



HERITAGE  
COUNCIL  
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

# REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES

## Permanent Entry

1. **Data Base No** 0573
2. **Name** *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* (1903)
3. **Description of elements included in this entry** The Convent of Mercy and the land on which it stands, being Coolgardie Town Lots 179-183.
4. **Local Government Area** Shire of Coolgardie
5. **Location** 35 Lindsay Street, Coolgardie.
6. **Owner** Christian Aboriginal Parent-Directed School
7. **Statement of Significance of Place (Assessment in Detail)**

### DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* was built in 1903 as a convent school for the Sisters of Mercy. The building was built in response to a significant expansion of Roman Catholic educational activity in the Coolgardie area.

The Catholic Church had been active in the eastern goldfields of Western Australia since 1894. The first Mass was celebrated in Coolgardie in April 1894 and the first hospital, served by the St. John of God Sisters, opened in 1896.<sup>1</sup> The railway came through Coolgardie in March 1896<sup>2</sup> bringing more people to the goldfields, and later that year, on 20 November, Bishop Gibney arrived in Kalgoorlie with the intention of establishing convents on the goldfields.<sup>3</sup> The Bishop purchased the Theatre Royal and the adjoining premises in Woodward Street, Coolgardie, for £800 and on 31 January 1898 the first convent school in the goldfields was opened. The school had fifty students and a staff of five Sisters of Mercy.<sup>4</sup> The Sisters of Mercy had come from South America, via Adelaide, to provide religious instruction in the region.<sup>5</sup>

By 1901 the Eastern Goldfields, including the towns of Boulder, Coolgardie, and Kalgoorlie, had a Catholic population of some 12,123 people, which was about 29% of the Catholic population of Western Australia.<sup>6</sup> The high number of school age

<sup>1</sup> Bourke, D.F. *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia*. (Archdiocese of Perth, 1979), p.132.

<sup>2</sup> Reid, A. *Those were the Days* (Barclay & Sharland, Perth, WA 1933), p.21.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p.219.

<sup>4</sup> Trotman, A.H. *The History of Coolgardie* p.79

<sup>5</sup> Bourke, D.F. *op.cit.* p.132.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.131.

children in the area prompted the need for a larger school building so the Sisters of Mercy decided to build "a convent for the Sisters, a Ladies' Boarding School and a High School for daily scholars."<sup>7</sup>

The architect of the *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* was Michael Cavanagh, a prominent Adelaide architect who, attracted by the gold boom prosperity in Western Australia, had established a practice in Perth in 1895. Cavanagh was responsible for many of the Catholic Church's ecclesiastical buildings in Western Australia, as well as numerous other commercial, civic and residential buildings. By the time he designed the *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* (St. Anthony's Convent) in Coolgardie Cavanagh's commissions for the Roman Catholic Church included the Christian Brothers' College, Perth; Mercedes School House, Perth; St Brigid's Convent, Northbridge; the Convent of Mercy, Bunbury; a home for the aged for the Little Sisters of the Poor, Glendalough; a Boy's Industrial School, Glendalough, St. John's Convent and Chapel, Subiaco, a small convent in Guildford and the Roman Catholic Church in Northam. Later commissions in Perth were to include alterations to St. Mary's Cathedral, and the Bishop's Palace in Perth and the Redemptorist Monastery in North Perth.

On 24 January 1903, Dr. Gibney, Bishop of Western Australia, laid the foundation stone of *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)*, on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy.<sup>8</sup> Mr O'Connell was the builder, with Mr Michael Barry as the Clerk of Works.<sup>9</sup> The convent building, "regarded as the finest on the Eastern Goldfields", was officially opened by Bishop Gibney on the 2nd August 1903.<sup>10</sup> The exterior elevations were, according to the *Record* of 28 June 1902, very handsome and effective. The whole building was exceedingly simple and economical in design and arrangement, well lighted and well ventilated. It was "one of the most important, if not the most important architectural efforts in Coolgardie".<sup>11</sup> Later that year, in November, St. Mary's Church nearby, which was closely associated with the Sisters of Mercy, was opened.<sup>12</sup> The Convent was the only boarding school on the Goldfields<sup>13</sup> and until the War the Sisters made no discrimination on the basis of religious denomination.<sup>14</sup>

The Sisters of Mercy closed the convent at the end of 1978/79 due to financial considerations.<sup>15</sup> The property was purchased by the Christian Aboriginal Parents School, who re-opened the place as a school for Christian aboriginal children in 1980. The school, which caters for approximately 150 students ranging from primary school to Year 10, is the only Christian Aboriginal directed school in Australia, has 50 boarders from around Australia (25 girls and 25 boys) as well as day pupils from the surrounding district and Kalgoorlie.<sup>16</sup> The success of the concept has been such that, in 1993, C.A.P.S. has been able to expand its campus to

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7 "Sisters of Mercy, Coolgardie", (notes held by Catholic Church archivist), p.3.

