

Father James Phelan

Born c 1820 County Tipperary, Ireland.

Died Jan 5 1898 St Marys, South Creek, NSW.

Interred in St Marys Cemetery.

First resident priest of St Marys, South Creek, NSW.

Donor of land upon which stands Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School, St Marys.

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1. A brief biography:

Father James Phelan, from 1880 till 1885 parish priest of Penrith (including St Marys, South Creek), lived in retirement from 1885 till his death on **January 5 1898** in his own cottage on the northern corner of Swanston Street and Mamre Road, St Marys. He is buried in St Marys General Cemetery (Catholic section), cnr Great Western Highway and Sydney St, St Marys.

Father Phelan bought the land on which Our Lady of the Rosary Primary School St Marys now stands, on the corner of Mamre Road and Saddington Street. Father was the parish priest of Penrith (including St Marys) when Mother Mary MacKillop, Saint Mary of the Cross, began the St Joseph's Primary School, then in Putland Street.

Irish-born Father Phelan was ordained in Sydney on September 24 1853. Sydney newspaper (1850-1932), *The Freeman's Journal* (forerunner to the *Catholic Weekly*) reported on 1 October 1853, in its column titled "Ecclesiastical Intelligence":

ORDINATION. – Last Saturday, his Lordship the Bishop Coadjutor (Dr. Davis,) administered the Holy Order of Priesthood to the Rev. James Phelan, one of the Rev. gentlemen who arrived with the Very Rev. Vicar-General. Though the sacred ceremony was performed at the early hour of seven in the morning, a large congregation assembled to witness it. The Rev. Father celebrated his first Mass on Thursday morning, (the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel) at seven o'clock.

The same *Journal* recorded on 7 January 1898 the funeral of Father Phelan:

PHELAN – A SOLEMN OFFICE and REQUIEM for the Repose of the Soul of the late Rev. JAMES PHELAN will take place at St Mary's South Creek, at 11:30 on FRIDAY, 7th instant, his Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop presiding. The Funeral will take place immediately after Mass.

Some items from Father Phelan's biography:

1. Born c 1820, County Tipperary, Ireland
2. Educated for the priesthood at St Patrick's College, Maynooth and All Hallows College, Dublin.
3. September 24 1853: Ordained to the priesthood in Sydney by Bishop Davis OSB.
4. 1854: stationed at Petersham, Sydney.
5. 1854-1858: stationed at Kelso (Bathurst)ⁱ.
6. April 1858 – April 1869: resident priest at St Bernard's, Hartley.
7. 1869-1870: on holiday in Ireland.ⁱⁱ
8. 1870 – December 1877: resident priest at St Bernard's, Hartley.
9. Dec 1877-Jan 1878: Trip to Tasmania
10. 1877-1880 Chaplain, Parramatta Gaol.
11. 1880-1885: parish priest of Penrith (including South Creek, St Marys).
12. 1885 – 1898: in retirement, Mamre Road, St Marys.
13. January 5, 1898: Father Phelan died.

Hartley 1858-1877:

Nothing is known of Father Phelan's brief time in Bathurst/Kelso, but it was obviously long enough for him to become deeply appreciated by his parishioners, as is attested by the sentiments expressed on the occasion of his departure. (See endnote i)

Father Phelan spent the better part of his priestly ministry in the Hartley district. His area of pastoral responsibility extended, according to Patrick Lynch, author of his obituary below, from Ben Bullen in the north to Oberon in the south west, to Bullagorang in the south (a mining town, now submerged, under the Warragamba Dam) and to Wentworth Falls in the east – an area of hundreds of square kilometers.

Father Phelan covered the area on horseback, before there were roads in the district. He had forty Mass stations. That he in fact covered the area well is attested to by the fact that he baptized 1,117 people during his time at Hartley.

Father William A. Cuneo, author of a history of St Bernard's, notes:

"From January 1st 1860 to December 24th 1877 [when he left] Father Phelan baptized the amazing number of 1,015 people. And if you add to this the number of baptisms from 1853 [sic] to January 1st 1860, viz. 102, the final number of people baptized by this zealous Priest was in all 1,117. Surely this is a magnificent achievement, meaning that he baptized as many as the six Priests before him at St Bernard's. It becomes more spectacular when you remember that he would have journeyed many miles on horseback to baptize many of the children in outback areas."¹

Fay Hasler in her history of St Bernard's² notes that "the Catholic Directory of 1862 reports that there were two churches, one at Hartley and one at Fish River. Forty stations (Mass centres, homes) included Solitary Creek, Fish River, Brisbane Valley, Pipers Flat, Cox's River, Lowther Park, Ganbenang, Kanimbla, Walker's River, Cullen Bullen, Snakes Valley, Slippery Creek, Porters Retreat, Little River, The Duckmaloi and Ben Bullen."

