ST JOHN'S
ANGLICAN CHURCH
CANBERRA

Bearing public witness to
Jesus Christ, the source of life

St John the Baptist Anglican Church
The Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn

45 Constitution Avenue
Reid, Canberra

ST JOHN'S HISTORY AND HERITAGE

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EARLY HISTORY OF ST JOHN'S

St John's Origins

When the famous merchant of the early colony in NSW, Robert Campbell, was first granted land on the Limestone Plains (in compensation for the loss of a ship on government business), he was disappointed with its quality and value. However the property he established, centred on Duntroon House, would significantly shape the context in which the future Australian federation would emerge.

As the dominant local benefactor, Campbell contributed half the cost for the construction of a new church that was to minister to the scattered labourers and farmers of the area. He was also responsible for the construction of a schoolhouse (still standing on the site, and now a museum run by the church), to enable children from the nearby farms to receive a basic education.

The church's foundation stone was laid in May 1841 and the newly completed church was consecrated in 1845 by the first (and only) Bishop of Australia, the Right Reverend William Broughton. The new church was named 'St John the Baptist' – appropriately identifying with the prophet who is celebrated for courageously declaring the arrival of the Christ from the wilderness near the Jordan River. This new church, in the wilderness of another continent, and by another river, would likewise seek to make Christ known.

St John's in about 1860

At that time, this small rural church and its adjacent schoolhouse were far from the centre of power. But when in 1913 Canberra was named as the new national capital, St John's found itself the spiritual home of a new kind of parishioner – including many of the government officials, military leaders and politicians who would shape the new federation throughout the 20th century.

Construction of the Church

St John's Anglican Church was built in the English Gothic style which was brought to Australia in the early years of European settlement. Its foundation stone was laid on 11 May 1841 and it was completed in May 1844. The Church, with its adjoining churchyard, was consecrated in 1845.

The materials used for the Church were almost entirely local, with the stone coming mainly from Mount Pleasant and Black Mountain. Local hardwood shingles were cut for the roof and timber for exposed beams was carried in from the Hunter Valley.

A building program between 1860 and 1872 led to the church being extended to its present size. The first tower had been struck by lightning on 6 February 1851 and also suffered from a subsiding foundation. The current (second) tower with spire was designed by well known colonial architect Edmund Blackett. The chancel with its splendid East Window was added between 1872 and 1874 in memory of Robert ('Merchant') Campbell, and the original nave was then lengthened.

The Church, now situated adjacent to the Parliamentary Triangle, continues to recall the early European-built structures of Canberra. The heritage-listed precinct was placed on the ACT Heritage Register in 2004.

REGAL AND VICE-REGAL ASSOCIATIONS

Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II worshipped at St John's during four of her visits to Canberra including her first trip to this country (1954) and her last (2011).

Queen Elizabeth II on her first (1954) and final (2011) visits to St John's.

The Churchyard also contains the graves of two former Governors-General—Viscount Dunrossil and Major General Jeffery. Viscount Dunrossil was a former speaker of the UK House of Commons, and died while in office as Governor-General. His family presented a chalice and paten (still in use) to the parish.

Dunrossil's successor, Viscount De L'lsle (V.C.) gifted the church bells in memory of his wife Jacqueline who died in 1962. Two prayer desks in the church were 'thank offerings' from Sir William and Lady McKell.

MILITARY ASSOCIATIONS

St John's has had a long association with the Royal Military College, Duntroon, which is also situated on land originally held by Robert Campbell. The regimental colours of the (World War I) Werriwa Regiment and the historic colours of the Royal Military College, Duntroon (given by the Duke of York while opening parliament in 1927) are 'laid up' in the building.

Distinguished Australian warriors like Sir William Throsby Bridges (first Commandant of the Royal Military College and Commander of the 1st Division, A.I.F., killed Gallipoli) and General Brudenell Bingham White (Chief of Staff of the Australian Military Forces, killed in the Canberra air disaster of 1940) are memorialized in the church. So too are lesser known figures including William, second son of Rev'd Pierce Galliard Smith, who was killed in the Boer War, and the three Eddison brothers who lost their lives in the Second World War.

