IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY CHURCH 70th ANNIVERSARY

SUNDAY 7 DECEMBER 2025

A Parish Created

by Sophy Morley (neé Broeren)

Over seventy years ago, in 1950, Newborough was nothing but a collection of shacks, some houses amidst dirt tracks, scrub and bush. Initially this place did not have a name as it had begun as an outpost of Yallourn which had been established to house the workers at the State Electricity Commission power station.

To this primitive settlement, they came from all over the world – in the aftermath of the devastating effects of World War Two… migrants hoping for a better life and prospects in Australia, for them and their families. They came: the English, Scottish and Irish, and from Europe: penniless people, many scarred by their experience of war: Austrians, Polish, Ukrainians Maltese, Italians, Greeks, Dutch, German, and also migrants from the Baltic States, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Madagascar. Over 21 nationalities, including Australians, made this area their home. Many of the British and Irish migrants settled in East and North Newborough in prefabricated houses, imported from England by the State Electricity Commission to house their growing workforce. Others gradually built houses in what became known as Old Newborough.

There was no formally established church or parish. Most of the Catholic community either walked over Coach Road Hill to Yallourn or to Moe for Sunday Mass. Both destinations were over six kilometres away (4 miles).

Eventually, Mass was celebrated for the growing community by the curate from Yallourn, Fr O'Hagan, and by Fr Ryan, the priest from Moe, in various locations, including an old stable in Old Sale Road (using upturned fruit boxes for seats) and later, in a small Quonset corrugated iron hut (or Nissen hut) on Torres St Track, where the Polish people had been gathering for Mass.

In 1955, Fr Frank Ruth was appointed by Bishop Lyons as the first Priest of the newly created Parish of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In the early days, Fr Ruth initially celebrated Mass in the Polish church in Torres Track and then the community began to worship in a big Nissen Hut in Boolarra Ave, East Newborough, which was being used as a theatre.

In February 1955 a five-acre block of swampy, waterlogged and scrubby land on Monash Road was purchased for 5000 pounds. Father Ruth looked around for volunteers to help build a new place of worship. Within a few days, he found his first man, Barney Finan, who later became his life-long friend. Within days, Barney, Fr Ruth and several parishioners had begun work on the block, labouring to clear the land and pull up the tree stumps. Meanwhile, the Nissen Hut which had been used by the SEC to store sections of prefabricated houses, was sold to the parish for 450 pounds and transferred in sections to the Monash Road site. Barney Finan headed a volunteer team to begin work on building the first church.

Foundations were dug and after much backbreaking work, the church was built and furnished and prepared for use. At Midnight on Christmas Eve, 1955, Mass

was joyfully celebrated for the first time. The transformation from a Nissen Hut to a House of God was complete.

Two years later, in 1957, saw the commencement of St Mary's Primary School, with two Presentation Sisters from Moe teaching 104 children. They were succeeded soon after by the arrival of the Sisters of St Joseph. The parish was informed that they had just 13 weeks to build a convent to house the Sisters. In 1958, St Joseph's Convent was opened by Bishop Lyons. By this time the school had expanded to four classrooms with 278 students.

By 1960, the school enrolment increased to 332 students under the care of four Sisters: Sr Frances Paul had a composite class of 95 Prep and Grade 1 children, Sr Mary Camillus with 89 children, Sr Mary Borromeo with 73 children and Sr Ina with 75 children in the senior grades. Quite a different scenario to our much smaller class sizes these days!

The parish continued to grow and flourish under Fr Ruth's energetic leadership. A parish choir was soon established and comprised adults and children. They sang for Sunday Mass and also entered singing competitions at the local eisteddfod in Traralgon. Newborough became known as the 'singing parish' as many migrants had sung in parish and community choirs and with their families at home. Music and singing remained an integral and important part of their culture.

There was an active "Younger Set" for young adults and it was a vibrant part of the parish for many years. Many a match was made and engagements, weddings and baptisms celebrated. There were also several young adults from our community who became religious sisters, brothers and priests. And of course, one of our own, Fr Harry Dyer, became our parish priest in 2015 when Newborough and Moe became parishes-in-partnership.

Father Ruth returned for our wonderful 40th anniversary Mass, followed by Barney's BBQ named in honour of one of our pioneers. In his book *Gippsland, My Home Ground,* Fr Ruth confessed that of all the places to which he was sent, Newborough was a special place for him. He said that he had left his heart in Newborough.

