

Letter
MAR 2 - 1912

The Secretary
Schools Registration Board
Dear Sir

I hereby make
application to your Board to grant
Registration to the new Catholic school
now approaching completion here.



PART ONE

Founded in Faith: 1912–1936



THE STORY OF St Mary's Primary School begins, not – as you might expect – in 1912 when three Presentation Sisters arrived in Dandenong to establish a new convent and Catholic school, but forty years earlier in 1872.

The Victorian Education Act of 1872 withdrew funding for Catholic schools, threatening the continuation of Catholic education and prompting the parish priest of St Mary's parish in St Kilda, Father James Francis Corbett, to write to the Reverend Mother of the Presentation Convent in Limerick, Ireland. His letter opened dramatically: 'Dear Reverend Mother. From the ends of the earth I write to you for help ...'¹ Father Corbett asked that the Reverend Mother send a group of Presentation Sisters to Melbourne to provide children with a Catholic education. The following year, in September 1873, Mother Mary Paul Mulquin and six Sisters boarded the *Great Britain* steamer at Liverpool. They arrived at Port Melbourne three months later on 21 December 1873. They established a Presentation Convent and school at Windsor, before expanding their number and spreading throughout the state.

OPPOSITE

Dandenong was a developing rural township when the Presentation Sisters arrived to establish a Catholic school in 1912. This photo of Dandenong's busy main street was taken just three years later in 1915.

Sate Library of Victoria, H90.72/60

TOP

Extract from letter written by St Mary's parish priest, Father John Gleeson, to the Schools Registration Board in 1912.



In 1910, the parish priest of St Mary's parish in Dandenong, Father John Gleeson, wrote to Mother Ita Cagney of the Presentation Convent in Windsor, asking her to send some Sisters to Dandenong to open a new convent and start a Catholic school. The Shire of Dandenong covered an area of 60 square miles at that time, including Carrum, Springvale and Noble Park, and was primarily an agricultural and pastoral area. The leading industries in the district were market gardens and dairy farming. In 1911, the population of Dandenong was 1,500, out of 4,200 in the shire as a whole, and rose to 2,200 within a matter of months. The Dandenong State School, No. 1403, had opened in 1874 and the first Catholic school in the area, which had started at Eumemerring in 1858, had been converted into a State School in 1872, leaving the district with no Catholic school.² Mother Cagney was convinced of the need for Catholic education in the area and agreed to send three Presentation Sisters to Dandenong. Father Gleeson purchased two adjoining properties on Langhorne and McCrae streets to erect a school and convent in preparation for their arrival.

Challenging beginnings

On 12 February 1912, Sisters Patrick Considine, Fidelis Burgess and Angela Bourke travelled from Windsor to establish a convent at 71 Langhorne Street, Dandenong. An account of the establishment of the convent in Dandenong that is thought to have been written by Sister Angela Bourke describes the Sisters arriving at their new home in Dandenong with only a few pieces of furniture, 'a tin of kerosene, two lamps, a kettle, two saucepans, half a dozen cups and saucers'.³ The house had been newly vacated by Mr and Mrs Butler, who had moved next door, and Mrs Butler kindly brought the Sisters tea and scones on their arrival.

St Mary's Catholic School was officially opened and blessed by Archbishop Thomas Carr on Sunday 19 February 1912. Len Keating started his schooling at Dandenong Primary School and moved to St Mary's when it opened, along with many other state school students. He recalled his mother sewing 'suits of clothes from a blue and white striped material', making Len and his three brothers 'ready for the great day in February 1912. They appeared resplendent in their striped suits, straw boater hats and celluloid collars.' Despite the Keating boys' striking outfits, the Sisters may have been concerned about the discipline of their new charges when some of the boys present 'got on the roof and threw stones down' during the Archbishop's blessing.⁴ According to Sister Angela, however, when teaching began the following day 'the boys turned out to be fine lads'.⁵ The school opened with 75 students and by the end of the first year 100 pupils were enrolled.



