The Good Samaritan Convent – a Kandos Icon (Part 1 of 2)

I dare say it was my mother who decided that the front of the Good Samaritan Convent, with its stairs and columns and urns, would provide a stylish background for their wedding photos. When the nuptial knot was tied in the adjoining church (with its not-so-stylish facade), the wedding party, with the permission of Mother Superior of course, positioned themselves at the entrance to the convent and were captured on film. There is my father, shy and uncertain, my mother glowingly confident. In a short while they will join guests at Mrs Goulding's Kandos Hotel for the wedding breakfast.

St Dominic's Convent, despite being recently sold to a private buyer, will always be a Kandos icon. It is not just a significant piece of twentieth century architecture illustrating the Spanish Mission style. It is a visual representation of Catholic education in Kandos, as well as a reminder of the important role of the Good Samaritan nuns in Kandos history. Like other iconic buildings it contains layers of history and an abundance of stories – family and community; secret and imaginary.

Iconic buildings usually begin with high aspirations and it was certainly true of the convent. It was set on "a commanding knoll" (though not the highest hill in Kandos; the Methodists and cement company had snatched that). Father Eviston, an energetic fund-raiser, and Mother Bernard, were like-minded. It would be a convent to be proud of, "a fine building, one worthy of the sacrifice made by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan Order", reported the *Mudgee Guardian.*

They had the blessing of Mother Basil Carden, Superior General, who understood that church architecture was a powerful statement of God's presence; and a testimonial to the Congregation's commitment to carry out His work in the town.

When the nuns came to Kandos in 1923, they lived for almost eight years in a modest little house in Rodgers Street where, according to the memory of one parishioner (Pat Frappell) "the dining room was open to the elements...and they used wooden gelignite boxes for seating until chairs could be provided". It was inadequate accommodation for six nuns so it is not surprising that by the time there was enough money to begin a new convent, there was also enough psychological leverage to plan one that was out of the ordinary.

Father Eviston, at the blessing and opening of the convent in August 1930, revealed Mother Bernard's contribution: "Thanks are due to Mother Mary Bernard for her kindly interest when the plans of the new convent were being prepared. It is owing to her valuable suggestions that the Convent is what it is today." Perhaps it was her suggestions that contributed to a six month delay, a delay that was soon forgotten.

Spanish Mission style is a revival of the architecture built from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries by Spanish Catholic Missionaries in the Americas, so it seems a good choice for a convent.

The facade is the only part that most Kandos residents would be familiar with. It displays many of the Spanish Mission style features: the portico entrance and balconies with elegant columns; the red tiled roof with the dear little mission style chimneys and over-hanging eaves; the stucco finished walls; the parapets (walls extending above the roof line) with their decorative symbols, shaped tops and square pillars; the grouped arches for the entrances, balconies and modest-sized windows.

The front has a pleasing symmetry but on closer inspection the building is asymmetrical, a feature of Spanish Mission style. “The visitor is at once impressed by the simplicity and beauty of the design,” enthused the *Kandos Star*.

When Bishop Norton laid the foundation stone in September 1929 he also laid one hundred pounds on the table to launch an appeal for funds. The total that day reached four hundred and fifty pounds, a good start for the three thousand pounds plus which the convent would eventually cost.

Fund-raising had been an important part of the Kandos Catholic community since the early years of the town. Concerts and dances, bazaars and balls, princess and popular man competitions, Art Unions and euchre parties, raffles and appeals – regular events to pay for and maintain new church buildings for a new town.

At the opening and blessing of the convent the large congregation must have been surprised and secretly delighted to be told there would be no collection on this occasion “owing to the untimely [temporary] closing of the cement works”. Depression had hit the town.

Assistance for the nuns and their convent came in other ways. Kandos Cement Company provided cement at two thirds the usual cost and arranged for the convent to be linked to the company’s water main, a considerable saving and an unfailing water supply. Volunteer workers built the surrounding concrete fence and laid out the gardens under Mr Cant's direction. A set of Stations of the Cross was presented to the convent by Mr John Donoghue of Blackwater Station and an anonymous donor gave a valuable thurible and incense stand for use in the chapel.

After the opening, the nuns faded into the walls of their new convent and for the next four decades few people would see past the music rooms, just inside the entrance. We can only wonder what parts of their convent the nuns took most pleasure in and to what extent they expressed that pleasure.

For the first time they each had their own bedroom (there were six very small ones) as well as a community room, dining room, reception, music and theory rooms, “the usual offices” and four spacious verandahs. One of those verandahs, at the rear of the convent, “some sixty feet long set in with a colonnade of arches and columns”, provided a cool retreat on hot summer days.

Surely the utility rooms were the best they had known. The bathrooms and kitchen with white tiling, built-in fixtures and plumbing; the kitchen with the sink set in a terrazzo draining board running the full length of the room with cupboards beneath; the spacious pantry; the

servery opening to the dining room; the laundry “fitted out with all the latest improvements and fine spacious cupboards.”

Given that their daily spiritual life was a set routine of prayer, litanies, meditation, sacred reading and devotions it must have felt, in those first days in their chapel, as if a whole host of angels joined them in their Glorias.

The dome of the chapel was the magnum opus, the masterpiece of the architect and craftsmen who constructed it. I struggle with unfamiliar architectural terms but I believe it was formed by way of a squinch where the upper corners of the room were filled in to form a support for what is known as a pendentive dome. The dome is beneath the roofline and therefore not obvious from outside. The altar part of the chapel forms a semi-hexagonal extension.

Two Italian craftsmen who had worked on the Commonwealth Bank building in Sydney were contracted to complete the niches for the dome, statuary, fire places, cornices and artistic stone-work. Stained glass windows and concealed lighting together with “tastefully designed furnishings” completed the temple of prayer.

The Good Samaritan Sisters had already made a mark on the developing town. Their new home no doubt gave them a sense of permanence. It was not to be. Fifty years after they arrived they withdrew. Just as the cement company, which contributed to their establishment, pulled out less than a century after it started.

Their convent, significant as it is, was not their only legacy. I’ll tell you more about that next month.