

ST ALOYSIUS' CATHOLIC SCHOOL CRONULLA

Pioneer of Catholic Education in the Sutherland Shire

By Colleen Passfield

Dedicated to the memory of Olga Thompson, nee Hanley, her brother Jack and sisters Jean and Ita

In 1918, with a modest enrolment of about thirty children, St Aloysius' School became the first Catholic school to be established in the Sutherland Shire – the pioneer of the many primary and secondary schools that service the Catholic parishes of the Shire. Today, it is a systemic, co-educational Kindergarten to Year 6 school located near Cronulla Beach in the Sutherland Shire, a municipal area about 20 kilometres south from the Sydney CBD. To understand why Cronulla was favoured as the site for the first school in the area and later became the first Catholic parish in the Shire, it is necessary to consider the factors that influenced the growth and development of the Sutherland Shire. Sutherland township was, after all, the administrative centre of the Shire and where the local Catholic community had first become active. From 1891, a Catholic Church in Robertson Street was serving the needs of the small, but active, local Catholic community but they would have to wait until 1924 before a Catholic school would be opened in Sutherland and 1934 before becoming a separate Catholic parish. They must have been disappointed by the decision.

When the Government Gazette No.121 was published in March 1906, the incorporation of the Sutherland Shire was declared a victory for the small population of 1500 industrious settlers, led by the Miranda Progress Association, which argued successfully against the inclusion of the area into the Bulli Shire. By the end of WW1, the Shire was mainly a semi-rural area with a permanent population that had slowly increased to 8000, in 1921, and with the growing popularity of Cronulla and Port Hacking as a retirement and holiday destination. Attracted by the natural beauty of the area and improvements to the transport systems, in particular the electrification of the rail line between Sutherland and Cronulla, the population of the area gradually increased to about 40,000 after WWII. The post-war boom period witnessed the emergence of the Shire as one of the most populous in Australia with major development of public facilities, recreational areas, social services and preservation of the natural environment. Today, the Sutherland Shire covers an area of some 370 square kilometres, bounded by Botany Bay and Georges River in the north, Waterfall and Garie in the south, the Pacific Ocean in the east and Deadman's Creek and Woronora Dam in the west. The resident population of the Sutherland Shire exceeds 215,000 and, as the only metropolitan beach serviced by a direct rail link, Cronulla beach attracts thousands of visitors each summer weekend.

The growth of the Sutherland Shire has been matched by the growth of the Catholic faith in the Shire, with active parishes in all the main areas and reaching out to smaller communities like Bundeena and Kurnell. This growth has been supported, in no small measure, by the skill and dedication of the nuns and brothers of the various religious communities which established and nurtured the expansion of Catholic education from the small St Aloysius' Convent School at Cronulla, established in 1918 by the pioneer Sisters of St Joseph, to the network of primary and secondary schools which service the widespread community. A debt of gratitude is also owed to

those early settlers, priests and parents who worked so hard to build and consolidate Catholic schools throughout the Shire.

Prior to the 1880's, Mass was celebrated four times a year in a house owned by Jack Kelly near the gates of the Woronora Cemetery. In 1886, Sutherland was administered by the Bulli Parish and, in 1887, this responsibility was transferred to the Parish of St Patrick's, Kogarah. Mass was celebrated, according to notices, published in the local paper, at 11am on Sundays or, at times, on Saturday. In 1887, eight residential blocks, on the western side of Robertson Street, were reserved for a Catholic Church by the Intercolonial Land and Investment Company, which was developing Sutherland, transfer being completed in October, 1888. In 1891, a weatherboard building in Robertson Street was purchased and converted into St Patrick's Church, the first Catholic Church in the area that became the Sutherland Shire.

In 1904, Father John O'Driscoll was appointed in charge of Kogarah Parish, which stretched from Tempe River in the north to Bulli Parish in the south and westward to Canterbury Road. There were Catholic churches in Kogarah, Hurstville, Rockdale and Sutherland and, in 1907, a church-school was built in Penshurst. Prior to 1909, parishioners in Cronulla were able to attend Mass twice a year in the home of Agnes and Albert Giddings who often provided accommodation for the visiting priests. With the appointment of a third priest to Kogarah, this was increased to four times a year, with Mass celebrated in Sutherland every second Sunday and in Penshurst every Sunday.