As someone who is a first-generation Australian with a Dutch heritage, I can say that Newborough was a fantastic place in which to grow up. Our parish was the spiritual and cultural centre for our Catholic Community. I was born in the year that the parish was established and was baptised in what was the Polish church in Torres Street. My name is on the first page of the parish baptismal register. I

was six months old when the parish church was opened for that first Mass on Christmas Eve in 1955. I remember the dirt roads before the bitumen was laid and also the primitive little shops in Newborough before more lasting buildings were erected.

Over these seventy years, our parish has been blessed by the leadership and ministry of our dedicated priests and sisters. We have also been enriched by our migrants with their diverse cultural heritage; with music, stories, food, and ethnic customs and rituals.

Looking back on my childhood here, I have fond memories of joining the parish choir at the tender age of five, with my Uncle Martin as the first choir leader of the parish. We were taught to sing hymns and also Gregorian chant as well as secular songs. We had vibrant parish masses and embraced the liturgical changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. Music was also an important part of my childhood at home. Mum and Dad had grown up in Holland, singing in church choirs, so music was important to them. As a family, we sang a lot at home, and also in the car on long three-hour trips to Melbourne. I guess that in no small part my music ministry and involvement in church music and conducting community choirs stems from this early exposure music and cultivating a love of many various forms of music – both instrumental and choral.

Our parish, over the years, was a hub of activity with lots of different activities - groups for women and men and young adults and children, with Catholic Women's Leagues, dances, camps, family groups, sports and much more. We celebrated First Holy Communion and Confirmation with Mass and wonderful breakfasts in the school afterwards.

During this time, the Sisters of St Joseph were a constant presence in our lives and in the parish community – as dedicated, caring and compassionate women. I admire their courage and perseverance in taking on such enormous classes of 70 -90 children. I don't think they really had a choice! We received a good and well-rounded education from the Sisters. In addition to the education side, the Sisters organised netball and football trams, sports and swimming days and of course, who could forget the weekly marching formations around the quadrangle as marching music blared out over the outdoor loudspeaker as we all gathered in front of the Australian flag for the singing of the National Anthem. The Sisters' role as educators at St Mary's School ended in 1986, but for many years we were blessed by their presence as parish pastoral workers where they took on a multitude of responsibilities in helping to care for,

support and strengthen our parish community. We were sad to farewell the Sisters some years ago and we do miss their presence among us. The legacy and charism of the Sisters of St Joseph lives on and the ideals of their founder, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop continues to be fostered by our teachers and students at St Mary's Primary School.

In 1981, Fr John O'Kelly, our parish priest, together with the parish community realised that the time had come to replace the church. It had been our beloved *Nissen Hut* and the centre of our parish for 26 years, but the time had come to build a more permanent house of God. In 1982, Fr Herman Hengel, together with Fr Ruth's firm friend, Barney Finan, turned the first sod for the building of our new Church which was completed at the end of that year. Fr Hengel assembled a parish consultative group who researched architects, visited newly built churches in our Diocese and in the Melbourne Archdiocese, reviewed church designs and consulted the parish community on what features they felt the new church was to have. The overwhelming sentiment from the parish was that the new church was to have the same atmosphere of friendliness and community spirit that was such a feature of our beloved Nissen Hut Church. The community was consulted every step of the way and the final result is apparent: a light-filled, welcoming and beautiful church. This church, where we have gathered to give thanks and praise to God, is a clear testimony to the faith and vision of the parish in erecting a place of worship that is a fitting and beautiful home for God and the People of God here in Newborough. Our parish community has much to be thankful for – for the past 70 years of faithful witness and Christian living. We are also blessed now to be a new parish, amalgamated with St Kieran's Moe. We are enriched by the company of our brothers and sisters in sharing worship and social occasions together. Together, our community finds ways of adapting to the changing times and continues to live out our faith in our homes, workplaces and community.

And now, I would like to propose a toast to Immaculate Heart of Mary – the parish and church – to all our faithful priests, some of whom are with us today, to the Sisters of St Joseph, to our pioneers and all the parishioners who have been part of this community over seventy years. Please be upstanding and join me to toasting St Mary's Parish and Church!

Hip, hip, hooray!


PRAISE
FROM