

# KOGARAH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## 2018 Local History Awards

**Topic: The building of St Raphael's Church-School, South Hurstville, 1928**



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## **Introduction**

Research for this brief history of St Raphael's Catholic Church began when I stumbled on a mystery. I had read in archdiocesan records that St Raphael's was 'erected' in 1933. But then I noticed the inscription on the foundation stone near the entrance to this red-brick church, my church, in South Hurstville:

THIS STONE  
WAS LAID BY  
HIS EXCELLENCY  
THE MOST REV. B. CATTANEO  
APOSTOLIC DELEGATE  
21-10-1928.

Why did four to five years apparently elapse between the laying of the foundation stone and the building of the church? This question was the impetus to research and write the story of the circumstances surrounding the building of St Raphael's Church and Primary School in South Hurstville. It is also the story of three energetic and forward-looking priests who together galvanised the efforts of the parishioners of South Hurstville to ensure that the church they wanted was built. This is also the story of the first parish priest of St Raphael's, who set this new church-school on the path that would lead to its ultimate expansion and its position today. This brief history will ensure that present and future parishioners will never forget the effort and determination that went into the building of St Raphael's Catholic Church and Primary School.

### **The case for a new church-school**

The first Catholic priest to come out to Sydney from Ireland was Father John Joseph Thierry, who arrived in 1820 and made it his life's work to nurture Catholics in the new colony. Archbishop Michael Kelly (in office 1911–1940), like his predecessor Dr Patrick Cardinal Moran, worked to fulfil the spiritual needs of Catholics in the outlying districts of Sydney. He held talks with the parish priests of Hurstville Parish about its growing Catholic population and the need to plan for the future. The 1921 Commonwealth of Australia census recorded that there were now over 1.13 million Roman Catholics in Australia (out of a total population of nearly 5.5 million) and that over 480,000 of them lived in New South Wales, an increase of more than 28% in just a decade.

Archbishop Kelly was in the centre of immense changes taking place in Sydney in the early decades of the 20th century. Known as 'Michael the builder', he was keenly involved in the planning and building of churches, convents, schools and presbyteries, and was dedicated to the spiritual welfare of parishioners both young and old. His particular interest was to invest in Catholic schools, and he campaigned endlessly for state support, believing that Catholic children should have the opportunity to acquire a Christian education. Father Joseph Henry (Harry) Morris (1876–1928), Parish Priest of Hurstville Parish during the 1920s, had already begun to grapple with this issue. He had come to Hurstville Parish aged 46 and in good health, but soon realised that St Michael's alone could no longer accommodate the parish's spiritual needs, given the increasing number of Catholics moving into the St George district. He temporarily solved the problem by renting a dance hall in Woids Avenue, South Hurstville (now Allawah), to hold Sunday Mass, and Mass was conducted in this hall for five years. Archival letters and newspaper accounts note that by around 1927 the hall was

accommodating approximately 350 to 400 people on most weekends and had become uncomfortably crowded. An additional concern for Father Morris was that, unless they were willing to travel long distances, school-aged children of Catholic families in South Hurstville had to attend state schools, as there were no Catholic schools in the vicinity. State schools received government funding, whereas Catholic schools did not. Sometime in the mid-1920s Father Morris privately purchased four lots of land in the Florida Estate in South Hurstville as a potential site for a new church-school, despite a lack of funds at the time to pay for the building.

In 1926 Father Morris became unwell with cancer and plans for the new building were put on hold. Despite his illness, Father Morris continued with his pastoral work as best he could, but spent increasing amounts of time in St Vincent's Hospital. In around 1927 an administrator, Father Eris Michael O'Brien (1895–1974), took over the day-to-day task of managing the parish. Father O'Brien as Administrator of Hurstville Parish from 1927 to 1930 continued the work of Father Morris and organised the building of St Raphael's Church-School. Father Morris, Father O'Brien and Archbishop Kelly agreed that the area needed a new church-school to cater for the Catholic families who lived south of the Illawarra railway line. Discussions had also been taking place between the Archdiocese of Sydney and the priests of the St George district in a push to make South Hurstville a new Catholic parish.

