

## **CENTENARY OF TOOWONG CATHOLIC SCHOOL**

*17 February 2004*

*Mr Percy Hanlon*

Reverend James Quinn, the first Catholic Bishop of Brisbane and Queensland, arrived on Friday, 10 May 1861, aboard *Yarra Yarra* with five priests and six Sisters of Mercy. At the time, Queensland's population was 24 000 of whom 7 000 were Catholics. Four churches and four primary schools existed.

Roads and railways were non-existent and rivers were unbridged.

Bishop Quinn travelled by ship to Maryborough, overland to Condamine, to Dalby, to Toowoomba and to Ipswich to minister to his scattered flock.

In the next three years, a further three thousand settlers arrived and took up land grants mainly in Logan, Lockyer and the Darling Downs. In these areas Quinn set up a system of churches and schools. By 1870 the four churches had increased to 30 and the four schools to 28.

Quinn had arrived in Brisbane during controversy about payment of government grants to church schools. He was not awed by the power of politics and society in Brisbane and did not stand by quietly and agree to the 1860 Education Act that provided grants to some - but not to all – denominational schools. Bishop Quinn was joined by Bishop Tufnell to press for a fully Christian education. Tufnell suffered criticism for joining with Quinn.

A shanty and tent village existed in which there were only three houses of any reasonable size and where the largest building in the area was the goal.

Mother Vincent Whitty, the leader of the Sisters of Mercy, was an experienced educator and she had seen her schools in Ireland being placed under the Stanley National Education Board. A vested school was owned and controlled by the Board. A non-vested school had its buildings maintained by the Church while the teachers were paid by the Board. This system provided a compromise between 'no education' and 'protected education'.

Modified versions of this system were adopted by the Australian colonies. The Queensland version by the 1860 Act was set on a path of eliminating things religious from schools. Mother Whitty's experience convinced her that her schools needed to be independent of the Board if her desire of bringing total education, both intellectual and spiritual, was to be the norm.

With the withdrawal of payment of salaries to teachers in denominational schools and the lack of church funds to pay them, the Sisters took over the task of teaching at St. Stephens. They had to rely on the Sisters back in Ireland to make appropriate purchases of charts, maps and books; a practice that was continued for some years. On the first day of school, eighty children turned up.

The success of the Sisters of Mercy in teaching reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, and geography, as well as music, singing, history and needlework, was much sought after. Between 1861 and 1902 the Sisters of Mercy had provided staff for 47 schools in Queensland.

I have gleaned the notes so far from a 1987 publication of six books in a series on Catholic education in Queensland.

When it comes to the Brisbane riverside western suburb of Toowong, it should be noted that an ailing Archbishop was then in control of Brisbane. No parishes existed before 1915. Archbishop Robert Dunne had taken over from Bishop Quinn in 1882 and he had purchased land in Holland Street, Toowong, in 1885.

The first church in Toowong was opened on 9 April, 1893. The priest responsible for the building was Canon Thomas Francis Belton, a Canon Regular of the Latin Basilica in Rome who was in Brisbane for the good of his health as he was suffering from T.B. Canon Belton was residing at old St Brigid's Church/School in Red Hill and from this location was witnessing the urban development of the western suburbs of Milton, Auchenflower, Rosalie and Toowong.

Urban population tended to follow the railway lines; the Ipswich line having been opened in 1875, or the tram line that was opened to the Toowong Cemetery along Milton Road in 1904.

Also, urban population initially tended to be acreage, followed later by sub-division; causing a mix of business and worker dwellings. By 1888 the population was estimated at 2 230 in 446 dwellings.

In my historical observations of Toowong, I believe it to be singularly blessed by a number of people. I have already spoken of Canon Belton. He was a Jesuit Old Boy from Stoneyhurst, England. He was a much loved priest of the people and, during the 1893 flood, he went to extraordinary ends to monitor and console the people's losses, particularly the bush farmers in the Fig Tree Pocket area.

It is worth noting that the first Church of St Laurence was opened in Fig Tree Pocket in 1873 to serve the Irish farmers.

