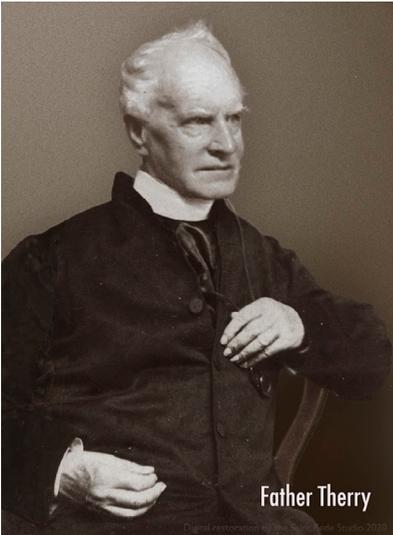


FOR A GODLY PURPOSE: PLANNING SAINT MARY'S CHAPEL IN OLD SYDNEY-TOWN

Michael Sternbeck*



Father J.J. Therry, a photograph taken circa 1860

The recent Bicentenary of the foundation of old Saint Mary's, Sydney was an opportunity to review previous studies about the old Cathedral and to explore some interesting leads to records that had laid untouched for decades. The story of the day when Sydney gathered to witness the laying of the Foundation stone of the old church by Governor Macquarie is well-known, but more obscure details, such as how the Hyde Park site was chosen and who designed the old church, have not been fully explored. It would seem opportune, therefore, to trace the story of how old Saint Mary's came into being and to demonstrate that it was by no means the outcome of one man's efforts, namely Father John Joseph Therry, but certainly the result of his leadership.

Gathering them in

Since the European settlement of this continent began as an off-shore prison, it is perhaps understandable that the practice of religion was not marked by enthusiasm. Some historians have commented that the practice of religion was seen by the convicts as part of the actual punishment.¹ For Catholic convicts, the situation was slightly different; the Government of the Colony, over three decades, had not encouraged the practice of Catholicism and sometimes suppressed it.

¹ Grocott, Alan, *Convicts, Churches and Clergyman*, University of Sydney, 1980, p. 117, *passim*.

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We can imagine the surprise, therefore, of the readers of the Colony's only newspaper, *The Sydney Gazette* to find an announcement prominently placed in the 17th June 1820 edition which reported that a gathering of Roman Catholics two days earlier had unanimously resolved to hold a public meeting at the Sydney Court House at the end of June to begin planning for a Catholic Chapel. This was something different for the inhabitants of the Colony of New South Wales. Their experience of Catholicism was of a circumscribed, private religion, which had even proved politically subversive. The Uprising by Irish convicts at Castle Hill in 1804 was never far from the minds of Colonial Government. The Church of England was the official form of Christianity in the Penal Colony of New South Wales and its ministers wished it to remain so.

Those views were challenged by the arrival in Sydney on 2nd May 1820 of two Irish priests who, with both zeal and enthusiasm, had volunteered to be missionaries in the far-off Penal Colony of New South Wales. The British Government had formally appointed them as Catholic Chaplains to the Colony and when they arrived, the Governor, Major-General Lachlan Macquarie, recognised their credentials and gave them instructions on how they were to conduct their work. These two priests were the pioneers John Joseph Therry and Philip Conolly. Soon, the two chaplains would have understood that their flock was almost entirely composed of convicts or former convicts and amounted to around 7400 men and women and children, spread throughout Sydney and neighbouring regions, such as Parramatta, Liverpool, the Hawkesbury etc.² Where would their work begin?

Mass and the Sacraments (particularly baptisms and marriages) had begun to be celebrated by the two priests in private residences, but they lost little time in determining that Catholics needed a permanent and fitting place of worship. It would be a base for the itinerant ministry of the priests, a place where Catholics could gather for the celebration of Mass and the Sacraments. They would also have held that God should be honoured with the construction of a permanent and fitting House of the Lord. There would be a better chance, moreover, of boosting the practice of the Faith once a church had been built. But whether the two priests regarded such a church as a means to an end or an end in itself is not something that can now be readily determined.

The preliminary meeting, which *The Gazette* mentioned, had been held at a

2 The approximate figure of 7400 Catholics or 25% of the population of the Colony in the year 1820 is proposed by James Hugh Donohoe in his interesting study *The Catholics of New South Wales*, (1988) page 11.

premises in Pitt Street, the property of John Reddington.³ The advertised meeting did take place in the Sydney Court House (now ground floor rooms in Parliament House in Macquarie Street) on 30th June and an extensive report appeared the following day in the pages of *The Gazette*. This was, undoubtedly, an article contributed by one of those present. Unfortunately – and probably deliberately – the report does not indicate how many attended. From this, it would be safe to assume numbers were low. The writer of the report was at pains to point out, however, that the meeting was attended by “all the Respectable Catholics of the Colony”.

In the high-blown prose found in newspapers of those long-gone days, a series of eleven resolutions was recorded, which included thanking various persons for their benevolence. It speaks volumes about the vulnerable position Catholics found themselves in that so much of the meeting's resolutions were devoted to thanking those in Authority for their “condescensions.”⁴

More practically, however, it was resolved that Catholics were to “unite with their clergy to build a House of Divine Worship in the Town of Sydney”. And to this end, a Committee was formed at the meeting, led by Fathers Conolly and Therry, which would “select a site for the building, administer the contracts, manage the finances for its building and authorise fundraisers.” A sub-committee was also to be formed to oversee donations from non-Catholics.⁵

From those present at the meeting, seven Catholic laymen were appointed to the Committee: James Meehan, William Davis, James Dempsey, Edward Redmond, Patrick Moore, Michael Hayes and Martin Short. In their different ways, and to a greater or lesser degree, they had been part of the patriotic uprising on the West

3 John Reddington had come to Australia as a convict in 1800 for his part in the Rebellion on the West coast of Ireland in 1798. He had done well for himself and owned an establishment where alcohol was served under licence – a pub named *The Harp Without a Crown*. The premises was also a grocery store and was frequented by Irish Catholics. Although he had died four years before the arrival of the priests - the beneficiaries of his Estate still owned the Pitt Street building. They were Catholic and willing to offer their property for Church purposes. The buildings were near the corner of Pitt and Market Streets, where the Sydney Tower now stands. Mass had also been celebrated in this premises in the month since the two priests arrived in Sydney. As late as 1823, Father Therry was resident at the Pitt Street address.

4 Prior to the Emancipation Act of 1829, the public practice of Catholicism was officially illegal in Great Britain. This was a remnant of the separation of the Church in England from Rome in the reign of Henry VIII. Although Catholics had ceased being persecuted for their Faith throughout most of the eighteenth century in England, there were few Catholic priests and these lived and ministered to Catholics privately. The laws prevented Catholics from constructing anything that even looked like a church.

5 Eighth resolution of the meeting: That John Piper, Robert Jenkins, and Francis Williams, Esquires, be requested by this Meeting to collect the subscriptions of the Protestant Inhabitants of Sydney.

