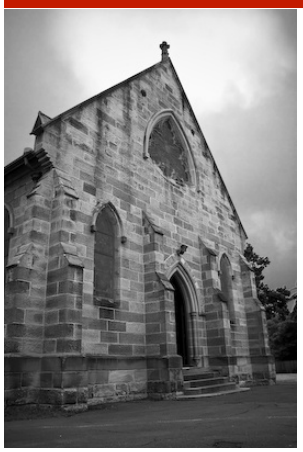
# History of St Matthias Church

by Caitlin Hurley

© St Matthias Anglican Church 2008

# History of St Matthias Church



On the busy corner of Oxford Street and Moore Park Road in Paddington, Sydney there stands a church. To a local partaking in some window shopping on Oxford Street on a busy Sunday morning this building is just another sandstone church. A church that harks back to a by gone era when people wore their Sunday best to a church service every Sunday. To the parishioners who still attend services in this building every Sunday it is just the infrastructure that houses a church of people. Little does the shopper or the parishioner know the important role this building and the people who flowed in and out of its walls played in the significant developments and events that shaped the early history of Sydney and by extension the history of Australia.

This building is the church of St Matthias. The St Matthias church building is a sandstone structure in the gothic revival style. This building began as a Maltese cross but "subsequent additions have altered this to be an approximately Latin cross."[1] Throughout its history and consequently throughout this written history, the building has been known as the St Matthias Garrison Church and more recently simply as St Matthias.

**The first St Matthias Garrison Church**

The history of the current St Matthias building actually begins with another sandstone building on Oxford Street. Just across the street from the present day Paddington Town Hall is a small bronze plaque. This plaque identifies the location of the first St Matthias Garrison Church. The first church of St Mathias was built in 1855 and throughout its short history has had many functions. Originally the Church of England School, it became the spiritual home of the St Matthias congregation from 1856 to 1861. The Rev Thomas Wilson conducted the first service of the St Matthias congregation on the 17th of February 1856. Unfortunately for the parishioners of St Matthias, services had been held in this building "for barely three months when the water board decided to resume the land for a raised reservoir."[2] Although the land of St Matthias was reclaimed "the church was given more land in compensation."[3] The land given as compensation was a large expanse of land known as the Lachlan Swamps and which would later become Centennial Park."[4]

On the 24th of May 1858, having received new land, a public meeting of the St Matthias parish council was called. At this meeting a member of the parish council, Mr Edward Bell, was appointed as the architect for the new church building. Having received government grants to finance the churches construction Mr Bell "produced a set of

---

[1] National Trust of Australia, Register of National Estate, St Matthias Anglican Church, Oxford St, Paddington NSW.

[2] White Thompson., *Paddington Sketchbook*, Rigby Ltd, Sydney, 1971, p. 28.

[3] White Thompson., *Paddington Sketchbook*, p. 28.

[4] Ibid., p. 28.

carefully prepared plans and specifications for work to be done on the start of St Matthias Church, Paddington"[5] to the parish council on the 14th of December 1858. Bell's plans, which would result in a church in the gothic revival style, called for a two stage building process. The first stage of this process detailed the building of the Eastern portion of the church that would seat 300 parishioners at a cost of £2000. The second stage of the plan involved extending the nave of the church taking the churches capacity to that of 700 parishioners. This extension, which excluded the construction of the church spires, would cost an additional £1500. With the plans approved by the parish council tender was called to construct the church. Tender was won by Linton & Clark for 25 ⊢ per perch of stone with 25 perches of stone per week.

With the construction of the new church tendered the parish council invited the Governor, Sir William Dennison to lay the church foundation stone. This important occasion in the church's history was planned to take place on the 24th of March 1859. Unfortunately, the governor became ill on the 24th and the foundation stone was laid the following day by the bishop of Sydney Bishop Barker.

