

# Church history uncovered

BY JACK MANNING

ESTABLISHED in 1864, St John the Evangelist Catholic Church once stood proudly in Port Elliot.

While the adjoining cemetery established the same year off Tottenham Ct Road remains, St John's is long gone, having been demolished in 1936.

The history of St John's is somewhat hazy - records exist of its demolition, but the reason behind its removal is unclear.

The SA Register recorded the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone and consecration of St John's on December 14, 1864.

Donations to help with building costs were collected on the day, with £86 being raised. The size of the church was given as 44 feet long and 24 feet wide (13.4m x 7.3m).

A convent was also at the same site between 1883-1884, believed to have been inhabited by the Sisters of St Joseph.

In 2020, Flinders University PhD student and geophysical archaeology specialist, Andrew Frost, donated his



**HISTORY UNCOVERED:** Parish representatives Robert Lee and Leigh Blacket, PhD student Andrew Frost and Parish chairman Paul Kennelly. **Photo: Jack Manning.**

time and expertise to survey the church's cemetery and discovered a number of unmarked graves.

Building on this project, Mr Frost recently completed further geophysical survey

work at the site of the old church at 54-60 Tottenham Court Rd.

The site is now largely vacant and Mr Frost's aim was to uncover the precise location of where the church



**FINDINGS:** Gradiometer results showing location and orientation of subsurface anomalies. **Photo: Andrew Frost.**

stood, as well as any remnant foundations.

"I conducted a GPR [ground penetrating radar] survey and picked up some remnants of a building," Mr Frost said.

"There are other methods you can then use to find sub-surface foundations or rubble. I used a fluxgate gradiometer which measures the differences in magnetic fields."

Through these methods, Mr Frost was able to map the foundations of the church and pinpoint accurately where it once stood.

"Seeing the actual shape of the church and its entryway that comes out through the

gradiometer was quite amazing," Mr Frost said.

"I identified another shadow past the church which may or may not be the old convent."

Mr Frost also identified a number of other small structures surrounding the church.

In the late 1800s, Catholic priests did not live in Port Elliot, but travelled to the area from towns including Willunga and Strathalbyn.

Around the time St John's is believed to have been damaged in a fire, a new church at Victor Harbor, St Joan of Arc's (constructed in 1920/21) had taken off with a permanent priest.

Whether a fire, the establishment of St Joan of Arc's, or both, hastened the decline of St John's, much of the church's history had remained unknown in recent times.

Victor Harbor and Goolwa Catholic Parish representative Leigh Blacket thanked Mr Frost for his work and said he was happy to now know more about the church.

"It's great we've now actually established where the old church was," Mr Blacket said.

"It looked to be a lovely little church in its time and it would be interesting to know why it was actually destroyed or pulled down. I believe they used materials from St John's in the construction of St Joan of Arc's, but that's another story.

"Now we know exactly where the church was, it underlines the importance of this block for future use."

As part of his survey work Mr Frost prepared a report on his findings which was gifted to the Parish. It has since been nominated for an Alexandrina Council Heritage Award.