



R.S.(Robin) DODS 1868 – 1920

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The Ecclesiastical Works

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Robin Dods was perhaps the best known architect in Queensland in his time, which was the early part of the 20th century. Although he was a partner in two large commercial practices, he designed as many as thirty-three projects for church clients, including both the Anglicans and the Catholic Church. His best-known church in timber must be the memorial to Robert Collins at Tamrookum, near Rathdowney, completed in 1915. The best known of all, would be St Brigid's Catholic parish church at Red Hill completed in 1914.

So who was Robert Smith Dods?

He was born in New Zealand of Scots parents and grew up in Brisbane in his stepfather's house on Wickham Terrace. After studies at the Brisbane Grammar School he was sent to Scotland to become an architect. He was articled to the Edinburgh firm of Hay and Henderson and while there worked on—among other projects—the drawings for the Bermuda Cathedral. His fellow students from this time were later to be influential, as were the churches they designed. Robert Lorimer, was Dods's greatest friend and designed several churches including St Peter's in Edinburgh in 1906–7. Walter Tapper, another of Dods's lifelong friends, designed only churches—many of them in a modern brick form.

Both Lorimer and Tapper had worked for G.F. Bodley in London, one of the most accomplished architects in Britain for ecclesiastical work. His St Augustine's at Pendlebury, was one of the best known churches and was influenced by Albi Cathedral in southern France. For this generation of architects, the fortified mediaeval churches of the South

of France were hugely inspirational—among them Albi which was the most admired and the largest. Dods's first recorded drawing in the field of church design was produced for the Tite prize in 1892. This was for the east end of a city church and was designed in the manner of Bramante. While it was considered almost equal to the winning design, it was criticised for the thirteen steps it showed up to the altar and for the position of the organ.

Dods then worked for the substantial London practice of Aston Webb and Ingress Bell and produced the winning drawings in competition, for Christ's Hospital (The Blue Coat School) at Horsham in Sussex. The school chapel was a major piece of work which contained ideas—later to be seen in Dods's work in Australia. In 1895 Dods visited Brisbane and produced a number of sketches to present to church bodies here, as a way of seeking work in the future. Some of these were directly aimed at Catholicism such as an 'Irish church for Australia, with a replica of the round tower of Cashell, Tipperary'.

Dods produced his first design for St. Brigid's about this time, which was quite unprecedented. Its unorthodox style and modernity contrasts with that of St Mary's South Brisbane, which had just been completed and in the Roman manner. (1892 architects Simkin & Ibler).

Dods joined Francis Hall in partnership in Brisbane from August 1896. The Anglican diocesan architect, J.H. Buckeridge, had left Brisbane at that time due to bankruptcy and sought work in Sydney. In his absence, Hall and Dods managed Buckeridge's incomplete projects from 1897; building up a relationship with the Anglican diocese.

In 1901 a small project was the first church designed by Dods to be built. It was commissioned by the McConnel family, who were family friends, to celebrate 25 years of marriage and also to commemorate the recent death of Queen Victoria. This modest building, on Cressbrook Station, was simply but beautifully conceived in timber, with a

hardwood shingle roof and side entry porch. Both the interior and exterior were unpainted.

Substantial additions at All Hallows' School saw the beginning of a long association for Hall and Dods with the Sisters of Mercy in 1900. A design was prepared also for a convent at Beaudesert, which was unbuilt.

It was not until 1904 that Dods was able to design another chapel; this time for the Anglican sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent at Nundah. It was a timber building of single skin, with exposed studs and a shingle roof. This building was subsequently relocated and serves today in an altered form as the Church of the Holy Spirit, Wavell Heights.

In 1904, the most prestigious project in the city, was the imminent construction of St John's Anglican Cathedral on Ann Street, designed by the late J L Pearson from London. It needed specialist skills to erect such a complex structure and an architect to administer it during construction. Dods, independent from his partner, was appointed diocesan architect for this role. His first task was the Cathedral day school, which was built from the re-used components of the old pro Cathedral at North Quay. This was followed by the design, some years later, of the diocesan offices and Synod Hall, of which only the offices were built. Both these buildings showed how to evoke the spirit of Gothic, yet in a more contemporary way.

As diocesan architect, Dods also had responsibility for the design of country churches within the diocese which included Gin Gin, near Bundaberg, (1905) and a number of smaller churches such as Mayfield on the Darling Downs.

In 1906 he prepared a design for a masonry church at Laidley for which sufficient funds were not available. The drawings were exhibited however, at the Royal Academy in London in 1910.

At Dunwich in Moreton Bay following a donation from the Governor's wife, St Mark's was built in 1907 to serve the Benevolent Asylum.

For the Sisters of Mercy, Dods designed a large hospital at South Brisbane: the Mater Misericordiae in 1908. This was to be the most modern facility in Australia at that time. Dods laid out the site and designed the first six buildings. The largest of these was the private hospital, 200 feet in length and of three storeys. The income from the private rooms subsidised the public hospital where treatment was free. The public wing, while smaller, was more adventurous by using an X plan or 'butterfly' plan form as used in Britain for several well-known Arts and Crafts houses. The grounds were arranged around a central garden of which the patients and staff alike could enjoy views from the surrounding buildings. Although the site has expanded, this positive aspect has remained.