Earlier still we have J.B. Fewings, an early resident of Toowong and a Church of England Missionary and Elder who described in detail the beauty of the Toowong area as he wrote to his cousins in England in the early 1860s. A detailed account of these letters is recorded in Helen Gregory's book *Arcadian Simplicity*. Just let me quote a paragraph or two of his letters to his cousin.

My Dear Cousin.

- a. This most picturesque spot nestles snugly in the lap of the South and West Elevations of the Taylor range of hills and is protected by them from the keen and bleak westerly winds in winter as well as refreshed and invigorated by the cool breezes ascending from the river and flaring up (to use a nautical expression) the numerous tributaries, creeks and gullies which intersect and diversify the district in summer.
- b. All nature in its infinite variety and loveliness seem to meet the stranger more than halfway with her smiles of greeting and welcome.
- c. There was no church then of any denomination in which the pious could meet appropriately and with one accord commune with their Creator in prayer and praise, no minister of religion then, to guide the young, soothe the sick, comfort the aged with his benign influence and kindly ministrations.

Not to be left out, I would like to highlight a lady - Marcella Ryan - who arrived in Brisbane as an Aspirant for the Sisters of Mercy. Because she was unable to obtain approval from her bishop she was unable to enter the Order, but instead married a Charles Lane. They settled in Dean Street, Toowong.

It was at this location that the first catechism classes for children were held in the 1880s. These classes later shifted to the Masonic Hall in the heart of Toowong Village due mainly (I believe) to provide access to the train station for the benefit of those travelling from along the Ipswich line to Toowong for Sunday Mass.

I believe Marcella Lane was responsible for influencing the Sisters of Mercy to come to Toowong. This was not easy as the Sisters had been busy providing staffing to more urgent situations all over Queensland. No doubt the Sisters had become involved with the Catechism classes and, in 1902, the Order purchased a convent on a high spot overlooking the suburb of Toowong.

The foundation block for a new Catholic School was blessed on Sunday, November 2, 1902, by Archbishop Robert Dunne in the presence of a large number of priests and parishioners. During his address, the Archbishop recorded that he had travelled over most of the world and he had never seen brighter children than in Australia.

The initial school building was 70 ft x 32 ft x 16 ft, consisting of an entrance hall and 4 classrooms with a verandah on each side. The official opening of this school building took place on Sunday afternoon, January 18, 1903. At the same time the convent, Mount St Mary's, was blessed. At the Opening Ceremony the Archbishop spoke at some length on the importance of education, particularly religious education. He exhorted parents to send children to school at once and send them regularly every day.

The total cost of the building was £570 of which £200 had been collected, leaving a balance of £370 to be raised.

In an application by Archbishop Dunne to the Honourable Minister for Public Instruction on 31 May, 1906, for an inspection by District Inspector, the roll call was listed at 116 with an attendance of 99 at last muster.

On the occasion of the Parish's Golden Jubilee in 1966, a Toowong resident who was a first day pupil at the Toowong Convent School, recalled some of the names of the Toowong pioneering Sisters of Mercy:

- Sr Mary Gabriel Casey
- Sr Mary Bernadette O'Brien
- Sr Mary Bertram O'Brien (Music)
- and a Postulant (name unknown).

I have not been able to support the accuracy of this information as neither the Parish, Archdiocesan or Mercy archives have any records of this.

I seem to have been involved with the historical aspect of the Toowong Parish since 1966. I have had to rely very heavily on particular Sisters of Mercy like Toowong girl, Sr Mary Hedwege Schlect, and Sr Mary Leonard Moylan, who taught music in Toowong for 44 years and who provided me with some details.

In recent times, as we have been celebrating the Centenary of the Toowong Convent School, it was estimated that some 130 Sisters of Mercy have taught in the school or have taught Music and Elocution; the fees for which – for quite a long time – were the main sustenance of the Mercy Community of Mount St Mary's.

The Sisters of Mercy, in residence in the convent in 2002, arranged an outdoor Mass in front of the convent near their Feast Day to celebrate their 100 years in Toowong. As time for the Mass to start drew near, the Heavens opened with 'Holy Water' necessitating us all to move to the Church. The Heavenly Father was obviously well pleased with the work of the Sisters of Mercy during the previous 100 years. *The AGE* of Saturday, 4 December, 1915, reports a concert held in the Toowong Masonic Hall by the children of St Michael's School, Toowong.