An excellent insight into Father Phelan's contribution at Hartley may be discerned from the *Freeman's Journal* obituary below.

Parramatta Gaol chaplaincy 1878-1880

There is at this stage no material on Father Phelan's time as chaplain.

Penrith parish priest 1880-1885:

There is little information presently gathered about Father's time at Penrith. During this time (1880) Mother Mary MacKillop established a primary school at Penrith and at St Marys. There is reputed to be correspondence from Father Phelan to Mother Mary held at the Josephyte archives in North Sydney.

¹ Cuneo, Fr William A: *Hunters of God – A Brief History of St Bernard's Church, Hartley 1838-1979* (published by W.A. Cuneo, Coastal Printing, c 1983), p.40.

² Hasler, Fay: *Sesqui-Centenary of St Bernard's Hartley and St Patricks Lithgow 1842-1992* (C&W Printing, Lithgow, 1992), p.6.

Retirement at St Marys.

The obituary below and the extracts from the family history *The Big Sycamore* below give an insight into this time in Father Phelan's life; a time of chaplaincy, reading, tending his animals in retirement.

A letter found among the papers of Father Patrick Hartigan, 'John O'Brien' of *Around the Boree Log* fame and author of *The Men of Thirty Eight*, a fascinating account of the lives of the Irish priests who arrived in the colony of New South Wales in 1838, has an interesting anecdote of Father Phelan from this period.

The letter to Father Hartigan is from George Robertson, co-founder with David Angus of the famous Australian publishing firm Angus and Robertson.

"...I was telling one of my partners about my plan this morning, and he said: 'Get him to immortalize Father Phelan, of St Mary's, (near Penrith). He used to steal his own fowls! and take them to the sick – Catholic or Protestant, it made no difference to him – with apologies for the feathers as his housekeeper 'had no time to pluck them' "

"His Reverence's indifference to the loss of pair after pair (they always disappeared in pairs) made his housekeeper storm, and, finally, invoke the local policeman's aid. Alas, the officer was probably an accessory both before and after the fact, and nothing came of that, so 'Josephine' lay in wait herself. Picture to yourself poor Father Phelan caught in the act of removing, in the dead of night, a couple of slabs from the wall of his own hen house!

"Now isn't that a beautiful story! – and it is true, too, for Mr Wymark says that a pair once came his way when he was a boy, and sick.

"Yours faithfully,
George Robertson."

According to information supplied by Brisbane-based Laurel Jones, great great grand-daughter of Father Phelan's sister Anastasia (born 1818): Father Phelan's nephew, son of his sister Anastasia, Father John FitzGerald was ordained in Ireland in 1867, was the first priest in the parish of South Yarra in Melbourne, built the first church there and died in Melbourne in 1893 while serving at the South Yarra parish. Father Phelan's great nephews, born in Grangemockler, Tipperary, were Cardinal Michael Browne (1887-1971, Master General of the Dominican Order from 1955 till 1962) and Michael's brother Monsignor Pdraig de Brun (1889-1960, noted mathematician and Irish language scholar, president of University College Galway) and Monsignor Maurice Browne (1891-1979, author of *The Big Sycamore*.)

The *Freeman's Journal's* February 5 1898 article below on Father Phelan, written by one Patrick Lynch, is a remarkable testimony to this extraordinary pioneer priest.

2. A remarkable tribute:

Freeman's Journal's February 5 1898

A PIONEER PRIEST. FATHER JAMES PHELAN.

OLDEN DAYS ON THE BLUE MOUNTAINS AND IN HARTLEY VALEⁱⁱⁱ.