Sister Patrick was responsible for the senior grades and Sister Angela taught the junior grades, while Sister Fidelis was in charge of the convent. The three founding Sisters were joined by Sister Philomena O’Gorman in 1914 and later by Sisters Margaret Mary McDonald and Josepha Shine. All three taught at St Mary’s School. Sister Josepha instructed the younger children up to Grade 3, while Sister Margaret Mary came from Star of the Sea in Elsternwick to take Grade 5.⁶ Sister Philomena taught Grades 7 and 8, known as the middle school. Len Keating recalled that students’ goal was to pass the Qualifying Certificate in Grade 6, and then the Merit Certificate in Grade 8 ‘in order to obtain satisfactory employment’.⁷ An Education Department Inspector who visited the school in 1915 recorded that on his next visit, he would ‘examine the candidates for Certificate of Merit in reading, poetry, occupations, including needlework and science’. With just three teachers to 100 students, discipline must have been difficult to maintain, however the inspector commented that ‘The school is carried on briskly, earnestly and with all the classes in very good discipline’.⁸

Similar to the convent, in the early days of St Mary’s School it was severely lacking in resources. When Father Gleeson arrived to show the first Sisters the school building, it was ‘empty except for a few desks’ and school started the following week ‘minus blackboards, maps, etc’.⁹ Len Keating described a weatherboard building consisting of ‘two large classrooms, separated by a folding corridor, a raised stage, and two small rooms’.¹⁰ School fees were not high, at just one shilling a week for older children and sixpence for juniors. In such difficult conditions and without any government funding whatsoever, the Sisters relied heavily on the local community for supplies, both for the school and for the convent. Although most local families were not well-off themselves, it was their donations that kept the school running. One pupil, Sarah (Sally) Carroll, recalled ‘being one of the “Milk Can Brigade”’ and carrying seven-pound treacle tins of milk to the convent daily with her sister and brothers. At Christmas and Easter, children would be sent to take cakes to the Sisters and Sarah also recalled plucking the feathers of a goose and carrying it to the convent with her siblings. Sarah reflected that ‘the early years of these three Sisters in the parish were more austere than those of the depression years’ in the 1930s.¹¹

Establishing traditions

Despite the hardships, these first Presentation Sisters are remembered very fondly by their students. Sixty years after he started school at St Mary’s, James McCarter remembered the nerves he felt on his first day, but asked himself later how any child could ‘have received anything but kind, considerate, and at times affectionate attention from Sister Patrick, Sister Angela and Sister Philomena’. James



The original convent at 71 Langhorne Street. Known to the Presentation Sisters as St Michael’s, the convent was established by the three founding Sisters when they arrived in Dandenong in 1912 to start St Mary’s School.

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

OPPOSITE

Sisters Patrick Considine (top) and Angela Bourke, two of the three original Presentation Sisters to arrive in Dandenong on 12 February 1912. Sister Patrick became the first head teacher of St Mary’s School. Sister Angela taught the junior grades and gave violin lessons.



recalled ‘Sister Patrick at the blackboard, speaking in a soft brogue, insistent and encouraging’ and Sister Angela teaching him violin.¹² The Sisters used music tuition as a means of bringing in extra money for the convent and established music as an important aspect of the school curriculum; a tradition that continues today. The first annual end of year concert was held at the school on 19 December 1912. The local newspaper reported that ‘the programme was a specially good one, and hearty praise and applause were showered upon the performers and the Sisters of the school’. The evening included musical and dance performances and the distribution of prizes to ‘the successful scholars’ by Father Gleeson.¹³ The school concerts were important events not only for the school community, but also the wider Dandenong population, and quickly became a highlight in the annual calendar of parish events.

By the December concert of 1914, the school building was filled to overflowing with the large audience and the local paper reported that ‘the hope was expressed by any that the building will be enlarged by next year’. Despite the space limitations, however, the children’s performance ‘quite eclipsed all previous efforts’ and the Sisters were asked for the entertainment to be repeated, demonstrating ‘the successful and painstaking tuition of the Presentation Sisters’.¹⁴ The school concert of 1916 was held in the Town Hall to accommodate the large audience.

In 1924, Sister Carmel Kierce joined the staff at St Mary’s as a full-time music teacher, instructing small groups and individual students. The importance of music, which had been a valued feature of school life from the beginning, was reinforced and the school gained the name St Mary’s – School of Music. Sister Macnise Dowling, who came to the parish in 1930, continued to highlight the importance of music at St Mary’s. Together with Sister Carmel and Sisters Teresa Patrick and Angela Bourke, she instructed students in singing and a variety of musical instruments. Sister Macnise remembered the many concerts, dances and balls that were held to raise funds for the school and convent.¹⁵

Sport and physical exercise were also important aspects of the education provided by the Presentation Sisters from the very beginning. Len Keating remembered Sister Patrick following an instruction book on physical exercises published by the Defence Department and she ‘even gave demonstrations of knees bending with arms stretching’.¹⁶ The first school sports meeting and picnic was held on St Patrick’s Day in 1914 at the old Eumemmerring Racecourse and continued to be held annually thereafter. Sister Macnise recalled that in the 1930s races were held by the Catholic community on New Year’s Day each year at DJ Bourke’s paddock, now the Pakenham Racecourse. Funds raised from the day were put towards the salaries of St Mary’s teachers.¹⁷

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

The original school building, built in 1912, was a weatherboard building consisting of two large classrooms separated by a folding corridor, a raised stage and two small rooms.