There was joy in many Catholic homes in Toowong on Monday evening when the children of St Michael's School, taught by the Sisters of Mercy from Mount St. Mary's, Toowong, gave their annual demonstration of musical skill. There were present, His Grace Archbishop Duhig, together with numerous parish priests.

A précis of the report lists the following concert items presented by the children:

The pupils en masse sang the greeting *Let Music and Song* (Glover). A series of tableaux was presented. The first was Vincent Wallace's *The Angelus* followed by *The Harp that Once*, *Erin the Tear* and one which illustrated the splendid old hymn, *Abide With Me*.

The final tableau typified the songs and dances of England, Ireland, Scotland and Australia. It was a beautiful arrangement, quite striking in appearance.

Pianos and violins were involved in such numbers as *Curly Locks* (Lynes), *The King of the Village* (Heins), *Mandolinette* (Fabian Rose), *Isis Waltz* (Smallwood) *Le Voi de-Village* as well as *Qui Vive* (Ganz). The Cantata, *Scot and the Fairies* was pleasantly performed.

The chickabiddies of a school are always welcome on any programme and the tiny Toowong girls caused genuine pleasure with the class song *The Toy Monkey* arranged by Coulthard. Clad in 'nighties' and carrying candles, they performed the action song *Good Night* (Mann), while some wore kimonos for *Happy Little Japs* (Gelling). A Ribbon Dance and the vocal chorus and drill, *Flowers* (Lewis), gave ample opportunity for bright dressing and kaleidoscope floral effects. The boys of the school donned khaki for *Australian Soldier Boys* (Roddi). They were very gleeful and proud as they appeared on parade.

Archbishop Duhig was quite impressed by the high standard of the concert prepared by the Sisters and in his Speech of Thanks he remarked: 'Really when we consider the tender ages of most of the performers here this evening, we have only to marvel that children so young could be brought to such perfection by any teachers.'

By the time the Jesuits arrived to take control of the new Parish of Toowong in 1916 - excised from Rosalie and formed as a Parish 12 months earlier - 170 Catholics were in residence with 120 children at the School. The district population was 4 000 and the first parish priest was Rev Father Richard Murphy, sj, who returned for a second term to build the new church and school.

From the Jesuit House History, 13 May, 1919, we learn that the school had to be closed for over a week due to a 'flu epidemic and the church services were limited to 45 minutes and people were to sit apart.

By 1923, the second parish priest, Fr John Roney sj, recorded in a letter to his Provincial, that five Sisters of Mercy taught 170 children.

In the intervening years, the Catholics of Indooroopilly were agitating for Masses locally. This led to the formation of the Holy Family Parish which was cut off from Toowong in 1926. Then there was the arrival of the Carmelite Sisters from Sydney to *Auchenflower House* in 1927. Archbishop Duhig had wanted the Christian Brothers to start a boys' school on this site; however, Dean Lee, Parish Priest of Rosalie, convinced him otherwise as he was arranging to bring the Marist Brothers to Rosalie.

By the late 1920s, the Sisters of Mercy at Toowong began agitating for the school in Toowong to be brought closer to their convent to avoid the hot and tiresome journey from convent to school. The Sisters preferred to go without their lunch rather than face the journey back to the convent for lunch.

Initially they wanted the school placed on land beside the convent. However there was another problem; the original church was too small for numbers attending. The Sisters of Mercy donated portion of the convent property nearest to Grove Street to the archdiocese for the purpose of building a new church/school.

This turned out to be the site of a new church on the top floor and the school on the ground floor of a two-storey brick building. So, in May 1930, the church and the school were moved from Holland Street to Kensington Terrace and renamed St Ignatius.

The old buildings and property were sold to offset the cost of the new venture – £11,000. The old school is presently the parish hall at Indooroopilly and the old church is Christ the King Church at Graceville.



The move to the new school presented problems anew: two Preparatory Classes and Grade 1 in one big room; Grades 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 battling with one another - in what is now the parish hall - with Grade 7 Scholarship Class in the foyer.

The new building was sliced into the side of a hill. There were no playing areas and the Sisters organized parent working bees to clear an area beside the convent for the girls' playing field where two basketball courts and a tennis court were provided.