The Churchyard contains the remains of many veterans from as far back as the Napoleonic Wars and the Boer War, as well as the famous Word War Two fighter ace 'Bobby' Gibbes (DSO, DFC and Bar). It is also the resting place of over 30 returned servicemen from the First World War, including Canberra's first Anzac, Sgt Ernest Murray (MM and Bar) – a member of the first landing party at Anzac Cove on 25 April 1915.

St John's continues to honour the memory of those who have made sacrifices in the defence of Australia, including by continuing to offer welcome and pastoral ministry to Canberra's large veteran community.

General William Bridges, killed at Gallipoli,
lying in state in St John's prior to his burial upon Mt Pleasant (1915).

MAY HAYMAN: CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Our St John's community has a connection to martyrdom through the powerful witness of Sister May Hayman who was one of ten Australian Anglican missionaries who were killed by Japanese soldiers in World War II.

Sister May was on the staff at Canberra Hospital. Originally from Adelaide, she was a parishioner at St John's while nursing at the Canberra Community Hospital, before going to New Guinea in 1936 as a missionary nurse. She was remembered by Sr. Clarice Cavanagh as being "small and sprightly with a very bubbly personality" which earned her the nickname of 'Merry'.

At Gona on the north coast of Papua, May retained her links to Canberra where the local Anglican community held regular fundraisers for her missionary work. While at Gona she became engaged to be married to the Reverend Vivian Redlich, the Anglican priest in charge of the nearby Sangara mission.

As the hostilities of war moved closer and closer to New Guinea, the Christian missionaries must have become increasingly fearful and anxious about their future. There is no doubt they could have fled back to the safety of Australia. However, they decided to remain. They were convinced that it was God's will that they should not desert their people in their hour of danger. Sister May thought of her patients. She said to her Bishop, "What will the sick do if I move from here?" She stayed at her post in Gona, along with Fr James Benson and Mavis Parkinson, until the very moment Japanese soldiers landed on their beach.

After the Japanese landed at Gona on 21 July 1942 they established a beachhead to support their attempt to capture Port Moresby by crossing the Kokoda Track. Sister Hayman and the others at the Gona mission escaped inland, aiming to cross the Owen Stanley Range to Port Moresby ahead of the Japanese. For two weeks they evaded capture; however they were betrayed by locals and ambushed by the Japanese near Popondetta.

May and another woman, the teacher at the mission Mavis Parkinson, were imprisoned in a coffee hut at Popondetta. Sometime between 13 and 16 August a native, warned off by the women from attempting a rescue, witnessed their murders by the Japanese. Both women were bayoneted and buried in a shallow grave just south of Popondetta. May's fiancée, Vivian Redlich, was beheaded at Buna a few days later. When Australian troops re-occupied Popondetta both women were re-interred at the old Sangara Mission.

In 1947 nursing staff of the Canberra Community Hospital began collecting funds for a memorial to Sister Hayman and Sister Mona Tait, who was killed after the fall of Singapore by the Japanese at Radji Beach (on Banka Island near Sumatra) on 16 February 1942. Enough funds were raised for an annual prize, the Mona Tait and May Hayman Memorial Prize, for the most successful candidates in the final nursing exams in the ACT. The remainder was used to erect a plaque in the main entrance hall to the hospital. When the hospital closed in 1991 the plaque was removed to the RSL Headquarters in Campbell. A memorial stained-glass window was dedicated to May Hayman's memory in 1949 and remains in the church to this day.

A detail of the May Hayman Memorial Window on the south wall of the sanctuary

On 10 June 1950, Bishop Michael Yashiro of Japan visited St John's and presented a small bamboo cross with the inscription 'Reconciliation and Repentance' at a service. The cross is now on display in the side chapel. This is what was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald on 10 June 1950:

