

If These Stones Could Talk The History Of All Hallows' School

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Sr Anne Hetherington, rsm

November 1st, 2013 was something of a 'red letter' day for All Hallows' School, Brisbane, as on that day 150 years ago, the school moved from its temporary location in a cottage near the old St Stephen's Cathedral to its present site on what was then called Duncan's Hill. It would be impossible to do justice to the story of All Hallows' in a short essay, so in this paper I will concentrate on one aspect: the buildings which constitute the physical environment of the school. The teachers and students of the past are long gone—hopefully they are not forgotten—but the buildings remain; a silent testimony to what has happened on Duncan's Hill during the past 150 years. As only one building of any significance on the site has ever been demolished, a look at the role the various buildings have played in the life of the school provides a fascinating insight into its development and to the way the Sisters of Mercy responded to the various social and educational factors which have impacted on the history of All Hallows'.

An aerial view of the site, as it is today, shows a very small area of about 3.5 hectares bounded by very busy streets and dominated by its near neighbour, the Story Bridge, and a number of highrise apartment blocks. The present footprint is somewhat larger than the original property purchased in 1863, as several adjoining sites have been added over the years.



Aerial view of All Hallows' School in 2011.

However, it is still a very landlocked and crowded site for a large school.

The Sisters of Mercy, under the leadership of Mother Vincent Whitty, arrived in Brisbane on 10 May 1861. As no suitable home was available for them, they occupied a couple of cottages near the old Cathedral, and a few weeks later, took over responsibility for St Stephen's School. Before the year was out, the Sisters received a request to take a boarding student. Her name was Annie Tighe and she came from Drayton near Toowoomba. She arrived on 15 December 1861, and this date marks the beginning of a fee-paying secondary school; in contrast to St Stephen's which was a primary school with minimal contribution expected from parents.

Over the next two years, Annie was joined by fourteen other young ladies who came from places as far apart as Sydney, Cardwell and Surat and other places in between. Extra cottages were rented for dormitories and a boarders' refectory, but conditions must have been very crowded for both the Sisters and the young ladies. Not all the parents could afford the small boarding fee, as Mother Vincent wrote back to Ireland on 17 April 1863: 'We have eleven boarders, but only six pay for their support.'¹ We know from other letters that the curriculum consisted of the 3 Rs, geography, history, music, painting, needlework, and of course, religious education. Even though Mother Vincent wrote in that same letter: 'We can get on very happily and do a great deal for God in a wooden cottage', both sisters and boarders must have longed for the day when they would have a permanent home.²

At last, on 18 August 1863, came the good news that the dream had become a reality. Again, Mother Vincent wrote back to Dublin: 'The Bishop has lately purchased the finest house and situation in Brisbane for a Convent. The purchase money is

£6000—where it is to come from I know not—but I trust God will send it'. Later in the same letter she adds: 'I forgot to say the six thousand has to be borrowed to pay for the new house, and the interest of it will be 500 a year !!!'⁴

What she didn't mention was that Bishop Quinn promptly handed the Sisters the bill for £6000, and then forbade them to do any fundraising to pay for it. But that's another whole story!

The house into which the Sisters and their then fourteen boarders moved on 1 November 1863 was called *Adderton*. It had been built in 1858 by the Petrie brothers for a Dr George Fullerton. He named it for his wife, whose maiden name was Julia *Adderton* Moffat. As the Sisters had taken possession of the property on the feast of All Saints, the house was renamed All Hallows', after the famous missionary college of All Hallows' in Dublin. By 21 November 1863, all were in residence, and *Adderton* had been transformed from a gentleman's home and doctor's surgery into a convent and boarding school. The first day-scholars were not taken until 1864.

Adderton consisted of two floors, a basement, and an attic. The Ground Floor was reconfigured to provide a Chapel and school rooms; the basement held the kitchen and dining rooms; the first floor and the attic provided the sleeping quarters. As time went on and more boarders arrived, additional cottages were rented nearby; but even so, *Adderton* was soon filled to capacity, and we are told that for some years a couple of rooms doubled as classrooms by day and dormitories by night.

By 1870, a Junior school had also been commenced, and of course, the concerts for which All Hallows' was famous were held regularly. A programme, printed on silk, and still held in the Mercy Heritage Centre, was for a concert in 1868 in honour of the visiting bishops of Maitland and Goulburn. Another interesting fact from these early days is the number of non-

Catholic students enrolled. Even after Girls' Grammar opened in 1875, and despite the high degree of religious prejudice in the colony, non-Catholic parents continued to seek enrolment at All Hallows' for their daughters. By 1894, a total of 501 Catholics, 401 Protestants and 25 Jews had been enrolled. However, proselytising was strictly forbidden, and non-Catholic girls were marched off to their respective churches every Sunday, just as the Catholic girls were sent off to St Stephen's.