In 1916, St Declan's in Penshurst became a separate parish with the appointment of Father Michael O'Kelly. At that time, the only Catholic school in the parish was at Penshurst, conducted by the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, known familiarly as 'the Joeys'. Immediately prior to his appointment, a Catholic Church was built on a block of land, in Curranulla (now Cronulla) Street, that had been donated by the Giddings family. For many years, the Giddings family had operated a successful business in Gerrale Street from which they ran a horse coach service between Sutherland and Cronulla until the opening of the steam tram service in 1911. This was also the first official Cronulla post office and a real estate agency. The generosity and continuing support of this family was significant in the history of the Catholic faith in Cronulla. Father O'Kelly recognised the need to establish a Catholic school in the Sutherland Shire where the population was increasing faster than any other area in the Sydney metropolitan area and appropriate measures were taken to bring this to the attention of Archbishop Michael Kelly, head of the Sydney Archdiocese.

The decision to locate the school in Cronulla rather than in Sutherland was no doubt influenced by the rising popularity of Cronulla, sparked off by the rising interest in surf bathing and the healthy, outdoors lifestyle. The opening of the tramway from Sutherland to Cronulla, in 1911, had an immediate effect on development in Cronulla which became a favourite location for permanent homes and holiday cottages. Many who had first come to Cronulla as tourists or holiday-makers were persuaded by the promise of a better, healthier lifestyle to make their permanent homes there despite the lack of basic services such as electricity, sewerage, permanent water supply and poor transport facilities. Many wealthy professionals and business people built holiday homes at Cronulla and many later chose to retire there. The 1891 census indicates the bulk of population was located in the rural area of Sylvania and settlements along the railway line from Como to Waterfall. By 1921, Cronulla was the largest centre with a population of 2,597 compared with

Sutherland with 1,671. The majority of people lived at the eastern end of the Shire with a consequent rise in the cost of real estate and Cronulla was becoming the centre of wealth and influence in the Shire.

In a letter dated 14 April, 1916, Archbishop Michael Kelly, no doubt prompted by Father O'Kelly, asked Mother Baptista Molloy, Mother Superior of the Sisters of St Joseph, for Sisters to teach in Cronulla. Accordingly, Sister Gonzaga Delaney and Sister Blandina O'Neill were appointed to open the first Catholic school in the Sutherland Shire in 1918 . During the first year of operation, the sisters travelled from Penshurst by train to Sutherland and tram to Cronulla and taught in the recently opened church-school. (Letter from Sister Benedetta Bennett, Congregational Archivist)

The generosity and support of the Giddings family continued and, in 1919, the sisters took up residence in a small weatherboard house, donated by the Giddings family, to be used as a convent by the nuns. The same year, the children of St Aloysius' School proudly posed for the first school photo. There are thirty-one children of various ages in the photo of whom ten have been identified. . Unfortunately, the names of the other children are not known at this time



St Aloysius' School, 1919

Back Row:(L-R) 7. John (Jack) Hanley, 10.Chris Blake

Row Three: 2. Mavis Smith 3.Jean Hanley 4. Olga Hanley 7. Enid Blake

Row Two: 5. Sylvia McMillan 7. Bella Cook 9. Linda Cook

Front Row: 5. Michael (Mick) Teague

In subsequent photos taken in 1920, the school enrolment had grown with twenty-six boys and twenty-six girls photographed in separate groups. Sister Joseph Felix Mulligan joined Sister Gonzaga and Sister Blandina at the Cronulla Convent. Olga's sister, Jean Hanley, is absent from the photo. The Hanley and Connors children were first cousins. Two children in the front row are dressed alike and are probably sisters. Another child could be Freda Colbran's sister. No children are wearing school uniforms, all appear well dressed and no bare feet are apparent.



St Aloysius School, c1920

Back Row: (L-R)

9. Greg Connors

Middle Row:

1. Ken Connors 2. John (Jack) Hanley 8. Colin Smith

Front Row:

5. Michael (Mick) Teague 8. Fred Jaeger



St Aloysius' School c1920

Back Row: (L-R)

5. Sylvia McMillan 7. Bella Cook 9. Freda Colbran 10. Linda Cook

Middle Row:

1. Esme Witcher 2. Doris Navin 3. Olga Hanley 4. Mavis Wilson 7. Mavis Smith

Front Row:

1. Enid Blake 2. ?? Maguire 3. ?? Maguire

Olga Hanley (b1909) completed her education at Star of the Sea School at Hurstville and Jack Hanley (b1908) at Marist Brothers, Kogarah. There were probably other children from St Aloysius' who followed a similar pattern. At this time, the Connors family lived at Sutherland, later at Caringbah, and the Hanley family at Miranda, later at Cronulla, and the children travelled on the steam tram to Cronulla, again a pattern that was probably similar to other children and indicative of the appreciation of local Catholic families for the dedication of the Sisters of St Joseph in establishing this first Catholic school in the Sutherland Shire. Esme Witcher transferred to St Patrick's School at Sutherland when that school was established in 1924 by the Sisters of Mercy..