> *Bishop Michael Yashiro of Kobe, presiding Bishop of the Japanese Anglican Church dedicated a memorial bamboo cross to Sister May Hayman, a Canberra missionary, killed in New Guinea by Japanese troops during the war.*
>
> *Bishop Yashiro, the first Japanese to enter Australia since the war, performed the dedication ceremony in the historic church of St John the Baptist.*
>
> *Beside him sat Padre H.F. Bashford, chaplain of the Royal Military College, Duntroon, who witnessed the execution of eight Australian soldiers whose deaths are now the subject of the Manus Island trials.*
>
> *Two police, from behind the cover of a clump of pine trees, screened all people entering the church.*
>
> *Bishop Yashiro, in slow, halting but correct English, expressed to a congregation of 70 his 'sincere regret' for his country's participation in the Second World War.*
>
> *'We have had a terrible experience in the last ten years,' he said. 'It is dangerous to be governed by politicians who are not guided by the Holy Spirit. Why can I stand on this pulpit in such a miserable condition of mind?' Bishop Yashiro asked. 'It is simply because I have deep within me a wonderful power of Christian faith.'*
>
> *Before he had left Japan for Australia he ordered all of the churches to observe September 18 as a day of remembrance for Sister May Hayman.*
>
> *In the southeast corner of the sanctuary at St John's a stained glass window depicts Sister May Hayman who was a parishioner at St John's and a nurse from the Canberra Hospital. She went to New Guinea as an ABM missionary in 1936 and was killed by the Japanese in 1942.*

In September 2014, Bishop Andrew Yatuka Nakamura, the Bishop of Kobe, and his wife visited Canberra and attended a service at St John's to give thanks for the relationship that now exists between the people of Japan and Australia.

CHURCHYARD, MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS

Churchyard

Not long after her arrival in Australia from Scotland with her family, 23 year old Barbara Potts died on 1 May 1844 of unknown causes. She became the first person to be interred in what would become known as the St John's Churchyard. In time, she would be joined by many other pioneers of the region. Famous names of early Canberra such as Blundell, Campbell, Gibbes, Crace, Guise and Shumack, now share the grounds with her. Significant national figures, too, rest here, including

Canberra's first public servant, Sir Robert (and Lady) Garran, and two Governors-General (Dunrossil and Jeffrey).

Prophetic Tombstone

On 8 November 1845, thirty-three year old Sarah Webb tragically died during childbirth. During her lifetime she was a pioneer in the Canberra region, but it was her death that catapulted her to fame.

She was buried on 12 November 1845 at the newly consecrated St John's church and churchyard. Her headstone reads, 'For here we have no continuing city but seek one to come,' a slightly inexact quote of Hebrews 13:14. The biblical passage refers to a heavenly city hoped for by believers.

The 'prophetic tombstone' marking the grave of Sarah Webb, and various family members.

Within a few decades after Sarah's death it became apparent that the Limestone Plains was going to be the site of the future national capital. The quote on Sarah's headstone started attracting notice, with many taking the passage to be a strange and coincidental prophecy of the coming city of Canberra. The prophetic tombstone or 'Prophet's Tombstone' as it eventually was known, rather quickly, became a local landmark with travellers going out of their way to visit it. Even so, it continues to bear witness to the ultimate hope of Christians – not simply the city in which we live, but the heavenly dwelling promised to all who die in the faith of Christ.

Monuments and Memorials

The interior of St John's Church, as well as the surrounding grounds, contains innumerable memorials recalling people or events of significance in the life of the church and the wider community.

After the opening of Parliament House in 1927, the parish became home to the main Christian congregation in the national capital, with which were associated various royal and vice-regal personages, eminent politicians and statesmen, senior public servants and scientists and military personnel (especially those associated with nearby Duntroon Military College). Especially between the World Wars, St John's was a significant national social institution.

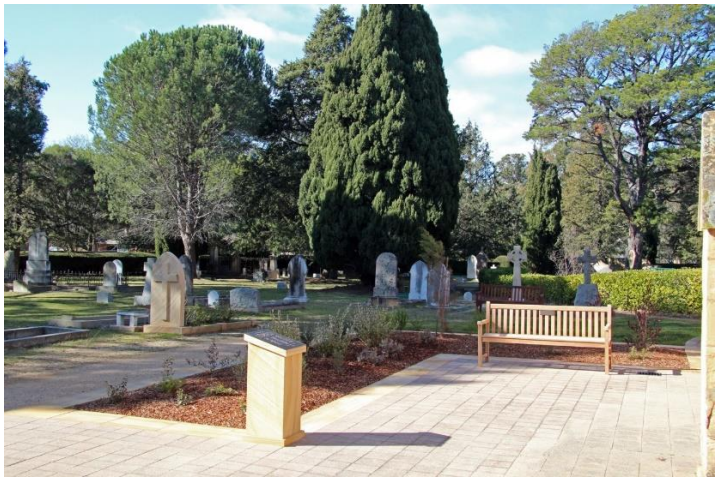
The church's interior is lined with memorials to parishioners from the pioneering pastoral era to eminent Australian statesmen of the early federal era (e.g. Sir Robert Randolf Garran, Sir Littleton Ernest Groom), eminent scientists associated with the early C.S.I.R.O. and Mt Stromlo Observatory, and post-World War II figures of national significance (e.g. H. V. Evatt and Sir William McKell).