I mentioned at the outset that only one building of substance on the site was ever demolished. That building was not *Adderton*. Instead of destroying the Georgian cottage to make way for the very impressive Convent Building we see facing the Story Bridge today, the Sisters simply built around it! The façade of *Adderton* can still be recognised if one stands on the terrace in front of the Convent Building. So it can be said that the Sisters of Mercy were into recycling long before the idea became fashionable!

Throughout the 60s and 70s, enrolments fluctuated according to the economic circumstances in the colony, but by 1881 there were 43 students on the roll. Although the need for a separate school building had been obvious for some time, it was not until 1879—when the debt on *Adderton* was finally paid off—that planning for this could commence.

The original *Adderton* property did not occupy the total site which we associate with All Hallows' today. Several adjacent property purchases were made in the early 1880s, and these acquisitions added considerably to the size of the original holding. This allowed the construction of the first purpose-built school building on a property—closer to the river—which had been purchased from James Ivory. This was the beginning of a building programme which saw a major addition or renovation on the All Hallows' site every twenty years or so

right up to the present day. It is interesting to note, however, that after the purchase of the Poole estate in 1885, no further land acquisitions were made until the year 2000 when adjacent properties fronting Ann and Boundary Streets were acquired.

What has always been known as the Main Building was completed in 1882 to a design by the famous Italian architect Andrea Stombucco. It provided classrooms, dormitory and refectory facilities for the boarders, music rooms, an art room and a magnificent (for those days!) concert hall, in which a grand concert was held on 21 June 1882 to welcome the Archbishop of Sydney and other visiting dignitaries. A picture taken c. 1900 shows the newly extended convent linked to the school by a covered walkway, with the music practice rooms as a small separate building in the background. In 1901, the Main Building was extended towards Kemp Place to provide additional dormitory, refectory, and classroom space. The Concert Hall was extended to include a large stage area, and for the next 85 years it functioned as the school's main concert venue and assembly hall. It is still in use today, although the whole school can no longer fit within its walls.

The move of the school to the Main Building and the arrival of more Sisters from Ireland in the 1870s and early 1880s had enabled considerable expansion of the school's curriculum, as this excerpt from the 1886 prospectus shows:

The general course of studies comprises all the branches required to pass the Junior and Senior Examinations in the Sydney University, and the matriculation examination in the Sydney and Melbourne Universities. It also includes studies in Practical and Theoretical Music required to obtain degrees as awarded by Trinity College London. Needlework (plain and ornamental), Lace-making (limerick and point) and Calisthenics are part of the general course.

Terms for boarders, including tuition in English, French, Drawing, Class singing, Theory of Music and Needlework, £40 per annum. Extra subjects for boarders and day pupils include tuition in Pianoforte, Harp, Violin, Guitar, Mandoline, German, Painting, Shorthand, Typing, Book keeping and Dancing.³

Lest readers are wondering about the exclusion of religious education from the above list, another sentence in the prospectus reads: ‘The religious and moral training of the children is carefully attended to.’

It also adds: ‘During the past year 1 pupil passed the Melbourne Matric exam, 7 passed the Sydney Junior University Exam, 13 passed the Practical Music exam, 7 of whom took honours, and 54 passed the Theory of Music Exam from Trinity College, London.’

This was not a bad record of achievement from a school whose total enrolment that year was 113! Overall, it shows an interesting combination of the traditional subjects considered essential for the education of a young lady, and the growing recognition of the need to equip young women with the foundations necessary for either a career or entrance to higher education. The Sisters were obviously aware of the shifting role of women in society and had adapted their curriculum accordingly.

By the time of the First World War, the school was again bursting at the seams, with enrolments jumping from 139 in 1900 to 309 in 1918. Contributing factors were the raising of the school leaving age from 12 to 14 in 1912, and the extension of the State scholarship allowance to students who obtained a pass of 50% or more. It was time to build again, and in 1919 it was decided to extend the Main Building by the addition of a wing at right angles to the existing structure. As this wing was intended to provide classrooms and dormitory

accommodation primarily for girls studying for the Junior and Senior examinations—now administered by the University of Queensland—it was called the University Wing. In 1933, this wing was again extended, and the cloister effect was applied to the whole wing so that a unified facade was obtained.

However, there was no sudden transition from what might be called ‘liberal arts’ subjects to examination subjects. A small building, known as The Studio, was constructed in 1922 as a purpose built art studio, and for many years the prominent Brisbane artist, William Bustard, took classes there. Gradually however, more emphasis came to be put on ‘exam subjects’ to the detriment of needlework, lacemaking and various forms of art. Physics and chemistry were added to the curriculum in the 1920s and there was a great increase in the number of girls studying commercial subjects. By the end of the 1920s, The Studio was taken over as a general purpose classroom, and later became in turn the school library, a staff room, a religious education centre, drama centre, staff offices and more recently a reflective space which looks out of the newly-created Catherine Place—an oasis of calm in the middle of a busy school.

