

## **Context**

Following World War Two Australia opened her doors to millions of immigrants. Many Irish came to work on the large construction projects being developed at the time. The Eildon Weir project, in northern Victoria, was one of these. Construction on the dam began in 1951 and finished in 1955. The Eildon Emeralds arose from the large number of Irish working on the weir. When the dam was completed in 1955, the club folded. But it was the progenitor of modern Gaelic sport in Victoria. For when those men settled in and around Melbourne, they formed new sporting teams. The immediate progenitors of St Kevin's were the Sinn Fein and Erin's Own Club.

According to Jim Harkin, one of the club's founding members, the impetus to form St Kevin's really emerged at the close of the 1956 season, when a group of men met at the Savoy Cinema in Russell Street. Being the end of the season, however, the interested parties had to wait until February 1957 to register the new club. During that first meeting, the founding members decided to breakaway from the standard practice of naming clubs after Irish rebels. Instead they chose St Kevin for their moniker. The club's colours were to be blue and gold. A forty pound loan from Mick Mulvey allowed the club to purchase its first set of jerseys. Dick Leahy donated ten pounds for the crest. Each of the member's present made a loan to the club to establish its coffers. The founding members were: Peter Charleston, John Culkin, John Finnane, Michael Hegarty, Michael Heagarty, Billy Hynes, Mick Mulvey, Theresa Nash, Sylvester O'Reilly, John O'Sullivan, Jim Reynolds, Chris Sullivan and Phil Tully.

Sylvester O'Reilly was named Captain of the football team; John Finnane received the same honour for the hurling team.

St Kevin's, 1957



Back Row (L-R): Sylvester O'Reilly, Peter Charleston, Billy Hynes, Paddy Phelan, Jack Paul, Dermot Harkin, Bill O'Reilly, Mick Brady  
Front Row (L-R): Steve Cushnahan, John O'Sullivan, Joe O'Sullivan, John Hynes, Tom Devine, Mick Heagarty (Cavan), Mick Heagarty (Mayo)

On 7 April 1957, the club took the field for the first time, and by the end of the season they had played their way into the league final. In summarizing the club's first year of operation, President Mick Heagarty "gave an account of a splendid year's progress on the field. 'St Kevin's' had come from an 'idea' on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1957 to be hot favourites for the League Champions on September 8<sup>th</sup> 1957.". Led by Captain Tom Devine, St Kevin's became the first team to win both the League and Knockout Championships in 1958, and at the end of the 1958 season, Father Patrick Maye offered a fitting description of the club's first two years, when he "thanked the members of St Kevin's for keeping the games alive here in Melbourne. He considered himself lucky to have come in contact with such a club as St Kevin's, because he realised that this club was founded and maintained at considerable inconvenience and expense to members. [He] stated that St Kevin's club had been rewarded in having a good year—the medals won were to this club equal to All-Ireland medals."

1958 League and Knockout Champions



Back Row (L-R): Billy Hynes, Tony Mulholland, Graeme Nagle, Jack Paul, Paddy Phelan, Peter Charlston, Brian O'Reilly, Tom Schofield, Dermot Harkin  
Front Row (L-R): Mick Hegarty, John O'Sullivan, John Hynes, Tom Devine, Joe O'Sullivan, Mick Hegerty, Liam McAuley

### **The Early Years**

With these auspicious beginnings, the club was on its way. Early on, the club established a Provident Fund to assist injured players, as insurance had not yet become standard practice. Fundraising efforts included raffles and Sunday night dances. From the start women played an important role in both running and supporting St Kevin's. It was the lady members who arranged many of the social events, furnishing countless plates of food for the club's benefit.

1966 saw St Kevin's play the league final against Erin's Own. They lost that final but

1967 League and Knockout Champions



went on to again win the double in 1967.

The 1968 and 1969 seasons were a struggle for the club. Disquiet within the ranks of St Kevin's resulted in the departure of a number of members and the formation of a new club—Padraig Pearses.

