

Heritage Citation



St Francis Convent (former)

Key details

Also known as	Toonarbin, Sisters of Mercy Convent
Addresses	At 51 Dornoch Terrace, West End, Queensland 4101
Type of place	Residence (group), Institutional / group housing
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Free Classical
Lot plan	L2_RP46006
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 July 2002 Date of Citation — August 2010
Construction	Roof: Ribbed metal; Walls: Face brick

People/associations	H. Corbett and Sons (Builder); Hall and Prentice (Architect); Sisters of Mercy (Association)
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Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (E) Aesthetic; (G) Social
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This building was originally the 1860s home of shipping agent, Captain Henry O'Reilly. It was altered and extended in the Interwar Free Classical style in 1927 for use as the convent of the Sisters of Mercy at West End. It is part of a religious precinct that came from the plan of the prominent Brisbane Archbishop James Duhig to expand the influence of the Catholic Church throughout Queensland after World War One. This religious precinct was the focal point for the Catholic Church's religious, social and educational activities in West End/Highgate Hill from the early 1920s onwards. It is a religious and educational precinct built along Dornoch Terrace that includes the adjacent St. Francis Church (1923), St. Francis School (1928) and St. Francis Presbytery (1928). The entire precinct is fronted by a brick fence that acts as a unifying marker for the four separate buildings within the precinct.

History

In 1919, James Duhig was appointed the Archbishop of the Diocese of Brisbane by the Catholic Church. Known as 'James the Builder', he oversaw a massive expansion program for the Catholic Church in Queensland during the 1920s. By 1930, Duhig had established 21 new parishes, 28 new schools and 100 new churches, just within Brisbane.

As part of this building program, a new Catholic Church building and school were proposed for West End. The church was completed in 1923, but was built across the road from its present site at 47 Dornoch Terrace. It was soon discovered that the original site was not large enough for both the new church and the proposed school.

In 1926, the Catholic Church took the opportunity to acquire a large block (8 acres) of land, located just across the road from the new St. Francis Church that belonged to the O'Reilly family who were Scottish Presbyterians. Duhig liked to select sites that were at the centre of a suburb, preferably on high ground. O' Reilly's Paddock along ridgeline of Dornoch Terrace fitted Duhig's strategy perfectly. So St Francis Church was moved across the road to its current location.

In February 1927, Duhig separated West End and Highgate Hill from St. Mary's Parish of South Brisbane to create the new West End Parish. Upon his arrival, Keating found that his new parish had poor facilities. Keating recalled that in 1927, he had found *"...a small church, a ramshackle building where the convent now stood, a 40 year's old fence along the front, a cow hall and a large number of gum trees"*.¹

The building of the proposed school was finally commenced in 1927. St Francis of Assisi School was blessed and opened by Archbishop Duhig on 22 January 1928. At the school's opening ceremony, Duhig outlined the role of the Sisters of Mercy in his plan for the West End Parish headquarters site:

“The Sisters of Mercy acquired the old family home (of the O’Reilly’s) which they are now enlarging, and we kept the remainder of the frontage to Dornoch Terrace for church, school and presbytery.’²

The alteration and additions were undertaken by building contractors H. Corbett & Sons with the Brisbane City Council approving the work on 4 November 1927. While the work was being completed, the nuns resided at the Sisters of Mercy All Hallows Convent in Fortitude Valley.

The Sisters of Mercy Convent Building was constructed by completely altering and extending the existing O’Reilly family’s nineteenth century house ‘Toonarbin’. ‘Toonarbin’ was built c 1869 for the shipping agent Captain Henry O’Reilly with the architect being the Englishman, Benjamin Backhouse. The architectural firm of Hall & Prentice were contracted to oversee the conversion of the nineteenth century O’Reilly Residence into a twentieth century convent.

The Convent was opened on 1 April 1928 by Duhig with the cost of the renovations and alterations of ‘Toonarbin’ funded entirely by the Sisters of Mercy. The work was completed just prior to the opening of the new St. Francis Presbytery. A brick fence that fronted the Convent and the adjoining Catholic Church buildings was completed by 1934. Gardens were planted at the front and in the rear of the property. In the quiet back garden, seats were placed where the nuns could sit and reflect while enjoying the views of the University of Queensland’s new St Lucia campus (work began 1937).