### **The planning stage**

In a letter to Archbishop Michael Kelly written on the 23 March 1928, Father O'Brien set out the proposal for the new church-school. In the letter he also mentioned that adjoining Father Morris's land in South Hurstville was a brick cottage that would be suitable for a convent, and he expressed the hope that the congregation of the Sisters of Charity could be induced to buy it. In the same letter, Father O'Brien also confirmed that, as instructed by the Archbishop, he was looking for land in Bexley to build yet another church. With the permission of the Archbishop secured, the land in South Hurstville was purchased and construction of the church-school seems to have begun sometime in May 1928. A building application to Kogarah Council dated 16 July 1928 was signed by the Reverend J H Morris, but it was Father O'Brien who took on the responsibility of the church's design and construction. He and Archbishop Michael Kelly collaborated on the choice of architect and builder.

### **The naming of the church-school**

In 1928 the Parish of Hurstville already had St Michael's Catholic Church, probably named by Archbishop Moran after Michael Gannon, who donated the land on which the church stood. Evidence suggests that it was Archbishop Michael Kelly who bestowed the name 'St Raphael's' on the new church-school in South Hurstville, although it is unclear exactly when the decision was made. An article in *The Freeman's Journal* (3 January 1929, page 17), reporting on an address given by Father Eris O'Brien at the blessing of St Raphael's church-school, states that, in his welcome to His Grace Archbishop Michael Kelly, Father Eris O'Brien said:

*'Your Grace, you are particularly welcome among your people at South Hurstville. We are grateful for your Grace's sanctioning, six months ago, the proposal to build a church-school in this district; and we hope that the Church of St. Raphael, which has been so named by your Grace, will ever be an inspiration to the Catholics of South Hurstville.'*

It is reasonable conjecture that, in the naming of St Raphael's, Archbishop Kelly's intention was to have the three churches in the area (in Hurstville, South Hurstville and Bexley) named after the three archangels in the Bible – Michael, Raphael and Gabriel. Only St Michael's and St Raphael's were built during the Archbishop's lifetime.

### **The design of the building**

The architect chosen by Archbishop Kelly and Father O'Brien to design the new church-school was Clement Glancey. His brief was to minimise expenditure by creating a building that could be used as both a church and a school. Both *The Freeman's Journal* (25 October 1928, page 29) and *The Catholic Press* (3 January 1929, page 15) reported on the design of the new church-school.

Plans were drawn up for a simple, solid building more or less after the Spanish Mission or Spanish Romanesque style, providing for a church and sanctuary 84 feet long and 30 feet wide [just over 27 by 9 metres] with a 40-foot-long verandah on the north-west side. The church was designed so that 11 feet of the church – the sanctuary and four church pews – could be shut off from the schoolroom during the week by lowering roller shutters to floor level. This would allow parishioners to come into the church from the verandah door in privacy while school was in progress. On the other side of the roller shutters, the remaining 50 feet or so of the interior could be divided into a two-roomed school on weekdays with a curtain drawn through the middle. Classes would be run by the Sisters of Charity. Seats were made that could be used for both church and school.

Despite his profile as a church architect, very little has been written about Glancey and his business, and his designs and drawing plans are difficult to source – perhaps a worthy subject for future research.

### **Finishing the interiors**

The last few months of 1928 were spent finishing the building, including the interiors, in preparation for its opening as a church and school at the beginning of 1929. A Mr Doyle, probably a parishioner, had donated £20 [nearly \$1500], and this was used to acquire an old altar from a church in Newtown, which was remodelled with a proper tabernacle and throne and placed in the centre of the sanctuary. The altar was replaced in about 1950 following directives from Vatican II. The new altar would have enabled priests to face the congregation during the service rather than have their backs to the auditorium.

Two stained-glass panels were installed, one on each side of the reredos. The one on the left was dedicated to Reverend Father Morris, and the one on the right to his predecessor the Reverend Father Woulfe, both of Hurstville Parish and equally well regarded by their parishioners. Each window also bore the name of Father Eris O'Brien. The windows – in dominant colours ruby and blue – were designed, donated and also signed by stained-glass designer John Radecki. On the south side of the sanctuary also designed by Mr Radecki were another four stained-glass panels, one depicting the Archangel Raphael.

A striking feature of the interior of St Raphael's Church is the very beautiful and unique moulding, especially in and around the sanctuary. Nobody knows for certain who designed and made it, but it may have been the work of the architect and builder. In 1997, following a generous bequest, this moulding was painted in various colours by a heritage decorator,

with spectacular results. The interior of the building is beautiful, despite the austerity of its red-brick exterior.

