

managed and taught their classes with good result.

3. PREMISES, BUILDINGS, AND EQUIPMENT.

The school premises were in very good order.

The access, drainage, light ventilation and sanitary conveniences were satisfactory.

Provision is made for temporary accommodation in an excellent playground.



An Era of Expansion: 1937–1961

IN 1937 the Presentation Sisters celebrated their silver jubilee in Dandenong, marking 25 years since the arrival of the first three Sisters in 1912. A commemorative grotto was constructed at the convent, built by former student Ted Green with stone supplied by another past student, Bernie Leigh.¹ Change continued at the Presentation Convent throughout the 1940s, with the departure of several much-loved members of the school and the parish community. After six years as principal, Reverend Mother Dominic Curtin, who had made an important contribution to the school, was transferred to Heathcote in 1941. Sister Vianney McCarthy was transferred to Windsor the same year, after ten years in Dandenong. The following year, in 1942, Father Michael O’Sullivan succeeded Father Thomas J Little as parish priest.

In its first 25 years the school gained a good reputation for learning and discipline, and this standing was maintained in the new era. This was due to the work of dedicated Sisters, who – like their predecessors – through their teaching skills, religious devotion and personalities, left their mark on St Mary’s.

OPPOSITE

The connection between the parish and the school has always been strong. The children pictured at their First Communion in 1948 are likely to have been students at St Mary’s School.

TOP

Extract from School Inspector’s Report.



This commemorative grotto was constructed at the Presentation Convent in 1937 to mark 25 years since the arrival of the first three Sisters in 1912. It was built by former student Ted Green with stone supplied by another past student, Bernie Leigh.

Mother Dominic's successor, Reverend Mother Anthony Patterson, who had come to Dandenong from St Patrick's Pakenham, quickly endeared herself to the school and the community. She steered the school through the difficult years of World War II. In 1947 she was joined by Sisters John Murray, Celestine O'Connell and Francis Lyons. These Sisters were to be part of a period of significant change in the St Mary's community. School facilities, long in need of development, gradually began to improve. Running water was introduced at both the school and the convent after the creation of the Dandenong Sewerage Authority in 1935. A decade later, in 1945, four new classrooms, an office and a brick shelter were added to the school buildings.² This was just the beginning of development for St Mary's. As the school entered a period of enormous growth in the 1950s further expansion was ahead.

Migration heralds a new era

After the end of World War II in 1945, Dandenong underwent a period of major development. The rural character that had defined the area since the establishment of the first pastoral run in 1837 gave way to a new era, as the post-war industrial boom, coupled with migration from Europe, resulted in enormous growth and development in the region. During the 1950s, paddocks were rapidly converted to shops, houses and industrial sites. Large factories were established on the flat land south-east of Dandenong by companies such as Heinz, International Harvester and General Motors Holden. The abundance of jobs attracted many workers, especially European migrants. The new suburb of Doveton was established north of the Princes Highway by the Housing Commission to house the rapidly increasing population.³

Migrant children began attending the local schools, including St Mary's. By 1951 attendance had risen to 415. Mary Clark, who attended the school in the 1940s, recalled 'Natalia and Rosalia Ficcaro counting up to ten in Italian for lots of curious and fascinated listeners during a playtime'.⁴

Joan Kennedy started school at St Mary's in 1947, soon after the war, and remembers the influx of migrants from a variety of different backgrounds: 'English and Irish and Scottish, but quite a few Italians, Maltese, and so on'. Joan reflects that the welcoming attitude of the community to new arrivals stemmed from the school's founding and the continued presence of Irish Sisters. 'I think that helped us greatly not to be at all wary about these young people coming in, many of which spoke strange languages or had strange accents', she says. Joan herself felt privileged: 'I just loved ... having the experience of hearing about new cultures, new ways of doing things, having different ... foods, when other young people didn't have that experience'.⁵

Dutch migrant Paul Gubbels has reflected on how the post-war migration of Dutch people to Dandenong impacted on St Mary's parish. He recalled that 'they worked hard to establish themselves and to give their children the advantages offered in their new homeland which would have been impossible previously'. In the days before Catholic schools received any government funding, 'the financial struggle faced by all Catholic families in affording their children a decent Catholic education was shared by the Dutch'.⁶

Father Anthony Guelen, a Dutch migrant himself, was appointed assistant to the parish priest at St Mary's parish shortly after he was ordained in 1958, staying on until 1965. One of his main tasks as assistant parish priest was to visit St Mary's School every week and he recalls that the Sisters faced the monumental task of teaching huge numbers of children in very basic classrooms: 'because of so many migrants coming in the numbers were tremendous, and if you had seen those classrooms today most of the teachers would walk out'.⁷ One of Joan Kennedy's dominant memories of school is 'very big crowded classrooms'. 'I'm sure we had at least 70 children, perhaps more, in the class', she recalls.⁸

With the influx of migrants, the population of the Dandenong Shire rose from 15,122 in 1947 to 27,748 in 1954.⁹ By this time enrolments at St Mary's had grown to 470 and the school started to experience overcrowding. The opening and blessing of the Brigidine Sisters' Killester Convent at Springvale in 1955 offered some relief as a number of the senior girls from St Mary's transferred to Killester College to continue their education. In 1956 the parishes of Dandenong North, Berwick and Noble Park were created and consideration was given to open schools in these new parishes.¹⁰ However, it was clear that St Mary's School needed to expand.



