

History of our Church

Church History - Article 8 - Building St Josephs

In 1922 the building of the new St Josephs Church Coraki, was a spectacular and brave undertaking. There are many towns of ten times plus the population of Coraki who have never, then or now, achieved a Church to be compared with this fine building.

After the first World War was a time of comparative prosperity for farmers. It was a propitious time to "Dream the Impossible Dream." Bishop Carroll, and Parish Priest Dean Kiely decided that this was the time for the Catholic community of Coraki to build a church to take them forward as a centre of faith for years to come. Every project needs a dream, but it also needs the strength of purpose and planning to see it to fruition. The Bishop, Parish Priest, his Curate and laity are to be commended for a spectacular success with the building, and opening in 1923, of St Josephs. The construction was completed in a calendar year time frame, a tremendous achievement.

The dairy industry of the 1920's, which was the mainstay of Coraki, supported many outlying families. The Coraki Butter Factory on the river bank was a hive of activity. The river, an important, but diminishing, transport system, saw cream arrive in cans. It was churned to butter, packed into pine boxes, and slipped away to Sydney in the hold of a North Coast Steam Navigation Company ship. The monetary equivalent of many pounds of butter melted into the building of St Josephs.

The bricks for St Josephs were made and fired at Gunthorpe's Coombell brickworks. They were railed to Lismore and loaded onto flat top droghers owned by Grant Bros and then down the river road to Coraki. There were many bricks used in the construction of St Josephs, and there were many blisters involved in the movement of those bricks. Addie Kelly remembers the bricks being barrowed off the droghers, and loaded into horse drawn carts for the trip up Adam street. Tom Kelly had the hauling contract, he together with Pat Geeliey and Alf Lulham were some of the men to man-handle the bricks. It was hard, skin destroying work, there were no forklifts and at a mathematically based guess each brick was handled at least eight times from firing to laying. Down in the concrete basement, below the floor, there is a boy sized footprint that Addie imprinted as his mark upon the building.

Architect for the church was Col. FJ Board and a tender was accepted from PF Small as Builder. By the 22nd May 1922, the foundations were in place, and Bishop Carroll arrived to bless the foundations of the sanctuary and set in place the Foundation Stone. He used a" beautifully chased and inscribed trowel presented by the Architect, Col FJ Board. It was a showery day with a blustery wind out of the South. The speeches planned for presentation on site from a temporary platform were adjourned to the Church. The crowd was such that many were unable to gain admission.

It was planned that church would have a seating capacity of 700 persons. The Interior seating dimension of the Church 80 feet in length by 40 feet in width, with 15 feet to the communion rails. The sanctuary to be 24 by 24 feet. Two chapels one 14 feet by 15 feet 6 inches, one 14 feet by 13 feet 6 inches, these either side of the sanctuary. There would be two smaller chapels 14 feet by 7 feet and two side booths 11 feet 6 inches by 4 feet. The gallery to be 40 feet by 20 feet with stairs made of blue fig and polished cedar handrails.

The exterior would be brick and cement. Height from the top of the cross to the top of the steps 64 feet. There would be 4 pinnacles, 2 of 32 feet and 2 of 48 feet. There would be 32 windows of

2

Cathedral glass, with ruby tinted margins, there would be a round rose window at the entrance to the building. The intention was that the Baptismal font and confessionals would be just inside the front entrance, each approached by flat Gothic arches.

Flooring of the church was 4 by 1 inch Teak. The main church was to have 5 framed principals of straight grained Oregon supporting the slate roof, lined with Tallwood. The communion rails to be polished cedar. Intention for the interior finish was a 5 feet dado in natural finish with the rest of the walls cold water painted in suede grey.

At the opening in February 1923, there was a congregation of 800 people it was stated that "The Crowd would have been larger but for the inclement weather." In opening and blessing the Church, Bishop Carroll congratulated Dean Kiely, Father Hennessy and the Parishioners for their achievement.

