

FROM THE PARISH ARCHIVES

Number 2 September 2010

The Stained Glass Altar Window

Welcome to the second edition of "From the Parish Archives". We hope that you will enjoy reading about the history of the Parish. This is especially so with the 150th anniversary in 2011. This version was slightly revised in September 2011.

The "From the Parish Archives" aims to be factual. However, any opinions expressed are personal and may not be necessarily shared by other parishioners.

Geoffrey A Sandy, Parish Archivist and Parish Historian.

A Personal Reflection

When my wife and family joined St Margaret's in the mid 1980s I was enchanted by the stained glass window in the wall behind the altar. It was enchanting when the sun shone through it as the different colours were displayed on the carpet. It helped create a sense of mystery and awe as we encountered God in his house we call St Margaret's. However, this was not always the case.

The Case of the Lost Window

For decades this beautiful window was covered up and many were unaware it even existed. It was covered by a Dossal. It was made of a cloth (tapestry) and was dark green in colour with a gold pattern. It consisted of three panels. The middle panel was directly behind the altar. The two outer panels folded out. At the time the altar abutted the wall with the Dossal attached to the wall behind the altar. The altar rails circled the altar and there was no gap between them and the wall. The Priest conducted much of the communion service with his back to the people. A Faculty records that the priest of the time Tamillas Mappin requested permission to erect a Dossal for the altar on 24 June 1935.

We are not sure why the Dossal was placed there although in "catholic" churches it draws attention to the altar that is important in its sacramental theology. Certainly, the priest of the time, Mappin, is recalled as being Anglo Catholic and one sign was the wearing of a Biretta.

One story that has come down is that people in the front pews and perhaps those in the robed choir down the front on the west wall "complained" about the sun shining in their eyes through the window. This may have contributed to the installation of the Dossal. Note the wall locations, for example west wall are directional I am not referring to their liturgical meaning. Our south wall (back of church) is in fact our liturgical "west" wall. Our north wall in which the window is imbedded is in fact our liturgical east wall. Hope there is not too much confusion over this.

If you move around the back of the church outside you can see the window in the north wall. We wonder whether parishioners ever asked the question “I wonder what that window is like?” However, it could have been hidden outside as well as inside. A small wooden vestry about 8’ by 6’ existed outside on the west side of the back door to the church and this could have hidden the window. Also not many parishioners tended to come around the back of the church as it was close to the vicarage house (Dendy House) and this felt like an intrusion on the vicarage family. Perhaps parishioners in by-gone days were more reticent and acceptance of such matters than we are today. Whatever the reason the window was “lost” for many years.

The Lost is Found

In September 1963 during the incumbency of William Carter the white-ant infested floor in the church was replaced, the 1861 cedar box pews were disposed of and replaced by the blonde pews we use today (that’s another story), the altar and altar rails were moved out from the north wall to their present position and the “dust-encrusted” Dossal was taken down to reveal the lost stained glass window. Some long-time parishioners recall their amazement and joy when the window was revealed.

The Significance of the Window

Apart from the spiritual significance of the window it is very important architecturally and historically. The window is an original from 1861 when the church was built. However, it was set in the north wall that was temporary as it was thought that in the future the church would expand northwards. The original intentions of the founders are likely to be accomplished in the next year or so with our site-redevelopment plan.

In 2000 St Margaret’s received from Heritage Victoria a grant of \$12000 to restore all the windows in the church. The renovators were thrilled to discover the altar window and they claimed that it is one of the first windows ever made by Ferguson and Urie. This company became famous around Melbourne for their skilled and complicated designs during the late 1800s. This company only started making windows in 1861 so our window is one of their first. However, a letter (in our archives) from Ferguson and Urie dated the 22 November 1861 to the Church Committee on the progress of the window mentions specifically the production of imitation ancient glass for the small end window as being the first in the colony. Before then windows were imported from England, so our window is also Australian Made. The window cost one pound (\$2).

Not surprising the altar window was in need of repair and was covered in film and dirt. Technically the leadlight cement was in stages 2 and 3 deterioration, the lead structure was “folding” at the bottom border, there were broken soldier joints, bulging in the upper panels of both lancets and the raw edges of the glass exposed. However, the window with others in the Church were restored to their former glory and we now get the colour splashing onto the floor of the church as it did so many years ago. And, if the purpose of the Dossal was to direct our attention to the altar the beautiful window does it so more effectively.

The 1861 Altar Window of Ferguson and Urie

