

'The Cathedral of the Hawkesbury': 200 years of St Matthew's Anglican Church

A Hawkesbury Regional Museum Fact Sheet



In October 1795, a year after the first white settlers were established in the area now known as Windsor, the Reverend Samuel Marsden travelled to the settlement to conduct the first religious service.

The congregation was made up of ex-convict farmers and their families, servants, and a small number of free settlers, civil officers and ex-sailors. The arrival of the military in 1795 boosted the population to a grand total of 546 people, which did not include the Indigenous population.

As no church or sizeable building existed, the venue for Marsden's first service is unknown. It probably took place in the open, or in a barn or farmhouse nearby. In the years following it is believed that services were held in a building near the present Windsor Courthouse, and in 1805 the first dedicated church building was completed on the ridge near present day Thompson Square. The building was used for non-religious purposes as well.

When Macquarie appeared on the scene in 1810, he changed the name of the settlement from Green Hills to Windsor, laid out streets and squares, and identified the site for a church at the top of a 'great square'. Planning for St Matthew's – by foundation stone, the oldest remaining Anglican Church in Australia - had commenced.



Samuel Marsden, 'the flogging parson'

Church development and fabric

Architect Francis Greenway had been convicted of forgery, and sentenced to death, commuted to 14 years transportation. He was self-confident, temperamental, and quick to take offence, but his artistic abilities were great, and he was one of a number of Emancipists (convicts who had done their time) to be picked up and promoted by Macquarie, who made good use of his talents.



St Matthew's Church, Windsor c.1905 (Royal Australian Historical Society)

Together they were responsible for a magnificent architectural heritage including Windsor Court House and St James' Church in Sydney (though both men came to a sad end: Macquarie was demoted and denied his pension; Greenway died a pauper, and is buried in an unmarked grave in East Maitland).

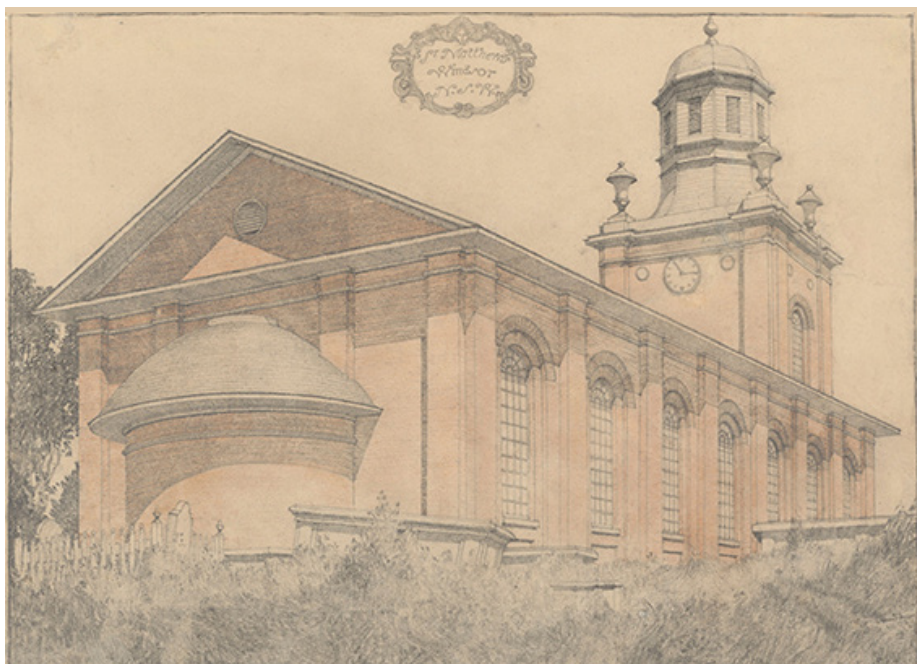
St Matthew's looks so perfectly

situated today that it is hard to believe that it was not always so. In fact, the original church, which did not involve Greenway, was half built and then demolished after Macquarie sent Greenway to find out why work was proceeding so slowly. He took one look and declared the work to be of inferior quality, with both mortar and bricks below-standard.

The building was demolished, and the builder sacked. Greenway designed a new structure, and directed the building himself, overseeing a team of four bricklayers, four stonemasons, two carpenters and some labourers.

