HISTORY

St John’s was built on the generosity of Osmond Gilles, one of the more flamboyant of South Australia’s early founders. Generous to the Church of England, Gilles donated the half-acre block on which the church is built.
His unfailing optimism and support must have encouraged many in the pioneering years. Being a successful entrepreneur and having a flamboyant character made him a little suspect to those who thought of themselves as ‘respectable’. However, he was generous to the Church of England.

On Saturday, October 19, 1839 the foundation stone was laid by Lieutenant Colonel George Gawler, Governor of the Province.

“After the ceremony, His Excellency, the ladies and gentlemen present partook of an elegant collation prepared for the occasion by the hospitable attention of Mr Gilles”
The Register, 26th October, 1839.

As Gilles lived in St John Street at the time the party did not have far to walk.

Lack of funds delayed the completion of the church even though the S.A. Church Building Society was devoting all the funds at its disposal towards the building. However, the church was eventually opened on Sunday, 24th October, 1841 by the Rev’d C.B. Howard assisted by the Rev’d Jas. Farrell, the first Rector. At this time Farrell and Howard were the only Anglican clergy in the colony. “Like Howard he was an Irishman, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and therefore presumably a Tory. He was ordained in 1826. … When he arrived in Adelaide in September 1840, he engaged in missionary activity in the outlying districts, also sharing in the work at Holy Trinity and other preaching stations. He became the incumbent at St John’s, Halifax Street, when it was opened in October 1841, but he continued to help Howard with his numerous duties. …

His simplified form of worship caused his organist to resign, but his vigorous sermons were applauded by Evangelicals. As one of them reported, ‘he drove away at the fundamentals of religion and never let you forget that there were grievous errors around you against which you were to set your faces like a flint’. His salary of £200 a year was paid by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an unfortunate arrangement which absolved Adelaide Anglicans from the duty of supporting their clergymen.” (Paradise of Dissent, Douglas Pike, 1957, pages252-253) Despite the isolation which prompted city dwellers to call the church St John’s in the Wilderness, the services in those early years were well attended by people who rode or walked from the nearby villages of Unley, Beaumont and Burnside. Upon Farrell’s departure in 1843 to take Howard’s place as Colonial Chaplain, the fortunes of St John’s fluctuated for nearly thirty years. Due to the difficulty of finding a replacement for Farrell, the church was closed for weekly services from December 1843 to June 1846. However, the registers show that 30 marriages and 88 baptisms took place during this period.

In 1846 the trustees of the church managed to persuade the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to allow its Missionary to Adelaide, the Rev’d W.J. Woodcock, to take over the parish. Fortunes were once again restored, as by 1848 a new organ costing £300 was installed. As £100 per annum would have been a good salary at that time, the purchase of the organ was a considerable undertaking. In 1849 Woodcock accepted the living of Christ Church, North Adelaide.

The next 25 years saw a succession of Rectors which made it difficult to establish a stable congregation. There were exceptions to this, in 1861 the Rev’d D.J.H. Ibbetson was appointed and stayed until 1871 when he died. During this time a new rectory was built on East Terrace for £1517.

The arrival in 1874 of the dynamic Rev’d F. Slaney-Poole coincided with the boom period in the colony and a rapid spate

of building in the parish. The wealthy built their town mansions along East and South Terraces. The consequent increase in population led to a renewed interest in St John's and a growth in the parish income. This funded a building program which created the fine facilities we associate with St John's today.

In 1880 the Parish Hall was completed and served a dual purpose as a school room for St John's Grammar School. It was built by John Wark to the design of Daniel Garlick. In 1886 three new classrooms were added on the eastern side of the Hall. In 1922 the Head Teacher was Miss Evelyn Henstridge and the fees ranged from 1 shilling to 2 shillings according to age. This would have been payable weekly. Some of the students would have received scholarships to sing in the Church Choir. The school closed in 1942 when the teacher, Miss Almond, married a priest.

In 1882 it was decided to sell the Rectory on East Terrace for £1550 and in 1883 the new Rectory was completed at a final cost of £1500. It is a substantial two-storey Victorian house with a fine balcony spanning the main façade which faces St John Street.

In 1886 the original church was condemned by the City Surveyor. In 1926 Slaney-Poole reminisced in the South Australian Register, "I do not think that I have ever entered a church which presented so woebegone an appearance as St John's did to me on my first inspection of it. To begin with some of the walls were out of plumb, and in several places on the walls were cracks through which daylight showed itself, and weather stains were everywhere. … The floor of the church was … ravaged with white ants."

