

## **Home on the Range: Historic Buildings of the Rockhampton Sisters of Mercy**

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I've entitled this talk 'Home on the Range' – this was the first quick response I made when asked for a title for publication in the programme. However, it is an appropriate title. Firstly, the Athelstane Range is an actual geographical feature on the south side of Rockhampton; the National Trust's Rockhampton Urban Character Study (c.1978) 'identifies the Athelstane Range as a major feature of Rockhampton's townscape with buildings of architectural excellence throughout its area'. If you drive along Agnes Street which winds along the top of the Range, from the northern end, you will pass many well-known local landmarks – the Base Hospital, St Anne's – our former Novitiate, Rockhampton Grammar School, Girls' Grammar School and then 'The Range'.

The buildings on the site of 263 Agnes Street, locally is known as 'The Range', have been home to the Sisters of Mercy since 1895 and a college for almost one hundred years. Without doubt, local residents regard 'The Range' as synonymous with the Sisters of Mercy. Further south along Agnes Street, past some very ornate homes and

with a left-hand turn into Ward Street, there's another property of ours – Bethany Home for the Aged and then the Mater Hospital in the next block.

Here I am focussing on two of our building sites

- Middle Hall on the Range site and
  - the building named 'Kenmore' at the Mater Hospital
- These are two of the oldest of our buildings, still standing and in use. Both sites are Heritage listed, therefore holding great interest because of their design and building features. This year we are celebrating the centenary of the Mater Hospital and one hundred years of formal involvement in health and aged care.

To start at the very beginning, seven Sisters of Mercy arrived in Rockhampton from Brisbane on 4 August 1873 after an arduous sea journey on the *Lady Bowen*. They were led by Mother M Vincent Whitty and in the group was the first Queensland postulant, Jane Gorry, known as Sr M de Sales. Interestingly, the ship's manifest listed the names of just several Sisters and then made reference to a 'quantity of extra luggage, Sisters of Mercy'.

A kindly Dean Charles Murlay, the resident priest, had already purchased a home for the Sisters from Dr William Callaghan in Kent Street. On their arrival at the wharf on the Fitzroy River, Dean Murlay greeted the Sisters and took them to a small, dim building that became known as 'the limestone convent'. However, in one of her letters, Sr M de Sales Gorry described it as a 'perfect little convent home'. This accommodation was typical of what the Sisters might expect and accept,

when they responded to a need – one can only wonder at the flexibility of the early Sisters as they adapted to living in such a different climate and culture. However, not daunted, the Sisters quickly set up a school nearby and carried out the works of mercy among the people. This Kent Street site was known as ‘St Brigid’s Convent’.

Overcrowding and lack of space became a problem at our original foundation at St Brigid’s, Kent Street, so in 1895, Bishop John Cani (the first Bishop of Rockhampton) offered the Sisters *Stoneleigh*, his residence on the Athelstane Range, as an education facility. Local historians say *Stoneleigh* was built in 1874 approx and was originally owned by the Jardine family.

Bishop Cani had purchased *Stoneleigh* and its surrounding land from Edward Livermore in 1883. Mr Livermore was an early mayor of Rockhampton and the founding chairman of Lakes Creek Meatworks so the commanding views from the site would have been fitting home for such a prominent citizen. From July 1895, the Sisters gradually moved to the Range site but St Brigid’s, Kent Street, continued to function as a Convent, a technical school and a hostel.

By 1900, the *Stoneleigh* building, now the Mother House of the Sisters of Mercy, proved inadequate to house the Sisters, boarders and day students of the new Convent High School, so extensions were made. During the alterations and additions, the original brick Convent building with its twelve inch thick walls was retained, and a new timber Chapel and upper storey were

added, the latter comprising three rooms – a large central community room with dormitories on either side.

In the meantime, Bishop Cani died in 1898. Bishop Joseph Higgins was appointed in 1899 and then moved to Ballarat in 1904. The third Bishop was Bishop James Duhig, consecrated on 10 December 1905 and to quote Dr Tom Boland ‘The youthful Duhig was devoted to children; and Our Lady of Good Counsel Convent High School was a principal interest during his episcopate in Rockhampton.’ You would know well that James Duhig was the most prodigious builder in the history of Queensland! Bishop Duhig wanted to build well and he built with style.

### **Middle Hall**

Middle Hall on the Range site is the first of Duhig’s buildings – its style set the pattern that typified his approach to erecting new buildings. Middle Hall was built because the Inspector of Schools did not consider the existing facilities at the Range to be adequate to gain approval for secondary school status.

Speculation exists as to who designed the building, and no original plans have ever been located, but in his speech at the opening of Middle Hall on 8 December 1907, Bishop Duhig specifically thanks the builder, C Slater for ‘the excellent way in which Slater had planned the building’. This may have been a modest reluctance to acknowledge his own part in the design, but Bishop Duhig clearly does not refer to an architect having been involved. Mr Slater was a relatively undistinguished

local builder so it is very unlikely that he designed Middle Hall. Given Bishop Duhig's predilection for grand buildings and his exposure to classical architecture while studying in Rome, it is a likely prospect that the inspiration for the design, especially the tower, came from Bishop Duhig himself. Exact cost is not known, over two thousand pounds but probably closer to four thousand – is what the Sisters believe they paid for the building.

The school featured a school hall, seventy feet by thirty feet, with a pressed steel Wunderlich ceiling. The huge hall was the schoolroom for several classes, whilst the stage doubled as a junior class room and display area. At the rear of the stage a classroom for 'senior' pupils was thirty feet by twelve feet. At that time, the highest grade at the school was the Sydney Junior University class.