The boys had to wait patiently for some six years after moving into the new school for their playing fields; these resulting from a 1933-1936 Relief Worker Programme around St Ignatius Church - organized by the then Parish Priest, Father William Lockington, sj, - to provide sustenance for the unemployed. This project involved removing 16 000 cubic yards of excavation which was nearly all solid rock. When this was done, 2 000 square yards of concrete paving and paths were laid as well as 500 feet of underground drains, 200 yards of roads, 600 feet of open concrete drain and 3 000 yards of stone built into walls that had been covered and turfed.

This project involved lowering Kensington Terrace 6 feet in front of the new church and considerable enhancement of the convent grounds, including a new driveway from Grove Crescent to replace the previous driveway from Kensington Terrace.

I was a pupil at this new school from 1939 to 1946 and experienced all these open spaces. Don't forget that the primary school child in those days went for nine years - from age five to fourteen.

Each Friday afternoon the School Janitor, with the aid of the pupils, had to clear the Main Hall of desks, blackboards, tables, etc. ready for the Friday night dance to raise funds towards the parish debt. Then on Monday morning, we would have to put it all back in place for school.

Mind you, we also had to do this for the school's fancy dress ball, school concerts and other functions put on to raise funds to feed and support the Sisters. School Fees were 5 pence a week and Requisition Fees for chalk, ink and other necessary teaching items were 1 guinea per term.

Girls in the upper grades formed the choirs to support church liturgical functions such as the First Friday Mass, Children's Sodality Mass on the Third Sunday, First Communion, 40 Hours Devotions and Easter Ceremonies. The Feast of St Ignatius was celebrated grandly with Solemn High Mass on the Sunday nearest the Feast and the Sisters fashioned a Special Concert to the Jesuit Fathers on their Feast Day, July 31, each year. During the month of May there would be Rosary, Litany and Benediction each evening praying for an end to the War and for peace in the world.

Scholarship Class was taken very seriously with classes starting earlier at 8.30am going through to 4.00pm with classes also on Saturday morning; the strictly supervised end of the year exam being your passport to 4 years of secondary schooling, Sub-Junior, Junior, Sub-Senior and Senior.

Each year, the Examining Sister of the Sisters of Mercy and the Inspectors from State Education came to conduct school inspections. We used to think it was of the children only but it turned out it was of the teachers also. Who could forget one particular Examining Sister of Mercy? She was the toughest and strictest. Many a good teacher was brought to tears before she finished her inspection duties.

During my time at the School there were ten or so boarders at the Convent – children from outback station properties. In addition, pupil teachers boarded at the Convent.

In the 1950s lay teachers who taught in the school received £6 per week plus board. This was before teachers in Catholic schools were obliged to be paid award wages.

When we were ready to return to school after the Christmas holidays in 1942, the school had been taken over for war purposes, as was Nudgee Junior (American Hospital) and Stuartholme (Army HQ). Our holidays were extended a week or so and eventually classes were held on the Convent verandahs, in the boarders' dining room or the music room. Eventually four demountable-type buildings were moved into the school grounds to house Grades 2 to 7. The Infants School continued at the convent until we returned to our own classroom later that year.

The open learning atmosphere of the new school was not highly regarded by some teachers and agitation commenced towards the end of the Second World War for a new school to be built on the boys' playing field.

A zig-zag air raid trench had been built along one side of the boys' playing field by the school fathers. The air raid siren for drill practice used to sound at 11am each Monday. By this time, school was at the convent and the Sisters had a big air raid shelter built at the back of the convent.

The air raid siren would go off and, with our emergency packs, we were shepherded into this huge air raid shelter with the Sister Superior blessing us all with Holy Water and leading us in prayer, the Rosary and Litany, until the 'all clear' siren sounded. Sometimes a fair dinkum siren sounded quite unannounced and a Duty Air Raid Post Warden would do his rounds to check on the situation.

Eventually, plans were produced for yet another school. The Archbishop decreed it must be in brick and fireproof, have two storeys, separate classrooms and facilities for Domestic Science. As we assembled in total school formation each morning and each afternoon, we were led in prayer for the arrival of the first load of bricks.

