

The Hollies Convent FCJ Manchester

EARLY DAYS

In France in the year of Our Lord 1820 Marie Madeleine Victoire founded the society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in Amiens and here in England in the same year Father Roland Broomhead founded the mission of St. Augustine in "the meadows of the outskirts of the township of Manchester". At first these appear to be two disparate events but as the FCJs were destined to give a "century of service" to the children of St. Augustine's it is not unreasonable to think Divine Providence inspired the birth of this new order in the Church and of this new parish in the heart of industrial England in the same year.

The FCJs came to Manchester at the request of Bishop Turner. After the Presentation nuns who came to Livesey Street in 1836, they were the second order of nuns to settle in Manchester since the Reformation. At first they travelled daily from Adelphi, Salford, to "St. Augustine's Poor School", Granby Row, but in 1852 they rented a house in Brook Street. In 1853 they took charge of the Girls' Day School in part of the Granby Row building where the Xaverian Brothers were teaching the boys.

BROOK STREET 1853—1900

The Brook Street house was near the Holy Name and served by the Jesuits. The nuns started there a secondary school for girls. There were two classrooms on the ground floor and one upstairs opposite the little chapel. In a long narrow room, probably the old coach house, was the preparatory school. A separate school in the garden was known as St. Joseph's.

We are indebted to the memoirs of a former pupil who started in the preparatory department at the age of seven for an insight into the education provided at that era. She writes that much time was given to grammar, parsing, analysis, reading and letter writing—but no literature of any kind. Arithmetic was "difficult". Geography consisted of lists of countries, capes and bays. History was more interesting "in spite of the dates" because "we did learn about people". French was commenced at an early age, memorizing verb endings, but there was no conversation nor reading. However, though the syllabus might be very different from today's, human nature was much the same for the monotony of sewing stiff calico at Needlework was relieved by "rolling a reel of cotton to one another across the room". There were no organized games but drill was given by one of the nuns who "taught us to turn out our toes and bend our knees". It is recorded that some good plays were produced and examinations were taken, set by the College of Preceptors and later by the Society of Letters and Arts, South Kensington. A distribution of prizes was held annually in December.

The greatest tribute to the work of the nuns in the Brook Street School is found in the same former pupil's comment: "Of the religious influence I cannot say enough. It was not so much the religious instructions as the personal contact with the nuns that influenced us. They were all saints and led most austere lives. (They certainly lived in the basement of this house at the time). They must have been very poor though poverty was never alluded to. Devotion to the Passion, the Rosary, the nine First Fridays, Quarant Ore, the Holy Souls and Benediction made a life-long impression on our minds and hearts". It is small wonder that a newly-ordained Jesuit, come to say Mass at the "Hollies" in 1922, told the children

that, under God, he owed his vocation to the early training he received from the nuns as a boy at the Brook Street Convent.

Not only on the children of their school but on very many converts was the deep spiritual influence of the nuns felt. The annals of Brook Street and of "the Hollies" down to the 1960's record the nuns' work in instructing converts, many of whose families turned against them, even to the extent of making them leave home.

Another field for the nuns' apostolic work was found by Bishop (afterwards Cardinal) Vaughan among the factory girls of the city which, it must be remembered, was one of the key centres of the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution. This remarkable and holy man was a pioneer in many fields and he frequently visited the nuns at Brook Street. He asked them for prayers for his Rescue Society and for his missionary Mill Hill Fathers. It was Bishop Vaughan who asked in 1886 that evening classes should be opened in the principal schools of the town for the factory girls of each parish. The nuns found the girls rude and undisciplined at first but they soon settled down and revealed many good dispositions. The nuns were assisted in this work by the Children of Mary of St. Augustine's of whom they themselves were in charge. The factory girls met in the school once a week. They knitted and sewed, sang hymns and songs and listened to the religious instructions with increasing interest. The Reverend Mother of Brook Street commented sorrowfully: "So many of them have wretched homes with either a drunken father or mother and sometimes both". By 1892 the factory girls were enrolled in the Guild of Our Lady of Good Counsel and 150-160 were attending every week.

When Bishop Vaughan, now Archbishop-Elect of Westminster, came to say farewell in April 1892 he enquired keenly about the number of girls attending night school and hoped that the rough ones as well as the quiet ones attended. The Bishop said he would never forget the nuns of Brook Street who had always been a comfort and consolation to him. He came back as Cardinal to visit them just a year later in April 1893. The Cardinal's successors in Salford, Bishops Bilsborrow, Casartelli and Henshaw, were all friendly and frequent visitors to the nuns and the school.

FALLOWFIELD 1900 AND DIDSBURY 1961

In 1900 Reverend Mother General at her visitation expressed concern "at seeing the inconvenience both in work and health" under which the nuns laboured in Brook Street. Consequently in September 1900 the nuns and school moved to "the Hollies" at Fallowfield. There were 30 pupils attending that September but the number grew to 40 during the year. Among the great traditions transferred to the new premises from Brook Street was fervent devotion to Our Lady especially expressed in the joyous celebration of her feast on December 8th. Preparatory to that feast in 1904, the Jubilee year of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Casartelli blessed Our Lady's chapel in November, saying he was reminded of the ceremonies in "dear old Brook Street convent" where he had been a frequent visitor. After watching the pupils give a performance of some scenes from Shakespeare the Bishop said that while the standard of education had risen to meet modern educational requirements "the old spirit still prevails in the work of the sisters" whose pupils were conspicuous for "their genuinely catholic spirit".

