THE CONVENT OF MERCY, 88 NICHOLSON STREET, FITZROY

INTRODUCTION

The complex that is currently known as the Convent of Mercy commenced with the construction of a bluestone house in 1850 for merchant John Watson. This house was acquired by Bishop Goold the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Melbourne in 1853. The second house on the site was also built in 1850 for Edward Wight, merchant. The Sisters of Mercy acquired these two houses, the first in 1857 and the second in 1861 and by 1863 they had been converted and extended to create a school. A three storey bluestone school building was constructed fronting Palmer Street during the 1870’s at a cost of £12,000. The Memorial Chapel on the corner of Nicholson and Palmer Streets was designed by Reed Henderson and Smart and constructed between 1887 and 1889.

Mother Ursula Frayne of the Order of Mercy had first arrived in Perth in 1846 along with companion Sisters to staff schools in that colony. Following considerable difficulties and problems in Perth, in 1857 she responded to an invitation from Bishop Goold to establish a Convent of Mercy in Melbourne. She arrived in Melbourne in March 1857 and immediately set about establishing her Convent around the Bishop's former residence.

HISTORIC SURVEY

This article is a precis of an extensive submission prepared by the Fitzroy Council Advisory Sub-Committee for presentation to the Historic Buildings Preservation Council in September, 1979. The submission did not pretend to be the last word as far as analysing this extensive complex, however, it did provide a relatively comprehensive view of the development of the site and the history of an extremely interesting church establishment.

SEQUENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

The sequential development of the site is best followed by reference to the schematic plan (see following page).

1. Goold House (1850)

Was constructed by builders, Hartley and Tye to a design by architects, Newson and Blackburn.
2. Kennedy House (1850)
   Was also constructed by builders, Hartley and Tye to a design by Newson and Blackburn for Mr. E. B. Wight, the partner of John Watson, the original owner of the Goold House.

3. New School Wing (1858)
The first extensions for the purposes of establishing a school were constructed in 1858, supposedly to a design by George and Schneider.

4. Additional Wing (1861)
   This additional wing was a two-storey bluestone structure added to the Convent (the former Goold House) consisting of two refectories, kitchen, storeroom, temporary chapel and sacristy.

5. School Building (1861 and 62)
   In 1862 a two-storey bluestone building was erected on the south side of the "House of Mercy" (former Kennedy House).

6. Palmer Street Wing (1869-71)
The three-storey bluestone building which faces Palmer Street was commenced in 1869 to a design by T. A. Kelly. It was continued and completed in 1871 after the architect had been changed to Leonard Terry. A contemporary description tells us that it was constructed from Malmsbury bluestone and Spring Bay (Tasmania) freestone in an "Early Decorated" style.

7. Palmer Street Wing (1880-81)
   No. 6 above related only to the first stage of the Palmer Street building. It was completed in 1881.

8. Chapel (1891)
The chapel on the corner of Palmer and Nicholson Streets was opened in 1889. It was designed by Reed, Henderson and Smart and built of Barrabool and Waurn Ponds stones and today remains as perhaps the most significant visual element of the whole complex.
9. Balcony (1929-1933)
Erected to link the former Goold and Kennedy houses.

10. Subsequent Additions (1950's-70's)
Between 1954 and the present day substantial additions have taken place ranging from substantial new buildings to small alterations.
Convent of Mercy

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

The importance of Archbishop Goold and Mother Ursula Frayne to the development of the Catholic Church in Victoria cannot be underestimated and they are key figures in the development of this complex.

ARCHBISHOP GOOLD

Born in Cork, Ireland in 1812, he was ordained in 1835. He arrived in Sydney in February 1838 and after working with Archdeacon McEnroe was appointed to Campbelltown. His reputation quickly developed and in August 1848 he was consecrated as the bishop of the new See of Melbourne. His early days in Melbourne were highlighted by disputes with the Anglican Church as he set out to establish the Catholic Church as a recognised influence in the colony. He was well aware of the colonies' need for priests and in the early 1850's was particularly active in recruiting priests from Ireland. This activity extended to the recruiting of teaching staff for a Catholic School System. Consequently in 1857 he was primarily responsible for the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy from Perth. When Melbourne was made a metropolitan See in 1874 Goold was appointed Archbishop. He died in 1886.

URSULA FRAYNE

Was born in Dublin in 1816 and in 1834 entered the Institute of Mercy. By 1842 she had become the Institute's first foreign mission foundation in Newfoundland and in 1845 moved on to Perth. Her foundation in Perth was hard pressed due to a shortage of funds and she and her fellow Sisters arrived in Melbourne in 1857 following the invitation from Goold.

With the Convent of Mercy in Nicholson Street she founded the first order of teaching nuns in Victoria and was also responsible for the establishment of St. Vincent de Paul's Orphanage at South Melbourne. She died at Nicholson Street on 9th June, 1885 and following the construction of the Memorial Chapel by her successor her remains were interred there.

FITZROY CITY COUNCIL, URBAN CONSERVATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE, HISTORIC BUILDINGS SUB-COMMITTEE