

ARNCLIFFE REVISITED

Fr Hugh Murray CM

Sometime in 1987 I approached the then Visitor, Fr Gerry Scott cm, about my placement at Marsfield. I was finishing a three year stint as Parish Priest and was a little reluctant to face up to a second one as I had real doubts about my ability to be a Parish Priest or even a priest in a parish.

Gerry accepted the situation and was keeping an eye out for my suitable occupation. One day he asked me to go with him to a meeting in the former nurses' housing at St Vincent's Hospital in Darlinghurst in Sydney. The meeting was about assisting in the pastoral care of a relatively new group, people who had been infected with the Human Immune Deficiency Virus soon to be granted the universal acronym of HIV. Both of us were deeply moved by the plight of the people involved, and Gerry, very tentatively, wondered whether or not this could be my apostolate in the coming year.

I was glad to accept. Because it was a new work for our province, and because Gerry foresaw marauding pastors anxious to use a priest who was not really engaged elsewhere, and, most of all, because the work might be dangerous and was involved with persons the Church disapproved of, Gerry suggested finding a new house.

For some years, one house of religious after another had become vacant as vocations dried up. We were looking for a place in the inner metropolitan area of Sydney. We were not having much success in the search. One day, quite accidentally I heard that the Good Samaritan house in Tempe might be closing. I knocked at their door and stated my quest to be met with a marked degree of disquietude. It was the first that the resident community, admittedly a caretaker one, had heard

Arncliffe Revisited

of the move. I needed all my skills to avoid naming my sources and backed off fairly quickly.

The rumour about closure turned out to be true. When I thought the time propitious, I approached the Major Superiors of the Good Sams and presented my case. To my delight it was accepted and early in 1988, the community of Bon Mannes cm, the Boxer Bitch called Silhouette, the Border-collie named Toby, and myself left Marsfield for our new home.



*Left to Right: Fr Bon Mannes CM, Toby,
Fr Hugh Murray CM, Silhouette*

Tempe House, as the neighbourhood called it, was soon catalogued as our Vincentian House at Arncliffe. It already had a wonderful life behind it.

Arncliffe Revisited



Tempe House

A prominent Sydney trader had had it built to the design of John Verge (1782-1861) in about 1837 or 1838. It had been the merchant's country estate. It was graced with gardens that swept down to Cook's River, with plenty of land on either side.

At another stage of its history it had been a school run by the remarkable Caroline Chisolm whose visage appeared for many years on one of Australia's bank notes.

At the turn of the century, the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, an Australian foundation of Archbishop Polding OSB, acquired the property. The Sisters had had to move because Sydney's rail system needed their property where Central Station now is..

So Tempe House was now a convent. On the site the Sisters established a laundry which provided work for the many women the Sisters were pledged to look after. By the time we arrived, Tempe House had served as the administration focus for a large work called St

Arncliffe Revisited

Magdalene's. There was a huge mass of buildings: a central courtyard surrounded by class rooms and work rooms, by kitchen and dormitories. A very large commercial Laundry was at one end. Another building housed classrooms at one time used by the De la Salle Brothers from Marrickville. Quite early in the piece, a chapel had been built in Gothic style, and between Chapel and Main Building, an enclosed swimming pool had been installed.

From this place, rented most reasonably to us by the Sisters, the Vincentians' work for people with HIV and AIDS started. We lived at first in the Main Building occupying cells and sitting room, kitchen and refectory, of some of the women who had lived there and whose liberties were less curtailed than the others.

The rest of the main block was rented to an evangelical group who used it as a school for song and dance. A Good Sam Sister stayed on living in Tempe House, and another, Sr. Frances, looked after the grounds and buildings with the assistance of week-end prisoners from Long Bay Prison. Frances was accompanied everywhere by a Very Large German Shepherd who loved her dearly. Frances was kindness itself but it would have taken a very bold prisoner to tangle with the Dog.