When it is considered that only six months had elapsed since laying of the foundation stone it was a tremendous effort. The builder PF Small, deserved accolades for the logistics of bring it all together. There is nothing available to indicate the size of the workforce but it must have been a significant number of men for the many tasks involved. Interesting to note that any workman up on the roof of St Josephs today, needs a "cherry picker," a safety harness, and an insurance policy that costs the earth. Not so in 1923, Kevin "Skeeter" Tuner strolled across the ridgecapping as a mark celebration for completion of the job. Maybe his mates shouted a beer for the walk, but more likely so many had been up clambering around that roof, they thought it just part of the job.

The sermon for the Mass of that day was preached by Father M O'Flynn from The Valley, Brisbane. His text being "My kingdom is not of this World."

The all up cost of the building was approximately 10,000 pounds.

Income to the time of opening was 7,699 pounds 33 shillings and 10 pence. A special "thanks" was offered to Mr RR Stewart, Banker, (father of Mons. Stewart and Sister Patricia) for procuring an overdraft of 5000 pounds, without this large overdraft the building could not have been achieved in such quick time. There was a banquet at school to accommodate 100 persons, from all accounts a slap up feed to celebrate the occasion. A fair bet that if you weren't a cleric or religious, to be one of that 100, meant a sizeable donation. It has often been stated by the cynical that 'there is no such thing as a free feed.'

In the original list of donations, at the laying of the foundation stone, were two gifts of 100 pounds. Those benefactors were Jno Turner Senr., and Patrick Casey. It is difficult to equate and compare money of 1922 with 1997. To maintain that 100 pounds would have been half a years income for many persons of that time, gives a rough relativity. Fortunately for the Catholic community of Coraki, St Josephs would have been basically debt free when great depression of the late 1920's early 30's arrived.

There were many persons who contributed magnificently with cash or kind, and the community must have felt a sense of pride when they arrived to worship in their new church.

Catholic fund raising in the late 20th century has become the province of skilled professionals. Their "softly, softly" methods usually give results and an improved "Planned Giving" input. Of course too. the professional does OK for himself. The first planned giving programme for Coraki Parish, happened in September of 1959. The Chairman for the Committee Mr. Bill Gooley, and

the canvass Chairman was Mr Jim Roinson.

At the time of the building of St Josephs, and for a generation or two later, the fund raising approach was not quite so subtle. Parish priests of those days were not without ability to extract worthwhile contributions. The method of calling your leading men together in the Church for an "advisory" meeting, shutting the doors, and then proceeding to itemise a donation list, gave results. A couple of good givers to arise and proclaim their donation, gave the "meeting" a momentum. It was not unknown for a farmer having what he considered a tough time to manfully plead exemption to a smaller amount. He would probably be given short shift, sat down and told "there are no token gifts here." The message soon soaked through others present. Another productive method of cash inflow was the annual cattle sale. Livestock owners were expected to donate animals to swell the Parish Fund (more of this in the next article).

St Josephs would have been opened with the final accoutrements incomplete. The magnificent marble altar was a latter gift of Dean Kiely, who at the opening said it was "the proudest day of his life". When Dean Kiely died at Kempsey, half a year late, when returning from Sydney in October of 1923, his will provided for the altar. Tabernacle was a gift of John Turner, that further complemented the altar. A list of, donors, though certainly incomplete, has already been presented in an earlier article.

The stained glass windows in the sanctuary were added in the late 1940's. These windows were contributed by the descendants of Patrick and Bridget Casey. To be seen to best advantage they require a early morning sun bursting through the richly coloured panes into a still dark church. They are fine examples of the stained glass, leadlight craft. The window of Mary and Child carries the inscription "Pray for the soul of Bridget Casey." The window of Jesus carries the inscription "Pray for the soul of Patrick Casey". It has been suggested that Fr O'Regan was of the opinion that a better Parish use could be found for the money than these costly windows. The Casey, Birmingham, Reardon families remained firm and St Josephs acquired two of the finest window the diocese.