Coast of Ireland in 1798 aimed at overthrowing British Rule in Ireland. James Meehan, William Davis and Michael Hayes all arrived in Sydney in February 1800 aboard the convict transport ship *Friendship*; Edward Redmond and Martin Short arrived at much the same time on the vessel the *Minerva*, whilst James Dempsey arrived in the colony in 1802. John Reddington, mentioned previously, was also among their number. These men had been accused of insurrectionary crimes for which they were not properly tried and of which - in most instances - they were innocent.

After a period of years, each of these men received a conditional pardon by the Colonial Government. Having become successful businessmen or farmers, they all had attained a favourable position in the Colony so that by 1820, two decades after their transportation from Ireland, they had become “the respectable Catholics of the Settlement”. They had come to know each other very well from their twenty-year residence in the Colony.

The Treasurer of the Chapel Building Committee, however, was neither Catholic nor a former convict, but from Armagh in the North of Ireland and a prominent figure in the Colonial Government of Lachlan Macquarie. His name was John Thomas Campbell. He had arrived in Sydney with Governor Macquarie’s entourage in 1810 and was immediately appointed the Governor’s Secretary. For eleven years he was Macquarie’s chief assistant in the administration of the colony, his intimate friend and loyal supporter. It is significant that a man as prominent and well-connected as Campbell became the Committee’s treasurer. It was obviously strategic - he would be instrumental in attracting support from a broader range of Colonists than Catholics. That he accepted the nomination indicates his personal support for the Chapel project and his good will. It also suggests the Governor’s approval of the project.

The Committee lost little time in encouraging donations to the Chapel building fund. Mr Campbell placed an advertisement about the building of the Chapel in *The Sydney Gazette* on 2nd September 1820, in which he advised that an account had been opened at the Bank of New South Wales “for the purpose of receiving subscriptions” and he requested “that persons of every Religious persuasion, disposed to contribute to this laudable Object, will make their subscriptions there as soon as possible, in order to the Committee being thence enabled to commence on the purposed building.” But Mr Campbell also sounded a note of caution to those who were suggesting that there should be more than one Chapel, supporting the needs of Catholics outside Sydney. Almost certainly this would refer to Parramatta

or Liverpool (or both). He wrote that he considered “the manifest superiority of advantage to be derived from such a building being first completed at Sydney, where the principal body of the Roman Catholics reside, before subscriptions for similar purposes elsewhere, be proceeded on.” He reminded readers that “the circumstance of the Roman Catholics of New South Wales being much more numerous than wealthy” it was best that they confine “their contributions for the present to the single Object of erecting a Chapel in the Town of Sydney.”

Fourteen months later, the fundraising efforts in attracting donations to the Chapel building project had proved successful, with the notice filling half a page in *The Sydney Gazette* of 1st December, 1821. The substantial sum of £628 had been donated in the course of almost 18 months – a remarkable figure. More interesting than the pounds, shillings and pence are the names of those who appear in this list, the Notable gentlemen of the Colony at this time. These are names we are familiar with from streets, suburbs and towns, such as Erskine, Jamison, Goulburn, Piper, Wentworth, Druitt, Wollstonecraft, Oxley, Cordeaux and Macquarie. These were all respected non-Catholics, some in official positions within the Colony, and all had made generous donations.

From “the respectable Catholics of the Settlement”, some had made very generous donations, such as William Davis and his wife Catherine: each gave £50. But many non-convict Catholic colonists had not contributed, while many more, being convicts, were in no financial position to do so. Still others, having no cash to offer, offered livestock and other goods. The “Widow’s mite” of the Gospel story comes to mind.

Choosing the site

The frequently-told account of how the Church came to have the land beside Hyde Park for the purposes of building a chapel seems first to have been given by Archdeacon John McEncroe at a public meeting of Sydney-siders on 6th July 1865. Father McEncroe was quoted as saying:

The late W[illiam] Davis asked Father Therry, many years ago, why he did not erect a church in the western portion of Sydney, and Father Therry told him he could not get any land to build a church upon in that part of town, because a person in the Survey Office, a Catholic well known as Jemmy Mein, opposed it. When Father Therry applied to him for a piece of land to build a church in the western part of the city, Jemmy Mein told him that that if he built a church there he would have all the poor in the city paraded before the Governor as he was going to church at St. Phillip’s, and that he

had better go and look for a piece near the prison barracks at Hyde Park.⁶

We met James Meehan (“Jemmy Mein”) earlier in this article, because he was among the members of that committee which was selected by the June 1820 meeting to bring about the construction of a Catholic Chapel in Sydney. Following his arrival in the Colony as a convict in early 1800, James Meehan was assigned as a servant to Charles Grimes, who at that time acted in the position of Surveyor-General. It quickly became obvious that he was competent, meticulous, honest and hard-working. Over the twenty years of his working life in New South Wales, he was almost continuously on expeditions to survey land grants all around Greater Sydney and even the exploration of territories into which Europeans had not travelled.⁷

We might add here, that at the time, James Meehan was probably the most prominent and well-respected Catholic in the Colony. He was one of that small group of former convicts who played an important part in the affairs of the colony during Lachlan Macquarie’s governorship. Of James Meehan, the Governor wrote in 1812 that he was “a most excellent Land Surveyor ... a Man of strict Honour and Integrity...”⁸

From 1809, a considerable number of the 1798 men had received either full or conditional pardons from the Crown and had acquired land either by government grant or purchase. This land formed a concentration to the south-west of Sydney, around and beyond Liverpool. It was not a coincidence; the whole operation of opening up and settling these areas was arranged by James Meehan himself, who evidently considered that the district possessed distinct advantages for himself and his fellow Irishmen. The role played by James Meehan in creating the pattern of Irish Catholic settlement in the colony from about 1810 to 1821 was decisive. Having

6 “Saint Mary’s Cathedral Sydney A memoir of its destruction by fire”, Sydney 1865, as quoted in *Saint Mary’s Cathedral 1821 – 1971* (Patrick O’Farrell, editor). This was a report of a public meeting held in Sydney on 6th July, 1865, in response to the tragic destruction by fire of old Saint Mary’s Cathedral a week previously.

7 Some years later in his testimony to the Bigge Commission of Enquiry, Meehan declared that “I have measured every farm that has been measured” since August 1803. Apart from fixing the boundaries of land grants James Meehan made several contributions to the mapping of the colony, most notably a map of Sydney drawn in 1807, and he surveyed the townships of Richmond, Castlereagh, Windsor, Pitt Town, Wilberforce, Liverpool and Bathurst in New South Wales, as well as Hobart in Tasmania.

8 An extract from Governor Lachlan Macquarie’s testimonial for the appointment of James Meehan as Deputy Surveyor General (Despatch to the Earl of Liverpool, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, 17th November 1812), as cited in *James Meehan: A Most Excellent Surveyor*, by Tony Dawson.

arranged for his own grant of land at Macquarie Fields (now Ingleburn) Meehan seems to have persuaded those compatriots to settle in that district of the colony.⁹

Consequently, the Catholics to whom Father Therry came to minister in 1820 were far from being entirely an impoverished serfdom. These 1798 men soon achieved a middle-class prosperity. Some of them were the members of the Catholic Chapel Committee.