The convent primary school had been constructed at the rear of the Convent. The nuns from the Sisters of Mercy provided the entire teaching staff for St. Francis School. The nuns ran a Children of Mary organization for the school’s pupils. Speaking at a 1961 ceremony for the opening of extensions to the school, former pupil, Father Robert Prentice O.F.M. Ph.D, M.A. said of the nuns: *“The influence of the Sisters on the minds of little children is a most profound thing”*.³ At the same ceremony, the long-serving Parish priest Monsignor Keating paid a warm tribute to the role of the Sisters of Mercy in the parish. Changing local demographics, particularly the reduction in housing across the West End Parish due to industrialization and the conversion of many old houses into flats and boarding houses for single people; together with the changes to the education system such as end of the state Scholarship exam and the policies introduced under the Radford Scheme had contributed to the school’s declining enrolments during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The nuns continued in their primary teaching role until St Francis School closed in 1974.

After the school’s closure, it served as the Remediation Centre for the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The nuns from the adjoining Convent provided teachers for the Remediation Centre. Other activities undertaken by the nuns based at the St Francis Convent were as lecturers at the Australian Catholic University’s McAuley campus or undertaking apostolate work with the local Aboriginal population.

The West End Parish was subsumed by the Dutton Park Parish in 1988. In 2002, only two nuns remained in residence at the Convent and the Convent closed that year. The Convent was sold as a private residence in late 2007.

Description

This brick and rendered masonry building features the symmetry and attenuated pilasters of the Interwar Free

Classical style. The building is private in its streetscape presence, with prominent portico elements standing forward of the entry. The front door, however, is recessed in deep shadow at the centre of the elevation, behind the decorative wrought iron security gates and grille.

The western portico features a rendered, concave grotto that formerly housed a statue. Four chimneys are visible from the streetscape, rising clear of the simple pitched, galvanized iron roof with flanking single pitched roofs to the east and west.

The building has a prominent presence in the local streetscape, and is complemented by the face brick and rendered coping fence with wrought iron gates, which extend along the frontages of the adjoining Convent, Church and School.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history

as an 1860s West End residence altered in 1927-28 for use as a convent. It is representative of the vibrant 1920s Catholic Church's construction programme initiated by Brisbane Archbishop James Duhig.

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

as an imposing masonry building with decorative porticos and arches providing a pleasing symmetry.

Social

CRITERION G

The place has a strong or special association with the life or work of a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons

as the convent for some 60 years of the Sisters of Mercy at West End who oversaw the provision of education for the Catholic children residing across the suburbs of South Brisbane.

Supporting images



Photographer unknown,
'Highgate Hill residence, Toonarbin on Dornoch
Terrace, Brisbane', undated,
John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

References

1. "A Progressive Parish – Tenth Anniversary of St. Francis's West End" *The Catholic Leader Brisbane*, 18 November 1937, p.15.
2. "St. Francis Parish, West End -The Archbishop Performs Dual Ceremony", *The Age*, 28 January
3. "Archbishop Blesses New School Additions at West End Parish", *The Catholic Leader*, 27 July 1961, p.5.
4. *The Architecture and Building Journal of Queensland*, 7 April 1923

5. Brisbane City Council Water, Sewerage Plan No.623, 1934
6. *The Catholic Leader Brisbane*, 18 November 1937
7. *The Catholic Leader*, 27 July 1961
8. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of title and other records.
9. 'Golden Jubilee at West End', *The Leader*, 13 March 1977
10. JOL Estate Map Collection and photographic collection
11. Lawson, Ronald *Brisbane in the 1890s: A Study of an Australian Urban Society*. St Lucia U of Q Press, 1973
12. McKellar's Map of Brisbane and Suburbs. Brisbane: Surveyor-General's Office, 1895
13. 'Progress and Development of the Church in the Archdiocese', *Catholic Leader*, Jubilee Supplement, 10 November 1955

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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

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