The foundation stone was laid in November 1946 and the building opened in May 1948. It was dedicated to Rev Father William O'Keefe, sj, Parish Priest of Toowong from 1940 to 1944 – who did so much to put the parish on a sound financial footing.

The Sisters of Mercy, supported by lay staff, now laboured on, all very nice and cosy, in the new building.

Pupils come, pupils go; Sisters come, Sisters go. Lay teachers are required to be paid award wages. The parish had to pick up the payment of the wages until parent and government bodies sorted things out. Now - Preparatory Classes have been abolished; Primary School is Grade 1 to 7; Grade 8 to 12 belongs to High School; the school loses 13 and 14 year-old pupils; Head Teachers require office space, a School Secretary is required; as well as a Sick Bay and Library. The powers that be are talking about regional primary schools but nobody can decide where and parent bodies are required to raise funds to gain government funding.

School Rolls and School Reports seem to have disappeared; however a School Report for 1954 which covers Government, Organization and Methods, showed a total number of pupils of 244 - 98 boys and 146 girls - and that an Inspection was held between 20 and 24 September. Sister Mary Teresina, the Examiner, noted that the students were friendly, obedient and anxious to please and that a harmonious feeling existed between teachers and scholars.

In 'Organization' she noted that the classrooms, in which Grades 6 and 7 were taught, were congested and uncomfortable; yet the best arrangement possible had been made. In 'Methods' in all parts of the school the teaching was earnest and purposeful and the teachers – without exception – were conscientious and painstaking.

At that particular time there were six Sisters and three Lay Staff teaching in the school. There were 290 pupils in 1959, 162 in 1962, 235 in 1965, 228 in 1968 and 170 in 1970.

In 1975 the Parish had the opportunity to purchase the 'Morrow' property next door to the school. The front of the property could be used as an infant school playground.

Vocations in the Sisterhood were falling off and eventually a Lay Principal was appointed in 1984.

Classroom sizes were considered inadequate; computers were needed; improved tuckshops required; libraries needed extending; teachers required amenities; the Principal required support staff and space; store rooms were required and so it goes on.

Meanwhile, in 1980, a two-classroom extension was built out from the 1948 building over the Infant School playground with an amphitheatre and new tuckshop underneath. This extension was dedicated to the Sisters of Mercy and Lay Staff since 1902; the Sisters of Mercy having handed over the running of the school to lay leadership in 1985.

The School Principal of the day, with the support of the Parish Pastoral Council and the School Parents and Friends body, pressed ahead to further improve the school. Out of School Hours Care, as well as swimming lessons were sought by parents through the P& F.

In the O'Keefe Building three classrooms were altered to make two, to provide the correct classroom size. In 1991, Grade 7 students were required to move into the 'Morrow House'. Plans were drawn up to sell the 'Morrow' House and replace it with a two-classroom building with covered open space beneath and store rooms and toilets.

This project met with hostility from the resident neighbours who formed an action group which, in turn, had a considerable area around the church and school, heritage listed. Much publicity was given on TV and in the media.

The School lost Federal Government Funding of \$300 000 that had been granted towards the new project, estimated to cost in the vicinity of \$450 000. However, through prayer and perseverance, the project continued and a beautiful brick building with abundant open space beneath and designed along the lines of the previous Morrow House was opened in 1996 after funding was acquired through the State Government.

This new building was dedicated to the memory of Sister Mary Leonard Moylan rsm. For 44 years – from 1950 to 1994 – she taught Art of Speech and Music at the school, as well as private lessons, and contributed greatly to the liturgical music life of the parish; both in pre-Vatican II days and afterwards. During her time at Toowong Sister Mary Leonard was an energetic and active fete and walkathon organizer.

Boys leaving from the end of Grade 3 onwards to attend Brothers' schools considerably reduced numbers in the higher grades; making combinations of grades necessary in some cases.

In 1997, a new energetic Lay Headmaster decided to double-stream Grades 1, 2 and 3. The previous Headmaster had advised the Building Committee, of which I was a member, that St Ignatius was now up-to-date as a single-stream school.

Of course, double streaming Grades 1, 2 and 3 required more rearrangements; necessitating the building of an elevated new two-classroom block on the site of a brick building which had been built originally as a School Porch for hats and bags and was the first tuckshop.