8 Trotman, A.H. *op.cit.* p.79.

9 Records of the Sisters of Mercy.

10 Trotman, A.H. *op.cit.* p.79

11 McLay, A. *Women out of their Sphere: Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia from 1846* (Sisters of Mercy, Vanguard Press, Northbridge, 1992) pp213-4

12 Bourke, D.F. *op.cit.*

13 Ware, H. *Coolgardie 1892- 1974* (1976), p.5.

14 Sisters of Mercy archives.

15 Sisters of Mercy Community Lists for 1979/1980/1981. (Sisters of Mercy Archives, Perth)

16 Telephone conversation with CAPS : Trevor Brownley. (30th November, 1993)

include a farm at Esperance.<sup>17</sup> If the school can acquire funding to allow them to construct new hostel facilities off-site in Coolgardie, the convent would be converted for educational purposes only. The building currently receives fairly rough treatment due to the residential use and there has been some damage to fittings and mouldings in the interior of the building.<sup>18</sup>

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)*, was classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) in June 1981 and subsequently entered into the Register of the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission in September 1981. Later, the place was listed as having heritage value by the Shire of Coolgardie in its *Town Planning Scheme No 4, Schedule V: Places of Heritage Value* and afforded protection under the scheme.<sup>19</sup>

## PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is a two storey brick, stucco and iron building comprising 916 square metres plus 370 square metres of verandahs.<sup>20</sup> It was constructed in 1903 for the Sisters of Mercy as a residential girl's school.

Sited on the corner of Lindsay and Moran Streets, Coolgardie the building has an historic relationship with the adjacent St. Mary's Church, in Lefroy Street, which was built a little later in the same year. The building is located in a sparsely developed area close to the town centre on a fairly flat yet slightly elevated site. The building has no architectural counterpart in the area; however, there are buildings of this nature and vintage in other goldfields centres.<sup>21</sup>

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is an example of the Federation Free Style, featuring red face brickwork, stucco string courses and stucco mouldings.<sup>22</sup> Like the majority of Cavanagh's religious buildings, the school has a broad symmetrical facade, in which the weighty details of the central entrance bay are balanced by two slightly projecting gabled wings. The whole building has a steeply pitched corrugated iron roof.

In this instance the central entrance is highlighted by a small frieze embellished with the words "Convent of Mercy" and topped by a shallow shaped gable. The decoratively moulded gable is flanked by a pair of finials. The central bay is then balanced by the slightly projecting gabled end wings. The visual weight of the two end wings is further emphasised by a two storey bay window and semi circular parapet. Both gables feature a moulded circular air vent and are topped by a cross. Plans by Cavanagh show *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* with the finished doorway in the front facade featuring a balcony over the entry which was not built.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *loc.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Discussions with Administrator, 19th December, 1993. Site visit by Shelley Jenkinson on behalf of the Heritage Council of WA.

<sup>19</sup> Shire of Coolgardie Town Planning Scheme. No.4 (District Scheme) (July 1991) Schedule V.

<sup>20</sup> Cornerstone Architects and Designers: Brief for Architectural Evaluation, 1992

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Apperley, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present.* (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989), pp.136-139.

<sup>23</sup> Plans, dated 11 Sept 1902, held by Sisters of Mercy Archives.

St. Brigid's Convent in Perth, also designed by Michael Cavanagh for the Sisters of Mercy, exhibits the same symmetry and shallow projecting gables at either end; however, whilst St. Brigid's Convent has a loggia linking the central entrance to the two wings, *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* has a flat windowed wall.

The *Convent of Mercy (former)* originally had two schoolrooms, ablutions, trunk room and porch, hat and cloak room on the ground floor in the east wing with a large dormitory, ablutions, and linen store on the first floor. The central wing, facing Lindsay Street, comprised a reception room, parlour and office, on the ground floor with a community room and two double cells above. The east wing, facing Moran street, comprised the sister's refectory, kitchen, scullery and laundry on the ground floor with the Chapel, sacristy and two double cells and bathroom above.<sup>24</sup> The Convent was dedicated to St. Anthony and, in the wide internal verandah across the back width of the building, there was a recessed shrine for a statue of the saint. The verandah formed a welcome breezeway, away from the heat of the sun, and was a popular meeting place for visiting parishioners and friends or, later, for reunions of past students and the like. A wide balcony above the verandah extended across the rear facade linking the two wings with a staircase down. The bathroom on the Moran Street side and the e.c. on the first floor in the west wing were built on this balcony.