Poole was determined to have the new church built in one major program and whilst it placed the parish in considerable debt for over a decade, the present parishioners and the Adelaide community at large must be grateful for the legacy of such a

fine building. Plans for the new church were prepared by the architect R G Holwell. A member of the congregation, William Rogers, was chosen to build the church and the substantial building is a credit to him. Rogers was a notable builder who erected the Jubilee Exhibition Hall on North Terrace and Rymill House on the corner of Hutt and Flinders Streets. The walls are constructed of sandstone rubble and are unusually tuck-pointed. The fine tower which still dominates this residential area integrates well with the rest of the church and its angled buttresses are noteworthy. The Bishop of Adelaide laid the Foundation Stone on May 14 1887 and on October 6th of the same year consecrated the building.

At Slaney-Poole's instigation it was decided to establish a mission church in the western part of the parish. He arranged for a plot of land in Moore Street to be purchased. As an economy it was proposed to use the materials available from the demolition of the old St John's to build the church of St Mary Magdelene. It was also thought that it might overcome the "tender regret" which members of the congregation felt at the demolition of old St John's.

This was not the first missionary endeavour with which St John's was associated, for Archdeacon Hale (1849-1851) had initiated the Poonindie Mission on Eyre Peninsula. He later became the Bishop of Perth and then Brisbane.

In 1886 St John's was incorporated under "The Corporation of St John's Act – 1886"

In June 1895, Canon Slaney-Poole resigned and the Rev'd W.S. Hopcraft of Port Augusta was appointed and inducted on September 6. The references to Hopcraft make it clear that he was much loved by his parishioners. This is illustrated in a letter from Mrs Manthorpe to Father Don Wallace in 1978. She writes, "My father was a member of St John's for 25 years or more, when Canon Hopcraft was Rector. He and my father were great friends. My father was a member of the choir, and I

think a Lay Reader and I know he attended meetings such as the Men's Society. My sisters and I used to walk the long distance from Unley, as tiny tots, with father on a Sunday morning to attend the church service. We used to sit in the first seat on the right hand side of the church in the front. We have vivid recollections of this, and the pleasant brief time spent at Canon Hopcraft's invitation to my father and us three to the Rectory, after the service, where the menfolk enjoyed a sherry, while we littlies were entertained with soft drinks and biscuits by the Canon's sister."

Much of Hopcraft's incumbency was occupied by the need to reduce the debt incurred by the building program. However, a new organ was built in 1902 by James Dodd at a cost of £800. It was substantially rebuilt in 1996 by George Stephens. Its sound and the acoustics of St John's are widely admired. Canon Hopcraft died on June 9, 1908. As a memorial to him the choir vestries were erected on the west side of the Parish Hall and altar rails were placed in the chancel. A covered way was erected between the vestry and the church in 1908. It was bequeathed by Emily Murphy as a thank offering.

World War One naturally had a great impact on the social fabric of Australia with so many of our menfolk volunteering to fight for King and Country. In the northern porch of St John's is a list of the 75 parishioners who went to war. Some of the memorials in the church remembered those who died. One such is the fine neo-gothic font and baptistery that was presented by the Needham family in memory of their father, Richard, and mother, Emma, and their two brothers, George and Francis, who died during the war. It was dedicated by the Right Rev'd A. Nutter Thomas on the 28th December 1919. Another World War One memorial is the pair of windows which flank the baptistery dedicated to Captain Thomas Baker DFC, MM with bar, who died on the 4th November 1918 a week before the armistice. He was 21 years old.

In the 19th Century it was the practice for families to pay

rent for a pew in the church. These were then reserved for their use each service and a brass plate with the family name inscribed was placed on the pew. One benefit for the church was that it provided more certainty about income. Archdeacon Hornabrook suggested that the practice should be discontinued in 1908 but a final decision was not made. However, the Rev'd H.P. Finniss was inducted to St John's on February 1st 1918. The Centenary Souvenir of October 19, 1939 records:

"Mr Finniss proved to be a very strong advocate for the abolition of pew rents and several vestry meetings were held to discuss this radical reform. Eventually it was resolved that the rents be abolished, the abolition to be a part memorial to those members of the church who had sacrificed their lives in the Great War. It was also resolved that the brass name holders be removed from the pews and moulded into candlesticks for the altar, inscribed with the names of the 18 deceased soldiers. It was necessary for the Rector and People's Warden to appear before the House of Assembly, and eventually an Act of Parliament was passed permitting the abolition of rents in October, 1920. … The memory of the fallen men was further perpetuated by a handsome leather folder, artistically printed, containing a record of the church life of each of the men. This was installed in a handsome brass grille, designed by the People's Warden, Mr H.E. Fuller."

These memorials are still to be found in the church.

St John's flourished during the incumbency of the Rev'd Finniss. One example of this occurred in 1922 when it was decided to install new choir stalls and these were filled with the choir members in those days. John Dempster, the Choirmaster, had 40 boy sopranos in the choir. A copy of the Parish Magazine dated June, 1922 lists those involved with the church in so many areas. There were the Wardens, the Sunday School Council, the Day School Council, the Auditors, the Lay Reader, the Parish Worker, the Sidesmen, the Altar Servers,

the Sunday School Superintendent, the Headmistress of the Day School, the Synodsmen and finally the Organist and Choirmaster. All in all 46 parishioners were involved.

