

RICHARD SUTER

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QUEENSLAND ARCHITECTS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

SUTER, Richard George (1827 – 1894) was born in London, the son of Richard Suter, an architect, and Ann Ruth Burn. Richard Suter snr (1797 – 1883) was a pupil of the architect D.A. Alexander, whom he succeeded as Surveyor to both the Fishmongers' Co. and the Trinity House Corporation in London. The younger Suter was educated at St Paul's School, London and from 1846 at Trinity College, Cambridge. There he was exposed to the ideas of the Ecclesiological Society which influenced the Gothic Revival in Britain and the colonies. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1850, R.G. Suter probably worked in London for his father whose major commissions then included: St Peter's Hospital at Wandsworth (1849 – 51); the Metropolitan Horse and Carriage Repository (c. 1854); and Gresham School at Holt, Norfolk (1858) all for the Fishmongers' Co.; and hospitals at Stoke-on-Trent, Guildford and Brighton. R.G. Suter became an Associate of the RIBA in 1853. The date and reasons for his subsequent emigration to Queensland are not known. He married Mary Handfield beforehand but appears to have emigrated alone.

By August 1865 Suter was working for Brisbane's leading architect Benjamin Backhouse while establishing his own practice. It is possible that Suter assisted Backhouse with the design of Bishopsbourne, Bishop Tuffnell's residence, and possibly the residences Rathdonnell and Keandstead. It is more probable that Suter was responsible in Backhouses office for the designs of a chapel at Bishopsbourne, and of schools at Nanango and Bald Hills, all built of timber with outside studding. This construction technique, which Suter developed and popularised in Queensland, was an ingenious local modification of traditional half-timbered construction (possibly derived from the architect Frederick Thatcher's buildings in New Zealand for Bishop G.A. Selwyn). Concurrently Suter also practiced on his own behalf in Brisbane. With the architect George McLagan, he was commissioned to report on the stability of William Coote's Town Hall. Suter's recommendations for strengthening the roof were accepted by the Brisbane Municipal Council in September 1865. Suter also took an active part in community activities. He joined the Queensland Philosophical (later Royal) Society in January 1866 and later served as its honorary secretary. He was a sergeant in the

Brisbane Rifles No.1 Company, a committee member of the School of Arts, and president of the Brisbane Dramatic Club.

Despite the colony's faltering economy, Suter's practice expanded. In January 1866 he won a design competition for a Municipal Market, but the building was deferred and re-designed before it was erected by July 1867. Also in January Suter completed a large model for the firm of J. and G. Harris of their new warehouse and wharves in Brisbane – the model was commissioned to send to England to show the extent of their trade. In June 1866, after giving evidence to a Select Committee on the Hospitals of the Colony, Suter presented an “able and practical paper” on the design and construction of hospitals to the Philosophical Society. He urged, among other innovations, the adoption of the pavilion system for improved cross-ventilation, hollow walls to obviate the effects of heat and damp, and raising floors above the ground on open piers or arches. In 1869 Suter gave evidence to another inquiry into the colony's hospitals and asylums, presenting plans for an asylum which combined the pavilion and cottage systems. He had opportunities to implement his ideas in 1868 when he won a competition to extend the Warwick Hospital, and in 1869 when he was commissioned for the new Toowoomba Hospital

Renewing his association with the Anglican Church, Suter became a warden of All Saints' Church early in 1866 and thereafter represented this and other congregations at diocesan meetings. In May 1866, the foundations were laid for St Andrews Church, Lutwyche, the first of Suter's several timber churches. Successfully reconciling the limited budget and the architectural aspirations of congregation, Suter further developed his use of outside studding. This technique, together with a timber bell-cote and spire, produced a “pleasing Gothic effect” like churches in the “old country”. His opportunity to building in more substantial material came in May 1867 with a commission for St Mark's Church, Warwick, which Bishop Tuffnell later called “the most complete and satisfactory building in the Diocese”. In 1867 Suter was unsuccessful in design competition to extend E.T. Blacket's St John's Pro-Cathedral and to complete Backhouses' suspended design of 1863 for St Stephen's Cathedral. Suter proposed to complete the latter in timber in view of limited funds, but Backhouse's more costly design was preferred. After Backhouse left Brisbane, Suter was commissioned to complete the cathedral, possibly to his own revised design.

