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A modern Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in South West Rocks in the 1980’s and awoke in 2008 would imagine himself transported to a different place altogether so great have been the changes in the last ten years. From a little holiday and fishing village it has become a bustling slice of city life as retirees have moved in to take advantage of the wonderful climate and stress free life of the area. And though modern shopping malls and housing estates now compliment the older houses which still cluster around the headland one fixture remains securely planted on the rock where it was first built – Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic church.

Father O'Regan was the priest responsible for purchasing the site at public auction in 1924. Asked why he had chosen such a difficult site he had replied “Where better to build a church but on a rock”. The church itself was erected in 1925 and was opened by His Lordship the Most Rev. Bishop Carroll of Lismore in 1926. Because of South West Rock’s popularity as a holiday destination the church was always overcrowded during the holiday season. Mgr Morris used to seat the children around the altar, boys on one side and girls on the other, to make more room for adults. Eventually during the 1970’s the church was extended and widened to make more room, a fact much appreciated on hot summer days.

Father O’Hare had the sanctuary restructured although he lived in perpetual fear that the large crucifix made by Frank Harris would fall down on him. He also had the old Tabernacle from Smithtown church installed. Today Star of the Sea is still an active part of the Smithtown parish and the location for the parish Easter services of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Truly can we say that Father O’Regan did well to build his church on the rock.
Set amidst lush hills to the east of Tweed Heads lies the rural pocket of Bilambil. With magnificent views towards Mount Warning and the nearby Tweed River it is one of the most attractive locations on the far north coast and tucked away among its homes is the little church of St Camillus.

It was in the 1930’s that the faithful of Bilambil succeeded in building a small box-style church in which to celebrate the Holy Mass. In 1934 it was moved to a new site closer to the centre of the small community and re-erected on a block of land given by the Duffy family. It was in honour of this family that the church was given the unusual dedication to St Camillus, the name in religion taken by one of their daughters when she joined the Sisters of Mercy.

The church is of the simplest construction comprising a nave, a sanctuary and a sacristy now used as an entrance porch. It stands amidst palm trees evocative of the tropical north of the state and is lovingly tended by its parishioners whose affection for their church is evident in its neat and pristine appearance.

Times change and today Bilambil is no longer as isolated as it once was and Tweed Heads itself has become a major metropolis but throughout all these changes the little church of St Camillus has continued to serve the Catholics of the area as it does to the present day.
Wardell

The Catholic history of Wardell goes back to the arrival of Father Jeremiah Doyle in 1878. Father Doyle made many visits on horseback to the outlying districts of his vast parish and among these was the area of the Lower Richmond around Wardell. Among the families who provided their homes for the celebration of the Holy Mass were the Tylers, Kennedys, Meaney, McDonoughs along with the Flood brothers and Dan Byrne. In short order Father Doyle set about building a church and this wooden building was opened by him in 1879. It was later used as the school and was eventually demolished in the 1950’s. The church was blessed on the Sunday after St Patrick’s Day and so was dedicated to that great Irish saint. In the early years people arrived at mass by rowing down the river or walking many miles to attend. The lucky ones came on horseback.

In 1903 Wardell became a parish in its own right with stations at Broadwater and Riley’s Hill (later moved to Dungarubba) and by 1910 had outgrown its little wooden church and a lovely new brick church was built in that year at a cost of 1400 pounds. The church was opened and blessed by Bishop Carroll on 13 November. The church on its little eminence beside the river is now approaching its centenary and is still in use.

Wardell was a very active parish for many years with a convent of Blessed Mary Mackillop’s sisters and a pretty little school house all nestled on the bank of the Lower Richmond. Sadly Wardell has been one of the victims of the loss of priestly vocations in recent years and is now administered from Ballina parish. Despite the changes of the years St Patrick’s continues to serve the little village now under the care of one of the Sisters of Mercy.
Some time during the first decade of the 20th century a small Catholic church was erected at the gold-mining settlement of Drake in the foothills of the Great Dividing Range. Dedicated to St Joseph it was part of the Parish of Tenterfield in the Diocese of Armidale. The gold soon ran out and the village declined leaving the little church to pass away as many had before it. It was not to be however. A short way down the highway lay the little village of Tabulam in the Parish of Mallanganee. The local Catholics had been having Masses in the Public Hall for many years but longed for a church of their own. This dream became a reality in 1960 when the old church of St Joseph was dismantled, transported to Tabulam and re-erected as the church of St Pius X. This red-letter day for the faithful of the far west of the Diocese was recorded by The Northern Star:

"An overflow congregation yesterday witnessed the solemn blessing and opening of the Roman Catholic Church at Tabulam by the Bishop of Lismore, Most Rev. Dr P.J. Farrelly.