FAR LEFT

The old convent at 71 Langhorne Street was vacated and rented to tenants in 1924 in favour of the new convent at 69 Langhorne Street, pictured here. Facilities remained quite basic. Running water was introduced at both the school and the convent in 1935.

LEFT

Students pictured the day after the school concert in the early 1950s. The first annual concert was held in December 1912. School concerts were important events for the community and quickly became a highlight in the annual calendar of parish events.



Mother Emmanuel (Sister Lois Young) and Mother Imelda (Sister Nancy Roberts) pictured with Scamp the dog in around 1957. By this time the school's enrolment had reached 738, with seven Sisters and three lay teachers on staff.

The rapid industrial growth and its accompanying rising population prompted Father O'Sullivan to make provision for the expansion of Catholic education in Dandenong. As early as 1953 he purchased a 4½ acre site in the heart of Dandenong for £11,000. Located opposite the original St Mary's School, the site was bounded on three sides by McCrae, New and Power streets. The attractive property contained the burnt-out brick shell of 'Roseneath', Dr Francis Langley's historic home, built at the turn of the century by former Member of Parliament and Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Sir Samuel Gillott. Joan Kennedy recalls the day 'Langleys' burnt to the ground: 'I remember sitting in the classroom and hearing the fire engines coming and feeling really sad because it was the most beautiful old home with the most gorgeous garden'.¹¹

A turning point in Catholic education for Dandenong

The year 1957 is considered a turning point in Catholic education in Dandenong. The enrolment at St Mary's School by this time exceeded 700. Sister Imelda Lynch was principal, following Sister Virgilius Kelly in this role.

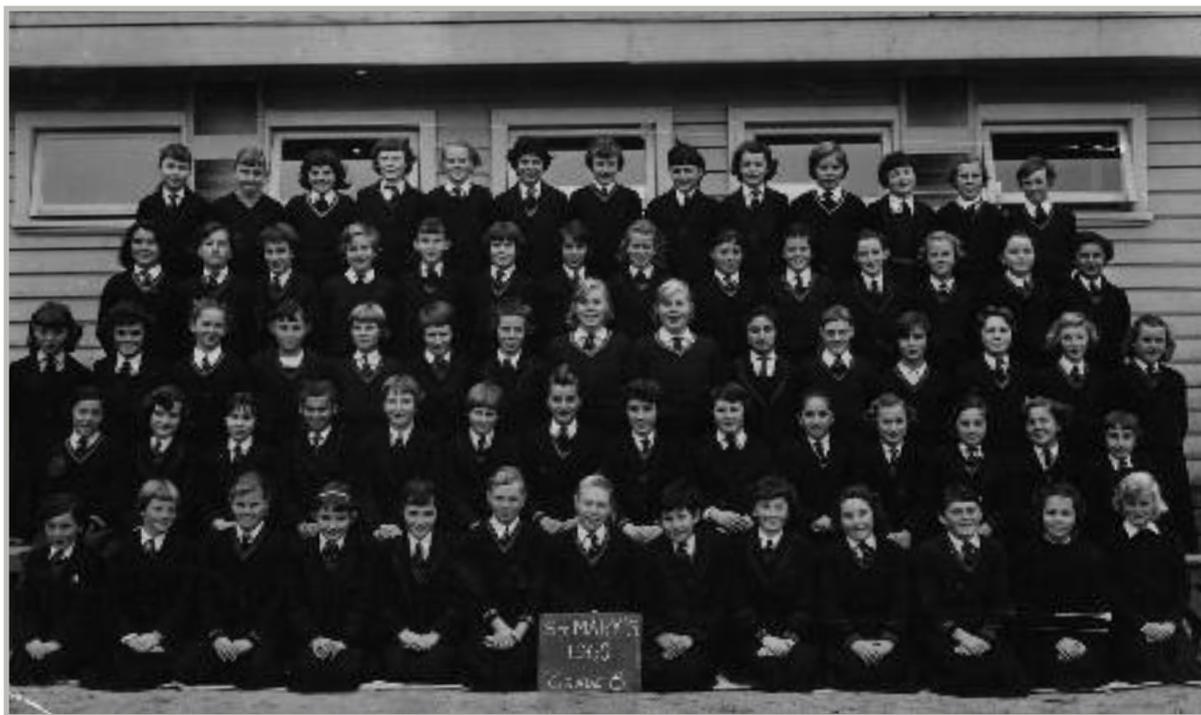
With the rapidly increasing population in the district, enrolment numbers at St Mary's rose from 484 in 1955 to 738 just two years later. Facilities at the school, already stretched, were unable to cope with the increased demand. Following a visit to the school in April 1957, the Inspector of Schools noted in his report: 'accommodation remains inadequate and restricts the implementation of progressive teaching methods'. Classes were being held in a converted shelter shed and a cloakroom. Nevertheless, the Inspector reserved praise for Sister Imelda and her teaching colleagues, extolling:

