

The First St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney

- by Dr Max Coleman, Trustee, St Vincent's Clinic Foundation

It is always useful to review our heritage and derive inspiration from the achievements of Mary Aikenhead's five original volunteers. They arrived aboard the Francis Speight in Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) on New Year's Eve 1838, yet it was not until August 1857 that their first Hospital was opened.

What were its origins and what was it like?

Between 1828 and 1831, Governor Darling issued 17 land grants extending from Darlinghurst to Potts Point. The land grants were bound by strict conditions: They had to have his approval before construction commenced; the houses had to have a minimum value of £1,000 and were to be single residences with no other buildings on the allotment; and they were to be set in landscaped gardens.

John Busby, who installed Sydney's first water supply, purchased one of these grants. Busby employed the renowned Colonial Architect and Builder, John Verge.

Verge designed Rockwall (completed in 1833 and which is still standing) and a separate cottage. He designed and supervised alterations to the cottage in 1836-1837 resulting in a two-storey verandahed residence.

Verge retired in 1838, so it is possible that John Bibb, his assistant who continued Verge's architectural practice, designed additions to the cottage that was to become Tarmons.

A plan endorsed by the Surveyor, J Armstrong, in 1839 shows The Mansion- viz. Tarmons - and describes "the property of Hamilton Collins Sempill Esq (grazier) but now sold by him to His Excellency Major General Sir Maurice O'Connell."

O'Connell had married Mary Putland, the widowed daughter of Governor William Bligh at Government House - the first social function to be given by Mrs Macquarie. Mrs O'Connell often filled in as first lady when Governor and Mrs Macquarie were unavailable

Tarmons (meaning sanctuary), named by O'Connell after the family's home in County Kerry, Ireland, was sited on an eminence some fifty feet above the Cove at the northern end of Victoria Street, Woolloomooloo.

The main entrance was from Macleay Street, with a long carriageway lined with elms and oaks leading to the front entrance. The house was built of Sydney sandstone and panelled with Australian cedar.

The entrance led to a tall spacious reception hall at the end of which was a carved cedar staircase to the second floor.

Large reception rooms exited from the hall on each side, each with an open fireplace. The reception room to the right led to a ballroom 48 feet (14.6 metres) in length.

Tarmons offered a fine view of Port Jackson with its multiple islands across to the north shore of the Harbour. The ground floor of the house was shaded by capacious verandahs.

The rules for patients included: “‘The sick poor are the only persons who can be admitted to this charity’ and ‘no person having any disease reputed to be infectious can be admitted’.”

The accommodation was as follows. The “convalescent ward” was a large room on the ground floor entered from the northern verandah and commanding a view over the lawn and gardens.

It was well-furnished with four or five iron bedsteads covered with clean white bed linen and surrounded with white net curtains. The room was provided with chairs, a table and a writing desk. It was occupied by patients awaiting discharge following a severe illness.

The male sick ward was to the east of the convalescent ward, had similar views and was also entered by the northern verandah. There was accommodation for eleven patients. The female sick ward was to the west of the convalescent ward, had similar views and was also entered by the northern verandah.

The furnishings were similar to the other wards. The dispensary was on the verandah and this area was also used for the operating theatre. This may have been on the western side of the building to make use of the natural light as operations were generally performed at 3pm on Wednesday afternoons.

The Sisters kept two schools at the rear of the Hospital, one attended by about 65 girls and the other an infants’ school accommodating about 30 children. Attached to the schools was a large playground. Under the Sisters’ ownership, the house now took on three purposes – a hospital, a residence for the Sisters and a school.

The Hospital received no funding from the Government, relying solely on public subscriptions, fundraising and donations. It was also non-sectarian as is seen from the following rule: “Every clergyman (of all denominations) living in New South Wales is privileged to recommend one in-patient and six out-patients in the year without paying subscriptions.”

Dr Robertson, the first surgeon and an Anglican, was appointed to the Hospital, and used the large entrance hall as his consulting room. When Sir Charles Nicholson had taken over Tarmons from Sir Maurice O’Connell he converted the ballroom into a library, which was now used by the Sisters for their chapel.

Tarmons, requiring substantial repairs from its 130 years of use, was demolished in the 1960’s. Its site is preserved at St Vincent’s College, Potts Point that was founded in 1858 as a co-educational primary school and currently a secondary, boarding and day school for girls.

And so the Sisters begin to fulfil their Mission ... their devotion to the health and welfare of the sick poor and their commitment to education.

At the time of the opening of St Vincent’s Hospital but one of the original five sisters remained in Sydney.

Yet Mary Aikenhead’s influence insured a sisterhood sufficient to progress the Mission and an uncanny ability to manage debt that has resulted in the extraordinary collection of organisations that constitute Mary Aikenhead Ministries in Australia today.

