

St Aloysius Convent School

1830 – 1970

Introduction

St. Aloysius' Convent School is in the process of re-organisation. In 1974 it will amalgamate with St. Vincent's Secondary School, Carlisle Place, to become a Comprehensive School.

Before this event takes place the committee of the Parents Association of St. Aloysius' School wish to have, for the benefit of pupils, parents and friends, a record of the life of the school.

The following pages give a brief history of St. Aloysius' Convent School from its foundation in 1830 by the Venerable Marie Madeleine de Bonault d'Houet, Foundress of the Society of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus, to the present day, 140 years of work in the field of Catholic Education.

Mother Josephine Clayton, F.C.J., Superior

Sister Placida Hoole, F.C.J., Headmistress

September, 1970

Saint Aloysius' Convent, F.C.J. 34 Phoenix Place, London, N.W.1.

ST. ALOYSIUS CONVENT F.C.J.

1830 — 1970

The School of Saint Aloysius, Phoenix Road, Clarendon Square, has an interesting history. The origin carries us back to the great French Revolution which, whilst it swept order and religion from France, brought a blessing to the Catholic Church in England.

Cardinal Gasquet, in his sermon on the occasion of the Centenary of Saint Aloysius' Church, October 4th, 1908, said that beyond anything else, it was the Christian charity displayed by the English, as a nation, towards the Bishops and Clergy exiled from France at the Revolution that effected a change and a lasting change, in the sentiments of the English people towards the Catholic religion. In the proof of its sympathy, the British Government furnished grants for the support of the French refugees, and collections were made in almost every Protestant Church of the land for these unfortunate emigrés.

Among their number was the famed Abbé Carron, a man of indomitable energy, and exceptional talent and extraordinary zeal. On his arrival in England, he rallied round him the colony of French exiles, who had foregathered in the then pleasant country village of Somers Town. Here, untenanted houses, offered at a low rent, attracted the poverty of the French exiles.

In due course, the Abbé Carron opened his first humble chapel called "Our Lady of the Garden Gate", at Skinner Street, Somers Town. This was the beginning of the present Catholic parish. He also provided schools, among them a boarding school for girls, and this boarding school was the nucleus of Saint Aloysius Secondary School.

Abbé Carron was recalled to France in 1814 by Louis XVIII. At his departure, he handed over the school at Somers Town to his Colleague, the Abbé Nerinckx. In the spirit of a seer and a saint, Abbé Carron predicted that a day would come when the school would pass into the hands of a religious congregation from France. This thought continually occupied the mind of the good Abbé Nerinckx from 1814 till 1830. When difficulties arose, and there were many, he would recall this prediction from his saintly friend and long for its fulfilment. Thus it came to pass that, when the Foundress of

the Faithful Companions of Jesus came to London in 1830, she was not wholly unexpected. Divine Providence directed her steps to Somers Town and there she found a ready-made school awaiting her. The event, as read in her life, touches on the miraculous.

The journey from Ostend to London took two days. On arriving in London, the Foundress and her companion hurriedly got into a cab and gave the driver an address written on a card which the Bishop of Ghent had given them. The little boy who had called the cab insisted on getting a shilling for his trouble. "This," says the naive contemporary account, "gave us an idea of the expense that any undertaking in England would entail and we longed already to be back in France". After driving about for two hours the cabman calmly drew up and informed them that he could not find the place and would take them no further. "I had feared such a possibility," said the saintly Foundress, "and we both prayed very earnestly to Our Lord and His Blessed Mother to lead us through this immense city, where we had Him alone as our Guide".

"We made the driver understand, as best we could, that he must make another effort, and we asked his good Angel to direct him. At last we met a kind lady who, I think, must have been a Catholic. She was well acquainted with the neighbourhood and conducted us to Father Nerinckx. On entering the courtyard we found ourselves in the midst of a troop of young girls, whose uniform showed us that they belonged to a School. Father Nerinckx received us very courteously, and after he had read the Bishop's letter, which described us as two French ladies, he called his sister, Miss Nerinckx, and asked her to give us hospitality for the night.

Next day, I told Father Nerinckx that I was a religious; I felt I owed him this confidence in return for all his kindness. He laughed and answered: "You are not telling me a great secret, for both my sister and I came to that conclusion the first moment we saw you". Later Miss Nerinckx took us through the establishment giving us most minute details about its organization without me asking a single question. Father Nerinckx explained to me clearly that to begin an establishment in England £20,000 as an initial outlay, would be required.

