

The Construction of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Darlinghurst

The Church of St. John the Evangelist, Darlinghurst was designed by three architects -- Gould and Hilling, Edmund Blacket, Blacket Brothers -- and built in four stages by three contractors – Aaron Loveridge, Messrs. Andrew and William Eaton, Robert Kirkham.

Stage 1 Nave, aisles and original chancel. 1856-58

At a public meeting, 6 March 1856, in the Anglican schoolhouse, Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, presided over by the Rt. Rev. Frederick Barker, Bishop of Sydney, a decision was taken to erect an Anglican church in Darlinghurst, establish a building committee, and begin soliciting contributions.¹ The building committee decided to hold a competition for the design of the new church, to be known as St. John the Evangelist's Church, by inviting architects, through advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Empire*, to submit designs for a church, without galleries, to accommodate no less than 700 people at a cost not to exceed £6000, exclusive of steeple. Provision, however, was to be made in the plans for the future addition of a tower and steeple.²

From the designs submitted those of the architectural firm of Gould and Hilling were chosen. Their plans envisioned a church built in the Decorated Gothic design, consisting of nave, aisles, chancel, tower and spire at the west end, porch on north side of church and vestry on the south side of chancel. The dimensions were: length, 120 feet; breadth, 50 feet; height to roof of nave, 40 feet; height of tower and spire, 110 feet. The church was to accommodate 700, with provision made in the plans for the subsequent erection of transepts, by which an additional three or four hundred people could be seated. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reporter, in praising the design, predicted that the new church would be "commodious and an ornament to the locality."³ Tenders from masons to complete the walls were called in mid December.⁴ On 28 December 1858 Bishop Barker, in the presence of a large crowd of clergy and laity, laid the foundation stone. Work progressed quickly and by August 1857 Gould and Hilling advertised for tenders to install the roof and floor and provide seating.⁵ Eight months later, April 1858, the architects sought bids for seating and internal fittings.⁶ The building was completed and opened for divine worship, Easter Sunday, 4 April 1858, with Bishop Barker preaching.⁷ The cost of the then erected portion of the building (nave, aisles and original chancel) was about £7000.⁸ The contractor is believed to have been Aaron Loveridge, builder of the Western towers of St. Andrew's Cathedral and the Great Synagogue of Sydney.

Stage 2 Tower, spire, and south transept. 1872-3

In response to the concern on the part of some parishioners at the unfinished appearance of the church, the church wardens called a meeting 1 May 1871 to consider completion of the church by the erection of a tower and spire. Two parishioners offered a financial incentive for the construction – Frederick Tooth, a

partner in R and F. Tooth & Co., brewers, offered one tenth of the money needed and Frederick Holkham Dangar, founder of the firm Dangar, Gedys, and Co., Ltd., promised £100. In supporting the resolution to take immediate steps to complete the church, Mr. Dangar complained that the unfinished state as seen from the road was “unsightly and a discredit to the parish”, and that the western exterior of the church looked “very ill and was out of keeping with the interior, which might vie with that of any other church in Sydney.”⁹

At a meeting 6 October 1871 the parishioners resolved to erect a tower and spire and also considered the expediency of further enlarging the church. £700 had been contributed for the tower and about £250 for the enlargement of the church.¹⁰ As George Hilling, the building’s original architect, had died in 1858 at the age of 33, the contract for the design of the tower and spire and the enlargement of the church by the erection of a south transept was awarded to prominent Sydney architect, Edmund Blacket. With both base and steeple to be constructed of stone, the tower was to become the most outstanding feature of the church. Tenders were called for constructing the south transept in October and for the tower and spire in November 1871.¹¹ Aaron Loveridge was awarded the contract for the tower and spire of St. John’s at a cost of £2000. The contract for the south transept, at a cost of about £700, was awarded to Messrs. William and Andrew Eaton, builders of St. Paul’s Church, Burwood, and the original St. Matthew’s Church, Manly. The object of adding the transept was to provide for 180 free sittings to the growing congregation. The Australian Town and Country Journal had had praise for the Eaton Brothers and Loveridge. Their work, he wrote, had “been executed in a most substantial manner and reflects the highest credit on the contractors.”¹²

Stage 3 North transept. 1875

The need for additional seating led to the construction of the north transept. Edmund Blacket prepared the architectural plans and called for tenders late October 1873.¹³ Fresh tenders were called for in mid November, and Messrs. Andrew and William Eaton, were awarded the contract at £900.¹⁴

