he wrote his Will.

His disinterment is recorded in the local newspaper, the *Clifton Courier* of April 1899 and states:

Our new memorial church is in the course of erection and will be a large and commodious edifice when finished. The...[remains] of the late James Mowen were removed and deposited under the new church...

Land for the church was purchased adjacent to the existing church. In 1900, the Memorial Church of St James and St John was officially opened by the Archbishop of Brisbane, Robert Dunne, who as a young priest on horseback in the 1870s had ministered to his flock on the *Clifton Downs Run*.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the district, the Catholic members of the pioneering settlement around Back Plains felt that a church was warranted in that locality. Back Plains was then part of the Toowoomba Parish. This district has large portions of hilly country, settled in the 1870s mainly by German immigrants who preferred the higher country

to the black soil plains which were favoured by the Irish. Back Plains is about 14 kilometres from the Clifton church and was regarded as too far to travel for Mass by sulky or horseback.

The Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Back Plains was blessed and opened in May 1901. Priests from Toowoomba came on a regular basis to celebrate Sunday Mass there.

Clifton Parish has had only five parish priests.

Father Cosgrove was the first and he came in 1910 when the new parish was formed by Archbishop Dunne. Until then, the spiritual needs of the Catholic people were met by priests, travelling by horseback from Warwick. As soon as he arrived in Clifton, Father Cosgrove set about building a place to live. He delighted to remind people that he was living in his new presbytery just seven months after his coming to Clifton.

The people of Clifton wanted a convent. For some time funds were being put aside for this purpose. Money was raised in many and varied ways. A clipping from the *Clifton Courier* newspaper shows one fundraiser: a dance in Mrs Twomey's barn in 1913.

The first little church had for some time been used as a meeting place, gymnasium, etc. Father Cosgrove decided that, with the aid of a steam engine, it could be shifted across the road, and located next to the convent. So this was done and, with a few minor alterations, a school was provided.

In 1917, six Sisters of the Good Samaritan Order arrived by train from Brisbane—just prior to the official opening of the convent and school which took place in February of that year. The Good Samaritan Convent School continued until 1962.

Father Cosgrove next oversaw the building of the Hibernian Hall, built in 1921. St Michael's Hall, as it was named, has been the hub of social communal activity in the town ever since. The wonderful Catholic

Balls held annually were *the* social event of the year and occasioned much bustling preparation for several weeks.

The other building that was erected in Father Cosgrove's time was St Mary's Church at Pilton, built in 1934. This was the same year that Father Cosgrove left Australia to live in Ireland. His successor as parish priest of St James' and St John's was Monsignor Michael McKenna.

Monsignor McKenna had a huge influence on all things Catholic in Clifton and, it is rumoured, on diocesan happenings as well. He was a man of God—possessed of intelligence, a conservative outlook, ambitious foresight and a personality that evoked fear and awe.

In just ten months after his arrival, he had completed the enlargement and beautification of the memorial church. It now boasted seating for 500 people, two sacristies, a choir gallery accommodating fifty choristers, pulpit and vestment presses in magnificent silky oak and ornate décor covering the interior walls.

The opening was described by the *Warwick Argus* newspaper as a 'red-letter day for Clifton' and it occasioned the running of several trains to bring guests from Toowoomba, Warwick and other places near and far.

Next "The Mons" as he was called (but not in his hearing) turned his attention to the renovation of the presbytery. He transformed an ordinary Queenslander into a modern building of six bedrooms and three bathrooms.

At the time of this building activity, Australia was in its depression-recovering years. One can imagine the talk and excitement aroused when these wonderful openings took place.

Another lasting legacy from Monsignor McKenna was the installation of the magnificent stained-glass windows which grace the walls of our church. We have twenty-six stained-glass windows in the

Church of St James and St John. They were purchased from Brookes Robinson & Company, Melbourne and each window has been identified from a Brookes Robinson job book. Owing to the strong exterior grills put in for protection by Monsignor McKenna at the time of installation, to date not one pane of glass as been cracked.

Two of Monsignor's greatest concerns were always the welfare of the Sisters and the welfare of the school children. He was responsible for the construction in 1962, of a modern two-storeyed Convent School. The renamed St Francis de Sales School was staffed by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and was equipped with every state-of-the-art educational tool needed for the pupils' education.

Monsignor McKenna was parish priest of Clifton for a record time of thirty-nine years from 1935 to 1974.

Our third parish priest was Father Leslie Schuhkraft. He was an elderly man who remained with us for just seven years—when he retired. His first appointment as a parish priest when he was only 28 years of age is an indication of the high regard in which the Bishop held him.

Father Schuhkraft's first parish was Cunnamulla, and he told how his residential quarters consisted of a lean-to at the back of the parish church. Soon after his arrival, a herd of feral goats took up residence under the church, and it was common for Sunday Mass to be interrupted by the sounds of the billy-goats' horns knocking on the floor during their frequent fights. Fortunately Father didn't have to put up with such goings-on in Clifton.

Father Schuhkraft's advancing age and ill-health plus the responsibility of a large parish, brought about his retirement from Clifton in 1983 and he passed away in 1992 at Mt Olivet Hospital.

Father (late Monsignor) John Bennett came from Dirranbandi to be the next parish priest. We were extremely honoured to have this dear man in our midst for sixteen years—from 1983 to 1999. Genuine and unassuming, he was greatly loved by all who knew him. A keen

gardener, bookbinder and an avid reader who had an enviable library of books on wide-ranging subjects: theology, psychology, poetry, religion, Australian flora and fauna and Australian history were only some of his interests. It's been said that the only books Father's library didn't contain were children's books.

The whole community mourned when news came that he was found dead in his bed on a Sunday morning. The Mass-goers waiting in the church were stunned. His funeral at St Patrick's Cathedral, Toowoomba in 1999 was attended by a huge congregation.

Our present parish priest, Father Thomas Areekuzhy, is from Kerala in India and belongs to the Missionary Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. He came to Clifton in 2000 and, because of the shortage of Catholic priests, his parish now consists of Cambooya, Greenmount, Leyburn, Allora and Clifton. Five towns with five churches is a huge task but Father's exuberance and social skills carry him through.

In 1899, the Hibernian Society held its first meeting and other societies and groups followed. These were: the Children of Mary—a group of young women and girls, the Catholic Ladies Guild—older ladies who home-visited in the parish, a Choir Group, the Knights of the Southern Cross and St Vincent de Paul. The latter three groups remain active today. As mentioned earlier, a separate chapter in my book is devoted to the parish organizations which existed through the years.

The foregoing is the history of our church in a nutshell. In my book on its history, the Appendices consume many pages. Several are taken up with newspaper reports of the opening of the two Catholic churches in Clifton. These may not interest every reader, but I felt their inclusion was warranted for their historical facts.

The book's title was one of the last things I decided. A friend thought the word 'faith' should be included; so from this, coupled with the fact that it is a 'memorial' church, evolved the title—*A memorial of faith: a History of St James' and St John's Catholic Church, Clifton.*



Today when tourists to Clifton hear about the grave under the Memorial Church of St James and St John, they can't wait to get down on their hands and knees to peer amongst the stumps.

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*Leona and Reg retired to Clifton town eleven years ago and their five children and thirteen grandchildren gladden their lives.*