
Mary MacKillop Penola Centre
RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION
A HERITAGE BUILDING IN A HERITAGE AREA

The schoolhouse has local, national and international significance for its association with Mary MacKillop and Father Julian Tenison Woods, co-founders of the Australian religious order of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart at Penola in 1866.

It is a simple gable roofed building of three stone rooms – a schoolroom, bedroom and kitchen – and is prominently located at the entrance to the Petticoat Lane State Heritage area. Construction is of roughly struck rubble masonry, hardwood floors and timber raftered roof. It has three large fireplaces. The original blackwood shingles remain, covered with galvanised iron.

The newly-completed school-room was described in the *Border Watch* of 15 June 1867 as ‘a fine room 40ft by 20ft and about 14ft high’, which was very spacious compared to the children’s homes. Its eight gothic windows ensured that it was filled with natural light and fresh air, and the fireplace provided warmth during wet, cold winters.



Sharam Cottage

The new St Joseph’s school, which was later renamed the Mary MacKillop Memorial School, opened in 1936, and the schoolhouse was then used for various parish functions such as dances and wedding receptions. Parishioners the Lynch brothers replaced the floor with one of fine jarrah and George Mepstead acted as caretaker, a plaque in the building commemorating his dedication over many years.

However, the building gradually fell into a state of disrepair. This deeply concerned a group of Federation Sisters of St Joseph from Lochinvar NSW who visited Penola in 1978. They roused the parish to an awareness of its significance and a restoration committee was formed. The Lochinvar Sisters’ donation was soon followed by others from Sisters of St Joseph in Australia and New Zealand, this generosity giving the committee the financial means and encouragement to proceed with the restoration programme.

The volunteers worked hard to restore the crumbling walls which were affected by severe salt damp, which was later completely eradicated. They repaired the roof and original windows. Robert (Bob) Geraghty’s engaging account of this work – ‘The Restoration Story’ – is available on request in the research room at the Centre. In 1988 the Restoration Committee merged with a new committee known as the Woods MacKillop Schoolhouse Committee.

This committee was responsible for setting up the schoolhouse as an information centre and on 5 March 1989 Archbishop Faulkner opened and re-dedicated the historic building. It was then opened to visitors for restricted hours, but proved so popular that the times were gradually extended. This was only possible due to the generous volunteers who agreed to staff it on a daily basis.

The Woods MacKillop Schoolhouse has long been officially recognised at the national and state levels as a heritage building:

National Estate – Australian Heritage Commission (item number 3/11/174/0022)
State Heritage Register (item number 7023-12701)

Its conservation continues in accordance with the Burra Charter, which sets a standard of practice for those who provide professional heritage advice to owners, managers and custodians of culturally significant places. Advice about the Schoolhouse is provided by the SA State Heritage Branch and also the Limestone Coast Heritage Adviser, this being a joint State, National Estate Grants Programme and Local Government initiative.