The church was brought from Drake and reconstructed and renovated by Evans Head builder M.F. Eastoe, at a cost of 3000 pounds.

Yesterday completed moves for a church at Tabulam which began in 1912."

The article provided some brief background to the church:

"Mr W. Hynes of Drake, extended best wishes on behalf of the Roman Catholic Community of Drake. He said the church was at least 53 years old and had originally been built at Drake. His grandfather was one of the people responsible for the original erection of the church."

The decision to move the church to Tabulam proved indeed to be an inspired one as today, one hundred years after it was first built in Drake, the little church of St Pius X is still in use standing proudly and prominently on the same corner in Tabulam where it was first erected 48 years ago.
On the feast of St Columba in 1911 Bishop Carroll laid the foundation stone of a new church at Uki on land donated by Gerald Parker a local farmer. In addition to providing a site of sufficient size to accommodate not only a church but also a convent and school, Mr Parker also donated a parcel of land for subdivision and sale to pay for the buildings. A truly generous benefactor indeed! The church was opened in 1912 and the first baptism, that of Vincent Thomas Columbkille O’Neill took place on August 25 of that year.

In 1923 three of Blessed Mary Mackillop’s sisters commenced a school at Uki that would last for forty years. A convent was built for them in 1922 and a schoolhouse in 1930-31. Living conditions were spartan but over 600 children have reason to be thankful to the sisters who bore with the difficulties to teach them over the years.

The church itself was built of timber from ‘Osborne’ a local farm and milled at Newell’s Sawmill at Uki. It is quite a large church for a small village and was a testament to the faith of the local Catholic population. The priest would come out from Murwillumbah fortnightly and would stay in the little room added to the back of the church. The church was lit with acetylene gas to enable confessions to be heard on Saturday night prior to Sunday morning Mass. The beautiful carved wooden altar piece is still in use in today’s church.

In 1963 the school closed and was transported to Kingscliff and the convent sold but the church continued to be used by the faithful such as the Reynolds family, five generations of whom have worshipped at St Columba’s. Today despite the many changes that have occurred since the opening of the church nearly 100 years ago St Columba’s still resounds to the voices of the people raised in worship and gives witness to the faith in the village of Uki.
On the 25th June 1922 the people of the little township of Mallanganee gathered to celebrate the opening of a new Catholic church by His Lordship Bishop Carroll. Described at the time as ‘attractively designed and well finished’ the little wooden church of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour owed its building to the drive of the Venerable Archpriest Barry of Casino and the zeal of the local Catholics who responded willingly to his call to help him build a new church. In 1924 a convent was completed and the Sisters of Mercy came from Grafton to teach the children of the town and its surrounding areas. They were to remain until 1971.

Six years after the church was opened it became the parish church of the newly designated Parish of Mallanganee under Father Cusack. In its time the parish included churches at Woodenbong (now part of Kyogle parish), Urbenville and Mummulgum (both now sold), Bonalbo and Tabulam. It is one of only two truly rural parishes in the Diocese and retains two of those magnificent wooden churches for which the Diocese of Lismore was once known. St Mary’s at Mallanganee is a wonderful example of the workmanship which went into these churches – not as interim buildings until a better could be built but as true ‘Houses of God’ in their own right. The beautiful sanctuary contains a tribute to another church of the parish in its altar which was originally the altar of the Mummulgum church. The carved wooden Last Supper is a gift of Fr John Casey a former parish priest.