Since two members of the Catholic Chapel Committee were also officials of the Colony's Government, namely James Meehan and John Thomas Campbell, we may assume that there was some type of "behind the scenes" discussion with the Governor about the granting of a plot of land for the Chapel and about its location. It seems that within days of the formation of the Committee, the Governor intimated certain areas where he would be disposed to make a grant. Just ten days after being elected, the Committee prepared a letter on the subject. The letter was written by Father Therry and signed by most members of the Committee. It was addressed to John Thomas Campbell in his role as secretary to the Governor. The committee suggested that the "Government ground, situated between Saint Philip's Church, Charlotte Place and the Military Barracks is, in every respect, the most eligible of all the plots of ground from which His Excellency the Governor, has had the goodness to offer a selection for that purpose."¹⁰

There was no reply to the Committee's letter for a full five weeks and in the meantime, for reasons not entirely clear, the Governor changed his mind:

The Governor is sorry he cannot allow the Roman Catholic Chapel to be built on the Site herein solicited in Charlotte Place, the ground in question being reserved for Govt. Public Buildings.

L.M. [Lachlan Macquarie].

N.B. The Deputy Surveyor General has received the Governor's orders to point out some other eligible Place in the Town of Sydney for the Catholic Chapel to be built on.

Parramatta L. M.

19th August 1820

Did James Meehan advise the Governor against a grant of land for the Chapel in

9 A fuller assessment of James Meehan's role in the distribution of grants is given by the historians James Waldersee, Patrick O'Farrell and Bernard O'Dowd.

10 There were three members of the Catholic Chapel Committee who did not sign the petition to the Governor. Two are entirely explicable, since they held responsibilities both in Government and on the Committee, namely James Meehan and John Thomas Campbell. The third absent name is much less explicable: the senior Catholic Chaplain, Father Philip Conolly. The petition, dated 10th July 1820 and with Governor Macquarie's reply written across it, is preserved in the State Archives of NSW.

what was then the hub of Sydney town? The speech given by Father McEncroe in 1865 (recounting his discussion with another Committee member, William Davis) suggests so. It would seem more likely, however, that the Governor sought alternative advice on where the Catholic Chapel should be built (or not built), not just the views of members of the Chapel Committee (including James Meehan).

The Governor's decision does not seem to be well received by the Committee members and it is presumed that a great deal of further discussion took place as to where the chapel should be situated. Such discussion dragged on for months. An indicator of the lack of consensus amongst the Committee was an advertisement which appeared in *The Sydney Gazette* in April 1821.¹¹ This startling notice was placed by another member of the Chapel Committee and greatly respected Colonial Catholic, William Davis. But he does not seem to be writing on behalf of the Committee, but in his own name. There is something else surprising about it: Davis makes clear that he is willing to purchase a suitable plot of land. So, what about Governor Macquarie's promise of a grant of land the previous August? Some light is thrown on the matter by the following comments of John Thomas Bigge, who was resident in New South Wales at the time, conducting a commission of enquiry into the affairs of the Colony on behalf of the British Government. Bigge wrote that he observed "some difference of opinion arose among the Catholics themselves respecting the situation of the allotment and the preference that had been given to the town of Sydney."¹²

The account of Archdeacon McEncroe's speech, cited earlier, together with the advertisement of April 1821 in *The Sydney Gazette* and the comments of Mr Commissioner Bigge, when considered together, indicate that William Davis was the dissenting party in discussions over the location of the land for the Catholic Chapel.

As a man who had been a faithful Catholic since his arrival in the Colony as a political prisoner twenty years before, William Davis had been an elder of the Catholic Community in those dark years when there were no priests to provide the Sacraments. His home in Charlotte Place had been a centre of private Catholic

11 "Wanted, an Allotment of Ground in Sydney as a Site for a Roman Catholic Chapel. Any written Proposal which shall described the most eligible Situation, and mention reasonable Terms, will be received and immediately attended to, by William Davis, Charlotte-place Sydney. The Extent of the required allotment must be at least 120 feet by 90."

12 Part of a letter by Mr Commissioner Bigge as cited in the article, *Old Saint Mary's*, by J.P. McGuanne (1915). Mr McGuanne's paper was originally a lecture given in Sydney in 1913.

devotion in Sydney. It is not surprising that he took the view that the more centrally-located Charlotte Place was the most appropriate place for the Catholic Chapel to be built. It had the added advantage of being immediately adjacent to his residence! It was not, of course, built there in 1821, but only twenty years passed before a **second** Catholic chapel for Sydney was needed and it was built in Charlotte Place. It still stands today, of course: Saint Patrick's Church Hill.¹³

At some point between August 1820 and November 1821, James Meehan selected a plot of land for the location of the Catholic Chapel at the North-east corner of what is now Hyde Park and subsequently measured it out himself. Having persuaded members of the Chapel Committee of the merits of the location, he obtained Governor Macquarie's approval for the selection. It most likely, however, that the Governor already had had some say in where that grant would be. The land selected was not the most prestigious area of Sydney town and nor was it the least.

The sylvan common now known as Hyde Park was unreclaimed scrub at the time of European settlement in 1788. As early as 1803, the area was associated with sporting activities, including cricket, boxing and horse racing, as well as popular games for families. Governor Macquarie was anxious to secure the land for public recreation, and exclude commercial activity. He recognised it as a public space with a proclamation in 1810, naming it *Hyde Park*. From 1817, a number of important new buildings began to take shape skirting around the northern end of Hyde Park, and all designed by Governor Macquarie's favoured architect, Francis Greenway. First constructed was the barracks for convicts (now known simply as *The Hyde Park Barracks*), then Saint James' Anglican Church and the Law Courts. Two hundred years later, the excellence of these buildings is undisputed.¹⁴



The engraving of Francis Greenway which once appeared on the Australian \$10 note.

¹³ The land on which Saint Patrick's Church was built from 1840, was donated to the church by William Davis and part of the land of his Charlotte Place residence.

