

## ST CATHERINE'S HOME - BROOKLYN

Brooklyn, a little fishing village on the Hawkesbury River, is one of the settlements that sprung up as a result of Captain Phillip's visit to the area in search of fertile soil for production and expansion, only two months after his historic landing.

Though it remained a village, Brooklyn had a significant part in northern development through its waterways, then by rail across the river by bridge and later when a road bridge replaced the punt to meet the needs of the increased flow and speed of road traffic, to and from the north. Between 1913-1933, three issues of the Five Pound note pictured the river at Brooklyn, and the one building included was an old hotel which, by that time, had become the foundation for St Catherine's Home.

Earlier in the century when Lineham's Hotel was inherited by a young Sister from the North Sydney Congregation, Brooklyn's identity changed dramatically. The Mercy Sisters were already known in Brooklyn through their monthly visits by train from North Sydney. They taught religion in a small hall (it later became a store) near the station, visited the sick and under-privileged, and in various ways, supplemented the work of the priests, on their visits. The Hotel provided the Sisters with an opportunity to take up residence and make a new foundation in Brooklyn. Hence, on the 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1907 Cardinal Moran "opened" and blessed the hotel as a Convent of Mercy. Part of the building was set up as a boarding school - St Carthage's College for Young Ladies. This provided the isolated families of the area with an opportunity of having their daughters educated by the Sisters. The school was eventually opened to day pupils as well.

Registered to take a capacity of forty children, St Carthage's offered care and a good basic education to many, some of whom had special needs. Funding had not been introduced but the annual fete, together with some bequests, donations and the generous efforts of friends and volunteers, enabled St Carthage's to function on a level equal to the best at that time, while planning for future development.

An old hall built in about 1914, opposite the Hotel, served as a school, church and an entertainment centre.

During the Depression Years, a need arose for the care of children leaving Babies' Homes and those deprived of normal family life. Many problems were created by unemployment and the effects of the war. Over the years, the Sisters worked in the spirit of their foundress, Catherine McAuley who had cared for the underprivileged, sick and uneducated in Ireland. In 1931, the year of the centenary of the foundation of the Sisters of Mercy, Child Care became an important focus for the Sisters and the decision was made to rename St Carthage's. It became St Catherine's Orphanage.

In 1956 a new building was opened on the premises providing comfort, privacy and facilities as yet unknown to the children. An old run-down cottage on land adjacent, which had been purchased by the Congregation, was renovated in 1959 to provide two airy classrooms. These accommodated the primary students, because an increase in road traffic had become a danger for the children crossing the road to the hall.

The old wooden building remained as the Convent until 1968 when it was demolished to make way for a new Convent, a Chapel (built large enough to serve as a Parish Church), a laundry and other necessary commodities, long awaited and welcomed.

By the 1970s Child Care methods were changing from those in large institutions to small family group homes. St Catherine's adopted these changes and trends, when, in 1972, the number of children was greatly reduced. The school which had functioned for over sixty years, closed to comply with the changes in education. All the children were enrolled in various schools, according to their individual needs. As the children progressed, every effort was made to provide suitable skills or professions through attendance at T.A.F.E., Business College or University, according to the ability of each child, before leaving the care of St Catherine's.

In the Home, transformations also took place. Renovations to the living areas eventually produced three self-contained flats to comply with family-group requirements. The children were cared for by Direct Care workers.

Some government funding which became available introduced many benefits and opportunities enabling the children to engage in educational

and social programmes. The older children were given opportunities to enable them to obtain the necessary skills for their future years.

The school building (an old cottage) on the premises was redesigned to provide accommodation for four residents. This enabled the girls to be better equipped, so as to function independently before leaving St Catherine's.

In the 1980s the old fenced swimming pool in the river was replaced by an in-built pool which was made possible, initially by the T.V. Company filming and producing "The Rovers", using property and facilities as their base and location for the series. Some government funding as well as donations and hard work by staff and volunteers, also made a half-court available for everyone to enjoy.

During the 1980s St Catherine's was considered to be a "model" Home and was often visited by Teams from non-government and government departments for the purpose of developing other institutions.

Government funding introduced many progressive changes to St Catherine's, but at the same time, it imposed many obligations that necessitated an increase in paid staff and associated workers, the cost of which was not covered by the funding. In addition, the workload of those involved had increased dramatically through the excessive amount of paper work, meetings, etc.

In May 1990 the Trustees of the Sisters of Mercy invited a committee to evaluate the future options for St Catherine's. Regretfully, the decision to close St Catherine's was made, and St Catherine's ceased to function as a Home for children in August of that same year. The remaining children were placed in alternative care.

In closing St Catherine's, the Congregational Leader at the time, Sr Joanne Kirk stated that St Catherine's warm, caring environment was due to the dedication and hard work carried out by the staff. Sr Joanne also praised the volunteers and local community for their loyalty and support over the years.

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