"Those who knew Father Phelan only when he was 'going towards sunset' – the thin face and the frail form; those who knew him only as he moved slowly amongst the flowers he loved so well, reading and always reading, in that tranquil little home of his at St Mary's, South Creek^{iv}, cannot really picture him a ruddy, robust man – a man of inexhaustible vigour, stout of heart and strong of limb, who met difficulties and disappointments with a serenity of temper which was proof against the evil effects of personal anxiety. When I knew him he was a typical 'bush priest'. The title has not a nice sound nowadays. To me – and I write in a spirit of deepest affection and reverence – it means all that is noblest and best in the priestly character: great piety, unresting zeal, great self-sacrifice, unsurpassable kindness, and great goodness; day and night ministering to his poor scattered flock, riding long distances through rough bush tracks, climbing rugged hills and crossing treacherous creek and river; combining with firm resolution a singular meekness which enabled him to perform with equal completeness those offices calling up the warmest and tenderest sympathy, as well as those demanding a soldier's courage. Reviewing the life of a distinguished Frenchman, a master hand has left us in noble language a tribute to 'the sturdy rectitude, the large charity, the good nature, the modesty, the independent spirit, the ardent philanthropy, the unaffected indifference to money and fame' which characterized the object of his eulogy. If I were set the task to sketch in a few bold strokes the life and work of Father Phelan, the words just quoted are precisely those I should use as a model.

It was in '59 that I pitched my tent in Hartley. Do not imagine, dear reader, that a venerable man is addressing you. As a matter of fact, I did not pitch my tent, for I was a small boy, a very small boy, at the time, and the 'free selection after survey' was done by my parents. In those days it was no laughing matter to cross the Blue Mountains; no holiday excursions then, no tourist trains, nothing of that sort. We started from the old Square and Compass Inn near the Haymarket one hot afternoon in a bullock dray, and, at the eminently respectable rate of ten miles a day, 'made' Hartley in eight days. Father Phelan was the parish priest. And a decent sort of parish it was as regards size. It extended from Bullock Flat (Oberon) to Weatherboard (Wentworth Falls), and from Ben Bullen to Burragorang. The Fish River Caves were part of the parish. Later on Father Phelan added to his duties by becoming, so to speak, the chaplain of the Zig Zag while the railway works were in course of construction. Father Phelan lived, or, to be correct, 'roughed it' in Big Hartley. As a boy I remember well – for I frequently accompanied him – how it was no uncommon thing for him to be called out of bed to ride ten and sixteen miles on a sick call, through chilling sleet and cutting wind. There were no roads at the time of which I speak; nothing but a bridle or bush track. Father Phelan told me he was often lost. His plan at such times was simple: 'I give my horse his head, and he always manages to find his way home.' A wonderful horse was "Robert". Now and then Master Robert played tricks on his ever-kind master. Once poor Father Phelan walked seven or eight miles of hilly country 'to save the poor beast, who appeared to be going lame.' On being turned loose into the paddock (this was at McAuley's, Long Swamp, where I was living at the time) Robert went through a few exercises after the manner of

Carbine [Melbourne Cup winner]. The good priest seemed a bit puzzled, but smiled as he made the remark, 'I don't think he is very lame, after all.'

Father Phelan used to have what we called 'stations'. He would say Mass at Kinambla (the Evan's) then at McAuley's, Long Swamp; then in turn at Marsden Swamp (Kelly's), at Lowther (I quite forget whose house he used), at Bullock Flat (Hogan's), at Slippery Creek (Slattery's), and at Sheedy's, now the site of Lithgow township. Often I kept him company when he came any way near Long Swamp. We were all very poor people – all Father Phelan's parishioners – and the weight of the collection at a 'station' never added much to the horse's load when the priest rode away to the next one. Still the dear priest never murmured. He gave away almost as much as he received. But about those 'stations'. It really was the 'early colonial' period of slab huts and bark houses. Gounod might well have got his inspiration to write 'Nazareth' in one of these humble dwellings –

"Though poor be the chamber,
Come here, come and adore."

The people of the house got warning when the priest was 'abroad' and everything was put in apple-pie order. Men and women and youngsters came in from ten and even twenty miles around, all on horseback; you couldn't drive in those days. Over and over again I stayed up all night to make an early start for Mass through scrub, and in Wintertime too. Sixteen miles there and sixteen miles back, and we thought nothing of it. I have a picture in my mind of those gatherings. In the stock-yard the horses are tied up in all sorts of ways. Mass would be said in the 'front room', facing the door. Half the congregation knelt outside. On these occasions the carpet – never used for any other purpose – was spread before the table, which did duty as the altar. Mass over, the carpet was folded away and kept 'in lavender' till the priest came around again. A 'station' meant considerable expense. The proprietor had to provide for all who came. By common consent all stayed to dinner, and there was no end of trouble to supply knives and forks and cups and saucers, to say nothing about plates. It was the rule to send out before and a borrowing expedition to all the neighbouring selections. Father Phelan knew that it was hard on a poor man to extend hospitality to all-comers. A characteristic incident. Sliding up quietly to the boss of the 'station', Father Phelan said, 'My poor man, you are out of pocket enough. Here is a pound note. When the collection takes place, put it on the plate.'