¹⁴ Although intended as a place of incarceration for prisoners, the impressive style and

Partly encouraged by the Governor, who did not regard public buildings solely from the point of view of their utility, in the aspirations of Francis Greenway, these buildings were part of a plan for a vast city square extending eastward from what is now the Sydney Town Hall. Some years later, Francis Greenway wrote a letter to newspaper *The Australian* outlining his concept that Hyde Park would be “given to the inhabitants of Sydney for ever, and to be laid down in the most elegant style of landscape gardening.” It would be planted out “in the modern way of landscape gardening, as many of the squares are now in London, the garden enclosed with an elegant rail fence”.¹⁵

When seen in the light of Greenway’s great plan, the selection of a plot of land on the eastern side of this proposed civic area does not seem at all like the caricature that Catholics were fobbed-off with a useless parcel of land in an undesirable area. This point was also made by the editor of *The Sydney Gazette* in his article about the laying of the foundation stone of Saint Mary’s Chapel:

The site chosen for the erection of this edifice, which is intended to be spacious as well as handsome, lies to the east of Hyde Park, the front of the chapel facing the town. The spot in every way appears extremely eligible, and there can hardly be a doubt entertained but that the structure, when completed, will join with the other superb buildings in that attractive end of the town, in affording additional and consistent beauty to the rapidly-improving Australian capital.¹⁶

The plot of land, which was more or less square, and almost one hectare, was a sizeable tract of land, but it was also rocky and had a decided slope downward from the level plain of Hyde Park.¹⁷ For the purposes of buildings, this would pose some significant problems. The grant was partly unreclaimed bush, and close to

scale of the Hyde Park Barracks acts as an effective terminus to Macquarie Street, which was formed during Governor Macquarie’s tenure. The Houses of Parliament, Sydney Hospital and the Mint Building were also part of Macquarie’s building program.

- 15 Part of a letter to the editor of *The Australian* of 28th April 1825. Greenway published a series of letters to this newspaper, defending his work and outlining his plans for the future of Sydney town. His plans for a Sydney square had been fully developed during the period of his collaboration with Governor Macquarie.
- 16 *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* Saturday 3rd November 1821. Some historians have commented on the Gazette’s assessment of the land grant almost mockingly. But perhaps it might be accepted at face value.
- 17 It seems that the precise measurements of the grant were not documented until as late as 1834, after a protracted dispute, which is a story in itself. The grant was finally settled at being 2 acres, one rood and five perches (being in metric measure, 0.92 hectares). This was almost four times the area that would have been available for a grant in Charlotte Place.

tracks which lead to Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and beyond to South Head. Although not looked upon with enthusiasm at the time, in only a couple of decades it was realised that the site of Saint Mary's was both very suitable for its purpose and admirable in its position. Catholics in Sydney and Australia have benefitted enormously from James Meehan's wise judgement and foresight.

The anecdote quoted earlier – which Archdeacon McEncroe publicly repeated – about the selection of the site, is rather unfair in apportioning negative responsibility to James Meehan. Meehan was a hard-working, skilful, effective and upright man and he was also a very generous donor to the fund to build the Catholic Chapel. Over the twenty years from 1800, James Meehan would have seen the tremendous growth in the settlement of Europeans. It is reasonable to assume that he understood that the Catholic community would require more land than the immediate need for a rather small chapel. The point needs to be emphasised that had the Catholic community been given a plot of land in the more densely settled area of Sydney town, it would have been very much smaller in size and with little capacity to accommodate the expansion of the Catholic community.

Foundation Day 1821

The great occasion in the history of the Church in Australia and for Sydney took place on Monday 29th October, 1821.¹⁸ It was on that day that the foundation stone was set in place for the first Catholic Church in the Colony of New South Wales; and a grand day it was. The Governor, with Mrs Macquarie and all the members of his staff in dress uniforms, walked from Government House to Hyde Park for the ceremony at 1 o'clock, witnessed by a large number of Sydney residents, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Catholics from more distant settlements travelled to be present for the occasion. Preparations had been in train for some time, but it was only on short notice that the date was set. Somewhat daringly, Father Therry sent a letter to Governor Macquarie notifying him that the ceremony would occur, and inviting him to lay the first stone. Governor Macquarie had laid the first stone of many buildings in the Colony, including some Anglican churches, but certainly not a Catholic building.

Father Therry's invitation was strategic and of the greatest importance to the

18 The day selected by Father Therry for the founding of the Colony's Catholic Chapel was All Saints' Day 1821. It is most likely that he chose it to coincide with the Feast. On 20th October, the Secretary replied that the Governor would "be very happy to have the honour of laying the first stone of the intended Roman Catholic Chapel", but stipulated that it could not be on the proposed date. Consequently, Monday 29th October was chosen by the Governor.

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHAPEL

On Monday last the First Stone of the first Roman Catholic Chapel, in this part of the world, was laid in the presence of a vast assemblage of respectable persons, who were anxious to witness so important and interesting a ceremony. The site chosen for the erection of this edifice, which is intended to be spacious as well as handsome, lies to the East of Hyde Park, the front of the Chapel facing the Town. The spot in every way appears extremely eligible; and there can hardly be a doubt entertained but that the structure, when completed, will join with the other superb buildings in that attractive end of the Town, in affording additional and consistent beauty to the rapidly improving Australian capital. HIS EXCELLENCY the GOVERNOR performed the grateful ceremony; for which purpose a very handsome Silver Trowel had been prepared by Mr. Clayton, which was adorned with an appropriate inscription. "St. Mary's Chapel" was the designation which this intended place of worship received from HIS EXCELLENCY. The Reverend Mr. TERRY's Address on the occasion, and HIS EXCELLENCY's Answer, have been transmitted to us for insertion, and are subjoined for the information of the Public.

progress of the Catholic Faith in the Colony; but it was also somewhat unusual. If we were to accept at face value the coverage from *The Sydney Gazette*, the occasion was purely civic.¹⁹ The ceremony for laying the first stone of a Catholic Church is not a civic ceremony, however, but a rite of the Church, usually performed by a bishop. Various accounts give us details about the rite which Father Terry carried out that day and, piecing together those accounts, it most likely was *The Rite of the Blessing and*

*Laying of the Foundation Stone for the Building of a Church.*²⁰

19 *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* Saturday 3rd November 1821.

20 Four accounts survive of the proceedings of the Foundation Day in 1821, the first being from *The Sydney Gazette*. Columbus Fitzpatrick's published letters from 1865 are well-known. Then we have the report of Archbishop WB Ullathorne. Father Ullathorne arrived in Australia in 1833 as Vicar-General. In later years, he wrote his memoirs, which were published initially during his life, but significantly revised after his death. His memoir also preserved some details of the foundation of Saint Mary's. These are in the form of testimony repeated to him by Catholics present on the day in 1821. Lastly, there is a letter to the *Freeman's Journal* from 23rd September 1915 in which a Mr A.T. Dwyer recounts a conversation with an old man who had been present on the Foundation Day. From the details found in these three accounts, it is certain that a choir sang the chants appointed in the liturgical books at the Foundation stone ceremony. They also indicate that Father Terry celebrated the Rite in his "sacerdotal vestments" and by this is probably meant his cassock, surplice and stole. This may not seem so very remarkable, except when one recalls that at the time, Catholic priests were forbidden by law to appear in public in priestly attire.

A letter written in 1865 by Columbus Fitzpatrick (a ten-year old boy who assisted Father Therry at the 1821 ceremony) confirms that the occasion was far from a civic ceremony, and that singing of the chants set down in liturgical books was observed.²¹ An important detail is that the celebration of Mass was part of the occasion, although this took place distinct from the Foundation Stone Rite, and certainly not in the presence of the Governor.