Though in many ways time has passed Mallanganee by, St Mary’s still stands as a glorious testimony to the faith of those early Catholic settlers who responded so readily to Archpriest Barry’s call eighty five years ago to erect a place of worship which the people of Mallanganee could call their own.
The Catholic church in Ulmarra, the historic river port downstream from Grafton on the mighty Clarence River, owes its origins to the desire of Catholic parents to raise their children in the faith. During the late 1800’s Father Doyle, brother of the first Bishop of Lismore and priest in charge of Grafton would journey downriver to celebrate mass at people’s homes in Cowper and Ulmarra and it was to Father Doyle that Mother M. de Sanctis, superior of the Cowper Mercy Convent turned when the parents of Ulmarra requested a convent school in their town.

The school opened in 1897 and became an immediate success. With the opening of the school the people of Ulmarra had mass each Sunday and the district experienced a ‘marked improvement in religious tone’ as it is recorded in ‘As Gentle Rain’. It was inevitable therefore that the faithful would wish to have a church set aside for worship and to house the Blessed Sacrament permanently and in 1913 the little church of Our Lady Help of Christians was opened on the riverbank at the upper end of the town.

The church has undergone many vicissitudes over the years, waxing and waning in keeping with the rhythm of life in the town itself. In 1951 the school closed and the church became a peaceful country station of Cowper and today is looked after by the priest at South Grafton.

Few churches in the diocese can claim such an incomparable setting as Our Lady Help of Christians set as it is in the midst of an emerald lawn overlooking the Clarence. The small community that attend the church have kept the faith alive despite the hardships of a modern world all too ready to reject religion as a relic of the past. Ulmarra church stands today as testimony to the error of such a belief.
On August 22, 1921 the Catholic residents of Coramba, a small mining town in the hills behind Coffs Harbour approached Bishop Carroll with a petition pledging themselves to bear the financial burden of purchasing and erecting thereon a Church as soon as permission is obtained. Five years later land was duly purchased from the Coramba Dairy Society Butter Factory and on November 28 1926 the Foundation Stone of St Therese’s Church was laid.

The site of the church was an awkward one as it dropped steeply from the main road. As a result the church had to be raised on stilts which are clearly visible from the side but virtually invisible from the main entrance. The church was a substantial country church of its time with twin sacristies and an apsidal East end correctly oriented towards the rising sun, ancient symbol of the Risen Christ.

At the time of its opening in March 1927 the Coffs Harbour Advocate referred to it as a ‘triumphal day for the Roman Catholic community at Coramba.’ The church itself was described as ‘lofty and well ventilated with a well-pitched roof. Its construction is of hardwood with windows of stained glass. The furnishings and fittings are in keeping with the building which is lined with Dorrigo plum... One of the features is the outlook from the church over the beautiful Orana Valley, the green flats in the foreground and the hills in the distance.’

In the same month as the laying of the Foundation Stone, Coramba along with the church at Karangi became a separate parish of Coramba-Karangi a status that was to last until 1935. Since then Coramba has been an active station of Coffs Harbour parish. The church has of course seen many changes over the years but still sits serenely enjoying the same beautiful outlook as the day it was opened eighty years ago this month.
The Dorrigo Plateau rises dramatically above the Bellinger Valley and is best known for the series of spectacular waterfalls that have given the road up to the top the name the Waterfalls Way. For the early settlers of Don Dorrigo as it was known the attraction was less the waterfalls and more the stands of timber and later the superb dairy country that opened out before them. A road was cut from Bellingen in 1865 linking Dorrigo to the coast but it was not until the early 20th Century that settlement really got under way.

Dorrigo was listed as a station of Bellingen when that parish was formed in 1908 and the first church was built in 1910. An attractive wooden church of the type found throughout the diocese, it served as both church and school for many years. Dorrigo became a parish in the 1915 just 5 years after the church opened and in the midst of World War I.

The present church was opened in 1960 as a memorial to those killed in the two World Wars and the Korean War. Signs of the new architectural styles that would revolutionise church design in the late 20th Century are evident in the A-frame structure of the church which yet manages to retain the traditional liturgical orientation within.

Outside the church stands an attractive Lourdes Grotto overgrown with greenery and further back the original statue of St John which stood outside the Presentation Convent now replaced by Mt St John’s school.

