

Richmond is one of the oldest parishes in Melbourne. It began in 1853 and the parish at that time stretched out to Nunawading, although most of the population was clustered around the villages of Hawthorn and Richmond. Many people, decisions, and great efforts were made to raise this church for God.

Father Dalton: Founder



Fr Joseph Dalton SJ was the person chiefly responsible for undertaking the project to build the church.

At the urgent request of Dr Goold OSA, Bishop of Melbourne, who was seriously short of priests to attend to the religious and educational needs of the rapidly increasing Catholic population in his diocese, the Irish Province of the [Society of Jesus \(SJ\)](#) agreed to send him as many of its members as it conveniently could. The first two Irish Jesuits, Frs Joseph Lentaigne and William Kelly arrived in Melbourne in September 1865, and in April 1866, 17 years after the first Austrian Jesuits arrived in South Australia. Dr Goold offered the Jesuits two ministries: the Parish of Richmond, and the college reserve at the University of Melbourne.

In April 1866 five more Jesuits arrived including Fr Dalton.



Before leaving Europe for Australia, Fr Dalton had been appointed Superior of all the Jesuits in

Melbourne. He was a man endowed with many excellent qualities. He not only endeared himself to everyone with whom he came in contact by his gentle and unassuming manner, but possessed uncommonly good judgement, remarkable foresight, great initiative and moral courage. He was a deeply spiritual person, as well as a person of action.

Within a few days of his arrival, Fr Dalton had accepted from Bishop Goold, the pastoral care of the Parish of Richmond in Victoria, Australia, which at that time included not only Richmond as we now know it, but also Hawthorn, Kew, Camberwell, Nunawading and extended as far as Lilydale - several kilometres distance.

On 25 April 1865, only a few days after he had landed in Melbourne by ship, he moved to Richmond with a companion, Fr M'Kiniry, and took up residence in the presbytery attached to the old St James' Church which was in Bridge Road at the time.

Search for a Permanent Church Site



Although the Richmond of years gone by was little more than wild scrub in the 1840s, there was rapid development in the district in the decade that followed. By the early 1850s, the population had increased to such an extent that the local Catholics petitioned Bishop Goold to send them a resident priest, as many found the journey on Sundays to [St Francis' Church](#) (the only Catholic church in Melbourne at the time) so inconvenient that they had given up attending Mass altogether.

In 1853, the Bishop granted the people's request for a priest and sent them Fr Joseph Madden, who lived for a time in the home of Mr Joseph L'Estrange, chief clerk of the Crown Law Department. According to an old tradition, it was in this house, which was named "Erindale" that the first Mass in Richmond was offered.

"Erindale" was situated in a 9 acre paddock bound by Highett Street, Bromham Place and Ross Street. It was here that Catholics came each Sunday to attend Mass.

After some time, this house became too small for the increasing number of Catholics, so a

move was made for a brief period to a house in Abinger Street. This, however, was only a temporary arrangement as a site for a permanent church was being sought. This was found at the corner of Bridge Road and Coppin Street.



Fr Madden took advantage of funds provided by the Colonial government to build the first church of 'St James' on a site provided by the government on Bridge Road, Richmond. He also built the church of St Joseph, West Hawthorn, which still stands.

Several priests succeeded Fr Madden in St James' Church until 1866, when it was handed over to the Jesuits by Fr Parle, the last diocesan priest to serve there. It is of interest to record that the tabernacle in which the Blessed Sacrament was reserved at "Erindale", was preserved for years in the L'Estrange family. In 1948 it was presented to the Jesuit Community by the family, in commemoration of the centenary of the arrival of the first Jesuits in Australia.

A Church Site is Found

The population of Richmond when the Jesuits arrived there in 1866 was about 20000 of whom about 4000 were Catholics. It was soon apparent to Fr Dalton that a much larger church situated in a more central position was urgently needed. On looking around, he saw that the most suitable, most central and most attractive site in the whole area was the summit of Richmond Hill. But how could Catholics of Richmond who were, for the most part, people of very moderate means acquire such a valuable property? To a man of less courage and vision than Fr Dalton, it would have appeared impossible.

With his boundless confidence in God, Fr Dalton convinced himself that the site on Richmond Hill was the only suitable place for the church he had in mind. Devoting all his energy and gifts of persuasion to the task, he finally purchased the site from a Dr Stewart for £2500, a princely sum of money in those far-off days. The total area of the property was an acre and a half.

Having secured such a splendid site, Fr Dalton was determined to build a church truly worthy of it. He was fortunate to receive as a gift from the sons of W W Wardell, architect of [St Patrick's Cathedral](#) in Melbourne, plans of a church whose size, beauty and magnificence were completely in accord with his own great ideas and vision. When built, it would be the third largest church in

Australia.