Given the presence of the protestant Governor, it may be that Father Therry was inclined to modify the rite so as not to offend sensibilities. As it was, it is recorded that Macquarie did attract a great deal of criticism for assisting at this Catholic ceremony.²²

What follows is an outline of the rite which is presumed to have taken place that day, together with the text of particular prayers that were likely to have been recited.²³

The ceremonial stipulates that the foundation stone or corner stone was to be square (i.e. not rough-hewn) and to be laid upon stone footings by the celebrant. It also supposes that a large timber Cross – suggested to be two metres in height – was to be erected beforehand on the site of the intended church and this Cross was to signify that place where the altar of the church would be erected. The foundation stone was to be laid at this place. Of the details that have been preserved, there is no evidence that such a Cross had been erected, but we cannot say that it was not put up. The Cross was to be blessed with holy water, whilst Psalm 83 was sung.

Attention would then have been focussed on the first stone, which was intended to be part of the structure of the wall, rather than a commemorative feature. The following is a translation of the prayer which invokes God's blessing over the stone and was almost certainly said by Father Therry on that occasion:

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, you, true God Almighty,
brightness and image of the Eternal Father, and Eternal life; you who are the

21 The choir that sang at the ceremony had been formed by Mrs Catherine Fitzpatrick and Mr Maguire in 1818 and had become very accomplished. Whether the music they provided for the Liturgy was sung to the Gregorian melodies or to other compositions (probably somewhat operatic), we cannot be certain. The choir formed in 1818, continued in various forms to accompany the Sacred Liturgy at Saint Mary's Church - later Cathedral – and does so until this day. An interesting essay about this devout and dedicated Catholic pioneer can be found here:

<https://australiancatholichistoricalsociety.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/gleesoncatherinefitzpatrick.pdf>

22 Criticism of Governor Macquarie is detailed in a letter of Columbus Fitzpatrick 3rd July 1865 published in *The Southern Argus* (Goulburn).

23 This centuries-old rite is found in the second volume of *The Roman Pontifical*, originally published by Pope Clement VIII in 1596.

corner-stone cut out without hands from the mountain, and the unchanging foundation; fix firmly this stone to be laid in your name. We pray you, O Beginning and End, the Beginning from which the Father created all things before all ages, be the beginning, advancement and completion of this work which is to be undertaken for the praise and glory of your name.²⁴

The celebrant was then to sprinkle the stone with Holy Water and trace the Sign of the Cross upon each face of the stone. The rite indicates that the Litany of the Saints was to be sung after this and then Psalm 126. It was at this point that the stone was put in place, with the assistance of a stone mason. This would have been the moment when Governor Macquarie used the trowel presented to him for the occasion and the short addresses made.

In the Rite found in *The Roman Pontifical*, the celebrant turns his attention away from the foundation stone towards the entire site of the intended church. He is to bless the outline of the building, walking around it sprinkling the area with holy water whilst Psalms 50, 86 and 121 were sung in succession.²⁵

The hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*,²⁶ was then appointed to be sung whilst the celebrant prays that the Holy Spirit will come down upon the building which is about to rise from the ground, that He would make acceptable the offerings of clergy and people, and purify the hearts of the faithful. The last petition is that the building itself may endure forever as an unfailing source of heavenly blessings.

Columbus Fitzpatrick, in just one sentence of his letter, confirms that the Rite described above was celebrated that day:

The trenches [marking the line of the intended walls of the building] were dug out, and a large quantity of stone placed on the ground; a marquee was erected, in which Mass was celebrated, and a procession formed which made a round of the site, while the choir chanted the various hymns appropriate for the occasion.²⁷

As mentioned above, *The Sydney Gazette* recorded the speeches given by Governor Macquarie and Father Therry before the ritual of laying the First stone of the chapel

24 Translation of the prayer by the author of this article.

25 The extent to which this part of the Rite was observed in 1821 is a moot point, since at this time no definite plan for Saint Mary's existed, only some ideas about its size and design.

26 The ancient hymn to the Holy Spirit, *Come O Creator, Spirit blest*.

27 Columbus Fitzpatrick's reminiscences were published in *The Goulburn Argus* in 1865, immediately after the fire which destroyed old Saint Mary's. They are an invaluable source of information, since he was an intelligent and observant boy and then young man, frequently in the company of prominent Catholics and sometimes the service of the priests Father O'Flynn, Father O'Connolly and Father Therry from 1817 onwards.

commenced. Father Therry said, in part:

... We, the Catholics of this Colony, cannot refrain, on so auspicious an occasion, from expressing our most sincere and heartfelt gratitude to Your Excellency, for having deigned to honour us, by personally laying the first Stone of the First Roman Catholic Chapel attempted to be erected in this Territory.” Father Therry continued “In the Temple which you now commence, prayers shall be frequently offered to the Throne of God, to invoke upon yourself, and your amiable Family, the richest blessings of Heaven; and we venture to predict, that, whilst it shall continue to be appropriated to the sacred use for which it is intended, neither the Name, nor the Virtues of Your Excellency, shall at any time be forgotten.

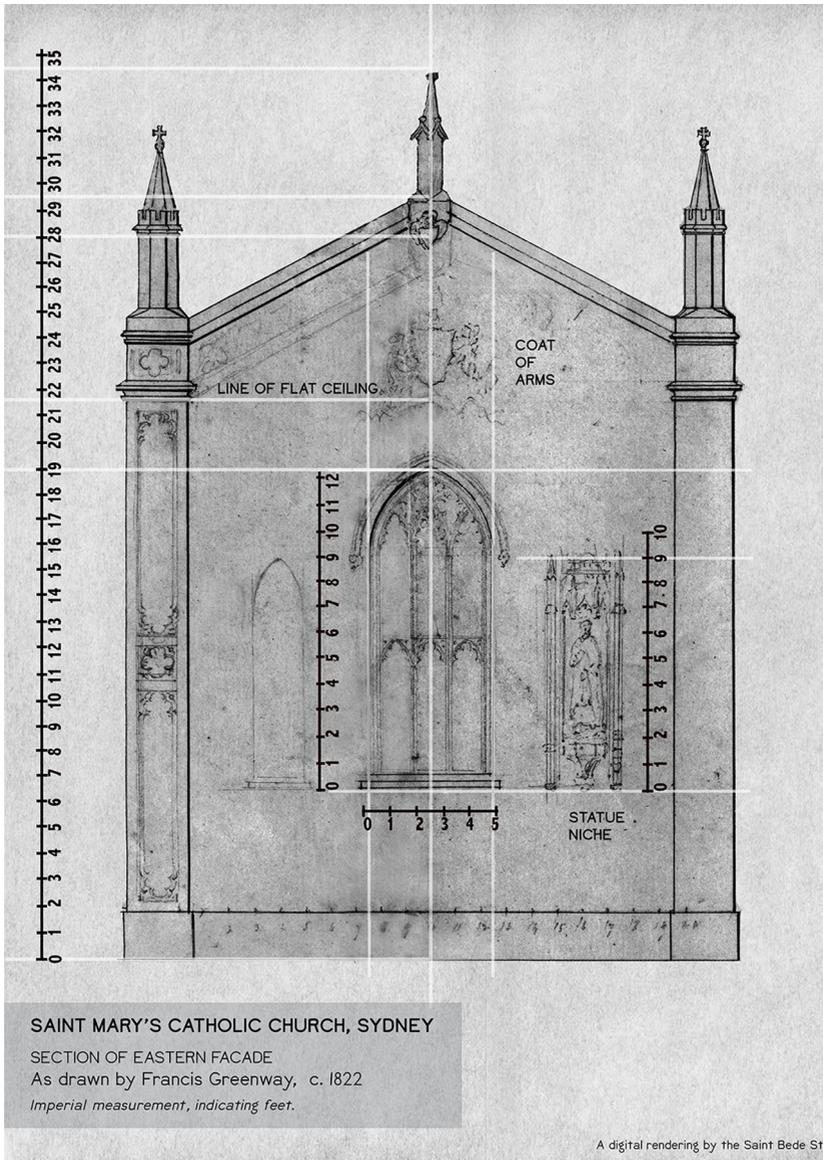
This is part of the Governor’s reply:

...I receive from your hands, with much pleasure, in your own name, and that of your Roman Catholic Brethren of New South Wales, the very handsome Silver Trowel now presented to me; and I feel myself much honoured in having been thus selected to make use of this Instrument in laying the First Stone of the first Roman Catholic Chapel attempted to be erected in Australia.²⁸



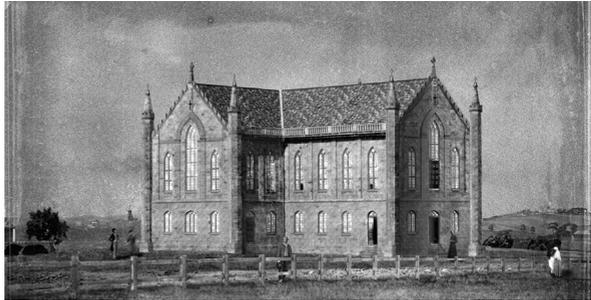
The silver trowel used by Governor Macquarie to lay the foundation stone of Saint Mary's Church, 1821. Image : The State Library of NSW.

²⁸ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* Saturday 3rd November 1821. Governor Macquarie’s name did appear on the completed chapel, as Father Therry promised to the Governor on the day the foundation stone was laid.



Enhanced section of Francis Greenway's drawing of Saint Mary's Chapel circa 1822. The measurements (in feet) are indicated on the drawing. Image : The Therry Papers in the State Library of NSW.

The language of both addresses is of another age, but important points are made both by Father Therry and Governor Macquarie. Given the social and legal standing of Catholics at this time, it is unsurprising that the tone of Father Therry's address is deferential, but



The completed Saint Mary's Church as it appeared in the early 1840s. Image : The Saint Bede Studio.

in another part of the address, Father Therry suggests what Catholicism can add to the Colony of New South Wales, namely, social cohesion through the spread of Christian morality and mutual respect. In his turn, Governor Macquarie concluded his address by making a most important observation about his experience of the Catholics of the Colony, namely, that they are “Faithful and Loyal Subjects of the Crown.”

A few lines are not out of place here about the trowel that was used by Governor Macquarie to lay the cornerstone. “The Governor wiped the trowel with his own handkerchief, and put the trowel in his bosom, saying ‘You must know Mr Therry, that although I never laid the first stone of a Catholic church before, I am a very old Mason; and I shall keep this trowel as long as I live, in remembrance of this day, and I wish you and your flock every success in your pious undertaking.’ “These off-the-cuff remarks were recalled years later by Columbus Fitzpatrick, the altar boy who had held the trowel at the Foundation ceremony, before it was handed to the Governor.²⁹

²⁹ In early 1822, Macquarie left Australia and returned to England, taking the trowel with him. In 1962, his descendants returned it to Australia where it remains preserved in excellent condition in the State Library of NSW. In 2022, it was lent for display in Saint Mary's Cathedral. The silver trowel was made and engraved by Samuel Clayton on only a week's notice. Clayton arrived in Sydney as a convict in December 1816 and was a talented portrait artist, engraver, art teacher and silversmith. He did very well for himself through hard work. Freemasonic devices are engraved on the trowel and the inscription reads: “The Capt. Gen. Governor & Commander in Chief, Vice Admiral, and Commander of the Forces in and over the Territory of New South Wales and its Dependencies. His Excellency Lachlan Macquarie Esq. Major General in the Army &c &c &c. Used this Instrument at the Ceremony of laying the first Stone of the first Catholic Chapel erected in the said Territory on the 29th day of Oct. A.D. 1821.”

Designing a chapel

Towards the end of 1821 (or perhaps in 1822), when fundraising for the Catholic chapel was proceeding well and the land for its construction allotted by a Crown Grant, the architect of the Colony of New South Wales, Francis Greenway was asked to prepare a design for the chapel. The Catholic Chapel Building Committee and Father Therry had reached a decision that they did not want a timber building, expedient to immediate needs, but something more substantial. This approach was supported by Father Therry's superior Monsignor Slater O.S.B. who lived on the island of Mauritius, and under whose jurisdiction the continent and islands of Australia then fell.³⁰

Francis Greenway was well-qualified to prepare a design for such a chapel; he had built several fine churches, in King Street, Sydney, at Windsor, and at Liverpool, all of which continue to be used as churches, two hundred years later.

The plan Greenway drew-up for the Catholic Chapel has survived and shows a charming design in that style called *Regency Gothick*.³¹ Although an imperfect expression of that Gothic style which emerged from England in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Francis Greenway's design for the Chapel demonstrates his knowledge of Gothic decoration. It resembled the type of little church frequently found in rural areas of England. It was intended to be a rectangular-shaped building - one large room - with beautifully detailed windows in stone and other ornaments carved in stone to enrich wall-surfaces, including provision for statues on the exterior wall at the altar-end of the building (the east).

Francis Greenway's drawing is only a glimpse of his design for Saint Mary's church. It depicts what the sanctuary (East) end of the building would have looked like and what a section of the south side would have looked like. It also depicts his

30 Monsignor Slater's letter, of 2nd October 1822 is in response to a letter sent to him in Mauritius by Father Therry in March 1822. It is clear from the letter that the intended size of the chapel was still a topic of disagreement amongst the Sydney Catholic Community. The letter is reproduced pp 51-53 of Father Eris O'Brien's biography of Father Therry, published in 1922.

