
Short Histories

Use this fact sheet to learn more about St Mary's Cathedral after your visit.

Aboriginal Peoples

In 1829, when Swan River colony was founded, the area of the future townsite of Perth was Wadjuk country, including Wid'dogootogup, later the site of St Mary's Cathedral. In the 1830s, the townsite of Perth was laid out, including Church Square, later renamed Victoria Square. There is also a registered Aboriginal site at the site of the cathedral.

In 1843, Rev. Dr Brady arrived to serve the small Catholic community of Perth and work began to build the church on Lord Street, near Victoria Square. In 1844–46, he visited Europe, returning with a large party, including Sisters of Mercy and Benedictines, whose mission included “the conversion and improvement of the Aboriginal tribes” (*Inquirer*, 14 Jan. 1846). In Perth, the local Wadjuk people quickly developed a friendly rapport with the sisters, who established a convent and school near the square, where Aboriginal people from the Benedictines' mission at New Norcia regularly visited. Dom (later Bishop) Rosendo Salvado brought a girl, Cochina, to the Sisters, who founded St Francis Xavier's Benevolent Institution in 1847, reserved from 1849 for Aboriginal girls, whose baptismal names usually included Mary, for example, Mary Christian Cochina. They attended the Sisters' free school and some excelled.

Well-known parishioner John Gresswell (arr. 1831) appealed for provision of “a house of refuge” for infirm and sick Aboriginal people. His daughter, Maria (b. 1824; m. Bernard Smith, 1841; d. Perth, 1920) was renowned for her lifelong care for Aboriginal people in Perth.

Successive bishops and archbishops involved with Aboriginal missions also recognised how European settlement displaced people from their country. Bishop Brady (1845 to 1871) petitioned the Secretary of State for Colonies in London about their plight. Bishop Gibney (1886 to 1910), deeply concerned for Aboriginal people, devoted much effort to their welfare and assisted Daisy Bates. More recently, Archbishop Hickey (1991 to 2012) worked extensively with Aboriginal people, “the original owners of this land”.

In December 2009, Noongar elders welcomed Catholics to the opening of the latest major addition to St Mary's Cathedral, where Noongar artist Laurel Nannup had designed a pathway depicting elements of traditional Aboriginal life and the coming of Christianity and a mosaic lane in the processional forecourt. Each year NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week is celebrated at the cathedral.



Artist Laurel Nannup at the opening ceremony of St Mary's Cathedral in 2009.
Courtesy of the Archdiocesan Communications Office. Photo by Ron Tan