

St John's Dedication Festival

Personal reflections on the St John the Evangelist Halifax Street Adelaide, History of a Colonial Church (working draft 2021).

Judy Gilbertson

Firstly, I must say that I could never be construed as a historian. At St Johns that cap fits firmly on two heads whom we all know and respect. But I do find enjoyment in good stories and this church certainly has a few.

Guests who roam around our church may wonder at the aged fixtures, beautiful glass windows and ... they may even look at the Rood and wonder where these features all came from...and indeed they should. For we are a part of this city's colonial past and on a journey to this present moment.

When Rev'd James Farrell sailed from the motherland to lead his new congregation at St Johns- in -the- Wilderness he was no doubt full of energy. He was sent out into the bush to find his church only to discover its foundations. The tears he is said to have shed can be understood as he was expecting something much much better.

Eventually the church was built but it was far from serviceable. Indeed, it was with time so woebegone (according to Rev'd Slaney Poole) that it was condemned by the City Council. The walls were out of plumb and cracked and the floor a home to white ants. All I can say is that the parishioners must have been sturdy folk at that time. Given our risk management focus these days most of us may have felt compelled to stay at home, or listen to the service from one of the cracks in the walls.

With the passage of time a new church was built and many of the old bricks provided for the building of what is now known

as St Mary Magdelene...so all was not lost. The style of that new church is the form we have today.

Over the next few decades, the depression, world wars, and indeed the great flood of the river Murray created havoc in society. St Johns led the way with youth shelters and accommodation for homeless men and women. We should be proud as parents of these programs.

More recently arrangements with the Society of the Sacred Mission proved hugely beneficial to both parties. It seems to me that a pivotal point came when Father Christopher Myers was appointed as he took to heart the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council. I recall him saying to me how important he thought visual experience and power of beauty was to worship "to move people beyond words alone."

Thus began a monumental shift in the St Johns interior decor. I have no doubt many of you may recall those heady days of renovation. They must have been all consuming. Ron Danvers told me that when Father Christopher hung the Rood, he felt the church's keystone was at last in place... how special is that!

To those of you who are part of that history and the wonderful restoration work I say thank you.

Looking back over our grand history I am taken by the faith, resilience, and sheer determination of our forebears. Even we, who seem to live in a time bubble, can if prompted, look back at our youth and marvel at the journey that has led us here.

The thing that is the bedrock of our lives, and that unites us as a community is our faith. Without this certainty and guidance, life would be lived from one moment to the next and from one challenge to the next, without recourse to a rationale for the journey we seem to be on. Similarly church life can either be lived thinking of short-term goals or perhaps expanding them to a more distant horizon, the "long

game". That is the difference between strategies quickly achieved and those that are worked through over time.

I would like to think that at some point in the future a historian will say ...look at the St Johns church and its community...still strong and purposeful. They must be blessed ... and indeed we are. Let's be grateful for God's guidance and for providing us with an anchor and strength as we move through this life to the next.

But let's also look at the journey of our forebears as they can teach us much.

David Hilliard OAM

St John's is one of a handful of congregations in Adelaide which have had a continuous existence since the early years of the colony of South Australia. And unlike most of the others it remains on the same site.

In reading the history of this church, which was initiated by Caroline Adams and Ted Ward and brought to completion by Judy Gilbertson, I am struck by these particular features.

Churches change. This is pretty obvious. And they have their ups and downs. St John's had a near-death experience in the 1970s and was rescued by the arrival of the Society of the Sacred Mission which brought in new people and revitalised the parish. Sunday worship and the preaching at St John's in the 1840s was very different from, say, 1901 and there are many differences between 1950 and the present.

This is one of the few churches in the south-east corner of the city of Adelaide and therefore it has a unique relationship with this area. The only other churches are, I think the Christian Spiritualist church in Carrington Street and the Christadelphian Temple in Halifax Street which do not see themselves as part of the local community. Madge Memorial Methodist Church, further west along Halifax Street, was

closed in 1960.

When this area was thickly inhabited St John's was parish church for all sorts of people who lived here, in the big houses along East Terrace and the little cottages in the side streets. This is shown by the number of names on the First World War honour roll of young men from the parish who served and died. But today St John's does not have the same local connections that it once did and not many parishioners live in the area. For the people who occupy the cafes and restaurants in Hutt Street on Sundays this church is foreign territory.

For much of the last 130 years, since the opening of the new church in 1887, St John's has a strong tradition of church music. In the early years there was large choir of men and boys and H. P. Finniss, who was rector in the 1920s was a noted church musician. In recent years this tradition has been revived. The church has come to be a popular location for concerts and recitals.

Notable people have been associated with this church. Not many can claim as a parishioner a professor who was later awarded a Nobel Prize – Sir William Bragg. Many parishioners have played an important role in the public life of this city and state.

The people of St John's have not been concerned only with personal piety and the church world. They have looked outside. They have sought to meet the physical needs of people of the area – relief during the Great Depression, Father Wallace's assistance to homeless men in the 1970s, and notably the youth shelter that evolved into St John's Youth Services.

There is much to be proud of. However, no church can live off its history. This church has shown that it can adapt. It has great resources to meet the challenges ahead.

Caroline Adams

As the second Anglican church in South Australia St John's

holds an important place in the European history of the colony. Since its shaky beginnings from the laying of the foundation stone in October 1839 and its early meetings in the 'Temple of Ease' in Halifax Street it has been a part of Adelaide life. It has been a constant through depressions, wars, good times and pandemics. Such a constant can be a great comfort to the community. It is also important to consider that the land that St John's was built on was sacred to the traditional owners. In a way we are continuing to uphold a sense of sacredness.

Researching the history of St John's allows me to enter into the lives of others. Yes, the past is a foreign country that we can never fully understand, but we can appreciate the faith of those who came before us, from Jane Cox of Derby who, it is reported in 1841 donated amongst other things, some 200 hymn books to the fledging church, to local parishioner Professor Bragg. (How many churches can boast a Nobel prize winner as a sidesman!) Reading old copies of the parish magazine reveals that they had similar issues to us, from fund raising activities to caring for the welfare of others. They also had to deal with war, and indeed much of the fabric of the church has some connection to the memory of those who served Australia in war, from the memorial candlesticks (and snuffer) to the font and various stained-glass windows. There is a certain incongruity in that so much of the beauty of the church, much commented upon by visitors, is as a result of such remembrance.

Rev Don Wallace, writing on the 125th anniversary of St John's wrote how '[T]he original St John's congregation were pioneers. They faced the task of establishing a nation, and the equally formidable task of meeting and dealing with all the new knowledge that was just waiting to be born ...'. In the 21st century we are still pioneers, exploring how we can best use technology, negotiating living in a postmodern world with a multiplicity of voices and working out how we can live

ecologically sound in God's creation. Perhaps in years to come, historians will be writing about how we, in our little corner of Adelaide, tackled these challenges.