Enrolments continued to increase during the 1930s and 40s; there were 423 on the roll at the beginning of 1931, but that number had jumped to 724 by 1944. Unfortunately these were the years of depression followed closely by the dark days of World War II, and a dearth of both building materials and manpower meant that virtually no construction happened during this period. Classrooms were created out of every available space, and one of the casualties was the junior school (equivalent to the current Years 1-4). For years, these classes had migrated around the Main Building, finding a home wherever there was a spare room. However, with space at such a premium, the Junior School was temporarily closed from

the end of 1945 until the beginning of 1952, because there was simply no room to accommodate these classes.

It is not surprising, however, that when wartime restrictions were lifted, the first new building to appear on the All Hallows' site was the purpose-built Junior School, *Nazareth*. It was to remain the home of the younger grades until a decision was made to phase out the primary section of the school in 1976. Thereafter, *Nazareth* became overflow classrooms for Year 11 and then an art studio. Sadly, it was found to be infested with termites in 1985 and had to be demolished.

The 1950s saw further pressure on enrolments, with the raising of the school-leaving age to 15, and the increasing numbers of students wishing to continue to Senior level. Twenty-three girls had sat for the Senior Examination in 1948, but that number climbed to 54 in 1956 and to over 100 by 1963. By 1960, the existing science facilities were hopelessly outdated and totally inadequate for the numbers of students wishing to study science. Also, the government had made a decision to move Year 8 into high school from the beginning of 1964.

The Sisters of Mercy solved all these problems with the construction of a totally new Senior School Building in 1963 and extensive remodelling of an existing building for the influx of Year 8s. *Aquinas Hall*, the Senior School, was named for SM Aquinas Ryan who had pioneered the teaching of science at All Hallows' back in the 1920s. As well as general purpose classrooms and up-to-the-minute science laboratories, it also housed a language laboratory—a first for a Queensland school.

The new home for the Year 8s was the former St Ann's Technical School. This building had been constructed in 1894, on a property originally known as the Poole Estate, to provide training for girls leaving St Vincent's Orphanage (and others), in the arts of dressmaking, church vestment and banner making

and various forms of embroidery. Later it became a hostel for country girls attending Kelvin Grove Teachers' College or working in the city. By the 1960s it was no longer needed for these purposes and was incorporated into All Hallows' School. It is yet another example of a building being remodelled several times to meet emerging needs. It was home to Year 8 students until 1973 when it accommodated primary classes for a couple of years, then Year 11 classes and recently was extensively refurbished to house computer laboratories and general purpose classrooms.

The early 1970s saw the construction of the first purpose-built school library beside *Aquinas Hall*. This was made possible through a Commonwealth Government grant. Called the *Potter Library*, it acknowledges the contribution made to All Hallows' by Mother Patrick Potter who had been associated with the school in various ways for nearly fifty years from 1879 to 1927. Although unimpressive from the outside, it was equipped to cater for the increasing use of research methodologies and audio-visual teaching aids in the high school curriculum.

Towards the end of 1969, a momentous decision was taken by the Sisters of Mercy. An inner city site was no longer a safe place for a boarding school and the facilities would have needed extensive refurbishment to cater for the young ladies of the 1970s and 80s. The Sisters reluctantly decided to phase out the boarding section of All Hallows'. So the renovators were called in and the entire top floor of the Main Building was turned into classrooms of various kinds. It was a sad day when the last boarders were farewelled at the end of 1971, but time has proved the wisdom of such a courageous decision. One hundred and ten years after Annie Tighe was enrolled as its first boarder, All Hallows' became a Day School only.

Another building to be incorporated into All Hallows' School, after having previously served another purpose, was *McAuley Hall*. This four-storey structure had begun life in 1958 as McAuley Teachers' College, a facility initially for the education of religious sisters from all Congregations in Queensland to prepare them to teach in Catholic schools throughout the State. Eventually the College moved to new premises at Dutton Park and by the mid 1980s, a time when All Hallows' was again experiencing enrolment pressure, this building was given a new lease of life as space for Year 8 students. When a decision was made in 2004 to reintroduce upper primary classes, *McAuley Hall*, suitably refurbished, became the home of All Hallows' Middle School.