It was Father Phelan's custom to hear the children in their Catechism before Mass. Then he would hear Confessions. He had, of course, the best bed in the house, and that isn't saying much. Just before going to bed he would stop the clock. He could not sleep if the clock went on with its tick-tock. Oddly enough, he always slept with his watch under his pillow. In the morning he would set the clock going by his watch, and it was saying that we had the correct time only when Fr. Phelan gave it to us. Several tribes of blacks used to come in from Burragorang and other places. Fr. Phelan christened ever so many of the youngsters. In fact, all the aboriginals in the district were more or less Catholic. Anyway, they regarded themselves as members of Father Phelan's flock. The parsons didn't trouble their heads about them.

An old Scotch lady, who afterwards turned Catholic, gave Father Phelan a shock one evening. A scene at one of the 'stations'. It was just a little before Mass time, and His Reverence was walking up and down in the stock-yard reading his Office. He had been travelling all night. The old lady waited till there was nobody about, and walking quickly up to Father Phelan, said in a sort of half whisper, 'Father, you must be quite knocked up. Let me bring you a glass of rum; it will do you good.' Very often there was no one able to serve Mass. At one place Father Phelan spent about half an hour instructing a man how to 'do the answers in Latin.' The man, and what a 'character' he was, did not take kindly to the Latin; he got it into his head all right, but he couldn't get it out by hook or by crook. He was excellent whenever 'Amen' occurred, but all the rest was a shoreless sea

of confusion. Just when Father Phelan was giving up in despair, the unsatisfactory acolyte effected a brilliant compromise. "See here, Father," he said, "this Latin beats me entirely. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I can say all my prayers in Irish. How would that suit?" As it was a case of Hobson's choice, poor Father Phelan had to consent.

There was more prose than poetry in those 'station' days. Often and often Father Phelan had to wait till one o'clock for his first bite. And the food, what was it? – salt beef and damper, damper and salt beef. Which reminds me that there was a great commotion when His Reverence sold a cow to Parson Mayre. The parson and the priest were on the best of terms; in fact Father Phelan got on well with everybody – all the Protestants respected him. The sale of that cow upset old Tim _____. And Tim didn't keep his opinions to himself. When Father Phelan heard how his parishioner had been 'performing' he smiled and said, "I really believe Tim is afraid the poor beast will die a Protestant." Then about Father Phelan's horse. Well, as Kipling says, 'that's another story.' About 25 years ago Father Phelan went to Rome, and then to Tipperary, his birthplace. He left his horse, a young one, with a bit of good breeding in him, at Hartley. The man in charge trained the horse for racing work, and won several prizes. There was a pretty strong feeling against 'the priest's horse' being entered for races, but, all the same, we put our money on him.

We had weddings occasionally; no family should be without them. White satin dresses, orange blossoms, rose leaves, and Mendelssohn's March were regarded as wasteful and ridiculous excess. On one occasion Father Phelan was marrying a couple. The lady, who had come a long distance, was dressed in her riding habit. When the pair stood before the altar Father Phelan noticed that the bride held her riding-whip in her right hand. Turning to the bridegroom, the good priest, without showing the suspicion of a smile, said, 'John, will you tell Mary to put the whip away until after she is married.' One story suggests another. We had in the Hartley district a man who was very fond of airing his knowledge and his learning. Without knowing anything of Greek or Latin, it was his habit to fire off, in English, quotations from the classics. Once, with the intention of impressing Father Phelan, this village oracle pointed an argument with the remark, 'As Horace says', following up with one of his stock quotations. Father Phelan took all the bombast out of the speaker by simply saying, 'Dear me, Mr. _____, I really did not know that Horace spoke such good English.'

It was at the Catechism class. 'What should we be most afraid of in this world; what should we regard with the greatest horror?' A brilliant boy, with four-and-twenty imposing freckles on his face, made answer and said, 'Ghosts!' Once at the Fish River Caves his Reverence said Mass in 'The Devil's Coachhouse.' I was there. Many years afterwards I asked him if he remembered the incident. I could see that he was annoyed. He was very sensitive, and resented anything that had the flavour of levity when sacred subjects were being spoken of. 'I have said Mass in many strange and curious places!' That was the reply I got. Nothing more.

