

The History of St Matthews Manly

St Matthews is the oldest church in the district with a rich history that spans over 150 years

The opening worship service was conducted in 1863.

The Parish of St Matthews Manly had its official beginning in 1863 when the few residents of the area met together and decided to request permission to build a temporary church. An approach was made to the Darley Family who owned vacant land south east of the current Corso. A temporary weatherboard church was erected. The first Rector was Rev George Gurney who conducted the opening worship service on November 8, 1863.

The current building that exists in Manly was opened in 1930.

The first stone church was built on the current site in 1864. The bell tower reached a height of 75ft and remained a feature of Manly Village for many years. A Church of England Grammar schoolroom was erected on the site of the temporary church and was used for meetings of the first Manly Municipal Council.

The larger present building was opened September 20, 1930. Built in the English Gothic Revival style, the building was constructed with smooth face brickwork, which so characteristic of Sydney in the early 20th century, and is enhanced by large quantities of Hawkesbury sandstone. The current office and hall complex was updated in 1991, along with the creation of St Matthews Square.

St Matthews Manly continues to be a thriving church, with more than 800 people meeting each week across four services.

But St Matthews is more than a beautiful structure; it provides a place of Christian worship for people in the Manly Area, and affords a great presence in the Manly community from which all manner of ministries and community activities take place. More than 800 people meet each week at four Sunday church services and many more participate in numerous other activities on every day of the week.

An extended history follows on the next pages.

An Extended History

St Matthews Manly on The Corso is the district's oldest continuing church.

Henry Gilbert Smith, the "Father of Manly" made land and money available for "a little rustic church" in late 1857 at the current site of St Matthews. In January 1859 members of the Church of England, and others "interested in the progress of religion" were invited to the official opening in Manly's "weatherboard cathedral".



The St Matthews church in 1865 (above) and then 1888 (below)



Between 1859 and 1863 clergy from St Thomas', North Sydney made occasional visits to Manly Beach, or Brighton as it was then known. In 1864 Captain Benjamin Darley and his wife Katherine, the daughter of D'Arcy Wentworth, one of Manly's earliest and largest land-holders, gave the Anglican Bishop of Sydney a 200 foot frontage on The Corso for a new church, parsonage and schoolhouse.

The outstanding colonial architect, Edmund Blacket, was commissioned to design a graceful stone church in the form of a cross. St Matthew's seventy-five foot bell-tower became a landmark for Manly village for over 60 years. The foundation stone was laid on 6 July 1864.

In 1865 a schoolroom was completed in place of the original weatherboard church, and was used extensively over the next 35 years as a Sunday School, Church of England Grammar School and as a temporary Council Chambers where the new Manly Council held its first meeting in 1877.

Manly began to grow more rapidly in the 1870s, so transepts were added to St Matthews in 1876 to Blacket's original design.

By 1895 the Parish of St Matthews covered 150 square miles from The Spit to Broken Bay and including St Paul's, Middle Harbour (Seaforth), St John the Baptist, Pittwater (Mona Vale) and a Sunday School at Greendale (Brookvale). The new Rector, Reverend Stoddart, had to travel a whole day by horse and sulky, punt, train, horseback and rowing boat to see his

parishioners on the Lower Hawkesbury out from Peat's Ferry (Brooklyn).



The Victoria Hall on Darley Road in the 1900s

In 1901 the old schoolroom was demolished for Victoria Hall, on the corner of The Corso and Darley Road. It became the centre of village cultural activities including the School of Arts, theatre and musicals, and overflow classrooms for the crowded Manly Village Public School.

Widening of The Corso in the late 1870s had left St Matthew's sticking out several metres and obstructing traffic. Added pressure from motor vehicles and heavy pedestrian traffic

along what was then the Warringah Mall of its day spelled the doom of the old St Matthews Church. The sad decision was taken to demolish the historic church and adjoining Victoria Hall. The last service was held there in 1928.

The stained glass windows, honour rolls and memorial tablets were incorporated in the new St Matthews, which officially opened in December 1930. Shops were erected along The Corso to support the widening range of St Matthews' community responsibilities and the work of other parish churches in nearby suburbs. Reverend Ebbs, Rector from 1924 to 1948, was renowned for his Christian vision and practical

The current St Matthews church on Manly Corse (2015)



outreach. He started St Matthews Farm at Dee Why West for unemployed youth in the Great Depression, helped many struggling families, and billeted servicemen in the Parish Hall during the War. His example continues to inspire the community outreach work of St Matthew's Church to this day.

Text by Terry Metherell – May 2003