

Mary MacKillop's Presence in The Rocks Area

By Kath Burford rsj

1992

Introduction

On the last day of December 1879 Mary MacKillop with about 27 of her Sisters of St Joseph retreated from Queensland and, with hope for a peaceful future, ventured into NSW at the friendly invitations of Archbishop Vaughan (Sydney) and Bishop Torregiani (Armidale). Mary visited Archbishop Vaughan at his residence in the previous June and again in November with Sr M. Josephine Carolan, concerning the possibilities of foundations in NSW, believing that the Sisters' entry to the Sydney Archdiocese could prove to be a most important step in the development of the Institute. Sydney's location had so much potential, not only for its apostolate but as an ideal site for a second novitiate which the Constitutions allowed should circumstances call for such.

The Sisters' first temporary home in NSW was a house (153 Forbes Street Woolloomooloo) owned by Mary's cousin Francis MacNab. The Archbishop immediately established the Sisters in 7 schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney and wanted to set up a school for them in the inner city area. Mary MacKillop, however, preferred one which should be a kind of refuge for the poor rather than just a school, so as not to encroach on the work of other Religious Orders. Her suggestion of a place for homeless, aged and sick women, adolescent girls from the country seeking employment and also orphaned, neglected children was warmly taken up by the Vicar General of the Sydney Archdiocese, Dean Sheridan, who made this work his special concern. As in Adelaide Mary called this work, the 'House of Providence', insisting that the Sisters depend solely on Divine Providence for their sustenance.

St Joseph's Providence, The Rocks

The first place found was a rented house in Gloucester Street in The Rocks area, situated at the end nearer to St Patrick's, Church Hill. It was occupied by two Sisters, Ignatius Griffin and M. Josephine Carolan, and seven guests on 6 March 1880. Mary, still resident at 153 Forbes Street, visited them the next day.

From here she wrote her first letter from Sydney's first St Joseph's Providence on 7 March 1880 to Cardinal Simeoni in Rome: she told him of leaving Queensland and the kindness of Archbishop Vaughan. However by 11 April 1880 Sr Ignatius wrote to Mary in Adelaide: "*...the house is too small and overcrowded.*". The Archbishop thought so too and encouraged them to move to a larger place, one if possible, closer to the Marist Fathers' Church of St Michael in Lower Fort Street.

Thus the second St Joseph's Providence was another rather small rented house at the north end of Gloucester Street called '**Craig Terrace**', overlooking a network of buildings leading out of lower George Street, with a view across the harbour to Government House.

This was occupied on 5 May 1880 by a community of Sisters and nine children and six women. It had a flat roof where children could play in the absence of a proper playground, but always with the fear of falling through the railing. Mary MacKillop was in Adelaide all the time the Sisters were at 'Craig Terrace', which soon had new anxieties – more homeless applicants for bed and lodging and no school room for the children except the kitchen.



St Bridget's Hall Girls' School

In June 1880 the Archbishop offered to the Sisters, St Bridget's Hall School, 107 Kent Street North near Agar (now High) Street, for a Providence and a girls' school, with an average attendance of about 120 girls. There were adequate facilities for a Providence, but not for the Sisters' accommodation as a convent. Such an arrangement would have separated the work from the growing community of Sisters and Novices in 'Craig Terrace' in Gloucester Street North.

Despite favourable negotiations being drawn up by the Sisters and the Archbishop, it was not to be. The outcome was that the Sisters later staffed the school, but needed to look further for another place suitable for the work of St Joseph's Providence.

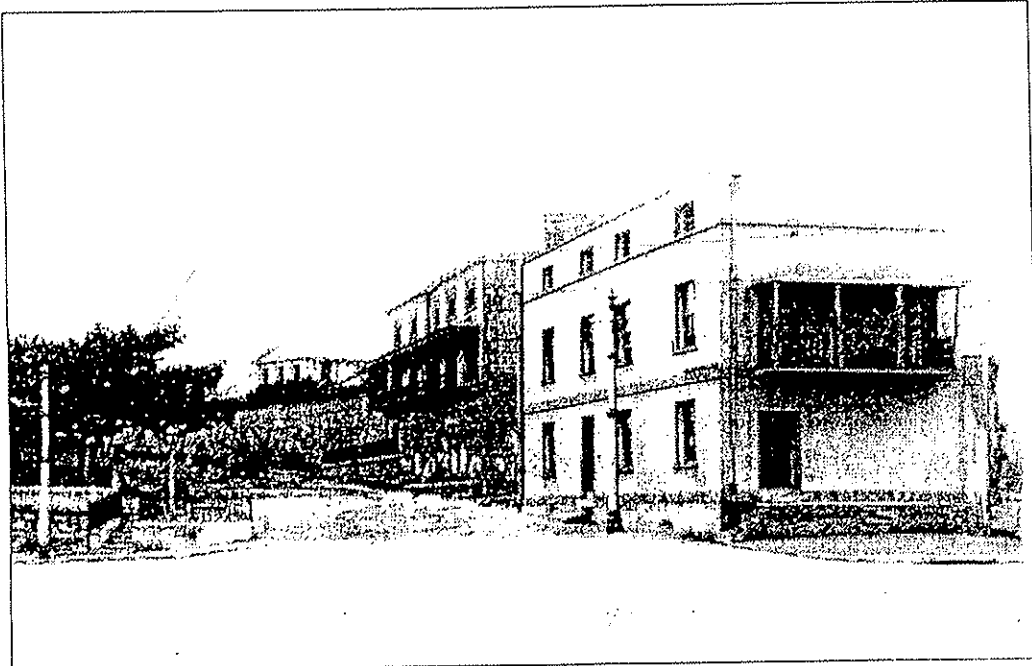
'Winsbury' 79 Kent Street

Unable to raise the finance necessary to purchase a much-desired large house in Cumberland Street, adjacent to the Marist Fathers' Presbytery and St Michael's Church, Sr M. Josephine Carolan settled for another rented house at 79 Kent Street. A three-terrace house (now Nos. 75-77-79) with nine bedrooms had possibilities. On 30 July 1880 the Sisters and guests were able to occupy 79 Kent Street, with the name 'Winsbury' still decipherable.