H.P.Finniss was a very capable and industrious man with a great love of music. During his time at St John's he participated in the founding of St Mark's College, the first University College in Adelaide. In 1927 he resigned from St John's and the following year he became Bishop's Vicar and Precentor of St Peter's Cathedral. In 1933 he founded in Adelaide the first branch of the School of English Church Music, later renamed the Royal School of Church Music. He had close links with Pulteney Grammar School. As well as teaching the boys Music Appreciation he was instrumental in establishing school scholarships for members of the Cathedral choir and also for St John's choir. He was very popular with the boys who nicknamed him "Saucy".

However, by the Centenary year of 1939 the character of the city of Adelaide had changed. The Centenary Souvenir concludes with the following observation:

"The encroachment of factories and business premises upon the south-east portion of the city, has materially affected the residential qualities of St John's Parish, whilst the settlement of the younger generations in various suburbs has also made a great change in the size of the congregation. Compensation is found, however, in the number of loyal parishioners from the eastern and southern suburbs, who retain an affection for St John's"

In the middle of the 20th Century young families wanted to move to the new suburbs with more modern homes and facilities. The large mansions were difficult to maintain without costly servants and were converted into schools, hospitals and public offices. There was a general decline in the fabric. The residential population of the city declined drastically over this period.

In 1945 the Rev'd E.J Cooper took over from the Rev'd Eric T. Wylie. During Father Cooper's incumbency there was a very lively program for youth. There were many sports teams including tennis, cricket and table tennis and the Young Anglican Fellowship had a membership of 30. There was also a chancel full of choristers. However, this level of support did not translate to the nave where the pews were conspicuously empty. Cooper would deplore the absence of support from the pulpit but of course he was preaching to the converted. Financial support for the parish continued to be a problem at a time when suburban parishes were expanding. Jim Cooper was also the Chaplain to the Royal Adelaide Hospital where he would conduct communion services as he also did at the Glenside Mental Hospital. When Father Don Wallace took over the parish in 1964 he was forced to go around the district asking for donations.

Whilst serving as the Rector of St John's the Rev'd Donald Wallace and his wife Gwen invited a young aboriginal boy, Harold Thomas, to join their family. Harold was enrolled at Pulteney Grammar School. His considerable artistic talent was soon evident. It is recorded that Harold designed the current aboriginal flag on the table in the Rectory kitchen.

Don Wallace also established a Memorial Chapel in the south west corner of the church. This was dedicated to previous parishioners who had died.

Father Don Wallace was a true humanitarian and most generous to those in need and greatly loved by the members of his congregation, many of whom had continued to be strong supporters of St John's. However, numbers had dwindled and as his retirement in 1978 approached, funding continued to be a problem. When he was approached by the Australian Provincial of the Society of the Sacred Mission with the suggestion that the Society make St John's part of their teaching and training establishment for clergy and lay people he felt this would be an ideal opportunity for the parish and the wider Anglican

Church in South Australia. The Society took up residence in May, 1978.

Father Douglas Brown became the Priest in Charge and the Rectory became a Priory which became home for a number of members of the Order. This has meant that the congregation has benefited from the involvement of the different brothers since 1978. In 1982 Father Dunstan McKee took over the incumbency and continued the path of progress which had been established.

A number of changes occurred. A mezzanine floor was built into the Parish Hall to accommodate a large segment of the SSM library to support the educational activities undertaken. These structural changes were supervised by parishioner, Don Taylor. The wider activities of the SSM attracted more lay people to join the congregation. Many members of the congregation were still travelling from afar but in recent years the nature of the South East corner of Adelaide has changed yet again. There has been a revival in interest in owning older, heritage homes, a rise in petrol prices made it more attractive to live closer to the city or in it and the Adelaide City Council offered attractive council rates to encourage people to return to the city to live.

When Father Christopher Myers became Priest in Charge in 1990 he undertook the challenge of improving the facilities. Research revealed that in the early years of the present church building the chancel was much more ornate with a wrought iron rood-screen, a wide decorated frieze under the windows and brocade wall hangings to frame the fine altar. In the intervening years the walls throughout the church had been whitewashed. With the voluntary work of architect, Ron Danvers, who specialised in heritage restoration, the original designs were identified and then a group of enthusiastic parishioners led by John Lelliot and Geoff Adams replicated the former designs. This restoration included the decorative frieze which runs along the side walls of the nave. The development, together with introduced features such as the

colourful reredos featuring the Archangels Michael and Gabriel and the rood cross made by themembers of the Little Monasteries of Bethlehem in France have created an aesthetically pleasing environment for our worship. ~ Ted Ward

An up-to-date history of St Johns in pamphlet form (last edited October 2022)

St John’s Booklet as at 17 Oct 22 (2024)