History of St Brigid’s Catholic School, Wynyard

In 1923, five sisters from the religious order, the Daughters of our Lady of the Sacred Heart arrived in the important seaport town of Wynyard to establish the Wynyard community and to teach at the new school, St Brigid’s. They were met at the Wynyard Railway Station by the Parish Priest Father Patrick Fanning MSC. The sisters were Sisters Joan of Arc McQuillen, Dominica O’Sullivan, Kieran Doyle, Ignatius O’Connor and St John Barth.

An historical day for Wynyard was the laying of the foundation stone of the convent and the school, dedicated to St Brigid, on the site of the old Catholic Church, by Archbishop Barry, on 16th October 1922. Rain steadily poured down as Father Patrick Fanning, MSC disclosed that the building program would cost £1891. The provincial of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Father Ryan, was pleased to hear that £580 was already in hand as he was at the ceremony.

On their arrival in Wynyard, the five Sisters of the Daughters of our Lady of the Sacred Heart found that classes were scheduled to commence in four days time in the newly erected school that was designed by Father Fanning MSC, the Parish Priest at this time. The foundation stone had been laid in October 1922. The school had fifty-four students that first year including three boarders.

Foundation stone laid in 1922
The Wynyard House Diary of the Sisters, tells the story of the transfer on February 1, 1923, of the Longford community to Wynyard. The new Wynyard community consisted of Sisters Joan of Arc McQuillen, Dominica O’Sullivan, Kieran Doyle, Ignatius O’Connor and St John Barth.

The details of the transfer are recorded by the community scribe: the last Mass at Longford convent, the packing and the disapproval of the railway authorities at the excessiveness of the excess luggage the sisters had! The very slow and tiresome trip on the train is also recorded and the excess luggage being changed to another train at Burnie. When finally the sisters arrived in Wynyard, Father Fanning, MSC warmly welcomed them and took care of the excess luggage.

The convent was not yet completed, but Father Patrick Fanning, graciously and generously, gave the presbytery over to the sisters temporarily and went to stay with a parishioner. Although the day had been very trying, the Sisters in the new community confided themselves and their new work, to the Heart of our Lord, to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph.

Classes were due to commence four days later in the fine new school building that had been designed by Father Patrick Fanning himself and built in 1922.

By the 17th February 1923, the Sisters vacated the presbytery and Father Fanning once again, returned home.

March 2nd 1923, the first Friday of the month, the new Wynyard community officially consecrated itself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, constituting Him the head of their little religious family. This consecration of their religious family to
the Sacred Heart of Jesus was recorded in a special register and signed personally by Father Fanning and the five sisters in the community. It was renewed on important feasts at least twice a year for ten years, signed personally by the individual members of the community.
By 3rd May 1923, both the convent and school were ready for the official blessing by Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne who was, at that time, on tour of Tasmania. Archbishop Mannix's visit was very much anticipated and eagerly awaited by many people in the district.

One of the sisters (identity unknown) wrote of the special day: “Students filed out of class in preparation for the honoured guests’ arrival. At midday, Archbishop Daniel Mannix, accompanied by Archbishop William Barry, Archbishop of Hobart, and several visiting priests, arrived at the school for the official opening, which was held in the presence of the students, families and guests. The students sang a welcome song and knelt for his Grace's blessing after which a suitable address was read. The blessing of the school and convent followed.”

“A platform had been erected in the grounds and Dr Mannix delivered a stirring address to a large assembly, who had previously inspected the buildings. Dr Barry and the other guests also spoke. The distinguished visitors were the guests of Rev Father Fanning MSC but were entertained at afternoon tea at the Convent, after which they left for Burnie, where Dr Mannix was to deliver a lecture that same evening.”

Much to Father Fanning’s delight, the Government School Inspector, when on a visit to the Wynyard State School, visited St Bridget’s Convent School and was very taken with the teaching methods in operation at the school. He consequently invited the Chief Inspector to come to see the teaching in progress. For Father Fanning’s new school this meant an easily gained registration.

The Sisters assisted Father Fanning by teaching Religion to the children of the Catholic families who lived in outlying districts. The Sisters prepared their work and travelled with the priest on Sunday morning. People in the outlying districts sat on backless benches in Halls while the priest said Mass. There was no heating at all. As soon as Mass was over, the Sisters began to teach the children from these rural and remote areas. Most of these outlying areas had Mass and the lessons the Sisters gave to the children, about once each month.

Sister Joan of Arc McQuillen
One of the five sisters who initially arrived in 1923 to begin work at the new school, Sister Joan of Arc McQuillen, was known for her teaching, both at the school and, instructing country children about the Catholic faith. Sister Joan eventually began teaching children of former children she had instructed about the Catholic faith with the same dedication and enthusiasm. Sister Joan of Arc McQuillen was described by many people as ‘a saint of the Tasmanian countryside who brought hope to the dying and peace to the troubled.’ She was an inspiration to all.

Between 1943 and 1951, the OLSH Sisters would travel to Waratah in their mid-year holidays, to instruct the children who lived there. The priest would drive them 90 kilometres to Waratah, on a Sunday morning and after Mass he would leave them and drive back to Wynyard. The Sisters would teach the children every morning, one Sister taking the older students and the other
Sister instructing those preparing to receive Sacraments. During the afternoons, the Sisters were devoted to home visitations and no family missed out. This meant that the Sisters often made their way through knee-deep snow to get to the next house. Even though houses were not close together, every home welcomed the Sisters and an open-fire was always going to warm them up before they left for the next visit. After a week, the priest would return and again they travelled the 90 kilometre journey back to Wynyard. This was during the school holidays!

Not only did two sisters give up their school holidays mid-year to carry out the Religious instruction to children and families in Waratah, but also recorded is that the holiday time was when the sisters also held instruction for country children in places surrounding Wynyard – Yolla, Henrietta, Sisters Creek, Moorleah, Myalla and Montumana.

The OLSH Sisters’ missionary work of setting up a school was completed at the end of 1971. The Sisters had served 49 years of dedicated service to the Wynyard community and established St Brigid’s Catholic School. Father Vincent Shelverton farewelled the sisters and told them their work would be long remembered and appreciated in Wynyard. The Sisters of Saint Joseph accepted responsibility for St Brigid’s Catholic School in Wynyard from 1972 until the end of 1983.

Mrs Kathleen Siggins was appointed the first lay Principal of St Brigid’s in 1984.

The Sisters of St Joseph – 1972-1983

In 1972 three sisters, Sisters M Mechtilde Dillon (first Josephite Principal), M Colman Fallon and M Andrea Colrain arrived in Wynyard to continue Catholic Education at St Brigid’s following the departure of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. As part of the Wynyard community they contributed to the well-being of the church and the town in any way possible. And so, it was with regret, that in 1999 the Sisters of St Joseph closed the doors of the Convent for the last time.

In 1939 two young Wynyard ladies, Mary McMahon (Sr M Luke) and Mary Wilkinson-Thompson (Sr M Anne), joined the Juniorate of the Sisters of St Joseph in Newstead. After spending three years in the Sisters’ Novitiate at New Town they were professed as Sisters of St Joseph.

St Brigid’s School will remain an important part of the Josephite history as Sisters M Mechtilde Dillon, Colman Fallon, Andrea Colrain, Agnes Hayden, Malachy Healy, Virgil Virtue, Fabian Laugher, Anna (Alban) Durkin, Kieran Cahill, Philomena Healy, Paschal Briggs and Marie Therese Pardoe lived at the convent in Wynyard and many were teachers at St Brigid’s School.

(Contributed by Sister Colleen Power SSJ)