

Our Australian Missions July 1895
"History Of the Hawthorn Mission" - Father Morgan O'Brien

In the colonial days of the early "forties," when the immigrants from the "old country" were encamped on the Yarra flats, the timbered slopes of what was called in the blackman's speech Boroondara (in English, "the place of shade") had already been occupied by pioneer squatters. Among the earliest was a Catholic, the late Thomas Herbert Power, who was the first lessee of Crown lands, and whose residence was close to where the Hawthorn Railway Station now stands. The son of this distinguished pioneer still attends our church. The timber of the district was turned to good account. Vast quantities of it were floated down the Yarra or carted to where the Queen City of the South was rapidly growing and gaining strength. Though the name Boroondara (which has rather an Irish ring about it) is still retained, the district was pretty early called Hawthorne, by Surveyor Hoddle, after an American naval officer who happened to visit him. As the people preferred a name which should recall memories of their forefathers, the final "e" has long since disappeared. It may, however, interest the "Home" reader to know that the hawthorn, which is here an exotic, is now to be seen in the district; but it blooms and scents the air, not in the Maytime, but in October.

The great influx of Catholics, mostly of the wealthy class, took place in the gold days. Then men with the well-known and honoured names of Duffy (Charles Gavan), Archer, O'Grady, Lynch and O'Brien were strong upholders of the Catholic religion in the district. A church had been built in Richmond and a small school (now known as St. Joseph's) in Lower Hawthorn by a Father Madden, who had charge of a vast district, like most priests of this country in those days. A deputation composed of Messrs. Duffy, O'Shanassy and Archer waited on Father Madden to request him to celebrate Mass on Sundays at St. Joseph's, for the convenience of the Catholics of Hawthorn. He at first was, unwilling, as he thought the people were not sufficiently numerous, but in the course of time he used to celebrate on Sundays there, and when the Jesuit Fathers arrived and got possession of Richmond, in 1866, they continued to serve the Hawthorn school chapel, which they very much enlarged and improved.



Here for many years Catholics of great name worshipped God after the manner of their forefathers; and it was here an illustrious English convert, the Hon. W. H. Archer, who still lives in the parish, knelt side by side with such distinguished Irishmen as Sir Charles G. Duffy, Sir John O'Shanassy, the Hon. Michael O'Grady and others. In this building, now greatly enlarged, Mass has continued to be said down to the present day.

But now we must dismiss this little school chapel to refer to it later on, while in the meantime we devote our attention to the history of the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Where the Church now stands was within the memory of men who have not yet passed middle age, the forest primeval; or, as Australians would call it, the bush - the huge spreading red-gums, recalling Victor Hugo's weird description:

“Ces hydres que, le jour, on appelle des arbres, Se tordent dans le nuit” -

the tall stringy-barks, the wattles, on whose feathery sprays Nature showers her gold in the Springtime - all were to be seen in abundance. Here and there - and especially down by the Yarra - grew the dense ti-tree scrub. The laughter of the great king-fishers (the "laughing jackasses" of the vulgar) and the weird notes of the magpie echoed through the gum-trees; kangaroos, wallabies, opossums, snakes and bandicoots still haunted the neighbourhood. Bullocks and sheep wandered over a district most of which is now lined with streets. The wretched Aborigines were then in the land. Clothed in opossum rugs, deftly sewn together by means of the sinews of the kangaroo's tail; later on, in the blankets supplied by the settlers - often naked, and not ashamed. Always accompanied by their scraggy dogs, they still hung round the white men's dwellings. In the beginning these simple blacks would not taste any intoxicants that were offered them by the settlers until these latter had taken the first drink but this objection did not last long, and the blacks soon learned to get drunk like the whites. In their coroborees, or war-dances, which they held in this neighbourhood, they were plied with whiskey, in order to make them go through their disgusting orgies more in accordance with the depraved tastes of the spectators. It is consoling, however, to know that at one time it was forbidden, under a penalty of £5 to sell intoxicants to these unfortunate people. A low type of savage was the Yarra black of whom we write. He and his congeners have almost disappeared from Victoria, and their old hunting grounds and fishing haunts know them no more. Dead kangaroos were hung in the butchers' shops in those days, and the settlers partook freely of parts of the animal when cooked. This practice in some places through Australia is far from having died out.