The Head Teacher and her staff are to be commended for the courage, enthusiasm and persistent effort with which they attack the manifold problems of accommodation, organization and instruction.¹²

In an attempt to address the inadequacy of the classroom facilities for the growing number of students, a school auxiliary was formed. This body of volunteer workers was responsible for raising funds for the school and also staffed the school tuck shop. The Schools Provident Fund, which had been created the previous year in 1956, also provided crucial funds for a number of school building projects over the years. 'But for the Fund it would have been impossible for us to make proper provision for the education of the children', said one parish priest.¹³

Lack of facilities was not the only challenge faced by Sister Imelda and her charges. In 1957, the Sisters assumed the added responsibility of staffing the new school at St Gerard's in Dandenong North. More Sisters were appointed to the Dandenong Convent to meet the educational needs of the students. The old convent at 71 Langhorne Street, which had been vacated and rented to tenants in 1924 in favour of the new convent at 69 Langhorne Street, was once again used by the Sisters to accommodate the new arrivals. By 1958 Sister Imelda had five other Sisters with her, as well as lay teachers, to staff the school. Each year, as student numbers increased, more and more lay teachers taught alongside the Sisters.

By the late 1950s, after almost fifty years of primary school education at St Mary's, the provision of secondary education to the Catholic children of Dandenong had become an imperative. With prompting from the parish, the De La Salle order in Sydney was persuaded to send a Brother to Dandenong for this purpose. On 4 February 1958, Brother Amedy Molloy began St Mary's Boys School with a total of 52 boys from St Mary's Primary School. The school had one Grade 6 class and



The Grade 6 class at St Mary's in 1960. The school population peaked around this time, with more than 700 pupils enrolled at St Mary's Primary School and St Mary's Girls Secondary School, under the guidance of Sister Imelda Lynch.

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

a combined class of Grades 7 and 8. The first lessons were held in two prefabricated rooms on the old St Mary's school site situated in McCrae Street, opposite the present school. The primary school was already overcrowded and so, to relieve this situation, after a few months a large galvanised iron shed was purchased. This ex-Army shed was partitioned into two rooms and placed on an old tennis court on what was then known as Langley's property, the site that St Mary's Primary School occupies today. Later that year, three new classrooms were built in New Street on the land earlier purchased by Father O'Sullivan. This was the forerunner of the present two-story school building. In August, Brother Molloy moved his secondary school classes into the new three-roomed, brick building. This was said to please Sister Imelda, who placed the very large Grade 5 class in the 'tin shed' vacated by the secondary boys.¹⁴

Dandenong underwent a period of rapid growth and development in the 1950s as paddocks and stockyards were converted to shops, houses and industrial sites. Large factories were established on the flat land south-east of Dandenong by companies such as Heinz, General Motors Holden and International Harvester, pictured here.

Airspy Collection, State Library of Victoria, H2008.41/43



In the meantime, with increasing numbers of St Mary's girls leaving to attend the newly established Killester College at Springvale to continue their secondary education, Sister Imelda was encouraged to conduct classes up to Grade 8. The secondary section of St Mary's soon adopted the name of St Mary's Girls Secondary School.

The problem of secondary education was temporarily solved, but additional space was required to meet the expanding number of students enrolled at the three schools now operating under the St Mary's name. In the quest for much-needed funds, the annual St Mary's School Fete was expanded to two days. Held in November 1958, it raised over £800.¹⁵ By this time the number of students enrolled at St Mary's was 683 – no less than 350 being children of New Australians, representing about twenty nations. The following year preparations were made to add a second storey to the building in New Street.

Proclamation of a city

On 14 March 1959, having exceeded the necessary annual revenue of at least £30,000 and with a rapidly expanding population, the Shire of Dandenong was proclaimed a city. The municipal directory described Dandenong as a 'prosperous, industrial, residential and market town on the Dandenong Creek ... with State, high and technical schools, Catholic primary and secondary schools'.¹⁶

St Mary's Primary School and St Mary's Girls Secondary School, under the guidance of Sister Imelda Lynch, had almost 700 pupils between them. Brother Amedy Molloy was principal of the boys' school in New Street, which by this time was known as St John's Boys School. This was the beginning of a new chapter for Catholic education in Dandenong, as the era of expansion was replaced by a period of great change.