By 1908 there were 78 pupils of whom the seniors were being prepared for the Oxford exams. This year afforded an early example of oecumenism; the nuns' protestant neighbour, Sir Edward Donner, had given Reverend Mother the key to his private garden so that the nuns could use

it at any time. On the day of the Garden Party, July 17th, the Bishop, a number of clergy visitors, children and the band went to Sir Edward's garden where he and Lady Donner greeted them. Thus the leading Nonconformists of the area entertained the Bishop in his robes, several Jesuits and many Catholics of the neighbourhood. Bishop Casartelli remarked that it was a considerable achievement to have won Sir Edward's goodwill as formerly he had been a bitter opponent to Catholic interests.

The work of the nuns continued to be blessed and to extend. Increasing numbers and Board of Education requirements necessitated the provision of more accommodation and in 1920, the society's centenary year, a neighbouring house "the Acorns" was purchased. At first the younger children were accommodated in the "Acorns" and the girls over 11 in "the Hollies". A new science room was built and further additions, including a corridor connecting the two houses, were made. In January 1928 Bishop Henshaw presided at the official opening of the new chapel. By Easter of that year "the Hollies" had become the school and "the Acorns" the convent. By 1935 there were 245 children at "the Hollies", including some boarders, and the need for more space led to the purchase of "Oak Bank" in 1938. The war prevented its use for school purposes but its cellars were converted into an air raid shelter for 300 children. In 1952 yet another house "Staneswood" was purchased to cope with the ever increasing numbers.

These increasing numbers are largely explained by the tremendous expansion of secondary education which followed the Butler Education Act of 1944. "The Hollies" was one of the schools given Direct Grant status under the terms of this act. By 1959 there were 58 girls in the sixth form and a £40,000 extension was planned. A period of great difficulty followed with the Corporation proposing that this extension should be permitted for only 15 years. Then Manchester University were given permission to acquire "the Hollies" by compulsory purchase. A site for two new schools, a grammar and a preparatory, was found at Mersey Bank, West Didsbury, and in September 1961, 520 girls moved into the new grammar school and 200 children into the prep. "The Evening Chronicle" described it as "the success story of a century from a few desks in a convent house to a £250,000 school of 16 classes set in its own (16 acres)". Now in 1973, with the grammar school pupils alone numbering 720, further extensions are actually under construction.

WORK OUTSIDE "THE HOLLIES"

It is easy to overlook, when reviewing the activities of "the Hollies" itself, the fact that it has been the home of nuns engaged daily and at weekends in apostolic work outside the convent. A brief reference has already been made to the work of the nuns in St. Augustine's school, starting in 1853. By 1863 over 300 girls registered in the school. The average number at Sunday School varied from 800—1,000 and 50 teachers, nuns and seculars, accompanied 1,000 children to Mass at St. Augustine's on Sundays. Sunday school work was of tremendous importance in the days before the First World War. At St. Augustine's girls too young for the Children of Mary were enrolled by the nuns in the Congregation of the Holy Angels whose members received the Sacraments regularly, often in spite of continual bad example at home. The nuns also had charge of the Children of Mary who, in turn, helped them in their work for the factory girls.

Old parishioners of St. Augustine's speak with tremendous affection of the nuns who taught them and all have vivid memories of the December 8th altars, massed with flowers and candles. The tributes paid to the nuns and the numerous Masses offered when the parishioners heard of the deaths of their old teachers illustrate the affection and regard in which they were

held. When Mother Josephine Crotty died in 1920, her name had been a household word in St. Augustine's for 40 years in the day school, the night school and the Sunday school. The hall door at "the Hollies" had to be left open on the Sunday after her death to admit the stream of mourners who came to pay their respects.

The FCJs served St. Augustine's for 107 years, 1853—1960, at Granby Row, York Street, and, after the school was bombed in 1940, in the Cavendish Street school. When they withdrew, at their own request, on re-organization in 1960 a special Mass of thanksgiving for their service was said and the parishioners presented the nuns with a set of Benediction vestments and a donation of £100 for memorial placques to be placed in St. Augustine's church and in the chapel to be built one day at Mersey Bank.

In 1971, again following re-organization, the nuns withdrew from St. Cuthbert's, Withington where they had served from 1889. As in St. Augustine's their service was not confined to the school but they established here, too, the Congregation of the Holy Angels and worked amongst the Children of Mary besides conducting Sunday school.

The parishes of St. Joseph's, Longsight and St. Robert's Longsight also provided work for the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Father Daly of St. Joseph's writing in 1895 was very keen that all his young girls should come under the influence of nuns and well into the 1960's the nuns were still organizing the Guild of St. Agnes and the Children of Mary in that parish. In 1933 these Children of Mary of St. Joseph's presented the nuns with a handsome green altar cloth, still in use in the convent chapel. The nuns also conducted the Sunday school at St. Robert's Longsight from the early days of that parish's foundation.

Even when on holiday at Pwllheli in 1927 the nuns could not escape the work of religious instructions. There the parish priest asked them to take his Sunday school which was attended not only by the parish children but by the gypsies of the neighbourhood



Entrance Didsbury