When the Zig Zag [railway line near Lithgow] was in the course of construction we had a great lot of strapping young Irishmen on the Mountains. Father Phelan had all the Catholic navvies and miners under his care. Not long after the shooting of the Duke of Edinburgh, preparations were made for a big procession. If my memory serves me rightly, it was the anniversary of the death of the Manchester Martyrs. A large number of green sashes were procured, and a band was engaged. The procession was to start at Lithgow, and finish at Middle River, near Wallerawang. Mr. Neale, the Police Magistrate at Hartley – the brother of the late millionaire – issued an order to the effect that the procession would not be allowed, as it was 'against the law.' Troopers came in from Bathurst, Green Swamp, and Hartley, in fact all the local police were on the job. The processionists assembled, and arrangements were made for the start. Then the police were drawn up, and the Riot Act, or something of that sort, was read. The police were in a wretched minority,

and would have been powerless to stop the procession. Just then Father Phelan drove up in his buggy – we had risen to the dignity of roads by this time – and all eyes were turned on him. He took a position in front of the half-organised procession. Standing in his buggy, the good priest briefly addressed the men. It was not an eloquent speech, but it was full of sound common sense. To put it in a nutshell, he said, ‘Your procession has been declared illegal; disband like good fellows, and don’t make fools of yourselves.’ Nearly all the young men at once fell out of the ranks, and took off their sashes. A few of the hard-headed veterans insisted on their right to walk. These fiery enthusiasts did walk a few miles, but the ‘authorities’ winked the other eye, and took no action. The procession proper, or improper, was smashed up by Father Phelan. In a few moments he did what all the police could not have done in a month of Sundays. The priest’s tact and influence saved us from bloodshed. With the passions of strong men aroused, goodness only knows what sacrifice of life there might have been. The police would have gone down for a dead certainty, and the whole district would have become a field of strife and bitterness. As a matter of fact, nearly all the English navvies cleared out the night before the Irish ‘celebration’, and did not return till peace was proclaimed.

Father Phelan ended his days very peacefully. He had his cosy home, his garden, of which he was very fond, his well-stocked library, and – greatest consolation of all- his little chapel, in which he said Holy Mass every day. To the last the poor were the objects of his love and solicitude. He was buried with ‘full military honours’, I mean, of course, that he had the honours due to a veteran. The Cardinal-Archbishop and his Lordship Dr Higgins journeyed to St Mary’s South Creek, to show their respect and regret. Some fifty priests sang the Dirge and the Requiem. In that ‘choir’ were the oldest friends of the dead priest, Monsignor Rigney and Archpriest Sheehy. The Vicar-General, Dr Carroll, Dean Healy, and Dean Slattery were also there.

What Macauley said of a world-wide favourite may with even more justice be said of the good priest who has gone to his rest:- “There are a few characters which have stood the closest scrutiny and the severest tests, which have been tried in the furnace and proved true, which have been weighed in the balance and have not been found wanting, which have been declared sterling by general consent, and which are visibly stamped with the image and superscription of the Most High. These men we trust that we know how to prize, and of these was _____^{vi}.”

MAY HE REST IN PEACE.

PATRICK LYNCH

Sydney, January 21 1898

3. Extracts from *The Big Sycamore*.

Further material on the life and times of Father James Phelan comes from the book *The Big Sycamore*³ written by a nephew of Father Phelan, Monsignor Maurice Browne (1891-1979), using the pseudonym Joseph Brady. Monsignor Browne wrote the story of his own family in novel form, changing the names of the key characters, some of whom were still alive. The material is, however, historically accurate. Monsignor Browne quotes at length from the letters of Father James to his niece Kate in Ireland, mother of Monsignor Browne. In the book James

³ Joseph Brady, *The Big Sycamore*, M.H.Gill and Son Ltd, Dublin, 1958.

Phelan is named as James Whelan. In the transcription of the text from *The Big Sycamore* below, Father Phelan will be given his true name.

Monsignor Browne writes:

"Several of the letters kept by Kate were written by her uncle, Father James Phelan. They were posted from many addresses in New South Wales. His parish was a vast one, embracing hundreds of square miles of scrub land. In his latter years at South Creek he complains of his poor health. And yet he has to do very hard work in the parish. On Sunday morning his first Mass is celebrated at seven o'clock. After that he mounts his horse and rides fifteen miles to say his second Mass at twelve o'clock, noon. The Eucharistic fast was most rigorous in those times. Not even a cup of cold water was allowed. He did not get his breakfast until one-thirty in the afternoon. He was so ravenously hungry that he took a substantial meal. This caused him grave discomfort.