Room configuration alters from that of the original plans with the ground floor music and boarder's refectory not built. The side verandahs are not shown on the original plans but appear to be quite early. It is not clear whether the first floor cells were ever constructed. At ground floor level, the configuration of the store rooms, amalgamation of the school rooms and dining room, cool room additions and second rear stair are later alterations to the building. At first floor level, both upper floor toilet blocks at the rear, opening up of the upper floor chapel/community room into the dormitory and works to the two teachers flats are also later.<sup>25</sup> The amalgamation of the Chapel and several cells to make a dormitory in the Moran Street Wing would suggest that the opening up of the rooms was made after the Sisters of Mercy had sold the property.

Early photographs show the schoolrooms to be finished with a pressed metal dado to window height and four panelled doors. The floor is tongue and groove jarrah timber. The rooms are light and airy with timber framed doors and double hung windows.<sup>26</sup>

Generally, the building fabric is not significantly altered. New ceilings have been installed throughout which are visually in appropriate and the kitchen/bathroom/laundry areas have been altered some time ago in an attempt to modernise them. The apparently oldest ceilings in the building - fibrous plaster on batten - are probably not the original as the skirting, architrave and other moulding treatments suggest that the original cornice and ceiling design may have been much

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<sup>24</sup> The plans of 1902 show the Chapel at the front of the building but it was built in the east wing and had a timber ceiling. See also Cornerstone Architects and Designers: Brief for Architectural Evaluation, 1992

<sup>25</sup> Plans, dated 11 Sept 1902, held by Sisters of Mercy Archives; Site report made by Shelley Jenkinson for the Heritage Council, December 1993; Cornerstone ... *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Photograph reproduced in McLay, A. *op.cit.* p.215; Cornerstone ... *op.cit.*

more decorative.<sup>27</sup> Fittings such as locks, some doors and many vent surrounds have been damaged and removed; however, the building is to a large degree still original, possibly due to the lack of funds to modernise. Thus, despite modifications, the building is representative of the form and layout of Convent Schools of the 1890s.<sup>28</sup>

Although there is some lawn and tended gardens surrounding the building much of the ground surface is hard dirt. The condition of much of the paving is unsatisfactory. The ground level to the rear of the building in the courtyard has been raised over the years and is now at verandah level which allows flooding in the wet season and is contributing to the fretting of brickwork at the base of the building in these areas adjoining the verandah. Excavation of the courtyard areas to reduce the height would alleviate the problem.<sup>29</sup>

## ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

### 1. AESTHETIC VALUE

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is one of a number of Catholic educational buildings designed by Michael Cavanagh, between 1895 and 1938.

The plan and form of the convent building conforms with the other buildings, however whereas the other buildings are styled in some form of Gothic Revival, the Coolgardie building is an understated example of the Federation Free Style.

It is of a more simple design than those in Perth, but the building is architecturally elegant and visually impressive.

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* defines the corner of Lindsay and Moran Streets, Coolgardie, although the current fencing detracts from the streetscape impact.

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is one of the major buildings constructed in Coolgardie during the Goldrushes. Each of these buildings contribute a streetscape element to Coolgardie, the loss of which would be detrimental to the scale and ambience of the town.

### 2. HISTORIC VALUE

Coolgardie was founded on the discovery of eastern goldfields, and subsequently the town played an important part in the establishment of the mining industry in Western Australia. The construction of *St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is closely associated with the growth of prosperity and establishment of a permanent population in the eastern goldfields.

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Feilman, Margaret A. *Coolgardie Historical Survey* ((1976), p.17.

<sup>29</sup> Cornerstone ... *op.cit.*

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is representative of educational practice at the turn of the century and is significant for its form, continuity of use and the historical development in Coolgardie. It was the first boarding school for girls in the goldfields

The building has a strong association with the Catholic Church, in particular with the Sisters of Mercy who established the Convent and who were influential in other areas of the State.

The building is representative of religious based education that was prevalent in the late nineteenth century.

### **3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE**

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### **4. SOCIAL VALUE**

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* contributes to Coolgardie's sense of place and its identity as a goldrush town. The place is recognised in the Coolgardie Town Planning as a place having heritage value and afforded protection by the scheme.