The original weatherboard school building in McCrae Street, pictured in 1973, remained very much as it had been in 1912. The large room behind the verandah held Grades 4 to 8 and to the right of the verandah was the music room.

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

St Mary’s class 1 and 2 students in around 1927. At this time the school had some 150 pupils enrolled.

Group of boys at the children’s communion breakfast in Dandenong, 1929.

St Mary’s students enjoying the outdoors in 1928.

Students busy in the school garden in 1914 with the original school building in McCrae Street in the background.

A strengthened community

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 had a significant impact on the St Mary's community. Events were held to raise funds for the war effort and parcels of gifts and letters of encouragement were sent to the 'lads' serving overseas. The parish community was, however, overwhelmingly against conscription. A student at the time, Len Keating, later recalled 'every member of each family proudly displayed his "No" badge' and when one family at the school began to openly support conscription, 'they were treated with a great deal of reserve for a long time afterwards'.¹⁸ Early accounts reveal that the Presentation Sisters felt similarly strongly about conscription: 'On the day of the voting at least five men came to take us to the polling booth. We had never voted at an election but did on this issue'.¹⁹ As the war went on, more and more familiar names of young men from the Dandenong community – some the brothers of St Mary's students – appeared on the casualty lists.



St Mary's students photographed in front of a large pine tree in the school grounds in 1917. This is the tree that was later struck by lightning and splintered in two, minutes after a group of students had been sitting beneath it during a lesson with Sister Josepha Shine.

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

Sisters Aquinas Gavin and Cecilia Rudd joined the Presentation community in Dandenong at the end of the war in 1918. The first lay teacher, Miss McManus, was also employed at the school that year. Her niece, Mary, came with her to the school and boarded with the nuns at the convent. Mary's arrival was particularly welcomed by the Sisters because, at times when there were only four nuns at the convent, her presence increased their number to five, allowing Father Gleeson to celebrate Mass and the Blessed Sacrament. Shortly afterwards, Father Gleeson was transferred to Flemington after 19 years of service in Dandenong. He was succeeded by Father Francis Merner, Dandenong's first Australian-born parish priest.

With enrolments continuing to grow, £700 was spent on extensions to the school in 1919.²⁰ The Inspector of Schools recorded in 1923 that there were 134 students on the roll and 'The class rooms are bright, airy and the premises suitable ... The school seems to have a satisfactory stock of material and equipment. There is a good library'.²¹ The outdoor spaces at the school were also well-used, with the Inspector of School noting in 1933 that 'the play area' was large enough for the 178 children on the roll by that time.²² John (Jack) Kelly, who was a St Mary's student in the 1930s, remembers playing cricket and football in the school grounds at lunchtime. He has strong memories of the orange tree in the neighbour's garden that 'used to hang over into the schoolyard, and every lunchtime he'd come and hang out over the gate to keep us away from his oranges'.²³

Two large elm trees stood at the front entrance to the school, while at the back there was a large pine tree that gained distinction after a near tragic incident in the school's early years. On a particularly humid day Sister Josepha Shine decided to conduct her class outside to escape the stifling atmosphere in the wooden school building. When it clouded over and started to rain Sister Josepha moved the children to the shelter of a nearby shed. Moments later a loud clap of thunder reverberated and a bolt of lightning struck the tree under which the students had been sitting just minutes earlier. The tree was splintered in two. Sister Josepha recalled:

Hardly had we got into the shed when a terrific clap of thunder sounded. This was followed by a very vivid flash of lightning. To this day I can remember the heat of that lightning in my face, and of course the children felt it. It was nothing short of a miracle that we were saved.²⁴



In this Inspector's Report from 1914 praise was offered to the three teaching Sisters and students at St Mary's School. The offer Inspector wrote: 'The discipline was very good. The teachers managed and taught their classes with good result'.