

St Stephen's Anglican Parish, Richmond, Victoria

A Brief History



Sunday morning at St Stephens.

In 1850 when Bishop Perry, the first bishop of the new diocese of Melbourne laid the foundation stone of St Stephens on 20 June, Richmond was on the edge of Melbourne's urban settlement. The site was described as "far out of town, and no human habitation could be seen except a few comfortable home nooks...and some brickmakers toiling in the distance...a pleasant suburban break in the surrounding forest." There was no mention of Aboriginal people though their settlements were scattered along the Yarra valley.

The acre of land had been donated by the Rev Joseph Docker (a generous squatter from the Wangaratta area) who had purchased at auction the land between the top of Richmond hill and the Yarra River. The Parish extended to Brighton, Camberwell and Doncaster. The only remnants of the original modest church are the roof and floor of the main body of the building, though within 25 years large additions had been added. However, the early days of the parish was not just about a building but also about building and strengthening the wider community of Richmond. And this close connection with local people has continued over the 170 years of the Parish.

The first vicar was Charles Perks who migrated from England in 1850, aged 25. His first wife died just before the migrant ship arrived in Adelaide and he married Martha Philipps at St Stephens in 1852. He was ordained priest in Melbourne on 2 December 1854, and remained vicar from 1851 until 1894 partly because the bishop valued his gifts in running the diocese and partly because he helped build the first cathedral in Flinders St.

During the Perks years, the Vicar initiated many community activities in Richmond including the Richmond Free Dispensary, a free community health centre in 1868. There is still a community health centre (Access Community Health) in Church St. He oversaw the creation of the first church of St Barnabas Burnley (1885), St Matthias North Richmond (1881) and St Thomas Cremorne (1857). He also saw the establishment of parishes in Hawthorn (1853), Prahran (1853), Kew (1854) and Doncaster (1868).

As the twentieth century arrived, the people of Richmond shifted from well-to-do professional gentry living in large houses along wide streets on the hill to industrial workers and tradesmen. The Vicar nevertheless complained about the people who claimed Anglican identity but who rarely sat in the pews. Despite these complaints, the evangelical parish flourished in other ways. More than 1,000 children filled the Sunday schools and in 1903 the new parish Jubilee Hall was built to accommodate the schools.

Despite the rising and falling economic prosperity of the Parish between the two World Wars, both St Stephens and St Thomas's in Cremorne enjoyed a strong social and community life. The Vicar, George Lamble, helped set up the RSL Club in Church St at the end of World War One. A new St Thomas church was built in Cremorne St. There were boys' and girls' clubs, (CEBS and GFS respectively), a scout group, a gym club, and a mothers' committee with a deaconess based at St Thomas's organizing many of these community activities. The women ran an opportunity shop in Lennox St and an annual fete attracted donations from local food factories such as Rosella. Clements Langford was a prominent layman in the parish leading the Sunday school for 52 years. His son George helped start the St Stephen's Harriers, an athletic club.

The Parish has a long history of deaconesses and provided them with a house to live in at the top of Docker St. They were trained in social work, education and book-keeping and ran many social welfare programs such as education courses for women servants in the nineteenth century. The parish thus became a strong supporter of women's leadership positions and later was a very active centre in the Movement for the Ordination of Women in the nineteen nineties and later.

In the nineteen fifties, Richmond began to change again. Children of the older families moved out to the newer suburbs taking their children with them. The Sunday School downsized to a meeting during the morning service. These long-term changes continued for decades more as many immigrants especially Greeks and Turks and then Vietnamese moved into Richmond. Younger renters also moved in, often temporarily. In 1968 the present two-storied vicarage and six adjacent flats were built and opened. By the early seventies, the regular congregation numbered 30 to 40 persons.

In the late seventies, the Parish opened a drop-in centre to assist the Clarendon Centre which was a government psychiatric clinic. The drop-in centre was run by Parish volunteers to help local people in boarding houses, mothers and babies, unemployed and isolated people, and organised group activities and social events. It lasted ten years

until the parish hall was closed and refurbished. During this time the Sunday morning congregation grew to about 60 in the morning and the evening one to 35.

In 1982, the Reverend David Chambers became vicar and St Stephens underwent deep changes. David had been for three years the Diocesan consultant on Welfare and Community. He and Deaconess Marjorie MacGregor who was a Parish social worker and who became the first woman priest in the diocese, both had a wide knowledge of social welfare policies and actions across the diocese. They were instrumental in getting the Richmond churches to form the Food Relief Centre, which was based in the parish hall (the Jubilee Hall).

But while the parish remained deeply involved in the local community changes were happening inside the building. The church interior was completely refurbished with new carpet, plastered and painted walls, a kitchen in the north nave, and pews replaced with chairs. The Parish shifted away from a low church, evangelical theology and style to a more liberal catholic and sacramental theology with a strong music tradition, incense and colourful vestments.

Bishop Phillip Huggins arrived in the parish in the late nineties to develop a wide contact with immigrant and Islamic communities across the city. This ministry reflected the great social changes running through Richmond. Phillip would sit outside a Swan St coffee shop on mornings and just chat with people who stopped to talk. He seemed to know everybody and years after he left the Parish, people would turn up at the church door asking whether the bishop was still around!

The community engagement continued when the Reverend Dennis Webster became Vicar having been chaplain at a Melbourne prison. He helped refugees with their various visas and accompanied many people to court seeking help with legal and mental health issues. The changing congregation reflected these shifts. People brought their dogs and cats to the morning eucharist and sat on the floor and drew pictures. St Stephens was increasingly looking into the wider and troubled community.

Dennis Webster was also a music teacher and together with parishioner Garry Warne, organised the restoration of the 1865 Walker Organ. The congregation seemed to sing more loudly and with a greater variety of music. Regular organ recitals drew an audience from across Melbourne. Music at St Stephens has evolved and grown and the church is now used by a variety of choirs and music groups for rehearsals and concerts.

When Fr Dennis left, the parish experienced difficulties in finding a replacement and so a Cooperative Agreement between the two Parishes was set up with the Vicar of St Bartholmews, the Reverend Matthew Healey. The two Parishes held some combined services, dinners and study groups This worked until the Covid 19 pandemic closed all churches for nearly two years and all activities including services were confined to Zoom. This period was a watershed for the Parish and, like most organisations, forced profound interruptions and changes to regular parish life.

The Parish is now working on another rebuilding as Richmond demographics shift again, an experience which is not unusual and seems to happen every few decades in the life of St Stephens. And the indigenous people are back in large numbers. Indigenous high school students from northern Australia and Victoria now live in the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School a cluster of renovated buildings on parish land and in neighbouring buildings.



Sunday morning inside St Stephens in 2022.

As a Christian community we are constantly amazed and confronted by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of God in energising and looking after us. The inside of the church building is much loved and enjoyed by many people. It has a great spiritual power which has affected thousands of people. Prayer, worship, singing and social life continue in the presence of God, while the Biblical injunction to love your neighbour continues through the Richmond community and beyond. It seems that God has constantly challenged the people of St Stephen's to get outside the walls, engage with the wider community, spread the Good News and love our neighbours in the Richmond area and beyond.

This history is partly based on the book by Morna Sturrock,
Fruitfull Mother. St Stephen's Paris History. 1851-1991.