

During 1955 the school was in operation for 100 days; to the present date of this year there have been 80 school-days.

The morning session is from 9.15 to 12 and that of the afternoon from 1 to 3.30.

With the addition of Religious Instruction the subjects treated are similar to those



## *A Period of Great Change: 1962–1986*

**P**OST-WAR MIGRATION to Australia saw the population of Dandenong soar. According to the 1954 census, the population of the Shire of Dandenong had more than doubled since 1933, reaching over 27,000 people. Those born in Britain constituted the largest group of European-born Dandenong residents, followed by people from the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Malta, Poland, Ukraine and Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>1</sup>

Waves of migration continued over the following decades, prompted by wars and humanitarian disasters, or simply by the promise of employment opportunities, improved living conditions and high quality education. Migrant groups made a significant impact on the Dandenong community, starting their own social organisations and opening businesses. By the 1960s, Dandenong was home to a Dutch butcher and Italian delicatessens and restaurants. While some of these communities started their own churches and parishes, many Italian and Polish Catholics joined St Mary's parish. A St Mary's student at the time, Moira Phyland (née Kelly) recalls that the children mixed well despite their different backgrounds: 'You met them all at Mass on Sunday, and the parents would all talk after Mass, and we'd

**OPPOSITE**

*Students at play in the St Mary's schoolyard, 1975.*

**TOP**

*Extract from School Inspector's Report.*

all be running around ... There was, I suppose, a real sense of belonging.<sup>2</sup> When English was introduced into the traditionally Latin Mass in 1964, a petition by the Polish community led to Mass also being held regularly by a Polish priest. A weekly Polish Mass still continues today. During the 1970s, regular Italian Mass was also held at St Mary's Church.<sup>3</sup>

While 17.4 per cent of residents in the City of Greater Dandenong in 1954 had been born overseas, this number tripled over the next 40 years, increasing to 32 per cent in 1971 and 46 per cent in 1991.<sup>4</sup> After the abolition of the Immigration Restriction Act, known as the White Australia Policy, in 1973, migrant numbers were boosted by people arriving from Asian countries. Vietnamese, Cambodian and Chilean refugees arrived in Dandenong in the 1970s and 1980s, often escaping conflict and persecution.

### *Expanding Catholic education*

While the wider population of Dandenong grew and became increasingly multicultural, Catholic education in the area was also expanding. Sister Gabriel Cobern, who succeeded Sister Imelda Lynch as principal of St Mary's Primary School in 1962, shared her predecessor's interest in extending the senior curriculum for girls, giving them the opportunity to remain at St Mary's rather than moving to Killester College in Springvale to continue their education. The senior girls section of the school, known as St Mary's Girls Secondary School, gradually expanded to offer classes to matriculation level. A proficiency exam for Form 3 students was introduced in 1965 and an intermediate exam for Form 4 pupils the following year. Sister Kathleen Conry recalled that it was decided under the leadership of Sister Gabriel that St Mary's would offer 'a Form V class with the help of a "swap" system of staff with the De La Salle Brothers from St John's who were then situated across the road'.<sup>5</sup> The first Form 5 class had 16 students, while just seven girls graduated in the inaugural matriculation class in 1968.

In 1968 St John's Boys School, which had been located on the site in New Street almost since the time of its establishment ten years earlier, moved to its own newly-constructed building in Caroline Street, Dandenong. St Mary's Primary School then moved permanently from McCrae Street to its current location in New Street, into the two-storey brick building vacated by the secondary school. Although St John's had earlier catered for Grades 5 and 6 in addition to the secondary school levels, when the school moved in 1968 it offered Forms 1 to 4 only. As a result, Grades 5 and 6 boys returned to St Mary's Primary School.<sup>6</sup> Sister Kathleen Conry recalled later that with the return of these boys, in addition to the extension of the girls' secondary curriculum to Form 5, overcrowding soon became

a problem and another tin shed was introduced to the site. Although these sheds were basic, Moira Phyland remembers a particularly caring Sister de Sales teaching her Grade 2 class in a shed: 'On the boiling hot days she would have flavoured ice blocks for us and pass them out to the whole class. She was just so considerate and so lovely'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1968 Sister Giuseppe (Nance) Morgan was appointed principal of St Mary's Girls Secondary School, while assistant principal Sister Declan Whelan took charge of the primary section. With the move of the primary school to New Street, the secondary school had the original weatherboard building of St Mary's Primary School in McCrae Street, along with the tin sheds, all to itself. With 300 students by this time, the extra space was much appreciated. Sister Kathleen Conry recalled later: 'At last we were able to spread ourselves and share out our luxurious tin sheds'. One shed was designated a craft room and appropriately named by one Sister the 'wool-shed', while the other 'became a multi-purpose academy with Art as its main purpose and a T.V. viewing room running