Finally, a cross was placed on the roof of the church facing George Street. The cross was destroyed by a storm in the early 2000s and replaced in sandstone. By December 1928 St Raphael's Church-School was complete, and in January 1929 the parishioners and schoolchildren would be ready to take advantage of the new facilities.

### **The blessing of the foundation stone, October 1928**

At the end of May 1928, work on the building was progressing at breakneck speed, and by October the main external walls were standing. A photo taken at the ceremony to bless the foundation stone, and reproduced in *The Freeman's Journal*, shows that the distinctive Spanish Mission arches were now in place. The day appointed for the blessing of the foundation stone was Sunday 21 October 1928. The Apostolic Delegate, His Excellency the Most Reverend Dr Bartolomeo Cattaneo, as direct and personal representative of the Holy Father, Pope Pius XI blessed the foundation-stone. Father Morris, officially still parish priest and determined to see his dream of the new church realised, had left his sickbed at St Vincent's Hospital to welcome the Reverend Father Dr Cattaneo. Unfortunately on Sunday 16 December 1928, at only 52 years of age, Father Morris died in St Vincent's Hospital only a week before his beloved St Raphael's Church-School was blessed (on Sunday 23 December).

Father O'Brien submitted a statement and report on the progress of the building work, reminding the audience that it was five years since Father Morris had engaged the public hall in Woids Avenue for the celebration of Sunday Mass and that the hall would continue to be used until the new church was completed. On 19 December 1928, Father O'Brien wrote to Archbishop Michael Kelly to canvass a number of issues, including agreement between the parishes of Hurstville, Penshurst and Kogarah that the interests of the people of South Hurstville would be best served by forming a 'new parochial district' of South Hurstville. He also confirmed that the Sisters of Charity would travel from Hurstville Parish to open the new school at South Hurstville at the beginning of 1929.

### **St Raphael's is blessed, December 1928**

Two days before Christmas, on 23 December 1928 at 3.30 pm, St Raphael's new church-school was blessed and opened by the Archbishop of Sydney, His Grace Archbishop Michael Kelly. Only eight months before, reflected Father O'Brien, the Archdiocese did not even have the land on which to build, but by December 1928 there was 'a serviceable building, centrally situated and fully equipped for church and school'. He congratulated Mr. Glancey, the architect, on making this church-school attractive in design at a reasonable cost. He thanked the Sisters of Charity for their taking charge of the school in the New Year and the parishioners of South Hurstville for 'their consistent generosity' (*The Freeman's Journal*, 3 January 1929, page 17).

Following Father O'Brien's address, it was the turn of His Grace Archbishop Michael Kelly to speak. This speech, too, was reported in both *The Freeman's Journal* and *The Catholic Press* of 3 January 1929. Archbishop Kelly said that he was 'pleased with the splendid outcome of the first building effort in South Hurstville, and the wise consideration of the future as explained by Father O'Brien'. He went on to say that the work of the Catholic Church was well started in South Hurstville and that the requirements of the next generation were being

kept in mind. The Archbishop believed the parishioners would be happy with new church-school and, as reported by *The Freeman's Journal*, conveyed to them that '*Christ was the way, the truth and the life. They would have their trials and hardships, but they would thank Christ for coming to share them, to bring good out of them*'. Archbishop Kelly's address was a real call to arms for Sydney Catholics to continue to build on their faith. On 3 January of the following year both *The Catholic Press* and *The Freeman's Journal* published extensive reports of the event. *The Catholic Press* described the building as 'designed at once for learning, culture, comfort and health', and *The Freeman's Journal* praised it as 'an ornament to the district'.

### **The costs of the building**

At the blessing of the foundation stone for the new church-school in October 1928, Father O'Brien had announced that the proposed total building costs would be about £4200. The builder, Mr Bowcock, had presented a tender of £3730 2s 6d for construction, and then there would be additional expenses for the architect's fees, electric lights, furnishings and 'unforeseen small changes in plan'. In addition the Archdiocese had paid Father Morris £360 for the land, and the hire of the hall in Woids Avenue had cost about £340, which meant that total liabilities would be about £4900 (*The Freeman's Journal*, 25 October 1928, page 29).