Throughout the design, tender and early construction process Bell worked without remuneration. Instead his salary was donated to the church in aid of the church building fund. Although this was the case Bell threatened to resign from his position as the church architect on several occasions. Indeed, in September 1859 Bell did resign but resumed his position two weeks later having resolved his issues with the parish council. In October of the same year James Cowlishaw was appointed to oversee the construction of the church roof. A tender of £759 was accepted by a Mr Lawes to tile the church roof with slate.

Throughout the building process the congregation of St Matthias continued to meet at the original St Matthias. Following the construction of the new St Matthias Garrison Church the original St Matthias housed a denominational school throughout the week and the St Matthias Sunday school on Sundays. This continued throughout the 1870's and 1880's until the school closed in 1881. In 1882 the building was bought by Mr Henry Zions and incorporated into the Grand View Hotel. The building eventually fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1922.

### The Early Years 1861 1868

On Sunday the 26th of May 1861 the "new church of St Matthias at Paddington was opened for public worship."[6] This first service was conducted by Bishop Barker with the evening service conducted by the "Rev. J.D Brennan, the minister of the church."[7]

---

[5] Herman, M., *The Blackets: An era of Australian Architecture*, Angus & Robertson publishers, Sydney, 1963, p.71

[6] *St Matthias Garrison Church*, Sydney Morning Herald, 27th May 1861.

[7] *St Matthias Garrison Church*, 27th May 1861.

Over the next year the parishioners of St Matthias, which "each Sunday included the troops, who marched to the church in a body and the residents of Paddington"[8] adapted to and embraced their new spiritual home. On the 2nd of December 1862 a parish council meeting was called to consider any "repairs and alterations required"[9] to complete the church. At this meeting it was decided the church chancel should be improved, the grounds fenced and turrets to be added to the building.[10] The grounds of the church were subsequently fenced by an iron bark paling fence in 1862.

In a further parish council meeting on the 15th of December 1862 it was recommended that the well known architect Mr Edmund Blacket be approached to provide estimates and designs for the construction of porches and turrets for the church. Mr Blacket responded to this enquiry and advised that the octagonal turrets would cost £110 and with the addition of porches to the Northern and Southern entrances of the church costing £140. Mr Blacket was then employed to oversee the building of the turrets and porches. In March of 1863 Mr Blacket was asked by the council to turn the northern turret into a belfry. Mr Blacket "refused to do so, on the grounds of a lack of strength in the stone work."[11] Although Mr Blacket designed, oversaw the construction of these extensions and provided the parish council with invaluable advice regarding the building by "October 1863 Blacket was paid the magnificent sum of £23 for his labours on St Matthias."[12]

This period of St Matthias history is not only marked by major structural change to the church building but also by changes in local government and ministry infrastructure. In 1867 the congregation of St Matthias was severely affected by the Municipalities Act of 1867. As a result of this act the church, which had previously belonged to the municipality was transferred to the municipality of Randwick. While this was the case the church still existed on the fringes of the Lachlan Swamps that fell under the jurisdiction of the City council. This minor technicality in effect left the church and its congregation in a local governance 'no mans land.' This problem was eventually rectified when the "Paddington council reached an agreement with Randwick council"[13] and bought the land in question for £500.[14]

---

[8] *Buildings & Works: An old Paddington Landmark*, Sydney Morning Herald, January 1922.

[9] Herman, M., *The Blackets: An era of Australian Architecture*, p. 71

[10] Ibid., p. 71.

[11] Ibid., p. 72.

[12] Ibid., p. 72.

[13] White & Thompson., *Paddington Sketchbook*, p. 28.

[14] Ibid., p.28

In terms of ministerial changes in the seven year period of 1861 to 1868 the church of St Matthias had four different ministers. These ministers where the incumbent Rev Brennan who was followed by Rev Spence. Rev Spence was succeeded by the Rev Mayne then Rev Synge and finally Rev W Byrnes. The congregation entered a period of relative stability with the incumbency of the Rev Zachary Barry.