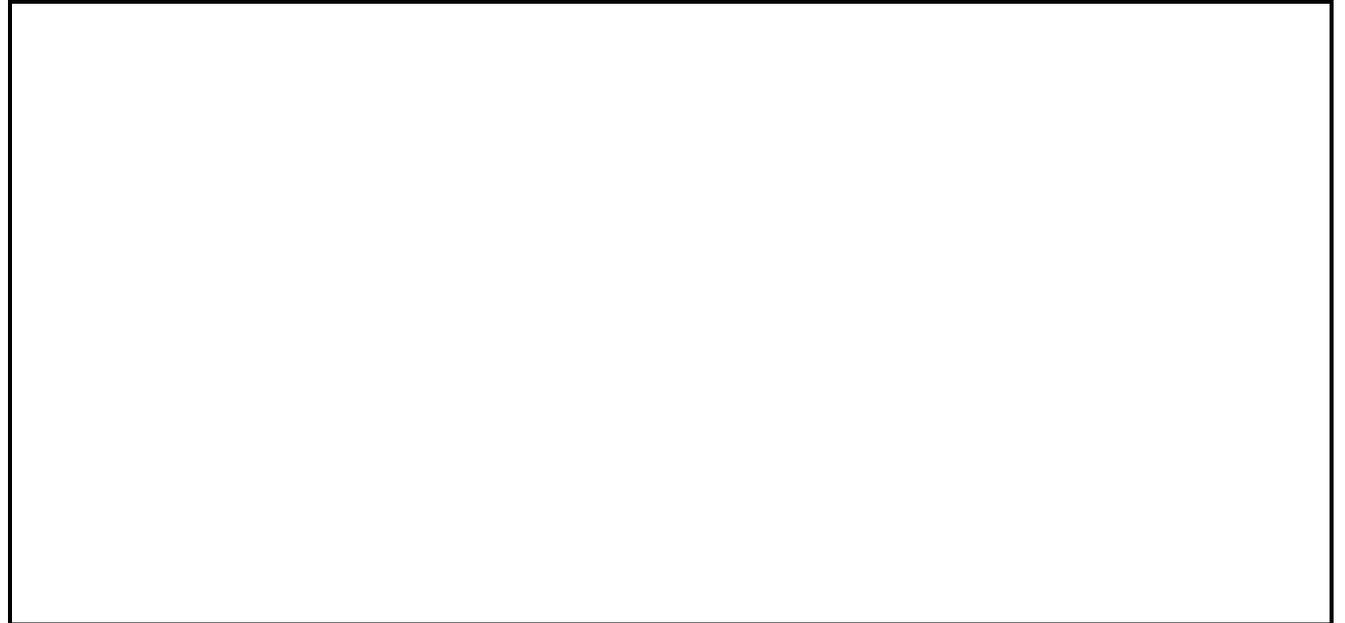
Because of the split in the club, the football season began dismally with a series of heavy defeats. However, with the help of new players and due to the dedication of Coach J O'Mahony, we finished the season by winning the Knockout Cup.

St Kevin's entered the 1970s with new jerseys and a reinvigorated spirit. In 1971, after a disappointing result in the league, the team claimed another Knockout Championship, this time under the captaincy of Noel Rochford. Socially, the club raised funds through a series of Bingo Nights and an annual dance. They also held a Sports Day of their own. 1974 again brought success on the pitch, with the team winning the Celtic Club Cup at the Irish Weekend in Geelong and the League



Championship.

On the larger stage, 1974 was also the year that the I.A.A.A began serious discussion about purchasing a permanent ground for Gaelic sport in Victoria. By 1980 the I.A.A.A were selling membership tickets for the new ground, "Gaelic Park." While the future of Gaelic sport was being secured, St Kevin's continued to succeed in their own right. In 1977 the club again claimed the double, winning both the League and Knockout Championships.