*St Angela's Girls School students in 1971. The secondary school developed in the 1960s to cater for girls who wished to continue their education without moving away from St Mary's parish. It was later renamed St Angela's in honour of Sister Angela Bourke, the last surviving member of the first Presentation Sisters in Dandenong.*



second in importance'.<sup>8</sup> The separation of St Mary's primary and secondary schools saw the enrolment of girls at the primary school drop accordingly; by 1971 the numbers of boys and girls had evened out with 220 boys and 231 girls.<sup>9</sup>

St Mary's Girls Secondary School was later renamed St Angela's in honour of Sister Angela Bourke, the last surviving member of the first Presentation Sisters in Dandenong. The two secondary schools – St Angela's and St John's Boys School – continued to share resources, until the decision was made in 1970 to integrate into one co-educational secondary school. From 1971 co-educational classes were held for senior students at the Caroline Street site of St John's, while the junior and middle secondary school girls remained at St Angela's in McCrae Street until the end of 1973. The following year, all year levels were combined at the Caroline Street site, becoming known as St John's Regional College. While senior classes were co-educational, girls and boys in Forms 1 to 4 continued to be taught completely separately until full co-education was finally agreed to in 1977.<sup>10</sup>

The primary school also expanded, adding an eight classroom junior block and tuckshop in 1970. While Catholic education in Dandenong was undergoing major change and development, the Presentation Convent was also growing. The Sisters had already returned to the old convent at 71 Langhorne Street, but found that they needed even more room. In 1969, the house at 75 Langhorne Street was purchased and three Sisters moved in immediately.<sup>11</sup> This house had originally belonged to the Butler family, who had moved there from 71 Langhorne Street, vacating it for use by the three original Presentation Sisters when they arrived in Dandenong to start St Mary's School in 1912.

### *Catholic education at the crossroads*

While the Dandenong population was exploding and schools were expanding to cater for increasing demand for Catholic education, this did not mean that the schools were flourishing. Government support for Catholic schools had been almost non-existent since the Education Act of 1872. Although the formation of the Schools Provident Fund in 1956 had provided crucial funding, the broader picture of Catholic education in St Mary's parish and throughout the nation was one of increasing financial struggle, as the Catholic community bore the burden of financing its schools. In July 1961, 1500 people attended a public meeting held in Dandenong, calling on the government to support denominational schools. Soon after, the preparatory class at St Gerard's in North Dandenong was cancelled in protest against the poor conditions.<sup>12</sup>

In 1964, Archbishop Simonds announced the formation of an Education Advisory Council. The



*The house at 75 Langhorne Street was purchased in 1969 to house the growing Presentation community.*

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

### **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

*Children from St Mary's parish on the day of their First Communion, 1971.*

*Prep students in 1973, the year the influential Karmel Report was released, changing the nature of funding for Catholic schools.*

*Grade 3 students in 1979 with Sister Helen Carboon (far left). Sister Helen started at St Mary's that year as Grade 3 teacher and Religious Education Co-ordinator.*

*Grade 6 students in 1981. Two years earlier Peter Slate had been appointed first lay principal of the school.*



council was made up of lay representatives as well as religious members, and advised the Archbishop on the education needs of the Melbourne Archdiocese. Signalling the era of lay leadership in Catholic education that was soon to begin, the Archbishop stated:

The council has a strong representation for the first time of lay people to whom the church looks for expert advice to produce results in keeping with the times and with the magnitude of the task ahead.<sup>13</sup>

Faye Chandley started at St Mary's Primary School as a teacher in 1972 and recalls that 'the sparseness of the resources was the thing that really struck me on my first day'. Although Faye received a warm welcome, when she arrived at her Grade 3 classroom, 'Sister came down and presented me with a box of white chalk, a box of coloured chalk, and two dusters, so that was about it'.<sup>14</sup>

The election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 marked a significant turning point in the history of Catholic education in Australia. The Whitlam government established the Australian Schools Commission, led by Professor Peter Karmel, which published an influential report in 1973. Known as the Karmel Report, it recommended block funding of Catholic education. Funding was to be provided to individual state governments with the proviso that it be allocated specifically to Catholic schools on the basis of need, as determined by state authorities. Despite significant opposition to the plan at the time, block funding of Catholic schools is now acknowledged to have given parishes and schools financial stability and allowed them to expand and develop according to the needs of their communities.<sup>15</sup>

This was certainly the case for St Mary's Primary School. In 1974, the school received over \$56,000 in combined funding from the Commonwealth and State governments. A school board was formed to monitor school fees and provide support to the school administration. The board aimed to ensure that 'no child will be deprived of Catholic Education because of money'.<sup>16</sup> The same year, the school buildings underwent extensive and much-needed refurbishment after teacher Faye Chandley fell through the floorboards of an upstairs classroom and broke her ankle.