Laying of the Foundation Stone

On 4 August 1867, the first Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Polding, OSB blessed and laid the foundation stone of the church, in the absence of Dr Goold, Bishop of Melbourne, who was then visiting in Europe.

It was an event which gave profound pleasure and satisfaction to the Catholics of Richmond. A collection by these people made on that occasion towards the building of the church realized £700 - a large sum of money in those days and especially since the givers were people of humble means.

Blessing of a Church: Stage 1

Work on the foundations was completed by March 1868 and in the following July, the building of the *body* of the church began. In less than two years it was completed and on Sunday 13 March 1870, the ceremonial opening of the completed sections of the church (the nave [central space in a church], aisles, and part of the tower) was performed.

By 11:00am, more than 1000 people had packed the new church so that there was not even standing room to be found: 2000 attended outside. The Vicar General of the diocese, Very Reverend Dr Fitzpatrick assisted by deacon and subdeacon, first blessed the church, and then celebrated High Mass. Peter Lalor, the leader of the Eureka Rebellion, and by now a much more sedate Member of Parliament took up the collection. The St Francis' Band was hired for the opening ceremony and the singing was performed by a combined choir which included members of a visiting Italian Opera Company. The cost of the building up to that date, including the site and furniture was £12000.

Completion of the Church is Stalled

In 1872, the present St Ignatius' Church presbytery was built. It was considered the finest in Melbourne at the time and afforded great views out to the Dandenong Ranges from its balcony.

In 1872 also, the government passed the Education Act. This provided for free, secular and compulsory education and it cut all government aid to private schools. This created a financial crisis for the church in Victoria. Bishop Goold responded by bringing teaching orders to Melbourne, and for a while the Christian Brothers ran the boys' school at Richmond.

Some years seem to have elapsed before the next stage of the building was undertaken, probably owing to these financial problems.

Father Dalton Leaves

In 1878, Fr Dalton was transferred to Sydney after 12 years of untiring labour in Richmond. Before his departure, which took place on 21 April 1878, he was presented with a farewell testimonial by the parishioners in St Ignatius' Church which was crowded to excess.

An illuminated address, a purse containing 250 sovereigns, and a chalice was presented to Fr Dalton. The address, which was read by Mr S V Winter, expressed in moving words, the sorrow of the Catholics in Richmond at losing their father and friend who by his zeal, prudence, foresight, and business tact, had done so much for the parish and people of Richmond. Fr Dalton, deeply affected, thanked his friends for their affectionate farewell and their generous cooperation during the 12 years he had been among them.

On the day of his departure for Sydney on the ship *Ly-ee-Moon*, a large number of his friends assembled on the pier to wish him "God Speed" and
"a ringing cheer was sent after him as the steamer bore him over the waters"

Father Mulhall Takes Charge



To Fr Joseph Mulhall, who succeeded Fr Dalton as Parish Priest of Richmond, fell the task of completing the building of the church which had been so splendidly begun. Fr Mulhall arrived in Melbourne in 1867 and later went to Richmond where he remained until his death in 1897. He was Parish Priest for 15 years from 1878 to 1893.

The Faithful Companions of Jesus in Richmond

In 1882, Fr Mulhall brought the nuns of the Society of the [Faithful Companions of Jesus \(FCJ\)](#) to Richmond. They established Vaucluse Convent and at once took charge of the Girls' School, which in a short time had an attendance of 400 girls. Soon after that, they opened their well-known secondary school at the Vaucluse.

Blessing of a Church: Stage 2

On 26 April 1885, Archbishop Goold blessed the foundation stone of the transept (either of the two wings at right angles to the nave of a church layout shaped like a cross).

On 5 August 1888, the transept was solemnly opened and blessed by the new Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Carr. The cost of this section was £21000.

The Church Is Completed - But No Spire



By 1892, after endless fundraising and with tremendous effort, the church was completed except for its spire, bringing the total cost from the beginning to £42000.

Girls' and infants' education was in the hands of the FCJ Sisters, and lay teachers under Jesuit leadership conducted boys' education. By now Victoria was in the grip of economic depression, and the first great period of building drew to a close.

Blessing of a Church: Stage 3

The solemn blessing of the completed church minus the spire took place on 4 March 1894. It was performed by Archbishop Carr, assisted by Bishop Reville OSA, Coadjutor Bishop of Sydney. Father Dalton, now 80 years old, was specially invited from Sydney to see the complete realization of the project he had begun 27 years earlier.

The passing of St James' Church

The history of St Ignatius' Church and parish of Richmond would be incomplete, were no further reference made to the old St James' Church, which Fr Dalton took charge of when he first came to Richmond in 1866. The old church had quite an important part in the [history of St James' Church](#)

Schools and More Schools

The population of Richmond continued to grow - factories built along the river provided employment as Victoria moved out of depression. Subdivisions of little cottages took over the flat land, while on the hill grand houses gave way for the growing need for schools.