Suter's school designs for Backhouse soon led to independent commissions from the Queensland Board of Education, initially for timber schools and teachers residences, and, after Backhouse's departure, for almost all the Board's work until 1875. Like his churches, Suter's early schools had outside studding and attracted favourable attention for their economy, internal finish and picturesque appearance. The Board accurately foresaw that Suter's schools would "afford to the inhabitants of the remote interior, models of neat architecture for their imitation". Built throughout the colony, the schools popularised the technique of outside studding which continued to be widely used in Queensland – mostly without the architectural pretensions of Suter's original designs – for half a century. Faced with equally restrictive budgets for several brick schools in Brisbane, Suter was obliged, as he had done with timber, "to fall back upon the materials as actually used to secure ornamentation...without in any way increasing the cost". The corbel tables he incorporated in the walls and gables were likened to lacework surmounting the "innate vulgarity of bricks". Apart from teachers' residence, Suter designed relatively few houses, but these include some of the most substantial and distinguished ever erected in Queensland. Long associated with the homestead, Talgai, with its climatically-responsive plan, Suter was also architect of the elegant Euston and Westbrook Hall and of Jimbour House, a witty parody of Brisbane's Parliament and Government Houses, built for the Parliamentarian Joshua Peter Bell (Suter had earlier designed additions to Government House). A strong circumstantial case can be made for his involvement with Glengallan homestead, near Warwick, possibly taking over from Charles Balding who left the colony in 1867. Suter was also responsible for additions to the Queensland Club, the Brisbane headquarters of his Darling Downs "Pure Merino" clients.

Early in 1872 Suter entered into partnership with Annesley Wesley Voysey as Suter and Voysey. Voysey, an employee since the previous year, was a grandson of Annesley Voysey, a former partner of Richard Suter snr in the early 1830's. The younger Voysey became resident partner of the firm's Rockhampton branch, established to oversee their Central Queensland commissions, in particular St Paul's Church in Rockhampton. Not long afterwards, Suter's fortunes faltered. Most of his larger ecclesiastical commissions had been commenced with insufficient funds for their completion or to pay his fees, resulting in delays and disputes. St Paul's Church was deferred in mid – 1874 with little more than the footings built. Later that year Voysey left the partnership to join the Queensland Railways. In Toowoomba, Suter was dismissed in November 1873 by his client for Westbrook Hall, leading to a dispute over fees which was not resolved until 1876. His formerly good

relationship with the Queensland Board of Education was also threatened. As the Board's building program rapidly increased, it sought to reduce expenditure on professional fees by using standard designs which Suter produced in October 1874. The repeated payment of design fees, however, had previously covered Suter's losses in supervision of the Board's widely dispersed and low-cost schools. The Board's refusal to recompense him for the actual cost of supervision was a matter of continuous discord. By 1874 there were also doubts about the merit of outside studding. After only a few years some schools had required expensive repairs due to unseasoned or non-durable timber being used for exposed joints, and many schools were later sheeted externally or protected by the addition of verandahs. Criticised also was "Mr Suter's clique" – his trusted group of contractors like J.J. D'Evlin. Moreover, Suter was placed in a difficult position in arguments between the Anglican Church and proponents of government education which led in 1975 to abolition of both the Board of Education and funding for church schools. Bishop Tuffnell's return to England in 1874 meant the loss of church patronage. Suter was also unsuccessful in his efforts to have the design of the new Supreme Court in Brisbane thrown open to competition. Worn out, Suter's health failed early in 1875 and he determined to leave the colony for a change of climate. After moving to Melbourne in the following year, he apparently gave up architecture and by 1880 was a priest of the Catholic Apostolic Church, Carlton. Suter died of heart disease in Melbourne on 27 July 1894.¹

SUTER AND VOYSEY were a partnership of Richard George Suter and his former employee, Annesley Wesley Voysey, as architects in Brisbane from early 1872. Suter's father, Richard Suter (1797 – 1883), and Voysey's grandfather, Annesley Voysey (c.1794-1839), both architects, had been partners in London in the early 1830's. From July 1872 Suter and Voysey opened a branch office in Rockhampton, with Voysey as resident partner, to undertake work in Central Queensland for their major clients, the Board of General Education and the Church of England. Despite some success in gaining other work, the firm's major project in Rockhampton, St Paul's Church, was deferred in mid-1874 due to lack

¹ References: information from Harold Marks, Ruth Kamen (British Architectural Library), Mark Nicholls (Cambridge University Archives), and Kevin Murtagh; H. Colvin, A *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600 – 1840*, London, 1978, pp 798 – 99; J. Mane-Wheoki, "Temporary edifices set new directions", in *New Zealand Historic Places*, June 1990, pp.21-25; *V&P of the QLA*, 1869, vol.1, p.43;LWO/A, 1865/2468, QSA.

of funds. The partnership ended in September that year when Voysey joined the Queensland Railways. The practice was continued by Suter until he left Queensland in 1875.²

² **References:** H. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, London, 1978, pp.798-99, 856; WOR/A, 1873/4996, QSA.