To prove this he entered into all the details of the probable expenses. I thanked him warmly and said that we would give up the idea and return to France as soon as possible. Father Nerinckx replied :- "You have told me your plans and secrets, now I will tell you mine. The institution here was founded by the Abbé Carron and was handed over to me by him on his return to France. My sister and I have devoted ourselves to carrying on the work. We have enlarged the buildings this year at a cost of £6,000. We often think with regret that if one of us were to die, the undertaking would fall to the ground, so we earnestly desire that a religious community should take over the charge and direction. We have always felt convinced that God would, in His own good time, send those whom He has chosen to replace us. Yesterday, on your arrival, we both felt that you were the persons so destined by God. Moreover, what is still more surprising, every one in the house is under a like impression. The eight young persons who help us are desirous of embracing the religious life. The furniture belongs to us and we have no debts. I now formally offer you all and ask only for your acceptance".

"My sister and the teaching staff wish to join your Society and to follow your rules. You are at liberty to receive them or not as you please; and you are equally free to dismiss them". I replied, says the Foundress, that I accepted his generous offer because I believed, as he did, that it was God's will and that his proposal was only one more instance of the tender watchfulness of Providence over our Society. Father Nerinckx then conducted us to the Bishop's house where His Lordship, Dr. Griffiths, received us kindly and asked us many questions. At the end of the interview the Bishop said: "I am satisfied with you, and I am of Father Nerinckx's opinion that it is God's will that you should remain in this country. On your return to the house, have the keys, account books and papers handed over to you and write to-morrow to France for other Sisters to help you".

On leaving the Bishop, Father Nerinckx took us to a saintly and learned Jesuit, Father Scott. He took a great interest in the Society and showed them much kindness. One day he said: "Do not be surprised that I take so much interest in your Society; it is God's will that I should do so. The first time I saw your Reverend Mother an interior voice admonished me to help you, as God had sent you here for the good of this country and to promote His Glory".

"We took possession of the house at Somers Town," the narrative continues, "on November 16th amid general rejoicings". God's hand was manifestly visible . . . the spirit of our Society, gentleness, humility and charity was at once understood and practised as in any other of our houses. The only rivalry that ever existed between the English and French sisters was the endeavour to forestall one another in charity. "All this shows that God was the bond which united us," says the Foundress, and others have attested that the spirit of Somers Town has remained unchanged since those first early days.

The first Superior of Somers Town was the gentle Mère Julie Guillemet, who had accompanied the Foundress to London on her first visit. Under her wise rule, distinguished for its gentleness and prudence, the school took a new lease of life.

In 1830 the school was what may be termed an industrial school of the old-fashioned type, where girls were given a simple education. Gradually, the status of the school changed, and it is to-day a flourishing, well-equipped and modern Secondary School.

It has the honour and distinction of being one of the first Catholic Secondary Schools recognised by the Board of Education, and it was also the first Catholic School in London to reach the standard of efficiency required by the London County Council to receive grants from its funds.

This recognition was obtained in 1902. In 1915 a Higher Course of Modern Studies was approved by the Board and later a post-Matriculation Course of Science was added to the curriculum. Every year, a number of pupils from the Sixth Form passes on to the University, and, at present, the number of teachers in both Secondary and Primary Schools who received their early training in St. Aloysius is a record one.

Many pupils have joined the ranks of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, and are helping to carry on the work of the Society in both the New and Old Worlds. In Convents of other Orders, Active and Contemplative, many former pupils of St. Aloysius' are to be found. The greater proportion of pupils naturally take their place in the ranks of the Catholic Laity, and, as such, reflect honour on the School, by their lives as excellent Christian women.

Side by side with the Secondary School, the Elementary School for Girls and Infants, has helped to keep the Faith alive in this part of London. Thousands of children have passed through the Nuns' hands since the days when a scanty few assembled in their very humble quarters of the old building.

From the outset, episcopal favour was vouchsafed to St. Aloysius' Schools, Secondary and Elementary.

