

St Gabriel's School and the Community of the Sisters of the Church



St Gabriel's School Tennis Team 1922

In 1870 the Community of the Sisters of the Church, an Anglican order of nuns was formed in London with Emily Ayckbown the first Mother Superior. Their purpose was for 'training and educating the children of the Empire'. The sisters' aim was that 'the children committed to their care shall not only be well educated but shall also become, with the help of God, pure and high-minded women.'

Sister Emily Ayckbown was an inspiring leader and the order expanded and grew. Chiefly an educational order they also opened homes for destitute children and worked with the poor. Their headquarters were at Kilburn, London and because of this they became popularly known as 'the Kilburn Sisters'.

In May 1892 the Bishop of Adelaide wrote to Mother Superior asking that the Sisters open a school there. That same year six sisters sailed for Australia. The sisters on that initial voyage were Sisters Lucy, Irene, Hannah, Phyllis, Bridget and Rose. Sister May accompanied them to help in the initial stages and then returned to England. They reached Hobart after a six-week voyage and opened a school there, then schools in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth.

The school opens

The sisters began a small church primary school at Saint Stephen's Edgecliff on 23 January 1893. Sister Irene was in charge of the school, which opened with 27 children, the numbers increasing to 66 within a few months.

As they wished to enlarge their school on 22 May 1893 the sisters began a tenancy at Waverley House where they established a day and boarding school for girls and infant dayboys, together with an orphanage. The orphanage was housed in 'Summaville', a wooden cottage on elevated ground on the site, the orphanage moved to Chatswood in late 1895.

The school was called the Collegiate High School and until early 1896 another school known as the National High School was also conducted on that large site. In 1900 the Collegiate High School is reported to have had 240 pupils. In 1904 the sisters' tenancy of Waverley House ended as the house was to be demolished and the land sold.

The school reopened at 'Glen Ayr' on Glenmore Road, Paddington, opposite the Royal Hospital for Women. This was a large two-storey residence set in extensive grounds, the former home of His Honour Judge Matthew Stephen of the NSW Supreme Court.



St Gabriel's Basketball Team 1952

'Preston'

In 1912 the sisters acquired the property 'Preston' on Birrell Street, opposite Waverley Park. This grand Victorian mansion had been owned by Richard Craven, who died in 1899, and had named his home after his birthplace of Preston, Lancashire. 'Preston' was itself built around the nucleus of an earlier building 'Glenroy'. During the demolition of 'Preston' evidence of this rebuilding became obvious. Until it was demolished, in 1966, the house still had numerous windows with large ornate 'R.C.' engraved on the glass, for Richard Craven.

Richard Craven's widow lived there until 1911 and then put the property up for sale. When the sisters moved in they used the large upstairs rooms into dormitories and bedrooms and left the house's huge ballroom for recreation, receptions and entertainment. Later it became a dormitory for junior students.

The billiard room with its ornate fireplace and mirrored archway in the eastern wing of the house became a classroom. The fireplace, with elaborate swan-neck grate and silver filament and hearth of Persian tiles, with marble fender, was removed and given to the National Trust in 1966.

The school opened as 'Preston College' but its name was changed in late 1912 to Saint Gabriel's, in honour of the patron saint of the Community of the Sisters of the Church. The school was officially opened on 29 July 1912 by Lady Chelmsford, wife Lord Chelmsford, Governor of NSW and was blessed by Bishop Montagu Stone-Wigg. It was always to be a boarding and day school, although only nine girls were listed as boarders

in 1912. Although the school was now open at Birrell Street, the junior classes remained at 'Glen Ayr' until 1913.

'Glenbournie' and John Macpherson

In 1914 the sisters purchased the adjoining house 'Glenbournie', making St. Gabriel's property the whole block between Langlea Avenue and Henrietta Street. John Macpherson had owned 'Glenbournie' but it was built for Holdsworth, Macpherson and Company, hardware merchants built in 1873-1874.

John Macpherson was an Alderman of Waverley Council 1868-1887 and 1892-1896. He was Mayor 1872 and 1875-1882. Nelson Road was renamed Macpherson Street in his honour in 1885. 'Glenbournie' was blessed and officially opened by Bishop Stone-Wigg on 25 June 1914 and renamed St. Michael's House.

Chapel

A key feature of school life was 'Chapel', the official name of the small church was Saint Michael and All Angels, although this name did not seem to be in common usage. The brick chapel was situated in the front garden of the property 'Glenbournie' and was opened on 22 April 1919 and erected in memory of Sister Stella and Sister Irene.

Sister Stella was in charge of the school from 1908 until her death in 1918 and had many times wished for St. Gabriel's to have its own chapel. Sister Irene had died the previous year after working for the sisters in Sydney from 1893. The chapel was open to the public for morning mass, which was celebrated for the last time by Father Patteson-Clarke, after the school had closed down, on 3 January 1966.

In 1915 the school took over took over St Mary's Sunday school students and incorporated them in to a school kindergarten. Students were divided into seniors, intermediates and juniors, who could be admitted from 5 y.o.

In 1918 enough graduating students existed with a strong connection to the school to form the St. Gabriel's Old Girls' Union (S.G.O.G.U.). In 1921 they held their first annual dances, which later became annual dinners.

In 1925 a new wing was built known as Saint Raphael's between the houses 'St Michael's House and 'Preston', now known as Preston House.

From 1927-1933 another school run by the sisters called Saint Gabriel's was conducted in Canberra, later taken over by the Diocese of Canberra, Goulburn and renamed the Church of England Girls' Grammar School. The school also owned a holiday residence on the North Shore, also called St. Gabriel's which was sold. Until 1930 the Sisters also taught at Saint Saviour's Primary School in Redfern.

By the 1930s the school operated in a classic boarding house system: the school had three houses: Kilburn, Preston and Waverley. Each house had a patron saint, a motto, house colours, President, Vice-Presidents, Captain and 1st, 2nd and 3rd Lieutenants.

WW11 to the end

From February 1942 to February 1943, because of the fear of enemy invasion during WW11, the school temporarily re-located from Bondi Junction to a property outside Goulburn.

The property was owned by the Community of the Ascension, a religious Order of Anglican priests, which formed after WW1. They who lived in Bishopscourt, a large stone residence still standing just outside Goulburn. The National Trust now classifies this building, at 126 Cowper Street, Goulburn. The junior School remained at Goulburn until the end of the war, reopening in Birrell Street in 1945.

In April 1965 it was publicly announced that because of the lack of teaching sisters the school would close at the end of the year. The news was received with deep regret by all connected with school. In September the whole property was bought at public auction by Waverley Bowling Club for 227,000 pounds.

The school closed with speech night on 2 December 1965 and the remaining sisters left the school site on 12 January 1966. The enrolled students transferred to St. Catherine's, Waverley. All the buildings on the site, including the former houses 'Preston', 'Glenbournie' and the chapel were demolished and all the large trees on the site, including an original very old Norfolk Pine were cleared.

The sisters continued their work and now visit prisoners at Long Bay Jail, and run the Sister Freda Mission at Saint James' Church, King Street, Sydney for the city's homeless. The order is now located at Glebe.

Published by Waverley Library from the Local Studies Collection, 2009.