The building was sufficiently finished to be used for church services in September 1821, but not used immediately, and not consecrated till the following year.

The church was architecturally far superior to any building in the colony at the time. Though it has undergone many repairs, refurbishments and restorations, the structure of the



Hardy Wilson, *St Matthew's Church of England, Windsor* 1913 pencil and french crayon

building has remained virtually untouched since its construction.

The style of the church is Georgian, and in the words of Morton Herman (1954) is 'pure Greenway'. The building is simple and uncomplicated, and the construction uncompromising. The large nave and semicircular apse with a high ceiling fill the interior, while the bricks of the walls are laid in Flemish bond, and have what Herman described as a 'delightful rosiness'.

The windows and doors are arched, and the octagonal tower with belfry and clock adds variety to the box-like body of the church. Atop the tower is a cupola, which was capped with a timber cross in 1844, and then replaced in 1963.

The Disappearing Dollar

On Saturday 11 October 1817, Macquarie took the rim of a Spanish dollar (also known as a holey dollar, which, along with the cut-out middle or *dump* constituted Australia's first currency) and placed it under the foundation stone. He then called on God to 'prosper St Matthew's Church', and struck the stone three times with a mallet. The coin was stolen later that night, so the next evening Governor Macquarie deposited another, and the stone was re-laid. The same thing happened

again a few nights later. Though the culprit was never found, the theft was presumed to be the work of 'indigent convicts'.

Stained glass windows

The seven stained glass windows, some of the finest around, were installed between 1864 and the early 1900s. They depict biblical scenes, and are memorials to illustrious parishioners including Edwin Rouse and John Terry, stepson of Samuel Terry, who had been the richest

man in the colony. The others are memorials to Harriet, the wife of Anthony Hordern, and Rev. Henry Stiles, an early minister.

To protect them from damage during WWII (due to proximity to the RAAF Base) they were taken down, and temporarily stored in the cellar of Rouse Hill House.

The Apse

An apse is a semicircular recess covered with a hemispherical vault, generally the name given to the place where the altar is located. At St Matthew's the apse is significant because of the ornate painted *reredos* - an ornamental covering of the wall at the back of the altar.

It has five arches in which are painted four scrolls with biblical wording. The ceiling of the apse was painted around 1880 in striking graduating colours of blue, with gold stars representing the night sky.

John Tebbutt, the famed Windsor astronomer, purportedly lay on the floor and drew the stars on the ceiling where they would appear that particular night. (Tebbutt's was one of the biggest funerals ever seen at St Matthew's, and the tomb he designed for himself features prominently in its graveyard.)



The church and graveyard in 1948 (Consolidated Press, photographer unknown)

Community, Congregation, Commemoration

The church's registers of births, deaths and marriages are both a valuable historical resource and a fascinating read.

The first funeral to take place in the newly consecrated church was that of First Fleeter Daniel Barnett on 17 February 1823.

Marriage by a clergyman in 1810 cost £3/3s (three guineas), and if you were a 'free person' (a non-convict) you were also required to pay a fee for funerals, christenings and churchings (when thanks were given for the survival of a new mother and baby).

The first baptismal font was made of timber, but was replaced in 1845 by the impressive stone font that can be seen today. It was donated by the Cox Family, and made from stone thought to have been quarried at Mulgoa, where they had links, as well as being important in the Hawkesbury.

Milestones of the church's history have always been celebrated, in both the local and wider communities. For the 108th anniversary in 1925, the president of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Frank Walker, gave an address on the history of the church. For the 113th anniversary in 1930, Brigadier General J.J. Paine gave the address, which was broadcast by the newly-formed ABC. Governors of NSW, and even the Queen herself have attended church services on special occasions.

In troubled times, the church has been a refuge, most dramatically in the Great Flood of 1867 when, from his death bed, the minister, Rev. Stiles, instructed that the doors of the church be opened to shelter those fleeing the rising waters.

While a good number of people turned up for the inaugural ANZAC DAY service in 1916, it was a different story after the Second World War, when it was noted in an Australian



The 108th anniversary of the church, 1925

Women's Weekly article that the population of war-depleted Windsor 'fails to half fill this noble church' (8 May 1948).

From its earliest days, St Matthew's has been a Hawkesbury landmark, an iconic symbol and a sentinel above the winding Hawkesbury River. It has inspired many artists, including Alfred T Clint, Lionel Lindsay, Sydney Ure Smith and Hardy Wilson, and its familiar outline has featured prominently on memorabilia and souvenirs.