**Zachary Barry 1868 1898**

The period of 1868 to 1874 was a significantly quiet period in the history of the St Matthias. Not including the churches transition from kerosene to gas lamps in 1869 this six year period was relatively few changes to the church structure. This all changed in 1874. In June of 1874 the parish council appointed the architect Mr Dave to extend the nave of the church in accordance with the original plan of Edward Bell. This extension can be seen in the present day church as the roof panelling of the nave extension does not match planning of the existing church.[15] Also, in 1874 work on the first St Matthias rectory began.

The 1890's marked a period of significant change both inside and outside the St Matthias building. In 1892 the land surrounding the church was subdivided by the local council for further residential development. The church interior in the following two years was also to be significantly redeveloped. In February 1895 the parish council presented to the congregation plans outlining proposed improvements to the church at a cost of £400. These improvements included relocating the church organ, rearranging the chancel and the pulpit and painting the interior of the church. Having received permission from the Bishop to rearrange the interior of the church a Mr Walcott was employed as the architect for the redevelopment. Under the guidance of Mr Walcott the organ was moved to its present location and raised by 9 inches and the current pew formation of lightwood pews with kneel rests put in place. This formation incorporated two aisles running east to west down the church and one aisle running north to south across the church. Choir stalls of cedar were also added and installed during this redevelopment process. Throughout the redevelopment process church services were held in the parish hall. This redeveloped went over budget and cost the congregation a grand total of £532. Although this cost was substantial its effect was lessoned by congregational donations amounting to £107 and the only recorded bequest to St Matthias from a Miss Gorman to the sum of £205.[16] It is fair to say that during the incumbency of Rev Barry that "considerable interior and exterior alterations were affected to the church."[17]

---

[15] Informal Interview with Paul Marquet

[16] The Paddington Society, *St Matthias History: the history of St Matthias Church Paddington, and transcripts of the letters concerning Rev Zachary Barry*, Paddington Society Archives.

[17] Beautiful Churches of Sydney - No. 15, Publisher unknown, c1920

Throughout his incumbency Rev Barry was the chaplain to Victoria Barracks. He was also an ardent proponent of a state funded education system. On his death Rev Barry was buried in the cemetery of the near by St Jude's, Randwick. On Sunday the 27th of December 1914 the contribution Rev Barry made to the church congregation and wider community was honoured through the unveiling and dedication of a memorial window for Rev Barry by the Lord Archbishop of Sydney.

**J. W Gillett 1898 1907**

The incumbency of Rev J W Gillett at St Matthias is marked by a very shaky beginning. In his second year as the reverend to St Matthias church the parish council decided it would ask the Bishop of Sydney to officially consecrate the church building. Unfortunately for Rev Gillett the Bishop refused to consecrate the building until the debt on the church was repaid. This refusal spurred the congregation to raise the required funds to rid the church of debt.

While his incumbency may have been shaky in its beginnings, the nine year incumbency of Rev Gillett saw significant change to the St Matthias church grounds. In the church minutes of 1901 it is noted that the parish council should consider replacing the "old dilapidated fence"[18] that surrounded the church grounds. As this idea was developed it was suggested that the replacement of this fence be built to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII. On the 2nd of September 1902 the parish council commissioned architect Arthur Blacket, son of Edmund Blacket, to "prepare a plan for a suitable stone fence to surround the church property."[19] This stone wall, which was constructed of dwarf stone, complete with its iron gates and gas lamps became known as the Coronation Gates of 1902. The parish minutes note that the coronation gates cost the congregation of St Matthias the grand total of £67 14s 16d.

The parish of St Matthias was further affected at this time by the introduction of a new church parish in the location of the present day Bondi Junction. The new parish was the Parish of Mill Hill. Through the introduction of this new parish the parish boundaries of St Matthias were drastically altered. As a result of the creation of the Mill Hill parish the demographic of the St Matthias shifted as many families moved to the new congregation at Mill Hill.

---

[18] The Paddington Society, *St Matthias History: the history of St Matthias Church Paddington, and transcripts of the letters concerning Rev Zachary Barry*, Paddington Society Archives.

[19] The Paddington Society, *St Matthias History: the history of St Matthias Church Paddington, and transcripts of the letters concerning Rev Zachary Barry*.