Father Thomas O'Regan undertook major works to St Josephs, following the initial planned giving programme in late 1959. Mass was conducted in the school for a period of time. The slate roof, with its six distinctive turrets on either side, was replaced with red terra cotta tiles in the early 1960's. This was considered necessary because of cracking slate and the accompanied leaks. The steel stabilising bars were inserted in the ceiling at this time, and these served to hang fluroescent lights. Pointing of the exterior brickwork took place and work was undertaken upon the windows. The windows in the front of the building, which are leadlighted in small inverted parallelograms of gold coloured glass, could be original. The main side windows had their glass replaced and the glasswork of these windows is no longer uniform.

Father Daniel Troy came to Coraki in 1963 and was Parish priest at the time of Second Vatican. In order to complete a Works schedule throughout the Parish he introduced a new Sacrificial Giving Programme. The major expenses planned were to Coraki Convent, Toilets at Coraki School, Toilets at Woodburn, and at St Johns Evans Head Painting, Priests Room and Garage.

Towards the end of his time in Coraki, Fr Troy adapted the marble altar to its present form. Part of the altar became the new lectern, replacing the large wooden rails that had framed the old speaking platform. An A.P.A. system (donated by the Sands family in memory of Bill Sands) was installed. The sanctuary was carpeted in red. The altar rails were removed and the Baptismal font brought forward to its present position. It seems that the large crucifix may have moved twice before Fr Troy fixed it in the present location. There are opinions that it was

A of H

once in the back of the church and that it hung high above the altar rails in the centre of the church.

The new two story brick Presbytery was another undertaking of Fr Troy. The location meant acquisition of land and changing of a road so that the building could be placed in its present central location. When the new presbytery became Fr Troy's home the old building was demolished and sold as recyclable timber. Fr Troy had very little time to enjoy the new presbytery as he moved to South Lismore at completion of the building.

The old presbytery, with its steeply pitched roof had a long and varied career. It was used as a convent after the 1904 fire, until the Adam street building was ready in 1905. The Parish priest Fr. Dumey, gave his home to the Nuns and moved into hotel accommodation until the convent was built. The wooden presbytery building was later moved to the hill. The logistics of cutting into sections and moving by bullock power no doubt created plenty of interest for young and old. It lived on as a solid home and planing centre for many priests. There is little doubt that the move of Catholic buildings to high ground was a sensible decision in a flood prone town.

During Father John Dacey's tenancy as Parish Priest the extra accommodation of the new presbytery was used at times for "living in" courses to introduce the Vatican 2 Renewal movement to the laity. The back chapel of St Josephs came into being about this time of the early 1970's. This chapel has been changed and updated on several occasions since.

The year 1985 saw Father Tom Chapman arrange painting of the church interior. The pews were lacquered in their present "cedar" colour. Carpeting of the oh. body & 4y took place at this time, prior to this the plain the plain & flooring was complimented with a heavy mottled red rubber runner along the aisles. The northern entrance was converted to a concrete ramp suitable for wheelchair access.

Father Michael Nugent became Parish Priest, and an architects report showed problems with St Joseph's. Serious leaking of the four alcove roofs was causing damage to the floors of the confessionals and anywhere that moisture reached the floor. These problems have hopefully been fixed. The choir loft has been cleaned up and restored as a place for making music to complement the liturgy. In a building with the ceiling height of St Josephs, sound at floor level is swallowed up in the carpet. The building was pressure cleaned and the roof sealed. It remains during our 75th renewal year for the interior to be painted and the woodwork of the ceiling to be cleaned and refinished. St Josephs will then be in pristine condition.

The work on St Josephs has been possible through a substantial bequest from the late Alice Turner and considerable fund raising by a hard working committee. The Turner family was a major contributor to the building in 1922, and 75 years on that family loyalty enables the church to be placed in fitting order for its dedication.

Looking to the future it is to be prayed for that anew generation will consider the ongoing maintenance of St Josephs worthy of their financial sacrifice. Towards 2000 and beyond, there are many unknowns for Coraki Catholic Parish. May the Spirit guide those who come after us to meet this challenge.

4/4j