Consecrated Ground

Churchyards with graves immediately surrounding the church are rare. In the case of St Matthew's, the cemetery was there before the church, having been set apart as a burial ground by Governor Macquarie in 1810.

The grave of Andrew Thompson stood alone in the cemetery with no church when the Governor and Mrs Macquarie visited in 1811, and a further 129 persons were interred before the church foundation stone was laid in October 1817.

The gravestones read like pages from a history book, with a number of First Fleeters among them, along with many well-known pioneers and characters, including William Cox (who built the road over the Blue Mountains) and John Tebbutt (the

world renowned astronomer).

The layout provides clear evidence of class segregation: Those who regarded themselves as Exclusives (influential in status and money, unblemished by the convict 'stain') are located on the front south church side, while at the back of the cemetery on the downward slope are convicts, those deemed to be of lower status, and those buried in unmarked graves.

Headstones range in style from the understated of the Georgian period to the elaborate of the Victorian.

A columbarium (place for urns containing cremated remains) was installed in 1960.



Reverend Hallahan smokes a pipe while contemplating the graveyard, c.1948. The layout of graves provides clear evidence of class segregation in the early years.

Safe Landing: replacement of the cross

In 1962 Reverend Harold Rawson noticed that the roof was leaking, especially in the tower. Inspection by the Government Architect followed, and the need for urgent repairs was identified, with the report noting that the roof and belfry had deteriorated to such an extent that the whole tower needed to come down quickly 'or it will fall down'.

Repairs began in earnest, scaffolding was erected around the tower, and the belfry was dismantled. The work was undertaken by Penrith firm, Iron and Hughes.

The National Trust was instrumental in saving the church by launching the National Trust St Matthew's Windsor Appeal, raising the £50,000 needed to repair the church and rectory. Early on it was determined that the 1844 wooden cross was not in a condition to be re-installed, and that a new one should be made.

In what turned out to be a stroke of genius, the Trust persuaded Richmond RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) to assist, by providing a helicopter to lift and position the new cross and orb into place.

On the day, thousands of people came along to watch the helicopter cross the sky, with its unusual cargo dangling from a rope. It hovered over the dome, and, just as the clock struck noon, the orb and cross were lowered into position.



All agreed it had been a very smooth and successful operation, so successful in fact that the helicopter pilots and the builders were asked to repeat the operation for the benefit of the television and newsreel crews, which failed to capture the action the first time round!



Images: Richmond RAAF supplied a helicopter and crew to place the new cross in position as part of urgently-needed repairs carried out in 1963.



If these walls could talk: the rectory

In 1823 the Sydney Gazette published a call for tenders for the building of a 'parsonage house' at Windsor. Although we don't know for sure, the architect was probably Francis Greenway. The building is typical of his style, and perfectly complements the church. Like the church, it was built by William Cox, in 1825.

From the street, the two-storey brick building next to the church presents as an elegant, symmetrical Georgian building with an ornate central front door, an inviting semi-circular fanlight and carved wooden cornice.

Inside, there are cedar fireplaces and joinery, and internal folding shutters on the windows. At the end of the central hall, a staircase curves up the semicircular wall.

The rectory stables at the back of the house dominate the landscape, and are a reminder of the importance of horses for nineteenth century clergy.

The Rectory was first occupied by Reverend Cross, in 1825. Reverend Joseph Docker opened a small school for boys there in 1829. Samuel Marsden, 'the flogging

parson', died on the premises in May 1838, having gone there in ill health for a rest. Reverend Henry Stiles and his family lived in the rectory the longest - 34 years, and he was the first to point out that the chaplain's stipend (pay) did not meet the cost of repairs.

Upkeep has been a problem ever since, and in the late 1930s the building became almost derelict. Even in the 1990s, Reverend John Butler and his family found themselves sharing their home with some ducks that had taken to sitting on the chimney pots and were inclined to fall down into fireplaces. A sticky substance dripping from the study turned out to be honey from a large hive of bees which had managed to enter the ceiling cavity.

Many locals and occupants of the rectory over time claimed to have experienced 'weird sounds suggestive of a ghost', cutlery being moved, footsteps on the stairs and even the ghost of Samuel Marsden himself.