### **Paying the debt**

On the day St Raphael's Church-School was blessed, as is usually the case, the final debt of £3440 was ceremonially handed over to His Grace Archbishop Michael Kelly. This would enable the Archdiocese of Sydney to pay, on behalf of the parish, all bills received. It would then be incumbent on the parishioners of South Hurstville to pay the money back to the Archdiocese by whatever means available, always the hard work of parishioners to pay for new buildings in every parish in Australia. Because a debt to the Archdiocese remained, St Raphael's Church could be *blessed* in December 1928 but not consecrated. According to the Archivist of the Archdiocese, parish debts to the Archdiocese are often never paid off in full because new churches and schools are continually being built or modified, and more money is borrowed. Apparently it is the fate of most churches to be blessed but not consecrated.

### **Donations and fundraising**

Following the opening of St Raphael's Church-School, the parishioners embarked on many and various further fundraising activities. They baked cakes and sold them at Mass and at other events, ran 'housie' (bingo) nights a number of times a year, and held entertainments both at home and elsewhere to raise money. Mothers groups were set up to generate fundraising activities and the mothers worked tirelessly. This was the year the Great Depression began and many people lost their jobs. Paying back the debt to the Archdiocese was therefore no mean feat for the parishioners of South Hurstville, who worked tirelessly to raise funds and dug deep into their own pockets. The need to raise money for maintenance, new equipment and the refurbishment of buildings is ongoing.

### **The new Parish of South Hurstville**

When St Raphael's was built in 1928 it came under the jurisdiction of the Parish of Hurstville, along with a number of other churches. However, the priests of the St George district, in discussions held for many years with the Archdiocese of Sydney, pushed for South Hurstville

to become a new Catholic parish. Finally the new Parish of South Hurstville was officially proclaimed in September 1933, and in all official documentation from then on, St Raphael's was said to have been 'erected' in 1933, the year in which the new parish was created, even though the new church-school had been built in 1928 and begun operating at the beginning of 1929. So, in fact it did not take four to five years to build St Raphael's Church; this was just the way it was reported in official records. The discrepancy between the date on the foundation stone and the year the church was built is now explained. By January 1929 the priests of Hurstville Parish were conducting weekend Mass at St Raphael's Church, and children were already enrolled at St Raphael's Primary School under the tuition of the Sisters of Charity.

### **South Hurstville's first parish priest**

In September 1933 South Hurstville officially became its own parish. The first parish priest appointed to the new Parish of South Hurstville was Father William McDonald, (1889–1964). The parishioners of South Hurstville found in Father McDonald a wise counsellor, an unfailing friend and a worthy priest, and he was interested in the spiritual welfare of each and every one of them. Father William McDonald would remain at the helm of St Raphael's Church-School for a total of 31 years until his death in 1964, and the Sisters of Charity would go on teaching at the school until 1974. Father McDonald would oversee many capital improvements – the purchase of additional buildings in the area for a presbytery, later upgraded, the building of new school buildings and new halls, and the purchase of land at Blakehurst for the building of another church. He would also advocate for regular bus services to convey his parishioners to church on Sundays, and to have steps and footpaths installed in the vicinity for their comfort and ease of access. He played an absolutely vital role in the development and success of the new Parish of South Hurstville.

### **Listing on the heritage register**

In the late 1990s Kogarah Council employed consultants Tropman & Tropman to identify buildings with heritage value in the Kogarah Local Government Area. In 1994 the Kogarah Heritage Study was completed, and in 1999 it was followed by the Kogarah Heritage Study Review, Stage 1. By May 2003 St Raphael's Church and Primary School were placed on the Register of the NSW Office of Environment & Heritage.

### **Afterword**

Catholics regard the parish church as the centre of their lives, the place to welcome new life and bring dignity to death. In this book I have chronicled the circumstances surrounding the building of St Raphael's Church, a result of the determination of dedicated priests Archbishop Michael Kelly, Father Joseph Henry Morris and Father Eris Michael O'Brien, who undertook to advance the spiritual needs of the growing Catholic population of Sydney in the 1920s. To build a new church-school and find creative ways to pay for it took energy and creativity on the part of these priests and the parishioners whom they brought along for the ride. However, it was Father William McDonald, first parish priest of the newly proclaimed Parish of South Hurstville, who put in the hard work to ensure that both the church and the school would expand and grow with the times to attain their present solid position in the local Catholic community.

In setting out to discover the answer to an anomaly – why the foundation stone at the entrance to the church is dated 1928 but official records tell us the church was erected in 1933 – I have been able to answer more than just this question. Future generations of Catholic parishioners and school communities in South Hurstville will know of the importance of St Raphael's Church and Primary School in both the St George district and in the parishes of the St George Deanery.

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