In a town which has lost a large number of its goldrush buildings, the Convent of Mercy has a high degree of social value. It is one of three of major public buildings which define Coolgardie in cultural tourism terms and provide a tourist attraction for the area.

The building has some social importance for the many girls who went to school there and the families that sent their daughters there.

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* has a strong association with religious education in the goldfields, and of Coolgardie in particular.

Since 1981 the building has had significance in terms of the role it has played in Christian Aboriginal Directed education in Australia.

### **5. RARITY**

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### **6. REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* is representative of Catholic convent schools, constructed at the turn of the century to educate a rapidly expanding population.

It is representative of the numerous Catholic educational buildings, designed by Michael Cavanagh between 1895 and 1938.

## CONDITION

An assessment by the National Trust in 1981 cited that the building was in a good state of repair. A Sister of Mercy commented that it looked dilapidated in 1991 but not significantly altered in any way.<sup>30</sup>

In 1992, Cornerstone Architects and Designers: Brief for Architectural Evaluation, 1992 reported that the general condition of the building, especially the basic structure, for its age was relatively good. The floors were level and in sound order. Although there were many cracks appearing (mainly above door openings) only a few were more than hairline and could be easily patched. The timber work (oregon) in the window frames and double hung sashes was in poor condition and needed urgent attention - most sash guides were almost rotten and some were missing. The windows needed urgent maintenance including replacement of broken or missing sash cords and weights, re-glazing of broken panes, stripping and painting. Many of the mouldings were damaged, fireplace surrounds missing or partly missing or damaged as well as most wall vents broken.<sup>31</sup> It was reported that the walls showed a number cracks as a result of movement; however, in view of the age of the building, none serious. Most of the tuck-pointing a metre from the ground had disappeared and needed to be re-pointed and coloured to match the existing. Timber fascias, barges, scotias, capping and gutters are also in need of urgent attention. The concrete coping which contributed largely to the architectural appeal of the building was badly deteriorated and in need of urgent repair.

The place received \$15,000 funding from the National Estate programme in 1991/2 for re-painting the exterior of the convent and for some exterior repairs to the parapets and chimneys.<sup>32</sup>

## INTEGRITY

The building continues to be used for the educational purposes for which it was built, and retains a high degree of integrity. Although it is no longer a Catholic school, there has been minimal alteration to the interior of the fabric.

A new ablutions block has been added to the rear of the east wing and a pre-fabricated classroom has also been located on the site.<sup>33</sup>

There is some conflict between the original intended use of the building and its current use. Some of the fine detailing featured is out of context for its current use; however, the building is mainly deteriorating because of age rather than misuse.<sup>34</sup>

## AUTHENTICITY

There have been few changes to the fabric of the building, and little new material has been introduced. The place has a reasonable degree of authenticity. Subsequent alterations and additions to the building are quite minor, for example: pin-up boards, filling in the verandahs and partitioning to rooms; and could be removed to

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<sup>30</sup> Sister Anna Maria : Sisters of Mercy archivist.

<sup>31</sup> Cornerstone ... *op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Site report made by Shelley Jenkinson for the Heritage Council, December 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Telephone conversation with CAPS : Trevor Brownley. (30th November, 1993)

<sup>34</sup> Site report made by Shelley Jenkinson for the Heritage Council, December 1993.

restored if required. The building requires some urgent maintenance work to preserve the existing fabric while accommodating its existing use.

## **7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

*St. Anthony's Convent of Mercy (former)* has cultural significance for the following:

the place has historic significance related to the important role of the education, and Catholic Education in particular, in the development of the eastern goldfields;

the building strongly contributes to the sense of place and identity of Coolgardie; a key town in the development of gold mining in Western Australia in the 1890s;

it is a simple, understated, but visually impressive example of Federation Free Style architectural applied to an educational building; and,

it is an important example and representative of the convent school architecture, from 1895 through to 1938, of prominent Perth architect Michael Cavanagh.

## **8. Register of Heritage Places**

Interim Entry        05/05/1992

Permanent Entry    01/07/1994

## **9. Conservation Order**

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## **10. Heritage Agreement**

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## **11. References**

National Trust Assessment Exposition

Australian Heritage Commission Data Sheet

Shire of Coolgardie *Town Planning Scheme No. 4. Schedule V. Places of Heritage Value: Public Buildings*

Cornerstone Architects and Designers: Brief for Architectural Evaluation, 1992

Site report made by Shelley Jenkinson for the Heritage Council, December 1993.