Sr M. Josephine Carolan wrote to Mary MacKillop in Adelaide: "*Our house is situated between St Bridget's Church and the Hall (School). I think you know where the latter place is. We are within five minutes walk of St Michael's and about the same from St Patrick's, and two from St Bridget's Hall School. We have 12 Sisters counting Sr Bonaventure (Provincial) – 36 in the house, 22 of these children and three families 'out of house' support. So there is a nice little family.*" (19 August 1880)

Mary MacKillop came to Sydney for health reasons and stayed at St Joseph's Providence, 79 Kent Street, during February and March of 1881. A photo-copy of a letter she wrote while there, 14 February 1881, is among the treasures of the occupants of 79 Kent Street (1981).

'Cheshunt' 3 Cumberland Street



No 3 Cumberland St— *Image from Mary MacKillop Place Archives*

It was not until the following May (1881) that Sr M. Josephine Carolan's big venture of acquiring the large stone house, 'Cheshunt', was realised. With one frontage in Cumberland Street and the other in Lower Fort Street, adjacent to St Michael's Church, this three-storey building with a basement, was large enough to satisfy all their needs.

This last new Providence became the Order's Provincial House for NSW, and served as a temporary Novitiate for the ten young women who entered between 1880-81. Mary MacKillop arrived at Cumberland Street early in December 1882 and stayed there until June 1883, using it as a base for the required visitation of the convents and schools established in NSW during 1880-82.

During this period of seven months she discussed arrangements with the Marist Fathers for the Sisters to service St Bridget's Boys' School at 14 Kent Street. This took place the following year (1884) and the Sisters of St Joseph remained there until 1898, when it was entrusted to the Sisters of Mercy, North Sydney. Mary would have frequently visited the two St Bridget's schools in Kent Street North and prayed in the Churches of St Patrick's, St Bridget's (still standing) and St Michael's (demolished), thus walking along Cumberland, Gloucester and Kent Streets.

Final Years

When Mary MacKillop arrived in Sydney after being exiled from Adelaide by Bishop Reynolds in November 1883, the only place she could go to was St Joseph's Providence in 3 Cumberland Street. From this time till the turn of the century she would have been a frequent visitor and resident there. In fact, the ceremonies of Reception and Profession of Novices took place in St Michael's Church in Lower Fort Street till 1891, when a more accommodating chapel was built on the property at Mount Street, North Sydney, which was acquired in 1884.

The resumption of the foreshores around Sydney Harbour was brought before Parliament for the purposes of improving and beautifying the city. Cumberland Street Providence was included in 'The Rocks Resumption Area' and due compensation was given to the Sisters of St Joseph by the NSW Government when they withdrew from the area on 19 March 1901, after a period of 20 years.

In 1887, through the courtesy of Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney, the young boys given refuge at the Cumberland Street Providence were transferred under the Sisters' care to a property at Kincumber. In 1900 the aged women were transferred to Randwick and cared for by the Little Sisters of the Poor, while the young girls were accommodated and cared for by the Sisters of St Joseph at a newly-acquired property, 'Gladstone House' on the Pacific Highway at Gore Hill.

In summary, Mary MacKillop visited the **first St Joseph's Providence** at the southern end of Gloucester Street (near St Patrick's, Church Hill) occupied by the Sisters during **March and April, 1880**. She was in Adelaide at the Mother House of the Order during the period the Sisters lived in the **second St Joseph's Providence, 'Craig Terrace'** at the northern end of Gloucester Street (**May-July 1880**). She resided with the Sisters at the **third Providence, 'Winsbury', 79 Kent Street** during **February and March of 1881**, and also at the final location, **'Cheshunt', 3 Cumberland Street** from **December 1882 to June 1883**. Finally she resided for a short period from November 1883 until May 1884, when a dear friend of her father, Dean John Kenny, donated for a Novitiate, a two-storey stone cottage, **'Alma Cottage'**, situated at Mount Street, North Sydney, where she lived until her death on 8 August 1909.



SUMMARY

St Joseph's Providence *The Rocks, Sydney*

Dates

- 6 March 1880** The Sisters took up residence as tenants
- i) Gloucester Street - the first St Joseph's Providence
 - ii) Craig Terrace, Gloucester St North - second Providence
- 16 June 1880** Archbishop Vaughan gives the Sisters right of possession of St Bridget's, 107 Kent Street, for a Providence and a girls' school
- 30 July 1880** The Sisters occupy 79 Kent Street as tenants 'Winsbury' – the third Providence
- 1 August 1880** The Sisters open school at St Bridget's
- 13 May 1881** The Sisters take possession of their purchased property 'Cheshunt' – 3 Cumberland Street – the fourth Providence. It became the NSW Provincial House

Dates cont'd.

- March 1887** St Joseph's Orphanage for Boys established by the Sisters of St Joseph at Kincumber
- 19 January 1900** First case of Bubonic Plague in Sydney – Windmill Street, The Rocks – quarantine imposed, Kent and Lower Fort Streets
- 27 March 1900** Legislative Assembly petitions for Government resumption of wharves area. Rocks Resumption Scheme put into operation.
- June 1900** Aged women transferred to Little Sisters of the Poor, Randwick
- August 1900** Girls transferred to Lane Cove Orphanage (Gore Hill)
- 19 March 1901** The Sisters vacate St Joseph's Providence