31 At some point in 1821 or 1822, the Catholic Chapel Building Committee approached Francis Greenway to prepare a design for the intended Chapel. It has not been able to be determined whether Greenway was given this commission before the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Chapel in October 1821, or afterwards. The Greenway design has survived in the papers of Father Therry (now preserved by the State Library of NSW). It is large piece of paper, folded and with the words "Mr Greenway architect" written on the reverse of the drawings. The existence of this drawing had been forgotten about for many years, until it was uncovered by the architectural historians Joan Kerr and James Broadbent and published in their 1980 study of early colonial architecture *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*. Even then, knowledge of Greenway's contribution to a design for the chapel remained largely overlooked.

intentions for the ceiling inside the building. That is all. It does not indicate how long the building was to be, nor what the Hyde Park (Western) façade would have looked like.

His drawing of the Eastern façade, however, is quite detailed, and the design indicates Greenway's understanding of the concept of *propriety*, namely that it was appropriate to enhance the area where the altar was to be placed with greater ornament. He designed a single East window opening divided by tracery³² into six compartments or *lights*.

There are further ornamental features of Greenway's design for this end of the building. The most notable are the elaborate statue niches carved from stone and set into the wall on either side of the central window. These niches Greenway designed with massive stone bases, carved to resemble leaves, and on which a statue was to be placed. An elaborate carved stone canopy covered the statues. Greenway even drew an idea for a statue for the niche: perhaps Christ or another saint. These statues were intended to be almost life size, just on five feet tall.³³

Francis Greenway's drawing also includes his design for the structure and ornament of the ceiling, within the building. We are given no other indication of the interior except this, so it was obviously of some importance to the overall design. Alternatives were proposed for the design of the ceiling, namely a flat plastered ceiling or a pitched ceiling of timbers.³⁴

This proposed timber ceiling was intended to be highly ornamental. The structure of rafters, running from the top of wall to the apex of the roof, would have been of polished timber, and the trusses – which would have corresponded to the position on the exterior walls of the stone buttresses, would have been segmented with curved timber members, each end of which was to feature carved timber and projecting ornaments called *bosses*. To use another technical term, what Greenway designed was a *hammer beam* ceiling. This was to be a grand structure, very much better than the ceilings of the other churches (Anglican) in Sydney at that time.

32 *Tracery* describes the timber or stone members which divide the glazing into separate and ornamental compartments.

33 And over all of these, Greenway intended to be placed the coat-of-arms of Great Britain, as with other public buildings of the Colony of New South Wales he designed. It would be safe to suggest that the coat-of-arms concept did not appeal greatly to Father Therry.

34 As Greenway explained in writing on the plan: "The pencil lines of the section of one of the rafters shews in what manner the roof might be done in wood only when the end window could be kept higher but such a roof would be attended with much more expense in completing than a flat ceiling yet it would be much more in character with the stile [sic] of the building."

All these architectural details, whilst interesting in themselves, are not the primary point of this description. The drawing is of great historical significance for at least two reasons. The first is that these finer, elegant Gothic details of Greenway's design were completely swept aside by Father Therry and his clerk of works James Dempsey. Were they perhaps deemed too costly to be incorporated? But those finer details were intended to create a chapel – even though it was small – which was distinctly ecclesiastical and mediaeval in appearance. What came to be built was neither. The second reason is that these details reveal that Francis Greenway was quite familiar with the finer points of Gothic ornament and was capable of employing them in his designs. His surviving churches bear little resemblance to his admirable and quite Catholic design for Saint Mary's chapel.

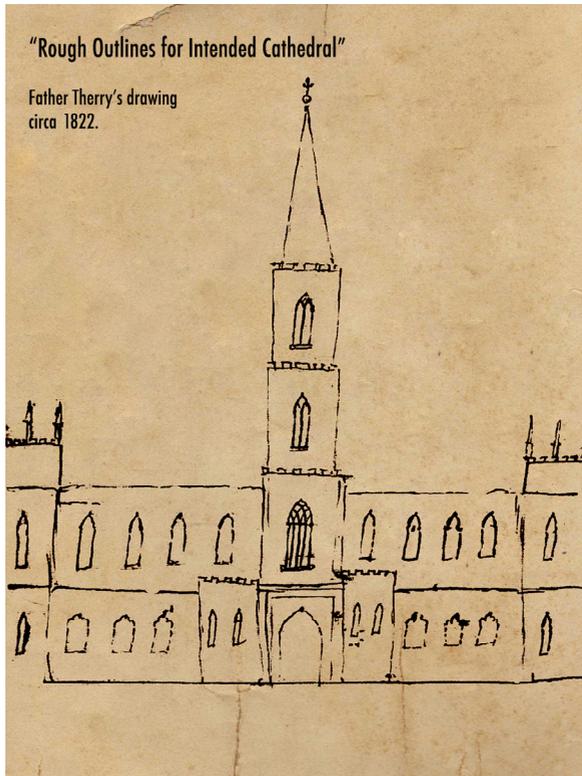
Being the type of person he was, Greenway not only designed the appearance of the building, but determined how large it should be, based on his own views of the needs of the Catholic population, rather than the opinions of his clients. Some interesting observations about this approach were written by Columbus Fitzpatrick:

Father Therry, who was a far-seeing man, would not be satisfied with a small one [chapel]. This led to dissension among the Catholics, many of whom could not enter into his views or see any necessity for so large a church as he intended to build. Among these was Mr. Greenaway [sic] the architect, employed to make the plans. He said, what was true, that Father Therry was but a young man and did not know what such a building would cost, that any one must be mad who suppose that the Catholics of Sydney would require such a building for the next hundred years at least. Many such arguments were used by well-disposed persons, but Father Therry was firm, and at last his plan was adopted by the Catholic Committee.³⁵

Francis Greenway's design did not win the favour of Father Therry. It has usually been suggested that the principal reason for the disagreement between these two determined men was that the chapel Greenway designed would be too small for anything other than the immediate needs of the mainly-convict Catholic population. It is true that Father Therry was more far-sighted; but he also had his own ideas about how that chapel should look and they did not correspond to Francis Greenway's

³⁵ Columbus Fitzpatrick *op.cit.* It is most likely that Columbus Fitzpatrick condensed an ongoing debate about the size of the Chapel, rather than reporting a particular meeting in which a decision was reached after discussion by those present. Monsignor CJ Duffy, however, took an alternative view that the whole matter was discussed at the first meeting of 30th June 1820. This seems highly unlikely. His view is found in O'Farrell *op.cit.* "The Ethos of St. Mary's", p 39. Greenway's design for the Catholic Chapel reveals his intention of providing a building less than half the size of the Anglican Church of Saint James, across Hyde Park in King Street, designed by Greenway in 1819.

efforts. At much the same time Father Therry prepared his own design which he described as *Rough Outlines for Intended Cathedral*. His quirky effort – a crude sketch which he drew in pen and ink between 1821–22 – did not, thank God, get off the drawing-board.³⁶ Many things, however, are noteworthy from this sketch. The first is that the design is referred to as a “Cathedral”, namely the church which is the seat of a bishop. In 1821, the notion of Australia having a bishop - let alone a Catholic bishop – would to most people have seemed far-fetched. There were only a few ministers of Religion and but one Catholic priest on the Australian mainland:



One of Father Therry's designs for old Saint Mary's.

what on earth would be the use of a Bishop? Evidently Father Therry had great aspirations indeed; this large church would one day be the seat of a Catholic bishop. And indeed, it became so, only thirteen years later.