The distinguished artist, Elioth Gruner, is memorialized by bookshelves and cupboards in the west porch. The first resident minister of St John's, the Rev'd George Gregory, was drowned in the flooded Molonglo in 1851 and is buried in the crypt, with a memorial plaque on the floor of the church sanctuary.

In memory of her several visits to St John's, a tree to commemorate the Platinum Jubilee of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was planted on 14 April 2023 by their Excellencies the Governor-General of Australia General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd) and Mrs Linda Hurley, with the assistance of children of the parish.

The Governor-General and Mrs Hurley, with some children from the parish, plant a tree celebrating the late Queen's platinum jubilee. (Photo courtesy of Government House)

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Anzac Landings, in 2015 a memorial native garden was planted on the north side of the church, alongside a plaque listing the 43 returned servicemen of the First World War who are buried in the St John's Churchyard.



The Remembrance Garden on the north side of the church.

Bells

The original St John's bell was donated to the Church of St Michael and All Angels at Hall, where it was re-erected in the churchyard. The was due to the gift of Governor-Genera Viscount De L'lsle, a peal of eight bells given as a memorial to his late wife. The bells were cast at the bell foundry of John Taylor & Co in Loughborough, England, and were installed in 1964. Ranging in weight from 13 to 2 hundredweight and in diameter from 3 feet 4.5 inches to 1 foot 9 inches, the largest bears the inscription:

> *For the glory of God and in devoted memory of his beloved wife Jacqueline this chime of bells was given to the Church of St John the Baptist, Canberra, by William, Viscount De L'lsle. J.D.L. Twentieth October, 1914 to Sixteenth November, 1962.*

Governor-General Viscount William De L'Isle inspects the installation of the St John's Bells in 1964.

The sound of the bells floats down upon the city calling people to worship. The bells are rung joyfully before and after weddings and at funeral services where one bell is tolled for each year of the deceased's life. St John's bell ringing team is still active, practicing on Monday evenings. (New members always welcome!)

The St John's Bellringers in action

Organ

St John's has had four organs throughout its history. The present pipe organ was built by Ronald Sharp, who also built the organ at the Sydney Opera House, and was installed in 1981, with the gallery being extended and strengthened in the mid-1970s in anticipation of its purchase. It is widely regarded as a joy to play, with its variety of stops enabling organists either to 'raise the roof' or be meditative or subdued, depending on the occasion.

The organ loft, and memorial to Dr H. V. Evatt

INCUMBENTS OF ST JOHN'S CANBERRA

- Edward **Smith** (Queanbeyan parish of which St John's was then part). (March 1845–May 1850)
- George **Gregory** (May 1850-August 1851)
- Thomas **Wilkinson** (September 1851-February 1854)
- Pierce **Galliard Smith** (May 1855-October 1905)
- Arthur **Hopcraft** (December 1905-October 1909)
- Arthur **Champion** (October 1909-April 1913)
- Frederick **Ward** (April 1913-June 1929)
- Charles **Robertson** (January 1930-May 1949)
- Robert **Davies** (May 1949-May 1953)
- (Robert) Gordon **Arthur** (June 1953-January 1960)
- Frederick **Hill** (February 1960-September 1972)
- Owen **Dowling** (October 1972-March 1981)
- Ian **George** (August 1981-October 1989)
- David **Oliphant** (November 1989-October 1995)
- Allan **Ewing** (April 1996-December 2003)
- Gregory **Thompson** (July 2004-April 2007)
- Paul **Black** (January 2008-July 2021)
- David **McLennan** (January 2022 -)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed information about St John's and its history, you may like to consider purchasing the following books from the St John's Parish Office:

Firm Still You Stand, by A.H. Body. 1986. A detailed account of the history of St John's.

Sanctuary in the City, by Randall Wilson and Rodney Garnett. 2012. A shorter, but still highly informative illustrated volume.