Having achieved the double championship in 1977 and then making it to the league final in 1979, it would be a number of years before the club were again victorious on the field. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, the club entered a new and challenging era. In 1981 St Kevin's stood on the brink of folding.

It is a credit to the members who attended the next meeting—Syd Bright, Mary Corr, Tom Devine, Mick Hegarty, Paddy and Mary Phelan and Laura and Andy White—for keeping the club active. Tom Devine, whose association with the club dated to its first year of operation, became the new president. Pat Kelly took the helm in 1983 and remained the club's president for a number of years. The players also sported new jerseys for the 1983 season. At the Annual General Meeting, held 28 February 1984, the committee nominated to stay on to “bring St Kevin's back in 1984.” And back they came. The team, coached by Tom Devine and captained by John McHugh, put in a “fantastic effort” to claim the Centenary Cup.

1984 Centenary Cup Champions of Victoria



Back Row (L-R): Stephen King, Paul Earley, Francis Duffy, Sid Bright, John Hamill, Pat Kelly, James Nash, Benny Beirne, Michael Reape  
Middle Row (L-R): Martin Monaghan, Sean Deignan, Sean Carney, John McHugh, Brendan McNaghan, Danny Ryan, Pat O'Boyle, Tom Devine  
Front Row (L-R): Vianney Keenan, James Hunt, Paul Lynch  
Not Pictured: Anthony Frank, Brendan Frank, Sean Dillon

### **The Era of the Visa Player**

In the late 1980s, there was a disjuncture between the number of permanent visas allowed by Australia and the demand for them. This led to a special agreement between the Australian and Irish governments, which granted one-year temporary visas to young Irish men and women. These visa players brought a new dynamic to Gaelic sport in Victoria. The impact on Gaelic sport cannot be overemphasized. These short-timers often brought exceptional skill and lifted the level of play. Their brief playing tenures, however, also meant that clubs lacked cohesive playing bases. Thus was the situation for St Kevin's during the early 1990s. The impact for St Kevin's was a new focus on Australian players. The club had always counted Australians among their number; indeed, three were part of the 1958 championship team. The early 1990s, however, saw a shift to mostly Australian players, without whom the club would likely have folded.

The new group experienced some growing pains on the field. It would be a number of years before the playing situation significantly improved. The commitment of the members through those years, however, deserves to be noted and truly underscores one of the vital aspects of St Kevin's membership—Friendship and Steadfastness. The leadership of the club also shifted during this period as the group of new recruits took control, albeit reluctantly. The story follows that Mary Corr, whose ties to the clubs date to the mid 1970s, was looking after things in 1994. One night she asked Gerry McElligott and Steve Jess down to the pub, where she dropped the club's books in their laps and told the lads, "You're running the club next year." Kudos to Mary for that brilliant play! And also to Gerry and Steve for stepping into the breach. Through their efforts, and those of Martin Forker and Paul O'Farrell, the club started on the path to recovery. A long term sponsor was found in Mark Durnan of the Grandview Hotel in Fairfield, and the era of the modern newsletter began. St Kevin's had once again found its feet, and 1996 became a historic year for the club.

At the close of the 1995 season, two women—Martina White and Penny Hopkins—addressed the St Kevin's Annual General Meeting about sponsoring a women's football team. At the 1995 Interstate Games, a group of twenty ladies had represented Victoria for the first time. Enthusiasm rising from the Melbourne games led to an organized women's competition. Sinn Fein sponsored one of the teams. St Kevin's, in a narrowly won decision, voted to sponsor a second team. Steve Jess served as liaison and defacto coach to the women, who helped fund themselves through lots and lots of chocolate sales.