The principal at the time, Sister Ann Halpin, later recalled that the building still contained reminders of its previous inhabitants – the students of St John's Boys School – with relics including 'old pen nibs dangling from the ceiling'. Needless to say, 'the rebuilding program was embraced with much creativity, great future vision and energy'.<sup>17</sup> Parish priest Monsignor Brian Walsh asked Sister Ann to provide him with a list of everything that would be needed in the refurbishment and she recalled 'very tentatively presenting this list expecting it to be halved'. However, with the support of

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

*St Mary's staff in 1973. Principal Sister Julian McKenna is seated in the middle of the front row.*

*St Mary's staff in 1976. Principal Sister Ann Halpin is seated in the middle of the front row.*

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives

*St Mary's staff in 1982. Principal Peter Slate is pictured standing on the far right.*

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*St Mary's staff in 1983. Principal Faye Chandley is standing in the front row, second from right. Sister Macnise Dowling is in the front row, third from right, and Sister Helen Carboon is standing directly behind her.*

Presentation Sisters of Victoria Archives



*St Mary's school buildings in 1974 after the construction of an eight classroom junior block and tuckshop in 1970.*

*Grade 1 students in 1969. By this time, St Mary's Primary School had moved permanently from McCrae Street to its current location in New Street, into the two-storey brick building vacated by St John's Boys School.*

government funding and fundraising by the school and parish communities, the school was able to add things to this list, including an intercom system and wet areas. Sister Ann recorded later that on completion of the project 'we became the model school and welcomed many envious visitors'.<sup>18</sup>

### *A new era of lay leadership*

Another major turning point for St Mary's Primary School during this period was the appointment of Peter Slate as the first lay principal of the school in 1979. Lay teachers were certainly not unheard of – the first lay teacher at St Mary's, Miss McManus, was appointed in 1918 – but, importantly, the school had always been led and managed by the religious community of the Presentation Sisters with the support of St Mary's parish. However, the appointment of the first lay principal did not signal the end of the Presentation Sisters' involvement with the school. Sister Helen Carboon started at St Mary's in 1979 as a Grade 3 teacher and Religious Education Co-ordinator. She was the only Presentation Sister on the staff, although Sister Macnise Dowling, who had taught at the school for many years, still maintained a presence and helped with remedial classes. Sister Helen recalled how grateful she was to have Sister Macnise at St Mary's, providing a connection to her 'Presentation family'.<sup>19</sup>



Peter Slate also ensured that a strong connection was maintained between the school, St Mary's parish and the parish priest, thanking Monsignor Walsh at the end of his first year as principal 'for the confidence he has shown and the autonomy he has encouraged in the operation of the school'.<sup>20</sup>

During his time as principal, Peter Slate updated the school's policies, introduced computers into the school and oversaw the addition of two new classrooms, a library and a resource centre.

Faye Chandley replaced Peter Slate as principal during 1983, after a decade of teaching in St Mary's parish at both St Mary's Primary School and St John's Regional College. In her first few years as principal, Faye introduced calculators into the mathematics curriculum and extended the school's extracurricular program, including activities such as swimming, music workshops and school fetes. Faye also reintroduced the school crest to the St Mary's Primary School uniform and publications, after finding an old blazer pocket hidden in a storeroom. The school crest includes the motto 'Aeterna non caduca', Latin for 'Not transient, but eternal'. For Faye, it was important to reintroduce this symbol to the school as a representation of its long history and 'as a sign of pride and also a sign of belonging'.<sup>21</sup>

Father Anthony Guelen returned to St Mary's parish to take on the role of parish priest in 1986. He had previously filled the role of assistant to the parish priest at St Mary's from 1958 to 1965. Like Peter Slate, Faye Chandley continued to work closely with the parish and with parish priests Monsignor Walsh and, from 1986, Father Guelen. Her philosophy was 'that they didn't have to work with me but I had to work with them, because we existed because of the parish, not the other way around'. Faye acknowledges the enormous support that both Monsignor Walsh and Father Guelen gave her and the school, describing them as 'just extraordinary men in their capacity to nurture, but also in terms of their leadership and their drive and their energy, and they taught me so much'.<sup>22</sup>

Father Guelen's arrival coincided with the retirement of Sister Helen Carboon as the last full-time teaching Presentation Sister at St Mary's Primary School. The remaining link with the Presentation Sisters was dissolved the following year when Sister Macnise Dowling retired from active service at the school, ending the Presentation Sisters' 75-year association. Sister Macnise was a much loved member of the St Mary's school community, and was given a big send off, as Faye recalls:

When she left us we had a great celebration and we lined the students and the families up all around the outside of the school and took her around the outside of the school and treated her like royalty, which she really was.<sup>23</sup>



*Sister Macnise Dowling (left) was a much loved member of the St Mary's community. She first came to the parish in the 1930s and was very much missed when she retired from active service at the school in 1987.*