**Sydney Glanville Fielding 1907 1924**

By the time Rev Fielding became the minister of St Matthias in 1924 the church had been "stripped of much of its original territory." While this was the case in the words of one observer the church continued to be "a very virile church." Fielding also maintained the churches connection to Victoria Barracks through his role as the "garrison chaplain."

The incumbency of Fielding is more noted for his contribution to the literary world and support of the masons rather than any particular changes or developments to the church building. As such, very little church funds were spent on the building except for general maintenance. While very little was spent on the building, Fielding did oversee the installation of memorial stain glass windows and the completion of a new wooden case for the church organ. The dedication windows to Rev Zachary Barry, his wife and others were unveiled by the Archbishop of Sydney on the 27th of December 1914. Five years later the Archbishop dedicated the memorial organ in service on the 28th of September 1919. Major General G.L. Lee unveiled the World War I Honor roll in the same service.

It was also at this time that the parish council decided to construct the churches second rectory. Under the leadership of Fielding and his wife the congregation was encouraged to raise funds for the rectories construction. This fund raising effort took the form of concerts, dramatic entertainments and festivals.

**J. Newton Stephens 1924 1966**

The incumbency of Rev Stephens marks a very active period of church change. It is also the period of the churches history surrounded by the most controversy. While he was only paid £500 Stephens was involved in many processes that drastically changed the interior and exterior of all the St Matthias buildings.

It was during Rev Stephens's incumbency that the second church rectory was constructed. Throughout this time the congregation continued to actively raise funds for the construction of the rectory but also for general "repairs to the church and hall." [20] In particular the church bazaars and social festivals between 1925 and 1927 encouraged parishioners to attend, as their support "represents a brick in St Matthias's new rectory."[21]

The period between 1958 and 1961 was the most active in terms of structural change to the church. Between 1959 and 1960 protective wiring was placed over all the churches stain glass windows, the guttering and drainpipes were replaced at a cost of £200 and

[20] Invitation to the 1925 Annual Sale of Works and Gifts, St Matthias Church Archives.

[21] Invitation to the Parish Bizzare and Social Events 1925 - 1927. St Matthias Church Archives.

the chancel and baptistery were recarpeted. On the 7th of September 1958 the memorial windows at the back of the churches nave was dedicated in memoriam to those who fell during World War II. The plaque below this large window reads:

In Memoriam 1939 -1945

The memorial window was dedicated by
Arch Deacon Ashley Brown C E
and unveiled by
Lt Gen R.G Pollard CBE DSO
on the 7th September 1958
during the incumbency of the
Rev J Newton Stephen BA CE

In 1959 Rev Stephens was informed by the Sydney City council and the department of main roads that they intended to widen Oxford St. This had major repercussion for the church and its buildings. In order to widen the street the Coronation Gates and the face of the Parish Hall would need to be moved back by 14 feet. This reconstruction took place between 1959 and 1961 and caused major disruption to not only the congregation but to the lives of the Paddington community.

It was also at this time that the interior of the church was changed dramatically. At this time the wooden panelling that stood at the front of the church was replaced by velvet curtains, a table and two large marble tablets. On these tablets are the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed. It is these changes that are surrounded in some controversy. It is believed that the wooden panelling was not removed by Rev Stephens himself but by one of the families of the congregation who donated the panelling as a memorial to a family member. This panelling was apparently removed as this family disagreed with the theology of Rev Stephens and his attempts to transform the church into a High Church of England church.[22] This attempt to transform the church is witnessed through the raising of the front of the church to mimic a catholic cathedral. Rev Stephens also moved several stain glass windows from the front of the church to their present location in the church nave. Since these major changes to the exterior and interior of the church under Rev Stephens the church, its grounds or its ancillary buildings have not undergone such extensive or permanent change.

Although his theology may have been unpopular at times Rev Stephens continued the church's long association with Victoria Barracks through his appointment as the chaplain to Victoria Barracks 1931. This connection was further strengthened by use of military orders of services in the congregation and the many military services that took place. During this time it was not unusual to see the troops parading in the church grounds or presenting colours. During 1960's it was not unusual to attend services

[22] Informal Interview with Paul Marquet

celebrating the Sydney Commando Regiment, the First Infantry Battalion or the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps.

