

A guide to
Villa Maria

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A brief history and notes for a walking tour of the Marist Fathers' Villa Maria property Hunters Hill, NSW.

The two 'Villa Marias' and their purpose

The Marist Fathers arrived in Sydney in 1845, and first came to Hunters Hill in 1847, but not to the present Villa Maria site.

The Priory

The original Villa Maria was a grouping of buildings on the other side of Tarban Creek, now known as 'The Priory'.

When that property passed from Marist hands in 1874 it was purchased by Thomas Salter, and later became part of

the Gladesville Hospital complex.

The 19th century sandstone buildings have survived intact, and are currently administered by Hunters Hill Council; the site is recognised as having significant heritage status.

In 1863, work began on building the present Villa Maria monastery. The Marists had decided to abandon their earlier site because of the poor quality of the soil for growing purposes, the desire for a better water access for transport, and the encroachment of the Gladesville Hospital.

While some parts of the new building were in use much earlier, the major relocation of the community to the new site appears to have occurred around Christmas, 1865: 'In three weeks, that is, around Christmas, we shall move to our new house' [Circular from Victor Poupinel to Sisters in Oceania,



Villa Maria monastery

6/12/1865 in Our Pioneer Sisters].

The purpose of the Marist establishment at Hunters Hill during the 19th century was to operate as an administrative centre and supply base for Marist mission ventures in Central Oceania; to be a sanatorium for sick missionaries coming to Sydney from the Pacific Islands for treatment; to be a transit base for missionaries travelling from Europe via Sydney to the Islands; and to provide renewal programmes called 'second novitiates' for missionaries who had been in the Islands for 10 years or more.

The priests at the monastery also cared for the parish of Hunters Hill, and provided chaplaincies to St Joseph's College, and the Gladesville Hospital.

And now, something about the current 'Villa Maria' buildings...

Villa Maria Monastery

(constructed 1863-65) was built to face Tarban Bay, which was the transport link to the city in the 19th century.

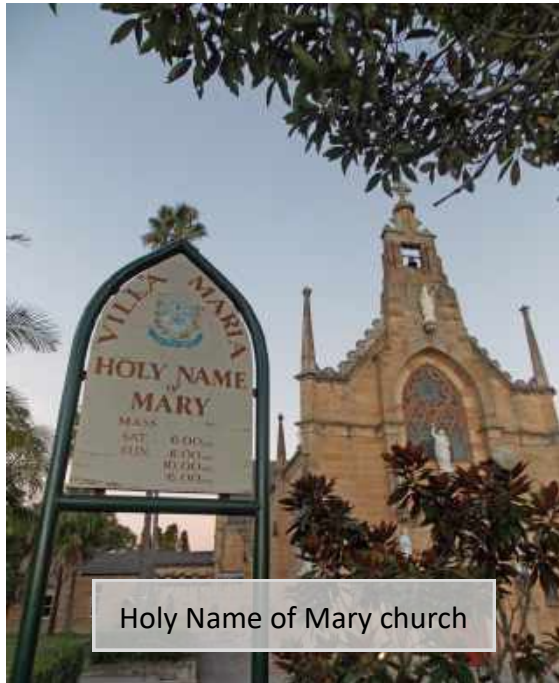
There was a ferry wharf on or near the site of the present St Joseph's College boat sheds, and a small boat provided a linking service with the larger harbour ferries.

The arched sandstone cloister dates from 1908, and replaced an earlier ironwork balcony.

The present red tiles were substituted for the original slate roof in the late 1950s or early 1960s.



The Priory



Holy Name of Mary church

Holy Name of Mary Church

Commenced in 1867 and completed in 1871, the church was originally only two-thirds its present length, and was initially built as a chapel for the monastery community rather than as a parish church.

In 1903-4 the front of the church was removed and two additional bays were added to the nave.

The sandstone annex, running at right angles to the Church, dates from 1883, and was built as a school-room and to provide overflow accommodation for the church congregation on Sundays prior to the 1903-4 extension. In recent times this building has come to be known as the Chapter Hall.