As enrolments continued to grow and the popularity of the school increased, it became obvious that a permanent school building was needed to cater for the needs of the Catholic children in the area and the desire of their parents for a Catholic school education. Negotiations with Mrs

Giddings led to the purchase of a section of her land in Giddings Avenue opposite the convent where a dedicated school could be erected. On 18 December, 1921, Archbishop Michael Kelly blessed the foundation stone of St Aloysius' School, a single story, well-ventilated building, with a stage at one end. Sister M Alphonus Stanley (RSM) wrote 'There was a small room partitioned off from the hall, which did duty as a staff room and a music room. A fair amount of land for use as a playground surrounded the building.' (unpublished text *Cronulla Parish 1924-1974*) This building later accommodated three classrooms for junior, middle and senior classes.

By 1922, there were seventy-one students at the school, as recorded in the Catholic Church Directory. Sisters of St Joseph records indicate that Sister Lucina Duffy joined the community at Cronulla. A photo of thirty-nine girls includes Jean and Ita Hanley and their cousin Lorna Connors who was to enter the Sisters of Mercy, Parramatta, in 1937, and be known as Sister M Austin. Sister Lorna (b1916) taught for many years and lived in retirement at Stella Maris at Cronulla until her death in 2007.



St Aloysius' School, c1922

Back Row: (L-R)

8. Mollie Kearns 9. Ita Hanley 10. Lorna Connors 12. Mary Eckman

Middle Row:

2. Mavis Wilson 3. Enid Blake 6. Jean Hanley 7. Doris Navin



St Aloysius' School c1923
Senior Girls

Back Row: (L-R)

4. Mavis Wilson 5. Jean Hanley 6. Doris Navin 7. Sheila Noonan 8. Marie Noonan 10. Reenie Burke

Front Row:

3. Mollie Kearns 4. Freda Colbran 5. ? Eckman



St Aloysius' School c1923
Junior Girls

Back Row: (L-R

3.Ita Hanley 4.Lorna Connors

Front Row:

3.Mary Eckman

It was apparent that the Catholic faith was alive and well in the Sutherland Shire and deputations, led by James Thornton on behalf of the local Catholic community, were successful in convincing Archbishop Kelly of the need to form a parish in the area. In 1923, Father William Hawe was appointed Priest-in-Charge prior to the declaration of the Cronulla-Sutherland Parish in January, 1924. This house donated by the Giddings family and formerly occupied by the nuns, became the presbytery for Father William Hawe when, in 1924, the Parish of Cronulla was officially constituted. Father Hawe, an energetic and sociable Irishman, was familiar with the area and its needs as, prior to his appointment, he had been Priest-in-Charge of Helensburgh, just south of the Sutherland Shire.

At the time of his appointment, there were 86 children enrolled at St Aloysius' School, many of whom travelled from Sutherland and the surrounding area. Father Hawe immediately perceived the need to establish a Catholic school at Sutherland where the Catholic community had been active since the early 1880's. He approached the Sisters of St Joseph with his request to establish the school but they were unable to supply the extra staff. Archbishop Kelly thought it would be

better if the children at both schools were taught by sisters from the same Religious Congregation and Father Hawe was informed that the Parramatta Community of the Sisters of Mercy had agreed to establish a convent in the area and staff both schools.

Thus, at the end of 1923, the Sisters of St Joseph ended their connection with St Aloysius' Catholic School at Cronulla. With faith and fortitude, they had successfully established the tradition of Catholic education in the Sutherland Shire and paved the way for the nuns and brothers of the various religious orders who followed in their footsteps. From the humble church-school in Curranulla Street has grown a vibrant network of primary and secondary Catholic schools which continue and embrace that tradition.

I hope that this article will correct an error, perpetuated over the years in various publications, that Catholic education in the Sutherland Shire began in 1924. As I have indicated, the Mercy nuns assumed responsibility for the school from 'the Joeys' who had established the school in 1919. I knew from a very young age that this was the case as my mother, Olga Hanley, her sister Jean, and brother John (Jack) were part of the original enrolment. They were soon joined by their younger sister, Ita, and cousins, Ken and Greg Connors, and their sister, Lorna. The family connection with the school continued in later years with my father's siblings, Joan, Murray and Syd Thompson. The Connors' youngest child, Marie (Atkinson) was also a student. I attended briefly during the early forties and my youngest brother, Peter, was a student at St Aloysius' in the mid-fifties. I am eternally grateful that my Auntie Jean kept the school photos reproduced here, especially the first one with the inscribed slate that persuaded me to right a wrong.

References:

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