It had been paid for out of the proceeds of a Silver Circle Fundraising Programme run by the school fathers over seven and a quarter years from 1957. This was the first building to be demolished and taken off to the tip.

The new classroom block, along with the Barbara Foster Arts Centre which was built on the site of the amphitheatre under the 1986 extension, was formally blessed by our Parish Priest and opened in Jubilee Year 2000 on Sunday, 21 May, by long time parishioner, Mrs Mary Persley, who was the pioneer President of the School Mothers' Committee way back in the 1950s. An anonymous donation of \$100 000 was forthcoming towards the project with the school P&F financing the loan balance necessary.

A school Centenary Committee, chaired by Mr Peter Hill, Principal of St Ignatius, met monthly throughout 2002 and 2003, planning many significant events to celebrate the Centenary of a Catholic School in Toowong founded by the Sisters of Mercy. This 15-member committee was made up of teachers, parents and a past pupil - myself.

The following ideas were framed, adopted and executed:

- a car bumper sticker, selected from many entries designed by pupils;
- Centenary Year heading for school newsletter;
- a 2003 school calendar featuring 13 historical photos;
- Installation, in the school administration centre, of *Centenary Year Mercy Cross* carved by Sr Helen Stanley, rsm;
- a Centenary Year school logo;
- distribution of a school history leaflet on Centenary Weekend, 18 January 2003;
- Centenary Year School Commencement Mass and Presentation of Centenary Badges, Friday, 7 February, 2003;

- Centenary Year heading for school stationery;
- renaming of sports teams: Baneraba – Green; Xavier – Red; McAuley – Gold;
- purchase of sports tents to suit Centenary sporting houses;
- ‘Buddying’ with new St Augustine’s school, Springfield; supplying many necessary utility items for a new school, January 2003;
- *Whole School Year 2003* photo;
- a display in Toowong Library during *Centenary of Toowong Week*, August 18-25, 2003;
- a Centenary Year tea towel;
- commission of sculpture *Jesus and the Little Kid* by Mardi Kearney, installed in school grounds and blessed before the 6.00pm St Ignatius Parish Lantern Mass, followed by Carnival and Bush Dance on Saturday, 29 July 2003;
- St Ignatius Feast Day Talent Quest with contribution by an elderly past pupil Syd Callaghan on Thursday, 31 July, 2003;
- special Centenary wines from Seven Hill Winery in South Australia introduced by Br John May sj, at Wine Tasting Evening, featuring special Commemorative Wine Glasses on Friday, 29 August, 2003;
- commission of watercolour painting of eight significant areas of parish/school by Graham W. Smith and sale of limited prints of the watercolour;
- feature page in the *Catholic Leader*;
- feature articles in *Westside News/South West News*;
- contribution to *Centenary of Toowong Celebrations*, August 18-28, 2003;
- presentation and hanging of *Centenary Quilt* on Friday, 21 November, 2003;
- sealing and placing *Centenary Capsule*, Friday 21 November, 2003; and
- *Centenary Birthday Party*, Friday, 21 November, 2003.



The parish symbol of *Ad Majorem Dei Gloria* (for the Honour and Glory of God), combines well with the school motto, *Sursum Corda* (Lift up your Hearts) and suitably records the life of the sisters, teachers, pupils and parents of Toowong Catholic School during the past one hundred years.

Presently, in this year of 2004, the school parent body is funding loan repayments of the 1996 and 2000 building extensions. The present St. Ignatius School opened on 18 January, 1903 as St Michael & All Souls School (alias Toowong Catholic School) and is still very much sought by parents – not only from within the parish but from suburbs nearby and on the western freeway route – as a fine educational institution. Teachers and staff still have a strong bond with the Jesuit Fathers and the Sisters of Mercy; three of whom still reside at Mount St Mary's convent.

The conviction held by Mother Vincent Whitty, back around 1861, that her schools needed to be independent of the Board, and her desire to provide total education - including intellectual and spiritual – has resulted in parents undergoing considerable sacrifice of other life needs and pleasures so their children could be amongst those pupils at some time during the 101 years of Catholic schooling in Toowong.