Stage 4 Enlarged Chancel and Vestries. 1885 -1886

The enlarged chancel and vestries were designed by Blacket Brothers, Cyril and Arthur, sons of Edmund Blacket who had died 9 February 1883, but were largely the work of Cyril. The enlargement consisted of demolishing the existing chancel and replacing it with one of greater height and length (some twenty feet longer) in order to provide space for a larger choir and new pipe organ. Vestries for the choir and clergy were also added to the north and south walls of the chancel. In order to shed more light through the building, and to provide an uninterrupted view of the new large eastern window, the main church roof was carried right through the new chancel. The cost of the enlargement was £2732.¹⁵ Tenders were called for on 14 & 18 March 1885.¹⁶ The contract was awarded to Robert Kirkham, builder of St. Stephen’s, Newtown, and All Saints’ Woollahra. In late November a reporter from the *Illustrated Sydney News* commented that

“the appearance of these [additions] is already imposing” and that it was hoped that they would be completed by in January 1886.¹⁷

Finishing touches were underway when one of the editorial staff of the *The Australian Churchman* visited the church in January 1886. He noted that the carved stone reredos, although only partially complete at the time of the visit, would, when finished, enhance the beauty of the chancel. The new choir stalls for the relocation of the choir from the west gallery to the chancel were still under construction, but the stonework for the new east window was complete with clear glass inserted in it.¹⁸

To complete the chancel additions a new pipe organ built by William Hill and Son, London, job 1928, was ordered for installation in the south side of the chancel. It arrived in July 1886 and was played for the first time at special services 11 August 1886.¹⁹ A new stained glass east window in the chancel, “Feeding of the 5000”, the gift of W.E. Sparks, and executed by Messrs. Shrigley and Hunt, Lancaster, England, under the instructions of John Sulman, designer, was installed in May 1888.²⁰

Dr. Donald H. Kirkham
Great-grandson of Robert Kirkham

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1856, p. 5; *The Empire*, 4 April 1856, p. 7.

² *SMH*, 17 April 1856, p. 8; 19 April 1856, p. 2. *The Empire*, 18 April 1856, p. 1; 21 April 1856, p. 1.

³ *SMH*, 29 December 1856, p. 5. Cf. *The Empire*, 29 December 1856, p. 5.

⁴ *SMH*, 11 December 1856, p. 1; 13 December 1856, p. 4; 16 December 1856, p. 4; 18 December 1856, p. 8.; *The Empire*, 13 December 1856, p. 6; 18 December 1856, p. 6; 20 December 1856, p. 1.

⁵ *SMH*, 10 August 1857, p. 1; 12 August 1857, p. 6; 15 August 1856, p. 2; 17 August 1857, p. 8.

⁶ *SMH*, 15 April 1858, p. 1; 16 April 1858, p. 2; 17 April 1858, p. 1; 19 April 1858, p. 1; 20 April 1858, p. 1.

⁷ Paul Egan, *Serving the Cross*, 2nd Ed, Fineline, Australia, 2008, p. 29; *SMH*, 3 April 1858, p. 1.

⁸ *SMH*, 25 Sept 1905, p. 5.

⁹ *SMH*, 2 May 1871, p. 4.

¹⁰ *SMH*, 6 October 1871, p. 6.

¹¹ *SMH*, 23 October 1871, p. 6; 24 October 1871, p. 1; 1 November 1871, p. 1; 16 November 1871, p. 1; 17 November 1871, p. 1.

¹² *SMH*, 23 September 1871, p. 5; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 17 August 1872, p. 17.

¹³ *SMH*, 30 October 1873, p. 1; 31 October 1873, p. 1; 1 November 1873, p. 2.

¹⁴ *SMH*, 15 November 1873, p. 2; 25 Sept 1905, p. 5; Egan, *Serving the Cross*, p. 29.

¹⁵ “St. John’s Church, Darlinghurst,” *Illustrated Sydney News*, 21 November 1885, pp. 11-14; *SMH*, 25 September 1905, p. 5; 22 September 1934, p. 10.

¹⁶ *SMH*, 13 March 1885, p. 3; 18 March 1885, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Illustrated Sydney News*, 21 November 1885, p. 11.

¹⁸ *The Australian Churchman*, 29 January 1886, p. 55-56.

¹⁹ *SMH*, 13 July 1886, p. 14; 12 August 1886, p. 7. See Organ Music Society of Sydney Website.

²⁰ *SMH*, 18 May 188, p. 7.