After the discovery of gold in 1850, there was an exodus from the district, but wealthy people after a little while again began to settle in it, and among them not a few Irish Catholics who had made fortunes, either directly through mining, or indirectly through the great impetus given to trade by the wonderful gold finds in Victoria. A certain Michal Lynch became possessor of property in the district, which he bought cheaply before the gold days. This was known for many a year as "Lynch's Paddock". This worthy Irishman presented our Fathers with the ground on which the Church of the Immaculate Conception now stands.

In connection with this church and the revival of religion in the district the name of the late Father Edward Nolan, S.J., must henceforth be frequently mentioned. A native of Dublin, he was born on the 10th May, 1826. The first landing of Ours on the shores of Australia was in 1865, but Father Nolan arrived the following year, and is justly entitled to the rank of a pioneer Father. His field of labour was for a long time the Hawthorn District. After Mr. Lynch's generous donation Father Nolan at once set about building a church. In this he was thought unwise by some on account of the small Catholic population. Generous and enthusiastic friends, however, came forward, subscriptions flowed in, and the time was deemed to have come for obtaining plans and laying the foundation-stone.



Competitive designs were sent in, but out of fourteen, as an old newspaper cutting tells us, that of Messrs. Crouch and Wilson, of Elizabeth Street, was finally adopted. The foundation-stone was blessed and laid by the Very Reverend Dr. Fitzpatrick, V.G, of the Diocese of Melbourne, on 8th December, 1867. On 16th October, 1869, the nave, side aisles and part of the tower were completed, and the church was opened for Divine Service. Dr. Goold (the Bishop) and Dean Fitzpatrick performed the ceremonies, and the sermon at the opening was preached by the Rev. Isaac Moore, S.J.

Down to recent times (of which anon) no further addition was made to the church, the accommodation being deemed sufficient for the Catholics of the district. At the time the church was opened the parish was very extensive, stretching away to the Lilydale Hills. After the opening, Father Nolan's collecting tours began. In 1870 he went to New Zealand. Mornane's Paddock, in the suburb called Kew, was bought the following year, and on this beautiful site it was contemplated to build a college for boys. For this purpose we find Father Nolan again on a collecting tour through Victoria.

For several years he was engaged at this work, visiting the stations, the diggings, the homesteads of the farmers - meeting with the scattered children of the Gael in all capacities - squatters, speculators, business men, miners, shearers, stock-riders, bullock-drivers, and a host of adventurers of all nationalities on the wallaby track. In 1879 he became the first Rector of the new college at Kew. In the same year an organ was erected in Hawthorn Church at the cost of £380, a notice of which, with an introduction on sacred music, appeared in a local paper from the pen of Father Nolan himself.



Meanwhile the faithful in Hawthorn had been increasing at the rate of one hundred per annum, and it was deemed necessary to build a residence close to the church. The carrying out of this work was left to Father Oliver Daly. A separation between the districts of Richmond and Hawthorn was made in 1881. In the following year Father Daly began the Hawthorn Residence, at the completion of which he became its first Superior, as the catalogue tells us, on 1st January 1883. He was joined in the Residence by Father O'Flinn.



Father Nolan, it will be remembered, became the first Rector of Kew College in 1879, and retained that position for six years, after which he went to Sydney. In a short time he returned to Melbourne and became Procurator at Hawthorn, having never been, strange to say, Superior of the Mission which he may be said to have founded. He now took up his residence for the first time near the church which he built. Father Daly remained Superior until 1886, when he was succeeded by Father O'Flinn, who came to Australia in 1879.