In 1911, Dods produced a design for the completion of St Stephen's Cathedral. At that time, only the nave existed and its design was rather undistinguished. As funds were not available, the scheme was put on hold.

At the same time as the Anglican Cathedral was completed, it was decided to build a new private chapel for the Archbishop at *Bishopsbourne*, Milton. It used local stone uncut for the walls, with a red-coloured concrete floor and slates to the roof. The chapel is a wonderful example of an Arts and Crafts approach in the use of materials which are used in a functional mode, but embellished in subtle ways such as the carved incised inscription over the entry porch and simple leadlight to the upper parts of the windows.

St Andrew's at Toogoolawah shows a similar approach in timber construction in a larger parish church. When barely a year old, it was damaged by a violent storm and has subsequently been strengthened by the addition of buttresses.

At Tamrookum, the All Saints Memorial Chapel is the finest example of Dods's timber churches and in 1915 was the last completed. When Robert Collins MLA died, there was provision to build this fitting memorial to the prominent pastoralist on a site close to his home near Rathdowney. The building is robust and of timber, with weatherboard-clad walls and originally with hardwood shingles on its roof. The interior is unpainted Cedar with Blue Gum for the structure.

A timber chapel was also completed at St Margaret's School in Brisbane, for the Sisters of the Sacred Advent. This had a terracotta roof of flat shingle tiles. Designed for long hours of prayer, the seating internally was unconventional and parallel to the walls.

St Brigid's Church came about in 1913, just before Dods departure for Sydney and a new partnership. It was an ambitious project to replace the existing parish church at Red Hill, on Brisbane's northern edge, with a much larger building. While it has Gothic bones, the details are a mixed bag of styles, with semicircular openings and classically derived details. Its dramatic siting is reminiscent of many fortified churches in southern France and Italy and its brick construction is consistent with modern stripped Gothic examples in Britain. While it has been compared to Albi Cathedral, this is a generalisation. Albi was largely influential to a whole generation of British architects and it is more likely that Dods was influenced more by them.

The original church on the site was pulled down and some of the stone reused within the brick walls of the lower sanctuary. While designs had been prepared by Stanley and Caldwell in the past, the church that Dods produced was an extraordinary departure from precedent. The nave is both long and tall with French lights opening between the buttresses on both sides and protected by verandah roofs. Dods's design included a tower—which was never built—but was to be located over the sacristy. It was described soon after its completion as the finest parish church in Australia.

Drawings were also prepared for a more conventional chapel at Nudgee orphanage. Here it was proposed to extend the existing Stombucco designed building, by doubling its length and adding transepts. It did not proceed in this form.

Other works for the Sisters of Mercy included a number of convents. Beaudesert (unbuilt) and Goodna were in timber, while Woolloowin and Wynnum were in roughcast brick. Three designs for works in Queensland were completed by Dods after his move to Sydney. In 1917, after Archbishop Dunne's death and replacement by Duhig, there was money from Dunne's estate for the completion of St Stephen's Cathedral. Dods produced a less expensive version of this in 1917 but it was further reduced by Hennessy and Francis Hall after Dods's death and not completed until 1925.

The chapel and convent for the Mater hospital was always intended as part of the master plan. Dunne left money to the Sisters for a more generous chapel than that originally conceived. Dods produced two further schemes in 1917 and 1918; the first with a huge tower and delicate tracery with a nave as high as St Brigid's. The second scheme—to cost less without the tower—was also stalled and did not proceed, until years later, as a completely different design by others. The last project designed was an Anglican church for Cairns in North Queensland. Again, this was a refinement of the stripped modern Gothic of St Brigid's, but longer and lower. Similarly, it could not be afforded at the time and was compromised after Dods death.

In Sydney there may well have been designs prepared in various competitions during the First World War. One drawing survives for an unidentified church—which is likely to be by Dods—and perhaps intended for Chatswood.

Robin Dods died at the age of fifty-two in 1920, midway through a career poised for greater things. His church design alone, would ensure him a place within a list of the best ecclesiastical works in the country.

This paper was extracted from the author's 2008 PhD Thesis completed at The University of Queensland and which contains endnotes.

Robert Riddel is an architect in Brisbane. His practice covers all aspects of both design and conservation with particular expertise in adaptive reuse.

In 2008 he completed a PhD at The University of Queensland which recorded all that was known at the time, of the life and work of Robin Dods. It was the culmination of an interest that had begun thirty years earlier, as a student of architecture under Neville Lund, and has continued through the work of his practice. Over the years, Riddel has been involved in the conservation of a number of these buildings and has found, each time, more to appreciate in the man and his work.

He is presently the principal of Riddel Architecture and Adjunct Professor at the School of Architecture, The University of Queensland.