**E. J Seatree & John Cashman 1966 1977**

After the rather controversial incumbency of Rev Stephen and the renovations of Oxford Street the relatively brief incumbency of Rev E.J Seatree, who was followed by Rev Cashman, was a period of relative calm and stability. Although there were relatively few significant structural changes to the church throughout these incumbencies, this period marks a significant moment in the church's history. This significant moment was the church building being identified by the National Trust of Australia as a "building of great historic significance."[23] The registration of the church, along with the churches ancillary buildings, on the 24th of October 1968 was justified through its "notable contribution to the streetscape of the cross roads of Oxford St and Centennial Park."[24] The church was also noted as of historical significance through the "long historic association with the nearby Victoria Barracks and the Anglican community."[25]

This period of the church's history also marks a time of significant congregational financial support for maintenance of the church's infrastructure. In December of 1968 new church doors were donated by Mrs E Hall in memory of her parents. The plaque on these doors, which at present are the main doors to the church, reads:

These doors were given by
Mrs E Hall
In loving memory of her parents
Robert and Letitia Johnston
And dedicated to the glory of God on Sunday 8th December 1968
Rector: Rev. E.J. Seatree

The practice of congregational support for the church can again be seen in 1975. In this year the gas lamps on the Coronation Gates were restored. The plaque remembering this memorial donation reads:

*I am the light of the world*
The gas lamps on the memorial wall were restored and dedicated in 1975 in memory of
Ernest Albert Samuel Hall 1903 1974

While the congregation was active in supporting the church the size of the congregation was beginning to reach dangerously low levels. This trend is reflected by a diocesan

[23] National Trust of Australia, Register of National Estate, St Matthias Anglican Church, Oxford St, Paddington NSW.

[24] National Trust of Australia, Register of National Estate, St Matthias Anglican Church, Oxford St, Paddington NSW.

[25] National Trust of Australia, Register of National Estate, St Matthias Church Group, Paddington NSW.

survey carried out in 1973. This survey notes that although three services are carried out a week a "decline in number of families in area continues."[26] The report also notes that "traditional church approaches"[27] to growing a congregation "do not seem particularly relevant."[28] Some less traditional avenues of growth were suggested but it was noted that the "traditional nature of the Parish does not facilitate"[29] these avenues. This report also states that congregation numbers had reached such a low level that plans were discussed for the possible amalgamation of the church with the church of St George.

**Philip Jensen & Warwick de Jersey 1977 to the present**

The decline of congregational numbers was dramatically reversed under the incumbency of Rev Jensen. Indeed the growth of the St Matthias congregation grew steadily under Rev Jensen and continues to grow in the incumbency of Rev de Jersey.

While the congregation grew under the direction of Rev Jensen during this period the interior of the church was dramatically altered. In the late 1980's the pulpit, prayer rests and tables were removed and placed in storage containers outside the church. At the same time the floor of the chancel was levelled and the church recarpeted. Changes to the church's ancillary buildings also took place at this time. The old rectory was sold and the Parish Hall was listed as a building of significance by the National Trust of Australia. The name of the Parish Hall was also changed to what it is currently known as, the Barnabas Centre. It was also at this time that the connection between the church and Victoria Barracks began to decline. This historical connection is now all but lost to the youth of the congregation who are not aware of any connection between their church and the nations' military history.

When Rev de Jersey was appointed as minister of St Matthias he inherited a very strong congregation but a church building that had not been renovated or changed in several years. At present the parish council is investigating the possibility of 'sprucing up' the church to its former glory days as a spiritual home for its congregation that adds personality to the prospect of Oxford St.

---

[26] Anglican Church of Australia: Diocese of Sydney, St Matthias Diocesan Evaluation & Report, 1973.

[27] Anglican Church of Australia: Diocese of Sydney, St Matthias Diocesan Evaluation & Report, 1973.