While Father O'Flinn was Superior, the School Chapel of Nunawading was much improved; St. Joseph's was enlarged, so as to form a commodious school during the week and a church on Sundays; the same school was taken in charge by the nuns called the Faithful Companions of Jesus; the beautiful School Chapel at Camberwell was also completed. Father O'Flinn also built the St. John Berchmans' Boys' School on the Glenferrie Road, which was opened in 1888;

also the School Chapel of Mitcham, as it now stands, in 1889. Here, it is worthy of note that the people of Nunawading and Mitcham subscribed unaided by other districts, nearly all that was necessary for the completion of their above-mentioned buildings. All these works were undertaken and brought to completion during the so - called "Land Boom". It may be well to explain here that the price of property in the vicinity of Melbourne had been going up for some time. Land frequently changed hands with great profit to those engaged in the transaction. Suddenly the banks refused to advance further money, the bubble burst, and thousands were ruined. We are now suffering from a consequent depression in trade, but how long it is to last, or whether it has reached a climax, does not come within our scope to discuss.

In October, 1889, Camberwell and the country districts of the Hawthorn Mission were placed under the charge of a secular priest. Father O'Flinn has been an indefatigable collector. He collected for the building of a new church for the parish of Kew, which was served by Ours. He also collected a large sum for the completion of Hawthorn Church, but, unfortunately, for the present, large sums promised during the Boom times cannot be realised. The ground for the church at Kew had just been purchased when, in 1890, it was given over by Ours to the Archbishop of Melbourne. The money we had paid for the land was returned to us.

Father Buckeridge became Superior of Hawthorn on the 1st February, 1891. He studied at the Propaganda College, Rome, where he took his degree of Doctor of Divinity. For many years he taught theology at Clonliffe Diocesan College, Dublin, where he was on familiar terms with such distinguished men as the late Cardinal Cullen and Cardinal Moran, of Sydney. He entered the Society in 1878, and came to Australia in 1886. He expended £10,000 in making the new additions to the church. The first part of the extension was the building of the belfry, the first stone of which was laid and blessed by Father Cahill, S.J. The bell was blessed and placed in position at the end of 1891. Meanwhile, the church extension was going on, and when the chancel was completed, in 1892, the opening ceremony took place on the Sunday within the Octave of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception; the preacher in the morning being the Very Reverend Prior Butler, of the Carmelite Order, and in the evening the Very Reverend Father Hegarty, Pastor of St. Kilda East.



Father Nolan breathed his last after a tedious illness on 11th January, 1893, and was buried in the Boroondara Cemetery. Father Nolan was a man of cultivated taste. For set sermons in large churches he had no particular liking, but he was

very happy in simple addresses to small audiences. He had a turn for botany, and also some skill in medicine. Of engaging address, he had the knack of accommodating himself to all classes, and was equally at home in the mia-mia of the fossicker and the mansion of the squatter. He rode a horse called "Tobin", which carried him everywhere. "Tobin" had a peculiar amble, which was a well-known warning to Catholics who were not what they ought to be. Father Nolan was a good religious man - a man of great piety, simplicity and zeal.

Father Buckeridge introduced the "cadets" into St. John's Schools. He also introduced the Children's Mass and congregational singing in church. In addition, he made a number of useful minor improvements too numerous to mention. He is no longer of the parish, having been transferred to North Shore, Sydney.

Hawthorn Church is in the decorated Gothic style, the walls being of bluestone with facings of freestone. The length is about 114 feet and the width 50 feet. The tower when finished will reach 170 feet. The tower and transept still remain to be completed. Beautiful stained glass windows adorn the interior of the church. The names of the donors of pillars, etc., are to be found inscribed thereon, and it is a striking fact that various nationalities are represented - England, Scotland, France, Germany, not to mention Ireland - thus reminding one of the great unity of the Catholic Faith.