The Right Reverend Thomas Griffiths, Vicar Apostolic of the old London District, gave the incoming Community a fatherly welcome to Somers Town and showed constant interest and kindness to them. His illustrious successor, Cardinal Wiseman, was ever a staunch and loyal friend. He often visited the Convent and presided at religious functions in the Chapel. Among precious souvenirs of his fatherly interest, are some letters written by him to thank pupils for their feast-day greetings. His death is recorded in the annals of the Convent as 'a bitter sorrow'.

In September, 1865, his successor Archbishop, afterwards, Cardinal Manning paid his first visit to the Convent. This honour he repeated on many subsequent occasions and, in a letter dated 10th December, 1888, he speaks of the Faithful Companions of Jesus as 'my staff officers in the diocese'.

Cardinal Vaughan, who had known and valued the Society in Manchester continued to take the same interest in it here in London and he liked to pay 'surprise' visits to the Convent.

The presence of the Cardinal at the Centenary High Mass of Thanksgiving in 1930, proved his Eminence's interest in what we think we are right in calling, the oldest existing Catholic School in the Archdiocese.

An important friend of the Convent was Cardinal Gasquet, who, as Cardinal Protector of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, was ever proud of his early association with the Somers Town Convent. Here as a boy he had met the saintly Foundress, Madame d'Houet. He writes in his preface to her life: "It is a pleasure to think that once, long years ago, I saw and had some words of blessing from this great and holy woman".

Bishop Brindle had a special affection for the Convent and said Mass in the Chapel whenever his engagement called him to London.

Sir William Henry Dunn was a generous benefactor and an influential friend. Whilst he was Lord Mayor of London, he presided at the Prize Day wearing his robes of office and entertained a party of the pupils at the Mansion House.

The year 1930 closed with a prayer that Almighty God would bless all those who had helped so much during the first century of the life of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus at Somers Town. Forty years have passed since then, but, looking back over this period, surely we can repeat the same prayer - friends and benefactors have continued their interest and sympathy and have proved them practically by many acts of kindness and generosity.

During the first ten years, the Schools both Grammar and Elementary, developed according to the requirements of the age. Changes were made in the organisation and curricula as necessary. Building projects were discussed and planned but were arrested first by rumours and then by the reality of war. In September, 1939, the evacuation of school children from the larger cities was arranged by the Government and Clarendon Square ceased therefore to be the home of some hundreds of children for, on a wet September morning, most of them with their mistresses, both religious and lay, left Euston Station for unknown destinations.

The Convent School arrived in Kettering, Northamptonshire, and the Elementary detained in Bedford. The older members of the Community were sent away for safety to Faithful Companions of Jesus Convents in less dangerous areas and very few nuns were allowed by the authorities to remain at Somers Town. As will be remembered the Country experienced a period of unexpected quiet, so, after some weeks many children returned to their homes. The Convent School was therefore re-opened and while a section of the School remained in Kettering with some nuns and secular mistresses, another worked in the Convent - and this arrangement lasted for the seven years of the war. The school in Kettering owes a debt of gratitude to the priests there who did all in their power to welcome the school. They encouraged the children by arranging special Church Services to suit them and thus helped them to remain faithful in the practice of their religion. In the newly opened Church, one of the windows, presented in gratitude by the School, has as its device the School Badge.

About this time the Public Authorities saw fit to re-name the older parts of Somers Town. Clarendon Square and Charles Street became known as Phoenix Road.

During the war the Convent felt the effects of Incendiary Bombs. A direct hit from a High Explosive Bomb destroyed the original 1830 School Building, windows were shattered by the V.I. and V.IIs, but the main building escaped serious damage and, thank God, no member of the small community was hurt.

As soon as Peace was declared the Convent resumed its pre-war activities, and the school soon settled down again as one unit in its own building.

The Education Act of 1944 affected all schools and, of course, the Catholic ones had to be very much alert so as to keep pace with the demands made on them. In order to provide Grammar School Education for as many Catholic children as possible, and, on the expressed wish of the Hierarchy, it was decided that, within its power, St. Aloysius Convent School would take its place in the National System.