At the southern end of Tempe house were two little fibro cottages. One of these was a storehouse. The other was used by a young one-parent family who, in many ways became Frances' family. After a year or two, this family moved on and their little cottage became our Guest House.

In 1990, I had gone to Bathurst for the Silver Jubilee of Brother John Gaven cm. After the celebrations I returned to Sydney and called in at Mollie Malone's house (Marsfield parishioners) to be greeted by the cry: "Your house is on fire." Within a few minutes I was around at Vincentia St, shaken and worried. Bernard Scott, one of the Vins in residence there, drove me the forty minute journey back to Arncliffe. We arrived there just as the fire trucks were packing up and with the

Arncliffe Revisited

good news that none of the community was hurt and the part that we lived in was safe.



Left: Fire damage to roof

*Right Foreground:
Guest House*



Not long after this, the Good Samaritan Sisters sold the whole complex to Qantas. This big Australian Airline was planning to install on the property, a massive computer, some floors deep, in the silt of the property near the river. This computer was meant to control Qantas world-wide activities, but the plan was put into hibernation when an amalgamation took place with British Airways.

We had to do some negotiation with their Property Manager. Fortunately, he seemed to take a shine to us and what we were about. (Qantas administration was marvellous in those days to the considerable number of staff who were HIV infected.)

The result suited us very well. We had the use of a beautiful but run-down historic home, about a five minute drive to Sydney Airport, acres of parking space, a guest cottage albeit Spartan, and 25 metre pool that

Arncliffe Revisited

Qantas serviced each week. The cost was unbelievable: Five Dollars per month provided, we were told with tongue in cheek, that we paid in advance.

I cannot remember the sequence of the confrères who shared our space. Bon and I lasted six years. Gerry Scott cm was there for six years. Kevin Canty, Peter Reedy, Brian O'Sullivan, Guy Hartcher and Brian Spillane, all Vincentians of the Province lived there in varying numbers. I cannot remember what year it was that I had to find a baby-sitter for Bon while I went to the International HIV/AIDS conference in San Francisco. Greg Cantwell who had come from Melbourne to Ashfield, and was looking to see how we Vins lived, very kindly came to hold Bon's hand. Greg served us well and has become a life long friend as have his wife and children. When Greg went back to Ashfield, my attention was drawn to a young Vincent de Paul man who was studying, Simon Watts, who later distinguished himself in State Public Service. He too, became Bon's "Ange" and a good friend to many of us. Another long-time guest was a young priest awaiting incardination in Sydney Diocese, Paul O'Shea, who was the Chaplain at De La Salle Ashfield.

The House proved to be a wonderful asset of the Province. Not only did it provide a safe parking space for our Jet Setters but also it provided refuge for some, and safe quiet for others. The House became renowned for its hospitality despite the fact that to live there, one had to be prepared to rough it a bit. To the best of my knowledge, it is the only house of the Province where a micro-wave oven was stolen from the kitchen while the community had breakfast in the next room. We were robbed on at least two other occasions, one of which happened while I was indulging in a bath next door to my room.

Bon Mannes and I left Arncliffe for Marsfield at the end of six years. Before we left, Brian O'Sullivan CM came to join in the work for HIV folk and, for a year or so, we worked together. Brian became the Community Leader when I moved on. He maintained to a very high

Arncliffe Revisited

standard indeed the nature of the place, not only from the point of view of the work, but also as far as hospitality was concerned. I think that it was in Arncliffe that many confrères learnt that we could, and did, live very well in circumstances where we virtually had not a penny to spare.



Fr Brian O'Sullivan CM – Cheffing !

In the end, Qantas found that they did not need the property. Fortunately this did not happen until after they had joined with Australian Airlines. They asked me if I would be willing to be Santa Claus at one Christmas. They planned to bring a 727 from Melbourne, with guests. How could I refuse? I said, facetiously, that I would be happy to do so if I could come up the river in a speedboat or fly in by helicopter. I should have had more sense. Somewhere in Qantas' archives are pictures of Hugh Murray CM, bursting with bonhomie, arraigned in red, and circling, in a helicopter, the faithful assembled on the front lawn.