Another aspect of note from the “Rough Outlines” is that it certainly depicts a building in the Gothic style – well, at least, a rather basic form referred to then (and since) as *Gothick*.³⁷

This was the style of late and post-mediaeval rural churches in Ireland and

³⁶ The whereabouts of the original sketch is not presently known, but it was reproduced in Father Eris O’Brien’s biography of Father Therry, published in 1922.

³⁷ The term *Gothick* came to be used of a revived style of architecture of the 18th century. This revival was part of a romantic movement in the arts and architecture and was initially domestic rather than ecclesiastical. These romantic beginnings gave way to a more scholarly attempts to reproduce mediaeval architecture. This second school is called *The Gothic Revival*.

England, but it certainly was not the architecture found in the colonial town of Sydney. So, we see that Father Therry wished the Catholic chapel to be set apart; he wished it to be large and he wished it to be in a more ancient form of ecclesiastical architecture. It was to look like the old churches that Irish Catholics knew. One senses that Father Therry's interest in this style of architecture was not a fashionable romanticism, but a deep desire to honour, even revive, an Irish Catholic heritage on the far side of the world. Consequently, stylistic correctness was not important to him so much as the general "look and feel" of old Catholic Ireland. Would Father Therry have shown his *Rough Outlines* to architect Francis Greenway? If he did, it would most likely have been treated with contempt and even mockery.

Yes, stylistic "correctness" was lacking; the "rough outlines" indicate – somewhat painfully – that Father Therry had no idea of Gothic architecture whatever. His "Rough Outlines" reveal a strange hybrid between the *Gothick* style and a domestic style of architecture, which we would call *Colonial* or *Georgian*. The large building he sketched out looks more like an English manor house than it does a church. This style, with its layers rising upward, is often referred to as *Wedding Cake Gothic*. Studying its oddities, one is not quite sure which end of the building is which. A three-storey tower with a spire is in the centre of the drawing. We also find that the main body of the church has two storeys of windows. And all the windows are pointed at the apex, in the *Gothick* style. Crenellations, giving the appearance of battlements, are also depicted.

An important question presents itself: how did Father Therry come up with the *Rough Outlines* design and, indeed, the eventual design to which old Saint Mary's was built? Answering this properly belongs to a further article which traces the history of the spasmodic years in which old Saint Mary's was constructed.

The initial work on Old Saint Mary's began early in 1822 and involved a great deal of time and expense in providing level foundations and creating a basement area. This was because the Grant of land sloped down from the flat area of Hyde Park and was uneven throughout. It was not until the second half of 1823 that the walls themselves began to be laid above ground level. With that construction well underway during 1823, a disgruntled Francis Greenway wrote to Father Therry, advising that he could not offer further assistance:

Dear Sir,

You have my reasons already fully explained, for my withdrawing that which I considered no longer of use, my services; I can assure you, Sir, however, that I have no resentment, and only lament that the designs have

For a Godly Purpose: Planning Saint Mary's Chapel in old Sydney-town

been so much injured and that I had not the power to render that service for which I had first hoped, I should have; and I am now ready on the same terms, without emolument, to do everything in my power, to forward the object, and I shall feel myself amply remunerated, if I am so happy as to give you satisfaction.

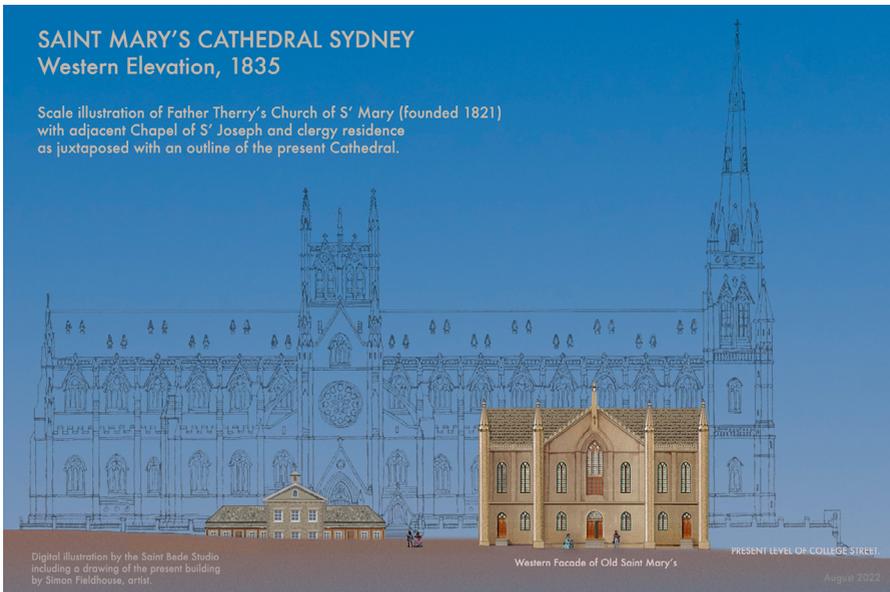
Your sincere friend and obedient servant,

Francis Greenway.

11th November 1823³⁸

The letter obviously is not Greenway's first to Father Therry on the subject and is a response to a reply he had received from Father Therry. Unstated is that someone else was directing what was being built. Closing his reply, Greenway offers an olive branch: he would continue to assist if his design were adhered to and not altered by Father Therry or anyone else. That olive branch was not accepted by Father Therry and the altered design continued to be built.

We must consider the possibility that the surviving drawing in the State Library was not Greenway's only design for the Chapel. Perhaps he was persuaded



Elevation of Old and New Saint Mary's juxtaposed: Image : The Saint Bede Studio.

38 The letter of Francis Greenway to Father Therry, which is among the Therry Papers held in the State Library of NSW, is cited in MH Ellis' 1949 biography of Francis Greenway on page 169. Ellis had seen the actual letter.

to consider the views of his clients and prepare an alternative design for a larger building, which included transepts and an apse (which were built). But there is no evidence of Greenway's further involvement with the project. And so, his charming design for a Catholic Chapel was set aside in favour of a building more than three times the floorplan size, double the height and, in every detail, quite unlike what Greenway had devised.

Conclusion

The story of the founding of old Saint Mary's, Sydney, encompasses the practical and public support of the Government and its officials, the generosity of a number of non-Catholic notables of Sydney and, most of all, the gathering-together of an incipient Catholic community. The enthusiasm, generosity and noble aspiration which emerged in the stages of planning the building, gave way to the crueller realities of inadequate funding (as Francis Greenway warned) and disagreement at all levels of the project. Whilst Father Therry provided leadership, the building of the Chapel is also the story of the important practical contributions of just a handful of people, mostly those men who had been exiled to Australia after the Uprising on the West Coast of Ireland in 1798. Their crucial contribution should never be forgotten.