"All his letters breathe nostalgia for the old land. He enquires for the neighbours, one by one. Money is enclosed for needy relatives, although he finds it hard to make ends meet. A money-order is enclosed as a wedding present for "Auntie" (Anastasia) who is about to marry Tommy Sweetman. He sends twenty-five pounds to pay the rent at Ballyduggan. 'I'm sorry that it is not more, but this is a poor parish. I have three churches to look after. One of them, Greendale, is fifteen miles away. In addition there is an out-station, Springwood, twelve miles further on, which I visit once in eight weeks. I have to preach three times on Sunday. The people here are very different from those at home. If the priest doesn't preach, he will soon have only empty benches...

"A letter posted on 26th May, 1897, was kept in a special envelope, on which Kate had written, 'Father James's last letter.' The handwriting is not done in the fine style of penmanship revealed in former letters. It is weak and spidery. His thoughts are on eternity: 'Remember me to the kind old neighbours who once knew me. I hope they will pray for me that I may persevere in the grace of God. Write a long letter and write soon. Let me know all you can about the poor people who will ever be dear to me.'

"...As he was not able to visit his parish on horseback, he had retired from active service to a house and five acres of ground which he had purchased. He ministered as chaplain to a community of nuns. He tells Kate about his cow, his horse, and his housekeeper who had looked after him for fifteen years...

"He reflects that it is now twenty-five years since he visited his homeland. The weariness that comes with old age was upon him. He was suffering from insomnia, and back again was the 'wind on the stomach', which had racked him for such a long time. Poor circulation also afflicted him. The doctor's opinion was that the insomnia was caused by his constant reading and studying of problems 'that are too difficult of solution.' Charcoal biscuits were prescribed as a remedy against flatulence. Long fasting was blamed for the trouble. 'This is what breaks down so many of our priests.'

"He mentions that there is great unrest in Australia. 'Who would have thought that New South Wales would come to the pass in which it finds itself at present? Thousands are in the poorhouse. When I came to the colony, no man need be idle for want of work. But now the case is entirely altered. There is at present a deadly strife between the sheep-owners and the

shearers. The latter are going about, shooting and burning and committing other horrible crimes. This is the New South Wales of today. Victoria and Queensland are just as bad.

“Father James had been a constant correspondent, giving bright and breezy accounts of life in the Antipodes. He thirsted for news of the old land. The next Australian missive was a newspaper cutting from The Sydney Freeman’s Journal of 5th February, 1898, an obituary notice of the death of Father James Phelan of St Mary’s Creek...”

4. Sources:

- a) Cuneo, Fr William A: *Hunters of God – A Brief History of St Bernard’s Church, Hartley 1838-1979* (published by W.A. Cuneo, Coastal Printing, c 1983)
- b) *Freeman’s Journal*
- c) Hartigan, Fr Patrick (“John O’Brien”)
- d) Hasler, Fay: *Sesqui-Centenary of St Bernard’s Hartley and St Patricks Lithgow 1842-1992* (C&W Printing, Lithgow, 1992)
- e) Jones, Laurel: family notes.
- f) Phelan, James: Diary (1869-1870): held at Sydney Archdiocesan Archives Office.
- g) Stapleton, Eugenie, *Other Days, Other Ways* (St Marys Historical Society, August 1985)
- h) *Sydney Morning Herald*

Thank you to

- Laurel Jones for supplying newspaper articles, family notes and an extract from *The Big Sycamore*; and for initiating research into the life of Father Phelan.
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- Mrs Margaret Dwyer and fellow-members of the St Marys Historical Society office, for access to the Stapleton history.
- Jo at the Sydney Archdiocesan Archives Office for access to the Phelan Diary microfilm.
- Sister Anne and Kristy at the Lithgow parish office for their assistance.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord. Let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace.