[28] Anglican Church of Australia: Diocese of Sydney, St Matthias Diocesan Evaluation & Report, 1973.

[29] Anglican Church of Australia: Diocese of Sydney, St Matthias Diocesan Evaluation & Report, 1973.

### St Matthias Parish Hall

The St Matthias Parish Hall was built in 1882 to the designs of Benjamin Backhouse. Like the main church building the parish hall is gothic revival in style. The building is a single story brick building with stone capping. The parish hall is distinctive with its steep pitch roof of slate and "set back buttresses that divide the side walls into nine bays."[30]

As a result of the Oxford Street renovations of 1959 the face of the parish hall was moved backwards approximately fourteen feet. At the same time £2000 was spent on refurbishing the hall and replacing the floor that had been destroyed by an infestation of white ants.

Throughout its history the parish hall played an important role in the church life at St Matthias. At the turn of the century the hall hosted several bazaars, festivals and concerts in aid of various church causes. The building is currently known as the Barnabas Centre, in recognition of the long ties this congregation has had with the congregation of St Barnabas (Mill Hill Rd Bondi Junction), and is the home of the church's Sunday school and Youth group program and bible studies as well as housing the church office. The parish hall was listed on the register of national estate in 1980.

### The Rectories of St Matthias

Throughout its history the church of St Mathias has had two rectories. The original rectory, located at 495 Oxford St was built in 1873 again to the designs of Benjamin Backhouse. This building continues the gothic revival style of both the church building and the parish hall. This building along with the church and parish hall is registered in the national estate as part of the St Matthias Church Group however it is not recognised by the City of Sydney as a heritage item but as an item of historical importance. This rectory was sold by the church in the late 1970's and currently occupied by a day spa.

The foundation stone for the second St Matthias rectory, 440 Moore Park Rd, was laid by the Bishop of Sydney to much fanfare on the 19th of March 1927. Having been recently renovated in 2005 this building provides the current home of the incumbent minister of St Matthias, Warwick de Jersey.

### St Matthias Organ and Honour Roll

The organ of St Matthias is a J.W Walker & Sons of London in 1876, job number 1084. The organ was imported and installed in the church in the following year. Both the organ and the honour roll were relocated to their current location on the south side of the church in 1894.

---

[30] National Trust of Australia, Register of National Estate, St matthias Church hall, Church Place, Paddington, NSW.

In 1919 C.W Leggo added a new case to the organ. This wooden casing allowed for the creation of an honor roll down the organ's right hand side. On Sunday the 28th of September 1919 at 11am the newly cased organ was dedicated as a memorial organ by the Bishop of Sydney. In the same service the honour roll was unveiled by the state commandant Major General G.L Lee. The inscription on the honour rolls reads:

"Fortes est Veritas"
(Through strength is truthfulness)

St Matthias Honor Roll 1914 1918

To the glory of God in loving memory of the brave soldiers of this parish of St Matthias who fell in the Great War 1914 -1918

In 1946 the organ was further refurbished by J.F & M.D Stephen. Unfortunately, the organ has not been played regularly in the past three decades and as a result has fallen into a state of disrepair.

**Military Heritage**

From its inception as a church the church of St Matthias was intended to be church "in which Anglican services for the troops were held."[31] In essence St Matthias was from the start a church for the army garrison of Victoria Barracks and hence its name as St Matthias Garrison Church. For the first 120 years of its history the church continued to function as a Garrison church with its minister performing the dual duties as the minister of St Matthias and the Chaplain to Victoria Barracks. As a result of this military connection many military services were held on an annual basis at the church. These services included the parading of the troops, the parading of the colours and several anniversary services including the tenth anniversary service for the Women's Royal Australian Army Corps. The connection between St Matthias and the Australian Defence Force declined after the incumbency of Rev Stephens. It was at this time the St Matthias Garrison Church became known more simply as St Matthias.

History of St Matthias Church by Caitlin Hurley

© St Matthias Anglican Church 2008

[31] *Buildings & Works: An old Paddington Landmark*, Sydney Morning Herald, January 1922.