Consequently, many changes took place in general organisation especially as all school fees were abolished and no child under eleven years of age could be admitted. The greatest development was found in the arrangements for Higher Studies. From the year 1915, St. Aloysius had developed an advanced course first in Modern Studies and then in Science. With the 1944 Act emphasis was placed on such work so the number of girls remaining at school for two or three years in Sixth Form increased. The courses were so arranged that many more combinations of subjects were at the choice of the girls, who could eventually make their selection from at least 15 different subjects. The traditional links with Universities, Schools of Medicine and Training Colleges (later Colleges of Education) were very much strengthened.

During the numerous discussions on the Education Act, we missed the help and advice of the pre-war Chairman of Governors, Sir John Gilbert, who had gone to his eternal reward. Sir John Gilbert was indeed a friend of the house, he was 'an educational expert and champion of all Catholic causes . . . he had ever made his own the interests of the School and Convent'. After some time, he was replaced as Chairman by our very great friend and adviser, the late Bishop Craven. We were also helped to make decisions by Cardinal Griffin and then later by Archbishop Godfrey who, as Cardinal was appointed by Rome the 'Protector' of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. It seems well to repeat here words which were written in 1930: "The names of many departed friends are not forgotten; they are held in grateful and undying memory by the Community".

In 1958 St. Aloysius Church celebrated the 150th year of its Foundation and, naturally, the Convent shared in the celebrations. The day of the special High Mass was a notable one, the Rector, Father Arthur Welland had the privilege of entertaining not only Archbishop Godfrey with Bishop Craven and very many priests from the Archdiocese of Westminster, but also Monsieur Carron de la Carriere, a direct descendant of Abbé Carron, the founder of the Church, who, in 1808, opened the humble chapel called "Our Lady of the Garden Gate". Also, a letter of appreciation and congratulations was received from a relative of the Foundress of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. It may be of interest to hear that the latest news received from Rome about the Cause for the Beatification of the Venerable Foundress reads: "In the midst of serious difficulties and in a most complicated and delicate situation, the Servant of God always maintained a surprising psychological and spiritual equilibrium and by her consistently exemplary conduct exercised in an outstanding degree the Christian virtues which were particularly put to the test in difficult predicaments -Prudence, Fortitude, Obedience, Humility, Patience and Gentleness". The next step in the Cause will be the decree on the heroicity of the Virtues in a plenary assembly of Cardinals from the Sacred Congregation.

During these years the Elementary School has also seen many changes. The Classification "Elementary" has been replaced by "Primary". The children over eleven years of age have been transferred to an inter-parochial co-educational school near Camden Town. The Community is now responsible for all boys and girls under eleven years of age, in all, some six hundred children.

If it were possible for the Venerable Mother Foundress to return to Somers Town to-day, she would look in vain for the Old Church, and the Old Convent Buildings which she knew and loved. Instead, she would see and appreciate a beautiful modern Church, built on the corner of what was in her time called Charles Street, a much improved Primary School, then a high fence around an open space on which had once stood St. Aloysius Church and the part of the Convent buildings which had held her own bedroom and small Chapel. Soon, it is hoped to see a new Convent block giving the Community a few modern conveniences, and also a most necessary School Extension. Schemes for the development of the School are under discussion, but whatever settlement may be finally reached, one point is sure that the Convent and School of which Mother Foundress took possession in 1830, will still live, carrying on an Apostolate tempered to the needs of modern times in the spirit of Charity and Devotedness. In 1830 Mother Foundress said of the foundation "The Hand of God was manifestly visible", it is hoped that she would say the same to-day.

During all these years the Community has been, as previously, supported by staunch friends. Hundreds of "Old Girls" were present in 1930 at the Centenary Celebration; to-day their Association is still loyal and vigorous. The members are always pleased to return to their Alma Mater and they can be relied on for full support when some special need arises. It is quite ordinary to meet children in school whose Mothers, Grandmothers and even Great-grandmothers were once on the School registers. Indeed, sometimes all generations are to be met at the same Re-unions. Another body on which the Convent can now rely is the more recently formed Parents' Association. In these days of anxiety and stress when the educational policy of the Government seems to be determined by the idea of giving equal opportunity to all irrespective of ability, the Convent has need, more than ever before, of the close co-operation of its Parents and Friends and already the Association has proved its devotedness and worth.

It is surely not out of place at the close of this second period of the life of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus at Somers Town, that its Members should again express their gratitude to all their friends and benefactors in the prayer of Holy Church: "Vouchsafe O Lord to reward with eternal life all those who do us good".