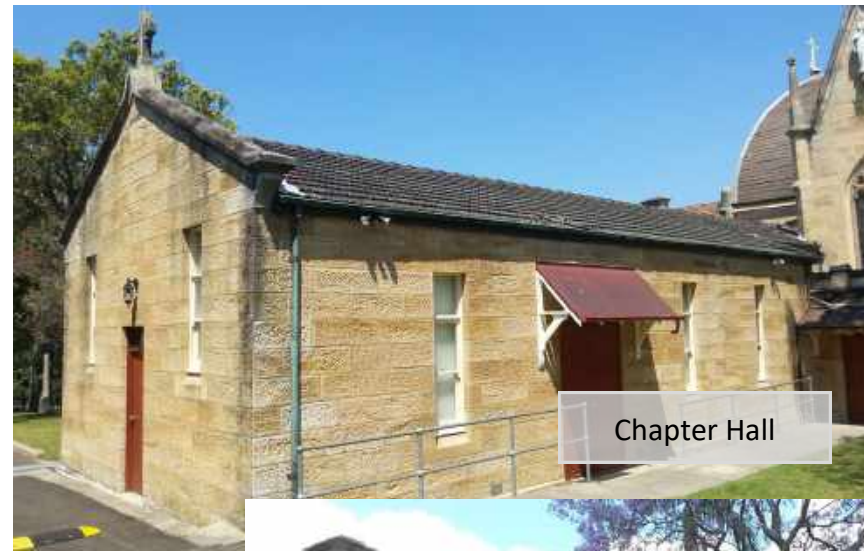
Southern wing of Villa Maria Monastery

Part of the original construction (1863-65). The ground floor was at one time the monastery kitchen; upstairs was divided into cubicles for accommodation for the coadjutor brothers.

Western Wing of Villa Maria Monastery

Completed in 1929, 65 years after the original monastery construction, hence the extensive use of cement render at the rear of this building rather than sandstone.

However, for the sake of appearances, a sandstone facing was used on the 'public' side of this wing. Stone for the



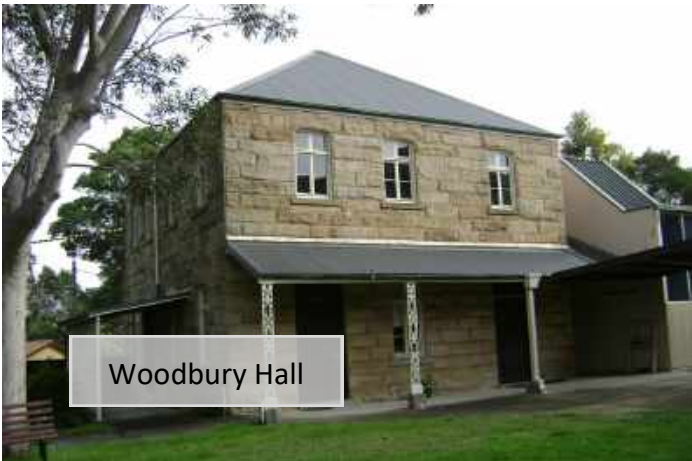
Chapter Hall



Southern wing



Western wing



Woodbury Hall



Piquet Centre

facing came from the demolition of a building called the 'gatehouse', situated nearby, and from a small stone building which the Western Wing replaced.

'Woodbury Hall'

Constructed 1902-3. The ground floor became the new kitchen for the monastery, replacing the original one in the southern wing; and a dining room for the Third Order of Mary Regular Sisters who lived on the site.

Upstairs was overflow accommodation for the use of Third Order of Mary Regu-

lar Sisters visiting Sydney.

After 1929, with the building of the Western Wing which accommodated a modern kitchen, the entire building became available for use by the Sisters.

'Piquet Centre'

In 1874 a 'small house' was built on the property as accommodation for Sr M. De La Merci (a Marist Tertiary nun), Sara & Silenia (Futunan aspirants to the sisterhood) and for kitchen maids.

This was a direct result of the sale of 'The Priory' buildings to Thomas Salter in June 1874, for these latter had been

used since 1865 as a convent for Third Order of Mary/Our Lady of the Missions Sisters.

