

The Catholic Church in Gungahlin -A Brief Background-

A neat and substantial school church has just been completed at Ginninderra for the united purposes of Roman Catholic worship and a provisional school. It is erected on land given for the purpose by Mr Florance McAuliffe by whose exertions also the principal costs of erection – about £70 – was collected – the building is about 25' x 18' in dimension.

Queanbeyan Age, 28 March 1872

We have a great history here in Gungahlin – both Catholic and secular – and it is one which should still resonate strongly with us today.

Its about new settlers, mixing of cultures, establishing of homes, families and livelihoods, coping with poor roads, facilities and communications, struggles with the environment and government policies, building community, establishing a Catholic mission, providing Catholic education and above all, building a Church.

What distinguishes our story from so many others is that its development and consolidation was interrupted – not once, but twice. Continuity with our past was fractured when this part of NSW was resumed in 1915 for the Federal Capital Territory. At that time many of the original landowning families left their properties rather than remain as tenants (Newman, Gillespie). Our connections were virtually severed from the 1990's through to the present, when the tenant farmers had to leave progressively to make way for modern Gungahlin. WE may all know people in this latter category.

It is a little wonder then that the threads to our past are not as strong as in some other communities, but the threads are there, all around us – we walk on them, drive past them, unconsciously emulate them and/or repeat them.

European settlement began nearly 180 years ago, when George Thomas Palmer established his “Gingininderra” (Ginninderra) station in 1826. The station was initially manned by overseers and convicts, and Palmer and his family moved in about 1845. The buildings were situated in what is now CSIRO land opposite Giralang, off William Slim Drive (Gillespie).

The Ginninderra Village that developed soon after, in response to the growing numbers in the area, was back on the Yass Road or Barton Highway, around the present Gold Creek Village site. It was never a declared village, but grew along the lines of the old English manor estates. It eventually lost ground to the surveyed village of Hall where settlers and ticket of leave people could buy their own properties. At its height, the village included St Francis Catholic Church and school (still there – see photos attached), the public school (still there), a post office, a police station, a blacksmith's shop, and numerous other small buildings (Gillespie).

Another early landholder was James McCarthy, who established “Glenwood”, around the Wallaroo Road area, in 1835. This property was later occupied by his sons, James and William McCarthy (Gillespie).

“Horse Park” homestead (Amaroo) was built in the 1840’s and is thought to be the earliest intact structure associated with small landowners in the Gungahlin area (Barrow). Today, it would appear that the Good Shepherd school in Amaroo occupies some of the “Horse Park” pastures (to be confirmed).

In 1857 Anthony Rolfe settled on his selection known as “Tea Gardens”. Anthony, a free settler had followed his brother William who had been transported to Australia in 1835 for poaching a hare (Newman). What irony, as it emerged that one of the greatest hazards to settlement in and around Gungahlin were the plagues of rabbits. Today, the remains of the “Tea Gardens” homestead, although privately enclosed, lie very close to the 4th fairway of the Gungahlin Lakes Golf Course (Newman).

Just down the road, Anthony’s son Edmund took up land and established his “Gold Creek” home. His grain crops covered the area occupied by the present Holy Spirit School, Parish house and Holy Spirit Mass centre (Newman). The homestead part of the property on Gungahlin Drive is still intact, but the story of its development and most uncertain future is still evolving.

The Yass Catholic mission to the area was established in 1839, but unfortunately for the Yass clergy, the mission extended as far south as Port Phillip Bay. As would be expected, visits by priests to this region took place only quarterly or monthly (Maher, Rochford).

The McCarthys, Rolfs, McAuliffes and others formed the vanguard of the Catholic Community in Gungahlin and their homes became Mass stations where the visiting clergy could say Mass and stay overnight (Maher).

During the 1870’s, and possibly even before the first church was built, the priest announced his visit via telegraph to the post office. The postmaster, in turn, wrote a note on people’s mail heralding the upcoming visit (Newman).

It is not difficult to imagine the scene – squeezing a growing congregation into a small space, setting up an altar, arranging chairs, unpacking the sacred vessels, preparing directions and cue cards for the participants etc.

One country church in the Archdiocese had prepared a phonetic Latin chart to guide the uninitiated helpers through the entire Mass. It included the following;

Ad dayum quee laytifficat yooventootem mayam

Queear too ays, Dayus, fortitoodo maya etc. (Maher)

As noted in the opening quote, in March 1872 Mr Florance McAuliffe donated land and collected sufficient funds to enable the building of St Francis Church, and provisional school at Ginninderra. Provisional schools were introduced for remote and thinly populated areas to enable private entities to provide education facilities for public students (Maher). More detail of the prevailing education philosophies and church/state tensions are in Rev Brian Maher's *Planting the Celtic Cross*.

In spite of such tensions, S Francis' provisional school met the education needs of all children in the area until the public school was established in 1884. With the loss of government support, Edmund Rolf contracted a catholic teacher to teach 5 local catholic children at St Francis in 1886. The teacher was offered free board and \$40 p.a. The arrangement was not that successful however and eventually Catholic education in the area ceased (Gillespie).

By the turn of the century, the tiny St Francis church was under pressure and even the visiting Archbishop Gallagher, who was in attendance for a confirmation ceremony in 1902, suggested that a new church was needed. A subscription list was commenced with £200 (about 20% of the final cost) being collected on the spot. Further fund raising over the next 8 years through sporting events, dances, fetes and balls etc, realised the greater part of the debt and by the time St Francis Xavier's opened in Hall in 1910, any outstanding balance was quickly met (Newman, Gillespie, Rochford).

What is significant here is that, apart from Mr McAuliffe's land donation, and in the best of Catholic traditions, there was no one single philanthropist. All the funds needed for education, visiting clergy and the new church were raised through donations from the general community.

The title for the old St Francis Church in Ginninderra was finally transferred from Church hands in 1928 (Rochford).

Like the new Church, much of the other activities in the region also transferred to Hall, and Ginninderra/Gungahlin region languished somewhat, until the 1990's when new development commenced.

In 1993 a new Catholic mission to Gungahlin was initiated.

References

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