Although Dorrigo is no longer a parish, it retains a rich sense of its history and past. The Presentation sisters have returned to the town and among them is Bride Baldwin who began her life in Dorrigo and has lived through the many changes in the town’s history. The church itself and its well-kept grounds attest to the people’s continuing love of their church.
For most people Taylor’s Arm is famous for being the location of the ‘Pub with No Beer’ and few go beyond that well known landmark. Should they do so they would quickly discover that Taylors Arm is in fact two villages – Lower and Upper of which Lower Taylors Arm is the one best known today.

From the viewpoint of Catholic history Taylors Arm was an important centre of Catholic worship. The first church, St Finbarr’s was built sometime in the first years of the 20th Century about midway between the two villages. A little wooden building it suffered the sad fate of many a bush church when it was burnt down in the 1920’s. Because of the large and active Catholic community in the Taylors Arm district, plans were soon underway to replace the little church. A large site was purchased in the lower village with ample space not only for a church but for a convent school which the faithful hoped to be able to erect in the future. For several reasons this latter project never came to fruition although the money raised was later used to help with the construction of the present church at Nambucca Heads.

On October 27 1926 the new church was blessed and opened by Dr Carroll, Bishop of Lismore. Just one year prior to this Pope Pius XI had proclaimed the feast of Christ the King to be celebrated on the last Sunday of October. Accordingly the newly opened church was dedicated under that title.

Of special note for a rural church and indicative of the strong Catholic community is the three-bay confessional added several years later. Such ‘external’ confessionals, common in large city churches, are quite rare for country churches.

Today a much smaller, though still active community, continues the 100 year old tradition of Catholic worship in this attractive little country church.
The village of Beechwood across the Hastings River from Wauchope has a special place in the history of Wauchope parish for it was here in 1889 that the first Catholic Church in the Wauchope district was opened. With the opening of St Joseph’s at Wauchope in 1907, Beechwood lost some of its importance but still continued to be a thriving mass centre for the people of the northern side of the river. Its congregation was drawn from Pappinbarra, Bellangary, Gannon’s Creek and Brombin as well as Beechwood itself.

The Beechwood congregation was very active during the first half of the century, the highlights of the year being the annual St Patrick’s Ball followed by the Catholic Ball. In addition the church had a connection with the Sisters of St Joseph who arrived in the 1930’s from Wauchope Convent to take over the choir and teach Sunday School. All in all Beechwood was the centre of a thriving Catholic community.

In 1957 the present church replaced the old wooden structure and gives testament to the strength and commitment of the congregation. The church was designed by the Sydney firm of Fowell, Mansfield and Maclurean and built of brick in an unusual style despite its traditional layout. It has been aptly described as a perfectly preserved gem of late pre-Vatican II architecture and thus a forerunner of many of our churches today.

The interior possesses a sparse elegance that has been almost untouched since the day it was opened. Of special interest is the intact baptistry with its superb carved stone font set behind its iron grill (pictured left).

Today the lovely little church of St Patrick’s Beechwood continues to witness to the devotion of its many parishioners during the 117 years of its existence.

Sources:
Port Macquarie Centenary History and Wauchope Golden Jubilee Booklet.
Comboyne

The rugged Comboyne Plateau was early recognised as probably the best dairy farming country on the Mid-North Coast but difficulties of access severely hampered the pioneers who settled there. In 1906 when the first cream was delivered to the Manning from the village of Comboyne, the Manning River Times reported: “The intrepid pioneers of the Comboyne are fighting their way against obstacles that for many years were considered insurmountable and are opening up country which in a short time will be a source of much wealth to the State, but in order to do this successfully, roads of access must sooner or later be constructed. Such patience and perseverance are surely worthy of reward and all that is asked for is a safe road to market. How much longer will the Government deny the residents this necessary convenience?”

It was this inconvenience that made the establishment of a church at Comboyne such a slow process with the nearest Catholic church being at Upper Landsdowne, a long trek for families from the plateau. Despite the difficulties the village forged ahead and in 1914 a cheese factory was opened by W. Debreceny whose descendant, Dulcie, continues to play an active role in today’s Catholic community.