There seems little doubt that the Piquet Centre is the 'small house' built in 1874 for the Sisters.

The Piquet Centre was definitely in use as the Third Order of Mary Sisters' convent in the last decades of the 19th century and remained so until after the Second World War.

It seems likely that it was specifically built for this purpose, and for accommodating domestics, in 1874.

The current internal configuration of

the rooms is entirely consistent with a description of the interior of the 'small house' given in contemporary documents.

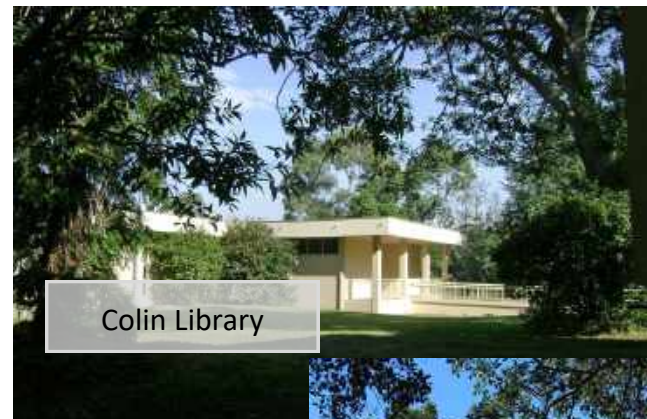
In the 1950s and 1960s the building functioned as offices for the Procurator of the Missions.

Colin Library and Chanel House

Both built in 1974-5, when the Marist Fathers' Seminary was transferred from Toongabbie to Hunters Hill.

The library no longer functions and the books have been donated to various seminaries and universities.

Chanel House is still used for accommodation purposes.



Colin Library



Chanel House

Memorial Stone and Headstone Walk

Placed in 1967 to commemorate the centenary of the laying of the foundation stone for Holy Name of Mary Church.

The large Celtic crosses were brought from the graveyard of St Charles' Church, Ryde, where the early Marists were buried prior to 1892.

Octagonal Chapel

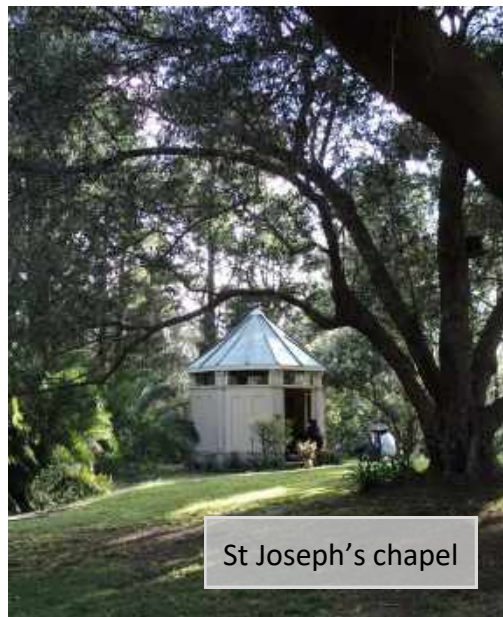
The small octagonal chapel in the grounds of Villa Maria monastery was built in 1863 by Fr Claude Joly sm, architect and clerk of works for the main monastery building.

The erection of the chapel marked the beginning of building works on the present Villa Maria property, culminating in the completion of the main monastery building towards the end of 1865.

For some years prior to the commencement of building works the coadjutor brothers came daily from the first Villa Maria site, on the other side of Tarban Creek, to clear the new monastery site.

One of the first things they did (perhaps as early as 1858) was to construct a small wooden shrine which housed a statue of St Joseph, dedicating their work to the care and protection of one of the special patron saints of the Marist order.

This statue (made of wood) had a special significance, since it was carried by the Marists involved in the disastrous



attempt to found a mission in the Solomons in 1845, and had been brought back to Sydney by the survivors.

This wooden statue was eventually placed inside the chapel, and a larger St Joseph statue in bronze, a metre tall, was placed on top of the chapel roof. Photographic evidence suggests that the original roof of the chapel was slate.