5. Hartley views



St Bernard's Catholic Church, Hartley. Completed 1848



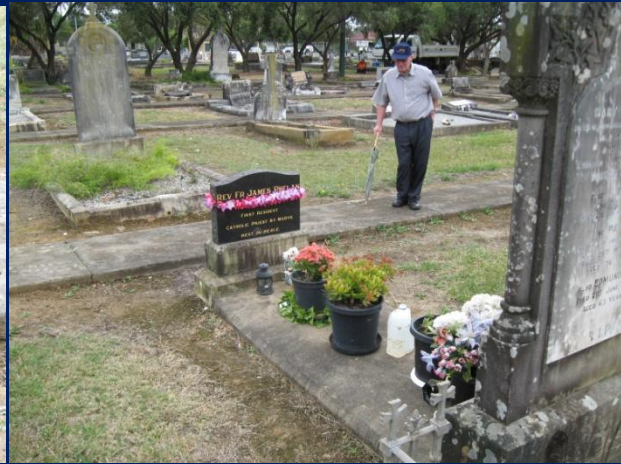
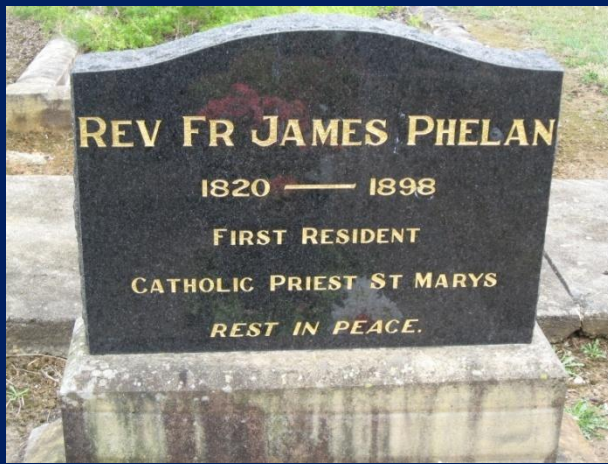
Catholic presbytery, Hartley (built 1859, during Fr Phelan's first year in Hartley).



Hartley presbytery and church



View from presbytery balcony, facing north. Courthouse middle right. With Governor Gipps' permission, the Court House was used for Mass before the construction of St Bernard's Church.



Fr Phelan's grave in St Marys Cemetery; regularly tended by three parishioners. The original tombstone fell into disrepair, and was replaced by St Marys' parishioners.

6. End-notes:

ⁱ The Freeman's Journal, April 28 1858, records the young Father Phelan's departure from Kelso (Bathurst). Father Phelan obviously made a great impression during his relatively short stay there:

ADDRESS TO THE REVEREND J. PHELAN

The following Address, accompanied by a purse containing one hundred and thirty-seven sovereigns, was presented by a deputation from his congregation, on Friday week, at the Deanery, to the Rev. J. Phelan, late St. Michael's, previous to his departure for the new sphere of his labours at Hartley: -

To the Rev. J. Phelan, Church of St. Michael, Bathurst.

"And as a Bird each fond endearment tries
To tempt its new fledged offspring to the skies;
He tried each art, reprov'd each dull delay,
Allured to brighter worlds and led the way."

REV. AND DEAR SIR, -

We, the undersigned, being a deputation of the Catholics of Bathurst, for ourselves and for and on behalf of the congregation of the Church of St. Michael, having learnt with deep regret that we are about to be deprived of your invaluable presence and services, and being aware that many pecuniary calls for charitable and patriotic purposes have been made upon you, which, notwithstanding your limited means, were always generously responded to, beg respectfully that you will graciously receive at our hands the accompanying purse containing *One Hundred and Thirty-seven Sovereigns*, which we present as the free-will offering of your affectionate and grateful people, and as a testimony of our appreciation of your attentive, pious, and persevering efforts in every matter connected with or conducive to the welfare of your Parishioners.

With unfeigned grief, we now utter those sad words Farewell, AND HUMBLY SUPPLICATE THE ALMIGHTY to bless and spare you for many years to be a useful and edifying Minister in His Holy Church.

JOHN MEILON, SEN.
JAMES FITZPATRICK
Bathurst, April 16, 1858.

The Rev. Gentleman replied in a few feeling and appropriate words, expressive of his deep appreciation of the good will of the people, of his gratitude for their munificent gift, and of regret at the separation which was about to take place between them; and concluded his reply by assuring them that they would be ever present in his prayers, although his personal supervision of them had ceased.

ⁱⁱ The Sydney Morning Herald (27 April 1869, page 5) records: "HARTLEY, Monday: An address, together with a purse containing 81 sovereigns, was presented to the Rev James Phelan yesterday, on the eve of his departure for Europe. The rev. gentleman left Hartley this morning, escorted to the railway-station by a large circle of friends."

The October 7 1869 edition of the Freeman's Journal reports on a lecture Father Phelan gave during his holiday in Ireland:

"REV. FATHER PHELAN, LATE OF HARTLEY.

We perceive from a Kilkenny Journal, that the Rev. J. Phelan, who for many years was stationed at Hartley, and who recently went to his native country for the benefit of his health, has been lecturing upon Australia. We take the following notice of the lecture from our contemporary of August 9. –

ST PATRICK'S YOUNG MEN'S SOCIETY.
Grangemockler, County Tipperary.