There was other movement at the station. A new Underground rail was to go to Sydney airport and was to go right through our front yard.

Arncliffe Revisited

In a few short years, the Vins were gone. Huge towers that hover like a menace, squeeze Tempe house property. The Chapel has been kept, the main house is being renovated, but all traces of the Institution have been obliterated. The quiet, the peace, the simplicity of Tempe House is gone forever.

No confrère of the house died while we were there but some “Associates” did: Toby, one of the Originals, a border-collie, used love to sit high on the cliff above Prince’s Highway with Bon. Toby had it in his genes to chase things. Somewhere in his doggy mind he thought big white trucks were sheep and he met his death by falling off the cliff chasing one. Suzie was a little lost creature who came to our kitchen door one day. She was full of mischief and lived out her remaining years as the celibate companion of the renowned Sebastian. Suzie eventually bit Bon and had to be put down.

Silhouette had come to us in an unusual way. Bon had had his heart set on a Schnauzer. We had gone one day to kennel country in Sydney’s Dural area. Bon was shattered at the cost of puppies but managed to insinuate himself into the soul of the owner. The result was that we came back from the Hills with a twitchy Boxer bitch. She was magnificently bred, but had failed to become a mother. Bon became the chosen instrument for us to have and to hold, from that day forward, for better or for worse, to love and to cherish until said bitch was showing the first signs of being on heat.

When that happened she was returned to the kennels, had her puppies and then presented as a gift to us until death were us to part. She lived with us at Arncliffe in the manner of a princess but inoperable cancer was to be her fate and she too had to be put down.

After Sil died Bon and I had gone to the RSPCA refuge for animals, looking for something as balm for Bon’s soul. He fancied himself as a dog lover and trainer, but every hound he ever had, in New Zealand and Australia, put it over Bon.

Arncliffe Revisited

Sebastian was a big dog, part Beagle and part Basset. When we arrived at the RSPCA, he was putting on a bit of a turn hoping to gain the attention of a couple. Faced apparently with the choice of dog or piano because of space, they opted for the piano. We bought him before they changed their mind. He was a three year old waif, without ID. Naturally, in the Refuge, he was called Fred after the comic strip Basset. I asked Bon what he wanted to call him. Bon had never heard of Fred in the comics, but announced that, although he had a father called Fred, and a brother, it was such a common name. Facetiously I suggested Mozart or Sebastian Bach. Bon was delighted and then intended to address the mutt as Bassie. We thank the Lord he never did, but Sebastian Bark was to become a part of our lives.

He hated water and to bathe him we had to inveigle a friend called Dominic Hearne to come along. We would close off the Courtyard, prepare an old bath tub with suitably warmed water, and Dominic would change into his swimmers. The battle was fierce. Dominic whom Sebastian loved, always won, but Sebastian would sulk and avert his eyes from his friend until love overcame all.

Sebastian was a dog who obeyed only when it suited him. We risked a couple of thousand dollars in fines every time he escaped from the property. The nature of the fences made this very simple. He would wander from one car-yard to another, from this favoured repair shop to that, in a constant search for food. He stole more lunches than we could count but, such was his charm, that when whole truckloads of navvies passed us on our walks, the men would call out :”Hello, Sebastian.”

These animals were as much part of Arncliffe as the confrères were, and I am so proud to honour their names and their taking ways.

Arncliffe Revisited



Above: Bathtime for Sebastian

Left: Silhouette in royal pose.

In the years that have passed since I lived at Arncliffe, I have come to the conclusion that animals in community can be a mixed blessing. But there is no doubt that for some, they complement our humanity and bring comfort to our lives.

Arncliffe was a one-off for our Province. But, each house that we have had, has a story. I hope that somehow others will dissect their memories and direct our attention to the places they have loved, incarnating the serene pages of the archives, giving us spirit again for days and ways that are gone, counting again and again our blessings.