The opening of the road to Taree and the steady growth of the village led to thought being given to the construction of a church for the village. A Mr Thomas Jones, a prominent Catholic settler, gave land for the construction of a church on a rise overlooking the village centre and on October 14, 1917, Bishop Dwyer of Maitland became the first Bishop to visit Comboyne when he laid the first block of the new church. One year later on November 24 he was back to bless and open the church which was dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

By then the road to Kendall had been opened and the priest would travel up from Kendall and stay overnight at the Jones’ home. A sad little story lies in the fact that the first baptism in the church was of Lloyd Thomas Jones in 1918. Just five years later his was the first funeral to be held in the church.

Originally built of oiled timber the church has in recent times been extensively renovated and painted which together with its lovely park-like setting makes it one of our most attractive country churches. Of special note is the almost untouched interior with its original wooden altar intact, a distinction it shares with but one or two churches in the Diocese.
On an auspicious day in January 1896, the river was threatening to flood. The local congregation were undaunted as they braved the weather to attend the blessing and opening of their church. Two hundred parishioners and visitors witnessed the Parish priest Father Buggy bless their church and celebrate Mass. An account of the day is recorded in the Kempsey Parish History.

Father Buggy, having blessed the church, proceeded to celebrate Mass in which he was assisted by Mr Smith and two altar boys from Kempsey. There was a choir of 13 “and their singing was the greatest musical treat that had ever been heard in that part of the district.

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After Mass Father Buggy delivered an address on the subject of modern unbelief. Father said ‘The erection of the church and the large congregation present for the opening might be taken as evidence of a profession of faith in God and a protest against unbelief’.

At the conclusion of his address Father Buggy thanked the choir for their great kindness in coming all the way from Kempsey to assist at the opening of the church and also the numerous friends who had come from a distance.

Father Buggy also stated that it was a great pleasure for him to open such a nice little church in the country, more especially when there was no debt on it. The church then had a credit of 7 pounds. The choir and visitors were invited to a ‘first rate spread’, which had been prepared for them, at Mr Carey’s, by members of the church.

St. John’s was built on land donated by Mr Carey, the publican of the Willawarrin Hotel.

The first wedding to be held there was Augustus Clark to Clarice Cavanagh and later the same year, Augustus’ brother Felix Clarke married Clarice’s sister, Mary.

St. John’s Willawarrin is believed to be the oldest church on the Macleay, still in regular use today. Water was connected to the church in May 1974.

In January 1986 about 170 people celebrated the 90th Anniversary of St. John’s with a special Mass, a tree planting and a huge morning tea in the Willawarrin Hall. A special cake was made in the shape of the church.

Kempsey Parish History
The church of St. John of the Cross at Copmanhurst is the longest serving brick church in the diocese.

On the 13th August 1887, a subscription list was opened for donations to build the church. George and Magdalena Lollback, new settlers to the area from Germany, gave two acres of their land as a gift for the church.

The foundation stone was laid by Bishop Torreggiani on the 26th June 1881. Noted for tenders were the details: dimensions of the building 30 x 17 feet with porch and vestry, brick walls and iron roof. Taking only some months to complete, there was the inevitable delay. The church was blessed and opened by Bishop Torreggiani on the 22nd October 1882.

This great celebration of the small catholic community was noted in the Clarence and Richmond Examiner of 21.10.1882: The Roman Catholic Church at Copmanhurst was opened and consecrated on Sunday last. The members of the church in the district attended numerously, as did also members of other denominations. The ceremony of consecration was conducted by the bishop of the diocese, assisted by the Rev Mr O’Sullivan from Grafton. I understand that the sacred edifice is now almost if not wholly free from debt, which speaks well for the liberality of the people in the district. It is also understood that the Bishop gave a handsome sum towards the building fund, and the Rev Mr O’Sullivan also gave liberally. The collection on Sunday amounted to over L13 which is a very fair sum considering that a list was circulated last week, and brought in something over L40. A few months ago an appeal was also liberally responded to. Altogether the building cost about L300 and a profit of the good