The chapel was used during the 19th century by members of the monastery community for the celebration of private Masses and other personal devotions.

Claude Joly also installed in the chapel a small set of stations of the cross, having made 14 recesses in the walls of the chapel to accommodate the 14 stations.

The St Joseph chapel was formally blessed by the Marist missionary bish-

op, Louis Elloy, on 24 April, 1864.

Both the bronze statue from the roof of the chapel, and the wooden statue from the 1845 Solomons expedition have since disappeared, though the latter was recorded as still being inside the chapel as late as 1964.

Cemetery

Constructed (half present size) in 1908 by Fr Placid Huault, who shortly after its completion became the first person to be buried there; extended 1937-8.

The original section of the cemetery had the large crucifix as its centrepiece.

Prior to the building of this cemetery, Marists from Villa Maria were buried in the graveyard of St Charles' Church, Ryde; and between 1893-1908 at the Field of Mars Cemetery, Ryde.

Cemetery contains graves of Marist Fathers, Marist coadjutor brothers, Third Order of Mary Regular sisters, and Marist Missionary sisters.

St Peter Chanel Chapel

The small sandstone building which is now called St Peter Chanel's chapel was originally in the grounds of the first Villa Maria monastery (1847-1865), Hunters Hill, which was on the opposite side of Tarban Creek to the present Villa Maria property.

The buildings associated with the first Villa Maria are still standing, and after being part of the Gladesville Hospital complex for many years, are now administered by Hunters Hill council.

In 1955 the Marists obtained permission from the Health Department to dismantle this building, thought to have been a small chapel, and reconstruct it at the Marist seminary at Toongabbie.

It was assumed that the body of the martyr, St Peter Chanel, would have been kept in the building while on its way through Sydney on the journey to France (1849-50), since contemporary documents indicate that the remains of St Peter Chanel were housed in the Villa Maria community chapel.

In fact, the original chapel at the first Villa Maria was wooden, and has not survived.

The stone structure now known as St Peter Chanel's chapel may still have been built by the Marists, in which case it would most likely have been used as a



St Peter Chanel chapel



Mass oratory for the celebration of private Masses.

However it may also have been constructed by Thomas Salter, a later owner of the site. It is designated as a latrine on an 1885 survey map, and may have been built by Salter for precisely this purpose.

There was a time lag of four years between the time the chapel was dismantled at Hunters Hill (1955), and its reassembling at Toongabbie (1959).

At this time, some additional sandstone was obtained from a demolished church at Concord, and incorporated in the reconstructed building.



Cellars and stables



The Cottage

After the Marist Fathers' Seminary transferred from Toongabbie to Hunters Hill in 1975, the chapel was once again dismantled (1981), and reassembled on its present site (1982).

Cellars, Stables & Cottage

The monastery had its own vineyards, principally for the manufacture of altar wine.

A small quantity of table wine was also made for the use of the Villa Maria community. The quality of the table wine generally left a little to be desired, although the 1874 vintage appears to have been exceptional: 'This year our wine has been wonderful; we have

made 16 barrels of wine, and good stuff too.' The last recorded vintage was 1906.

The cottage dates from 1877, and was constructed by a former miner by the name of Shortil, who obtained permission to construct a retirement cottage in the grounds.

Mysteriously, he changed his mind and left the area just as the building was nearing completion.

Inspection of the stonework where the cottage intersects with the winery building suggests that the winery building postdates the cottage.

The stables, on the other hand, almost certainly pre-date the cottage (Joly 15/3/1877: '[The cottage] will be of two rooms and a kitchen, and will be built close to the stable').

There are two references in correspondence suggesting an early 1860s construction date for the stables: 'Br Gennade has finished the stables. It is a handsome building' (Br Joseph Xavier Luzy to Poupinel, 19/10/1862); and Joly, April 1864: 'The building which later may be used as a stable for horses and as a barn, is finished and ready for use').

Originally the stables were a single structure. There are now two separate buildings, one of which may have been completely rebuilt from stone from the original structure.

