

A Short History of Post-Primary Education in Gort

by Sister de Lourdes Fahy

When the Sisters of Mercy came to Gort in 1857 their first concern was to provide an adequate system of Primary education but within a few years they ran what was called a pension or intermediate school for girls. In 1870 there were 20 pupils learning French, 13 Drawing, 56 Vocal Music and 20 Instrumental Music. The census of 1871 records 26 Catholics and 5 Protestants receiving "Superior" education, that is, being taught one or more foreign languages.

The Sisters also employed an Industrial teacher, who taught dressmaking and other needlework. The Technical Instruction Acts of 1889 and 1891 and the Local Government Act of 1898 gave added emphasis to practical subjects. This laid the foundation for Vocational Education in the 1930's. Weaving, Cookery, Shorthand and Typing were also taught.

In time, the Sisters withdrew from Technical education and from the years 1922 to 1942 they ran a "Secondary Top". This was under the Primary Branch of the Department of Education and prepared students for the Intermediate Certificate. St. Joseph's Secondary School was first opened in 1942. All available space in the primary school and the Convent was used; 23 Day pupils and 7 Boarders attended the school in the first year. Numbers increased steadily and accommodation was vitally necessary.

The new St. Joseph's was opened in 1966, just in time for the influx of students when Free Education and Free School Transport were introduced. When the school closed in 1995, there were about 300 girls on rolls. A Past Pupils reunion was held in 1992 to mark the Golden Jubilee of the School.

The Vocational Educational Act was passed in 1930. Gort was one of the first places chosen by the County Galway Vocational Education Committee for Vocational education. Classes were held in the Workhouse and general subjects were taught in the Boardroom of the Workhouse. The new St. Colman's Vocational School was opened in 1940. It was considered very modern by the standards of the time and was large enough to accommodate the student population. New Woodwork and Metalwork rooms were built in 1956. Numbers grew steadily during the fifties and sixties and reached the 300 mark after the introduction of free school transport in the late 1960's.

The first Leaving Certificate class sat for its examination in 1971. As well as teaching the new academic subjects, St. Colman's continued its fine tradition in the technical and practical subjects. It met a real need in Adult Education and teachers also travelled to outlying areas to conduct classes. By the time it closed in 1995, St. Colman's was in dire need of new accommodation.

A Boys' Secondary School, under lay management, was held in a house on the Ennis Road in the 1940's. When it closed, Gort was left without secondary education for boys. The Diocesan authorities acquired Gort House, now the Medical Centre, in 1956. They opened Our Lady's College, with 39 students in the first year class. Fifteen of them did the Leaving Certificate in 1961. Most of the original staff were priests from St. Mary's College, Galway. Numbers increased rapidly and parts of the Convent school and Town Hall had to be used for classes.

A new college, now the Lady Gregory Hotel, was opened in 1969. Many of the staff were past pupils of Our Lady's. The college was a godsend in 1956 because many parents could not afford to send their boys to boarding schools.

For the past few decades, rationalisation of schools in towns like Gort, seems to have been the preferred option of the Department of Education. From 1989 onwards plans were drawn up for the creation of one post-primary school in the town. After much soul searching and consultation the foundation stone was laid and Gort Community School opened its doors in September 1995.

Three excellent schools have merged. They have brought their own ethos and traditions. This has been an enriching experience and a remarkable unity of purpose is one of the hallmarks of the new school. Of course there were hiccups and frustrations. Teaching in a co-education system proved to be a quantum leap for those who worked in single-sex schools. Teachers took to the task with a flexible attitude and with remarkable success.

Gort Community School is aware of the proud academic records of the past, the achievements in sport and extra-curricular activities and above all the strong spiritual legacy of the three former schools. This Christian ethos is cherished and nourished in our new school - "Without a vision, the people perish".

Sources;

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- Census of Ireland 1871, C 1377, 1876, lxxxii, p.192.
- Register of Schools, District 42, File 6419 on Industrial Development
- Golden Jubilee; St. Joseph's Secondary School, Gort 1942-1992
- Caoga Bliain ag Fás; St. Colman's Vocational School 1940-1990
- Browser: Our Lady's College 1956-1995