The first boys' school on the hill, a converted house, became crowded - the infants' school built with the bricks from the first St James' Church had to make way for the completed church of St Ignatius'. The St James' school served the local area with the assistance of a community of the Sisters of St Joseph. The sisters also ran the school in South Richmond, St Stanislaus', named for one of the Jesuit patrons of youth. The other Jesuit patron of youth, St Aloysius, lent his name or a variation of it for the church-school of St Louis in Burnley.

Father Joseph Hearn Arrives



In 1896, Fr Joseph Hearn was appointed as Parish Priest and held the position for 18 years from 1896 to 1914.

In 1911, under the dynamic leadership of Fr Joseph Hearn SJ, the parish embarked on another huge building project. The first wing of a new school, designed by a Mr Vanheems was commenced. The second wing was then built and finally the hall which connects them. This enormous building was thought capable of housing 1000 pupils.

In 1914, at 60 years old, Fr Hearn volunteered to serve as a chaplain in World War I, and ministered to the Australian Forces at Gallipoli and later in France. His heroism in tending to the wounded won him a Military Cross. Many of the parishioners lost sons and fathers in the war and several are commemorated in the church.

Father McGrath Undertakes Church Completion



Fr Patrick McGrath was Parish Priest for 12 years from 1920 to 1932 and was responsible for building the spire which cost £17400.

After World War I, in the relatively prosperous twenties, another great burst of building took place. The temporary altar was replaced with a permanent marble altar, and the altar in the Lady Chapel was installed. So confident were the parishioners of the day that they took to the task of completing the tower and the spire - a measure of their confidence was the decision to employ Mr Vanheems and have him significantly increase the height from Wardell's original design.

Blessing of a Church: Final Stage



On 7 October 1928, Cardinal Ceretti, Papal Legate to the International Eucharistic Congress in Sydney the previous month, blessed and dedicated the spire. It was the tallest structure in Australia.

The finished St Ignatius' Church now crowned the hill.

The spire of St Ignatius was a strong symbol of triumph - over the struggle to gain the site, to find the money to build the church, and to continue to provide a Catholic education for all children in the parish.

Depression Hits Richmond

Barely a year after the consecration of the spire, the Great Depression hit, and hit Richmond very hard. Families struggling to survive on sustenance labour had no money to give to the church to pay off the debts.

The austerity of World War II followed the depression, and while this at least gave the people of Richmond work it was not a time for great celebration.

The Daughters of Divine Zeal In Richmond

In the post war period Richmond became a migrant suburb. The grand houses on Docker's Hill became boarding houses as the post war housing pressure made living on such a scale uneconomical. The parish responded with migrant chaplains, and in particular in helping the Italian and Polish communities. The [Daughters of Divine Zeal \(FDZ\)](#) arrived in the parish to run hostels and a children's home, and many languages other than English and many accents other than Irish began to be heard.

Acknowledgement to the Assistant Priests

Although the only names we have mentioned in the course of this brief history of St Ignatius' Church have been those of the Parish Priests, they would themselves be the first to acknowledge that their Assistant Priests contributed greatly. For more than 100 years, from Fr M'Kiniry who was Fr Dalton's Assistant Priest in 1866, to the present Assistant Priests at St Ignatius', each one is equally due credit.

Endings and Beginnings

By the early 1960s the proud spire had begun to crumble and threatened to fall. At the same time sweeping changes occurred in the church - Latin, a universal though remote language, was replaced by modern languages, priests turned away from the marble altars and faced the people, modern forms replaced the old ways. With a zeal for the new, some of the beautiful

fittings of the church which spoke of older ways were removed. The spire was restored, but all else was changed.

The Church Lives On

The most important work that has been done over the years has not been the material buildings that have been erected, but the spiritual activities that have taken place within the walls of our church, in the parish, and in the hearts and souls of its parishioners.

Without the generous support of the lay Catholic parishioners and work from the religious, the history of St Ignatius' Church could have been a very different story. As Fr Dalton spoke to a crowded congregation in St Ignatius' Church on the eve of his departure for Sydney on Easter Sunday, 21 April 1878, *"whatever good has been done for religion in St Ignatius' Church and Parish, is your work as well as ours"*.

As we think about what was before and what is now, the call to action and to justice is even clearer. For once to be a Catholic meant to build or be part of a world unto itself, now we are called to be fully in the world but not of it. We can still be inspired by the great deeds of the past and indeed the great buildings, but we must aspire to build the faith that seeks justice.

Sources: *Centenary of St Ignatius' Church Richmond 1867 - 1967* (Printers: Bernard, Overman and Neander) and *The Story of Our Parish*
- Author Unknown.