The First St Kevin's Women's Team



Back Row (L-R): Steve Jess, Martina Whelan, Chrissy Woodcock, Siobhan Englishby, Jo Bates, Penny Hopkins, Debbie Burmas, Angela Cole, Chris Collins, Fiona O'Connor, Rachel Bulger  
Front Row (L-R): Mari Hughes, Debbie Bock, Sue Drowley, Colleen Buckley, Jennie Bulger, Sue Marsiglio, Elis Hughes

And so 1996 witnessed the two ladies' teams battling it out for the championship. Sinn Fein, the more experienced of the two sides, claimed the early lead. But St Kevin's, who were captained by Martina White, gave a good fight. By the end of the season, each side had managed five victories. In the championship match, Sinn Fein pipped the St Kevin's Ladies at the post to claim the inaugural cup.

Off the field the club maintained an active social calendar. The continuing sponsorship of the Grandview Hotel meant a welcoming environment in which to celebrate a win or drown a loss. 1996 also marked the start of a new tradition—The Annual St Kevin's Trivia Night—now in its eleventh year! It is perhaps symbolic that a year of such great momentum for the club was also the year St Kevin's celebrated its fortieth anniversary. On 26 October 1996, more than 230 people gathered at Eden on the Park in Melbourne to celebrate St Kevin's and its members. If the photos are any indication, a good time was had by all!

St Kevin's returned to competition in 1997 with high hopes. While the men, led by Coach Sean Wight and Captain Mick Bramich, missed out on the finals, the season was deemed "the first year in a long time in which we could be seriously considered as final's contenders. The past two seasons have seen us step up from the bottom of the league ladder where we had sat for far too long.

For the women's side, the year began with two losses, but they turned things around on 27 April, apparently through the promise of a free pint of Guinness from sponsor Fanny O'Dea's for each lady should they win. A string of five consecutive wins meant the women claimed the premiership with a shutout of the Sinn Fein women on 27 July 1997.



That the ladies went on to also win the championship match only capped the year's success.

The rest of the 1990s passed in relative calm for both teams. The competition in the women's league grew stronger with Garryowen forming from St Kevin's in 1998 and

then Grace O'Malley and Padraig Pearses joining the following year. 1998 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Gaelic sport in Victoria. Part of the celebrations included an



over 35s match, which was won by St Kevin's.

In 1999 founding member, Jim Reynolds, donated a new kit for both teams.

The new century saw St Kevin's win the inaugural trophy for Best Presented GAA Team at the St Patrick's Day parade. On the football pitch, the first years of the "noughties" saw limited success for the club. In 2001 the ladies' team qualified for the final of the Knockout Championship but lost the cup to the team from Grace O'Malley. The following year, the men played themselves into the finals but could not quite go the distance. Finally in 2003, St Kevin's secured another trophy, when the women met Sinn Fein in the final for the Knockout Cup. The team, coached by Steve Jess and captained by Deb Manning, played a hard-fought match that went into two periods of extra time. In the end St Kevin's triumphed with a final score of 5-9 to Sinn Fein's 3-11.

2003 Knockout Champion



In 2004 the club found a new sponsor in PJ O'Briens, the Irish Pub. The well-known Southbank establishment helped fund a new kit for both the women's and men's teams. On many a Sunday evening, the Kev's Crew can be seen enjoying the craic at PJs, whether on stage with the Karaoke machine or dancing up a storm in the "Dancing Circle." 2004 also witnessed the inaugural Coburg Saints' Day. This fundraising event is jointly held with the Coburg Saints' Football Club. The highlight of the day is a half-and-half match of Aussie Rules versus Gaelic. Thus far St Kevin's are undefeated, and we hope the streak and the fantastic day will continue in 2007!

As St Kevin's celebrates its fiftieth year, we pause to reflect on what a great run the club has had. There has certainly been success on the pitch, and it is hoped that many more championships will come. But the true test of any club is the dedication of its members and the fact that those members stood by the club during the lean years. It is a testament to the founding members that they established an institution rooted in loyalty and friendship. For fifty years St Kevin's has proved a steadfast institution for

Gaelic sport in Victoria. There can be no better legacy for the men who founded the club.

What a great fifty years it has been! Let's hope the next fifty shine as bright!