

# A 1950s Island Miracle

## St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, Hammond Island (Kiriri)

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## St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, Hammond Island (Kiriri)

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Australia's construction industry was slow to re-establish after WWII, leaving many remote communities struggling well into the 1950s. During this time of austerity, community initiative and volunteer labour were required to realise new builds. Thus, even the most exceptional early-1950s churches were restrained in their architectural choices – they were neither the ornate gothic edifices of pre-war decades, nor the experimental modern monuments to come in the early-1960s.

For island communities, dedicated and determined local effort was necessary to build new churches. Of these, the remote St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church on Hammond Island (Kiriri), in the Torres Strait, was a remarkable achievement (Figure 1). With no architect and probably no engineer, it was designed by the mission's priest – the Sydney-born and trained Father Thomas Dixon (1916–1993). While most small regional congregations built in timber, this remote community made the most of what it had on the island or could acquire from Thursday Island nearby. Still standing today, it is a blue granite hilltop edifice with a sea view and is visible to every passing ship.

This short piece draws from completed doctoral research, archival research, and the writings and film making of others. It elucidates what at first glance might be read as rudimentary, by detailing the church building's inventive construction methods and the community-focused aspirations it embodies.

The island community's first mission church (1929) deteriorated during WWII (when the community was evacuated to Cooyar, Southern Queensland). The timber was eaten away by white-ants and it was overtaken by vegetation, until it finally slid downhill during a 1948 tropical cyclone.<sup>1</sup> From early-1952 to mid-1954, the mission priest and a team of locals – a mix of local Islanders and Filipino workers – constructed the new and larger church using local blue granite, steel roof framing obtained from several former army buildings, and two-foot concrete tubes filled with the bases of coloured glass bottles for windows. The design of the church is a T-shaped plan, with a rectilinear nave, and transepts to both sides of the sanctuary. Arched doorways and arched niches complement the circular windows. The stone is the dominate material, used to create the thick and buttressed walls.

1.

"Queensland Places – Kiriri (Hammond Island) – St. Joseph's Church," State Library of Queensland, August 1, 2018, <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/queensland-places-kiriri-hammond-island-st-josephs-church>.

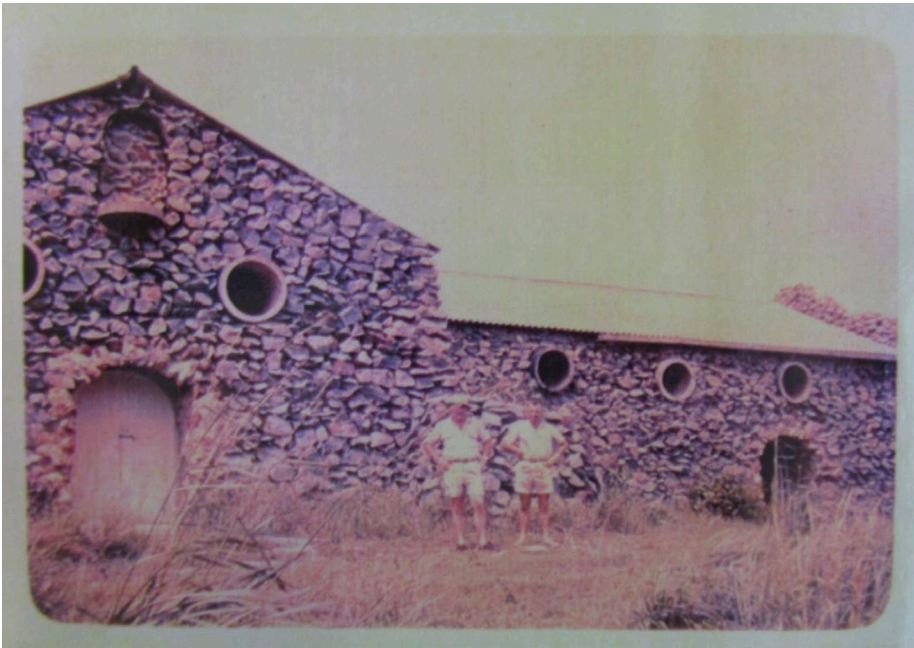


Figure 1:  
St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, Hammond  
Island (1954).  
(Undated early exterior photograph, CCDA file  
A531, Thursday Island Parish, with permission  
from Cairns Catholic Diocese Archive)

Dixon's diary recorded his and his companions more than two-year toil – described as a mix of stubborn determination, setbacks and miracles.<sup>2</sup> These records explain how the priest himself worked on many of the church's stones, with sometimes only one companion: finding and quarrying them, hauling them up to the site, breaking them open to expose a blue face, lifting, placing, and cementing them in. They used medial tools and physical human effort in the tropical climate (humid, monsoonal, and enduring at least one cyclone), and persisted during the rise and fall in numbers of able hands, as dictated by the pearling on and off seasons (most locals were employed as pearl divers). Such rudimentary methods, however, did lead to various inventive solutions to an array of challenges. The many successes and overcome failures are recorded in Dixon's diary.

The construction of St Joseph's used very limited new materials, and little to nothing was used in a temporary way. In fact, various waste products were wrangled into use. For instance, kerosene drums were used as scaffolding, rather than acquiring new timber or metal scaffolds. The roof framing was repurposed steelwork from

WWII army buildings – these a “jigsaw puzzle” needing various modifications to achieve their new purpose, more than first anticipated. Reused super six roof sheeting clad the roof. The windows were made from gathered empty beer and wine bottles. These captured inside on-site cast concrete tubes. Raising and positioning the tubes took several attempts and risky methods. Cement was one of the few new construction products purchased.

Construction began on February 6, 1952, but it wasn't until the morning of Christmas Eve in 1953 that a local, Eddie Mills, raised the last stone into place. The first Holy Mass was held in the church on Christmas Day of 1953; a celebration with white sand on the church's floor, cabbage palms and “profuse blooms of the Poinciana trees” providing the décor and offsetting the “impoverished altar.”<sup>3</sup> The semi-circle sanctuary rail was inch diameter water pipe decorated in colourful crepe-paper. The interior, with locally crafted timber furnishings, was completed for St Joseph's blessing and opening on May 9, 1954.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s the interiors gained a cement-rendered finish, with paint only applied to the interior's statue niches.

2.

Tyrone C. Deere, compiler, *Stone on Stone: Story of Hammond Island Mission* (Thursday Island: Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, 1994), 46–81.

3.

Deere, *Stone on Stone*, 75.

4.

Deere, *Stone on Stone*, 18.