One facility All Hallows' sorely lacked by the 1980s was an assembly hall capable of holding the entire student body. The Concert Hall had long ceased to be adequate for this purpose, and with numbers approaching the 1000 mark, it was decided to build a multi-purpose hall, which could also be used by the increasingly popular Physical Education and Drama classes. *Loretto Hall* was named in honour of SM Loretto Flynn who had guided the destiny of the school from 1916 to 1959. *Loretto Hall* was in so much demand for classes that in the 1990s a duplicate structure, *Mercy Hall*, was built on top of *Loretto Hall*. In a school where outside space is at a premium, these facilities were welcome additions to the building stock of All Hallows'. In a very clever use of existing ground space, they are squeezed between *Aquinas Hall* and the very edge of the property, and are now dwarfed by the surrounding highrises.

All Hallows' purchased its first computer in 1985. Even then it was obvious that technology would become an important tool in education; but no-one could have predicted how much computer technology would change the processes of teaching and learning. The need to incorporate computer and

other forms of technology into education has been a major consideration in much of the extensive refurbishment which has occurred at All Hallows' in the last twenty years. Most of the classrooms of today bear very little resemblance to the rooms which occupied the same spaces back in the 1950s.

There have been totally new developments at All Hallows' also, largely centred on the properties fronting Ann and Boundary Streets, which have been acquired by the school in more recent years. They are the *Consilio Aquatic Centre*, built to international competition standard for water polo, the *Claver Theatre*, equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual facilities, and the *Ellen Whitty Centre* for the teaching of Drama and Dance. The first two of these are named after two former long-serving staff members, and the last for Mother Vincent Whitty, whose courage and foresight were responsible for the relocation of the fledgling All Hallows' School to Duncan's Hill.

Before I conclude, I want to mention two other structures which are important parts of the All Hallows' site. They are the Chapel, and the structure which the casual observer probably associates most closely with All Hallows'—the wall fronting Ann Street. The first chapel on the site was a room in *Adderton* which had originally served as Dr Fullerton's surgery. As part of the extensions to *Adderton* in 1891, a separate chapel had been built as a memorial of Mother Vincent's Golden Jubilee. Sadly, Mother Vincent died on the day the first Mass was to have been celebrated there. In 1920, it was decided to extend the chapel to honour the Golden Jubilee of Mother Patrick Potter. Although extensive refurbishments have been carried out over the last 103 years, it is still basically the same chapel which is the focus of many school liturgical celebrations today.

Finally, the wall. I should begin by dispelling two commonly held myths.

Firstly, it was not built by the convicts—they were long gone before the wall was commenced—and secondly, it was not built to keep the Sisters and boarders safe from the outside world. Early pictures of Brisbane show *Adderton* sitting atop a prominent rise known as Duncan’s Hill. Originally the hill stood at the present height of the Ann Street wall, and a street called High Road ran over the top of the hill. Because of the steepness of the incline in the horse and buggy days, it was decided to cut through Duncan’s Hill along the eastern edge of present day Ann Street. Three successive cuttings were made, in 1865, in 1879 and in 1885. Overall this resulted in All Hallows’ being perched on the top of a cliff which eventually reached over twenty feet in height. The wall became necessary, not to keep the Sisters inside, but to keep the cliff face stable and to prevent rock falls onto Ann Street. Each time a cutting was made, the All Hallows’ driveway had to be realigned to reach street level. Originally, the wall extended only about twenty feet northwards from the driveway; but in 1927, the Council agreed to continue the wall right around into Kemp Place in return for the Sisters giving up a portion of their land to allow better access from Ann Street into Kemp Place. The gateway at the southern end of the wall, constructed in 1879, was the work of an early priest and architect, Father Joseph Canali. Careful examination of the wall, and a comparison of photos of the Ann Street gateway taken at various times, reveal ample evidence of the change in the level of the driveway over time.

We have now covered 150 years of All Hallows’ history as told by the stones of the past and present. I am conscious that, in concentrating on the school’s built environment, I have omitted so much more that could be said about All Hallows’. I wonder what stories will be told by the stones of the next 150 years? Then, as now, I am sure that the stones will be only part of the story, and that they will conceal as much as they will reveal.

Sr Anne Hetherington is a Sister of Mercy who currently resides in Brisbane. A teacher by profession, she was for twelve years the Principal of All Hallows' School.

With a keen interest in history—especially the early history of the Sisters of Mercy in Brisbane—she is co-editor of “The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty” which is a collection of over three hundred letters written by, to, or about Mother Vincent, the foundress of the Brisbane Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, between 1839 and 1892.

ENDNOTES:

1. MM Vincent Whitty to MM of Mercy Norris, 17 April 1863, in Anne Hetherington & Pauline Smoothy (eds.) *The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2011, p.153.
2. *Ibid.*
3. MM Vincent Whitty to MM of Mercy Norris 18 August 1863, *op cit.*, pp.162-163.
4. Advertisement in *The Australian*, 3 July 1886.