



St Brigid's 190th anniversary

The weekend of May 24-25, 2025, brought to a close a series of special events to celebrate the 190th anniversary of St Brigid's Church-School, Millers Point, the oldest surviving place of Catholic Worship in Australia.

St Brigid's is within the territorial parish boundaries of St Patrick's, Church Hill.

On Saturday May 24, two pilgrim groups, one departing in the morning and the other in the afternoon, travelled a route from St Patrick's, Church Hill, to St Brigid's, Millers Point, making 18 stops along the way at significant Catholic historical sites in The Rocks and Millers Point.

The following day, Sydney Mayor Clover Moore and her husband Peter joined the 9am Sunday Mass congregation, augmented by a large number of visitors and friends, for a special liturgy of thanksgiving for 190 years of Catholic endeavour at Millers Point. After the Mass the mayor unveiled a commemorative plaque, mounted at the entry gate to the church on Kent street.

It was then across the road to the handily placed Captain Cook Hotel to raise a glass or a cappuccino to St Brigid's next 190 years.

Principal celebrant was Fr Peter McMurrich sm, an assistant priest at St Patrick's, Millers Point. He was joined by Fr Robert Borg, who grew up in the local area, and Fr Garry Reynolds sm, who organised the restoration of the St Brigid's site in 2002-03.

As might be expected of a building which goes back to the early years of Catholic life in Sydney, St Brigid's has a rich history. Governor Richard Bourke approved the site and building plan in 1833: *"for a Roman Catholic School House, to be occasionally used as a Chapel"*.

The application for a land grant and school building was made on behalf of the Catholic community by Rev William B. Ullathorne OSB, Prefect Apostolic of Australia.

This was two years before the arrival of Australia's first bishop, John Bede Polding OSB. Neither Ullathorne nor Polding were overly optimistic as regards the citizens of The Rocks and Millers Point. Ullathorne in his autobiography noted that St Brigid's was built "among the rudest part of the population"; and when Polding was authorising the building, in 1840, of St Patrick's church, on the southern edge of The Rocks, he thought that the "harmonising influence of religion" was desperately needed there.¹

Plans for the new building were drawn up by the government architect, and construction by convict stonemasons commenced in August, 1834, using "*stone which is close at hand*". The single storey building was completed in April, 1835.

The building was handed over in May, 1835, and was put into use immediately. A partition of folding doors divided the interior in half, providing separate class-rooms for the boys and girls.

Over the years the Christian Brothers, Sisters of Mercy, Josephites, and dedicated lay teachers, have all had turns at teaching at St Brigid's.

St Brigid's celebrated its sesquicentenary (150 years) in 1985. Only seven years later, in 1992, the school closed because of falling enrolments: on 3 July that year, Sr Mary Joseph, the sole teacher over the previous 14 years, bade farewell to the remaining 11 pupils and closed the school doors for the last time. However, Mass continues to be held at St Brigid's each Sunday.²

When William Ullathorne was looking for a word to describe St Brigid's as a building in 1836, the word he chose was "plain"; it was indeed a plain, no-frills construction. It was a good fit for Millers Point, where over the years people have struggled to earn a living, find work, and raise their families. People often died young, unable to afford proper medical attention, and often wondering where the next meal was coming from.

They dealt courageously and as best they could with life's vicissitudes, helped by their neighbours and friends, who knew hardship too, and were always ready to pitch in and lend a hand. This was the social context in which the priests, and religious

and lay teachers at St Brigid's, worked over the years

In 1933 an upper storey was added to St Brigid's. Father Daniel Hurley SM was the parish priest. The upper storey construction meant that the school now had proper classrooms, and allowed the original ground floor building to be used exclusively as a Mass centre.

Beginning in 1974, and for about 40 years, Marist Sisters ministered as pastoral associates to the residents of Millers Point and The Rocks, based at St Brigid's. Sr David FitzMaurice was the first Marist Sister to work in the parish.

St Brigid's was closed for several months during 2002 to allow for interior restoration. Further restoration took place in 2003, and in connection with the restoration project, a free-standing meeting room with kitchenette and toilets was constructed on the southern side of the original building.

St Brigid's has survived for 190 years, perhaps against the odds. In 1886, the then parish priest of St Patrick's, Fr Peter Le Rennetel, came close to selling St Brigid's, but was eventually dissuaded by the archbishop, Cardinal Patrick Moran, to offload a different property instead.³ In 1900, St Brigid's was originally included in The Rocks Resumption area, and its fate would have most likely been demolition, but St Patrick's church, the Garrison church, and tiny St Brigid's were eventually granted exemptions.

Since then, it has stood firm during two world wars and the great depression. In recent years significant social change has occurred in the Millers Point area, with large areas of public housing being sold or leased to private buyers. A small but dedicated congregation still keeps the St Brigid's flame burning. The future is always uncertain; it's in the present we live. In 2025, St Brigid's proudly celebrates 190 years of Catholic faith, dedicated educational endeavour, and total immersion in the local community.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Peter McMurrich, *The Harmonising Influence of Religion*, Patrick Books, Sydney, 2nd edition 2018, p.11.

² See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4.7.1992, p.3

³ See Le Rennetel to Moran, 12.8.1886, Sydney archdiocesan archives, "Marist Box".