What Bishop Duhig wanted to create at Middle Hall was an environment of 'cultural design' – an atmosphere that ensured an uplifting and ennobling effect on the young mind. As Middle Hall and the other school buildings developed, the total environment reflected an atmosphere of the Catholic faith, and the children were enveloped in the peace and beauty of the place. Bishop Duhig was particularly concerned with the social advancement of Irish Catholics and, in Middle Hall, there were the facilities and the style to prove that Catholic secondary education was the equal of any in the State.

In his opening speech, Bishop Duhig describes the features and functions of Middle Hall as:

- ten separate music rooms for ‘practising music without the least distraction’
- a library for ‘directed reading of proper books and magazines
- a kitchen ‘where children would be taught domestic duties’
- a stage which served as a classroom for junior pupils on school days then entertainment and displays on other occasions
- classrooms that were well ventilated, clean and hygienic and a view that took in the whole panorama at every compass point.

Overall, the once rugged hillside had undergone complete transformation. Following extensive restoration and refurbishment in 1996-97 Middle Hall won the John Herbert Award in 1999 for restoration of a heritage listed building.

From a cultural and historical point of view, Middle Hall is significant for:

- its strong association with the Sisters of Mercy as a place of Catholic education
- its architectural excellence particularly in the outstanding creativity of the tower
- its townscape prominence as a familiar landmark in Rockhampton
- its demonstration of the development of Catholic education in Queensland in response to both Catholic ideals and Government policy
- its special association with Archbishop James Duhig.

A particular feature of Middle Hall is the very ornate tower. Above the school rose its most striking architectural feature – the tower – already a landmark in Rockhampton by the time the construction work at the Range was completed. Above the stage area in the Hall, two rooms on different levels led to an open space under the tower lantern. Surrounding this platform and at its roof level was decorative cast-iron, the designs of panels representing the moon or stars. The feature ironwork by Sidney Williams and Company was planned to complement the use of the tower as an observatory. The Bishop asserted during his speech on opening day that the tower would soon boast a telescope, but it is not known if a telescope was provided.

Since 1907 Middle Hall has been more than a landmark for local residents of Rockhampton. It has been the centre for creative, religious, cultural and multi-purpose activities and holds significant memories for so many people, particularly the Sisters of Mercy and the hundreds of past pupils of the Range Convent High School.

### **Kenmore**

*Kenmore* is a very different building from Middle Hall. Still standing today, it was originally a private mansion commissioned by the Honourable John Ferguson and built by James Flint in 1894 at a cost of fifteen thousand pounds. Ferguson was one of the eight original shareholders of Mt Morgan Mine and he was president of the CQ Territorial Separation League, which was

pressing for the separation of Queensland into three separate states. If the Separation Movement had succeeded, it is probable that Kenmore would have become Government House and John Ferguson the first Governor of Central Queensland.

The never-to-be Government House was built on classical lines. The front marble steps shelter a stone portico with stately lions guarding the entrance. This provides entry through a marble-tiled vestibule to a huge central hall, undoubtedly planned as a stateroom or a ballroom, tiled with locally-quarried black and white marble, similar to that in St Joseph's Cathedral. The walls are decorated with hand-painted and lacquered Japanese embossment. A magnificent cedar staircase with carved balustrades leads to the upper floor and an equally opulent reception hall. This mansion was the centre of a glittering social life. In August 1894, tenders were called for two sets of 'Grand Entrance Gates' in stone and wrought iron to complete the mansions which, in many respects, was unequalled in Queensland.

After Ferguson's retirement, *Kenmore* was bought by Mr Stuart MacDonald, a pastoralist. How did the Sisters of Mercy get involved in purchasing this mansion? There was a young maid-servant working there who was taking instructions in the Catholic faith from one of the Sisters over at the Range. Out on visitation, two Sisters visited *Kenmore* to see this young woman and in chatting to Mrs MacDonald they expressed their admiration of the beauty of the building. In reply, Mrs MacDonald suggested that she was finding it too large for a private home, and she wondered if the Sisters could put the



building to good use. In turn, the Sisters went home to the Range and retold the story to Reverend Mother and the Bursar, and so negotiations began for the purchase of the building. As well, the Sisters promoted the cause of the purchase of *Kenmore* by constant and fervent prayer!

A firm offer of sale was made by Mr MacDonalld in a letter dated 1 February 1915. Having been built for fifteen thousand pounds in 1894, the building and the 1.4 hectares of land passed into the hands of the Sisters of Mercy for the modest sum of four thousand five hundred pounds.

Why did we purchase this mansion? The reasons for purchasing this stately building were:

- to establish a Catholic hospital in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy
- the building easily adapted to hospital requirements
- accommodation was provided for thirty-two patients and nurses' quarters; the billiard room became the chapel and the ballroom was converted into a four-bed ward
- the alterations were carried out with care and forethought

Bishop Joseph Shiel, then Bishop of Rockhampton, blessed the new Mater Hospital on 14 November 1915. The hospital was also registered with the health authorities on this date.

This event formalised the Sisters of Mercy ministry to care for the sick and dying. Since that date the Sisters and staff have delivered quality care and the Mater site has evolved to meet the changes, demands and standards

of private health-care. Yet the essential character and graciousness of the mansion have been retained. To honour the beginning of the Mater Centenary Year the Catherine McAuley stained-glass window, crafted by Dr Tom Dewar a retired specialist, was formally erected.