The Rev James Phelan lately delivered an interesting lecture in the new and spacious hall of the above society on the 'Social, Religious, and Political position of the Irish in Australia.' The rev. gentleman has recently returned from that distant land, where he has resided as a missionary priest for the last seventeen years. the spiritual director of the Society, Rev. John Dee, who occupied the chair, briefly introduced the lecturer. He (the Rev. chairman) begged to observe that the intellectual treat which would be laid before them was one which would afford them much interest, information, and pleasure. A large and distinguished audience assembled on the occasion, in addition to the members of the society. The Rev. lecturer was received with the utmost enthusiasm throughout, and especially at the conclusion of his very eloquent and instructive discourse. It was a comprehensive history, embracing all the characteristics of the Irish race. At its conclusion, Father Phelan paid a grateful and well-merited eulogium to the Irish people and their descendants on their attachment to our holy faith. The lecture occupied one hour and thirty-five minutes in the delivery. The usual vote of thanks was then proposed both to the lecturer and chairman, and carried with acclamation. The meeting then separated, evidently delighted with the lecture and the information it afforded."

ⁱⁱⁱ Hartley is a little village near Lithgow, a significant centre in Father Phelan's time. The church (completed in 1848) and presbytery still stand. Hartley Vale is a few miles from Hartley.

^{iv} Cf Eugenie Stapleton, *Other Days, Other Ways* (published by St Marys Historical Society, August 1985), pp237-239:

“Another early church in St Marys was the Roman Catholic church..completed in 1875 and was opened by Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide. ... Father James Phelan was appointed to take charge of both the Penrith and St Marys districts [in 1880].

“In 1880 the Sisters of St Joseph set up a convent in the Presbytery next to the church and opened a school. One of the nuns, Sister Patrick, wrote in May 1880: “We have been in our little convent a month and the people seem delighted to have us with them. There are fifty six children on roll. Father James Phelan comes out every Thursday and says Mass...

“In his early years in N.S.W. Father James Phelan had a bush parish that embraced hundreds of square miles of scrub land over which he rode on a horse which had cost him £25 to conduct services in his extensive parish.

“By the time he came to South Creek his health was poor, but he still worked very hard, preaching in three different churches on Sunday, including one at Greendale. He also rode to Springwood once every eight weeks to an ‘outstation’ to take a service.

“His first Mass was celebrated at seven o’clock, his last at noon after a ride of fifteen miles to Greendale. He did not get his breakfast till 1:30 in the afternoon, for the rules of fasting were very strict at that time. This caused him much discomfort, for which charcoal biscuits were prescribed, and his health deteriorated steadily.

“He sent home to Ireland any money he could, but times were bad, with unemployment and poverty and great strife between sheep-owners and the shearers.

“By this time Father Phelan was nearly eighty years old and, unable to ride round his parish, he had retired to a house and five acres of land in St Marys. He ministered as chaplain to the community of nuns. He had a horse, a cow and a housekeeper who had looked after him for fifteen years...

“...The headstone over his grave records his name and other details in Latin:

A.D.M.

Rev Jacobius Phelan

Sacerdos Dioces Sydneyan Per Annos 46

Obit 5th January 1898 Annes natus 79 R.I.P”

^v On 12 March 1868 at Clontarf, Sydney, Irish-born Henry James O'Farrell (1833 – 21 April 1868) shot and wounded HRH The Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, the second son and fourth child of Queen Victoria. Anti-Irish sentiment spread through the colony. The March 27 1868 edition of the Sydney Morning Herald reported: “There was a talk of a meeting of Irishmen on Hyde Park, on the night of the 16th Instant [March], but it came to nothing. On the 16th a special sitting of the Supreme Court, in its criminal jurisdiction, was ordered, to be holden on Thursday, the 26th Instant. Its object is to try O'Farrell, now in custody for attempting to assassinate his Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. An order was also made for a special panel of seventy-two jurors. The preliminary investigation in respect of the late attempt to murder the Prince took place, at Darlinghurst Gaol, on the 13th and 16th instant. On the latter day the prisoner was fully committed to take his trial. On the Great Western Line, on the 17th instant about 140 Irishmen, wearing green sashes, & c., assembled near Hartley to march down the line. The Rev. Mr. Phelan, the Roman Catholic priest, met them, and warmly remonstrated with them. They took his advice and dispersed.” O'Farrell was hung on April 21 1868.

^{vi} Here Macauley had inserted the name of the poet Milton. Lynch suggests Phelan’s insertion.
