

A brief history of St Mary Immaculate School

On May 8th 1905, St Mary's School, West Street, Warwick opened for its first day. The Headmistress, Miss Cecilia McDonnell (1905-1916), wrote in the school log book;

'The school was opened this morning. 66 children presented themselves and were admitted. A temporary timetable will be followed for the present, until the remainder of the books ordered are delivered.'

Before this school was built, there had been some earlier Catholic education in Warwick. In 1876 an Education Department representative visited a school building, next to the Catholic Church. This consisted of two cottages, joined together to form a single room and was in the charge of an ex-pupil teacher. There is no record of when this school had been established, but it may have been around the time when the Church opened, in 1860. This school was still open in 1881, but had fallen out of use by 1892.



A new school was now needed, and in 1904 the priest in charge of the parish of St Mary Immaculate applied for a building grant, noting that he had 104 children in his parish, and that 36 of these were less than 5 years old. His application was successful, and the new school opened the next year.

The new Roman Catholic School, called St Mary's, was built next to the Church in West Street, on the site of the two cottages. It had two classrooms with room for 100 children. Pupils could attend the school from the age of 5 until the school leaving age of 14. St Mary's remained an all age school until 1959 when the Dormer RC High School (now Trinity) opened to take children from aged 11, and St Mary's became a Primary School only.



West Street, Warwick around 1910

By the 1960s the school was seriously overcrowded, and needed to find space outside the main building for extra classrooms. It lacked proper playground facilities or dining areas and it was clear that something needed to be done if the school were to flourish.

In 1971 work began on a new, open plan building at Priory Pools and the new St Mary Immaculate School was completed in 1973 with room for 300 pupils.

Voices from the past

What was it like to be a pupil at St Mary's during the past 100 years? What was it like to teach there? The following pages give a flavour of those years, a glimpse into life for at least some of the children and staff.

The beginning of the school:

Miss Cecilia Broadley was a pupil from 1908-1915, having started school at the very young age of three. Her aunt, Miss Cecilia McDonnell, was Headmistress at St Mary's from 1905-1916, and had asked Miss Broadley's mother to take over the infant class in 1908. So she had to go along too! She still has very clear memories of her time at St Mary's:

'Warwick was a very poor place then; people were really poor. Mrs Emmett (who had paid towards the building of the school and whose name is on the foundation stone) was very generous to the poor. She paid for milk to be sent to the school from the Dale Hotel in New Street. It was a temperance hotel. The milk sent was cold in the summer and warm in the winter. My mother had the job of doling it out. I remember seeing this big churn coming, but I never had it. I hated milk!

The school was mixed. The boys and girls weren't taught separately, but they had their own playgrounds. Where the car park is now was the boys' playground and

there was a row of cottages overlooking it. The girls' playground was on the lower level.

The infants had their own room. There was a fire, with a beautiful fireguard all the way round. I remember the very poor children coming to school in the winter, crying with their cold hands, and my mother would have them standing round, warming their hands. Then they would have some of Mrs Emmett's warm milk. When the Inspectors came in and saw this, they said that children everywhere should have milk too!

It was a very happy school. We were brought up on singing games. One I remember well was, 'There was a jolly miller and he lived by himself....' and we ran round, one, two, three, skip. There was 'Oranges and lemons' and 'Chip, chop, chip, chop the last man's head'. They were not only enjoyable but they taught rhythm.

The thing I deplore is the cane! I think canes ought to be burnt! If you can't control children any other way then you shouldn't be a teacher. It wasn't normal practice to use the cane in school. My mum and Auntie never did, but they were very good teachers. I think it's a sign of weakness myself!

In those days, children left school at 13 to find work, unless they had already gone to other schools at age 11.

The First World War, 1914-1918

The school log books, in which the head teachers kept a record of day to day matters in the school, make little direct reference to the effect of the war on the school, though on 18 Sept. 1917 the then Head, Miss Constance Finch (1916-1929), noted that,

'The school was closed this afternoon in order to enable the children to gather blackberries to make jam for the troops. Twenty pounds were gathered.'

The 1930s: Between the Wars

Mary Forster (nee Bowley) attended the school from 1931-1937. Some things had not changed much from the early days of the school;



First Communion 1933. Teachers:
Mrs Broadley (l) & Miss Harrison (r)

'At the front of the Infant classroom was a fireplace with a stone kerb and an old fashioned fireguard. In winter children coming from the villages around Warwick would arrive very cold, and the cleaner, Mrs Kibler, would pull away the fireguard and let them sit on the kerb until they got warm.

A great big can of hot milk was delivered in winter. It was revolting, and doled out in horrible enamel mugs!'

All the rooms were lit by gas. I remember two lights with chains hanging down and rings to pull them on. I thought they were wonderful as I was used to paraffin lamps elsewhere.

We went to Mass every Monday morning and Miss Lillian O'Brien, the Headmistress (1929-1947), always referred to by the children as 'the Lob', played the organ. We also had a piano in the

Infants' class and sometimes Mr Broadley, husband of the Infant teacher, came in and played the piano for us. We used to be visited by Miss Tustin, who we called 'the bug hunter'!



Infant Classroom 1931

(Photos: Mary Forster)

The photo of the Infant classroom was taken in 1931. At the back left hand corner is a picture of a 'staircase to heaven'.

All Catholic schools collected money to help the Missions, poorer churches in Africa and elsewhere, and children were encouraged to bring pennies. With each penny given 'their black baby' was symbolically moved up one stair nearer to heaven!

From the late 1930s – 1940s ; The Second World War

According to the head teacher's Logbook, the school was already becoming overcrowded by this time, and a new classroom was needed. As work on this began, in November 1938, a visiting Inspector wrote:

'The premises of this school present certain difficulties. The space available for physical training is inadequate, and the main classroom is occupied by 74 children, though its recognised accommodation is for 60. Two classes share the main room and overcrowding may account for the lack of concentration.

The school is in such a mess that it will be difficult to carry on normally. The wall on one side is down and the men are hammering, banging and sawing.'

What were the children's lessons like at this time?

Former pupils, Eileen Cummings (at school 1935-1944) and Audrey Peabody (1937-1946) recalled that;

‘We went swimming in open air baths in St Nicholas’ Park. The water was from the river, tadpoles and all, and we were taught by being pulled from one end to the other!’

‘When we were older, over 11, girls went for laundry and cookery lessons to Westgate School. Because we were a small school we joined in with others and spent a day there each week, and had to learn to wash and iron our handkerchiefs! The boys went to Coten End school to do woodwork.’

‘We sat at desks in our year groups, called Standards, and wrote with pens and nibs, dipped in ink. Children did not leave their desks unless the teacher called them out! At this time there were three classes, for infants, juniors and seniors (11 year olds and over). The Head taught the seniors. Teaching such large groups and age ranges was only possible because the children were quiet!’

Another pupil at the time, David Caves (1937-1946), remembered spending a lot of his time in school stoking the boiler rather than learning! He described a boxing ring in the back playground of St Mary’s, and remembered how, as children, the famous local boxers Randolf and Dick Turpin, who were in a gang from Westgate school, would often fight a gang from St Mary’s!

Attending the school in the 1940s, Sheila Thumwood remembered,

‘It was terribly Catholic. Religion came into everything. We learnt everything by rote, did handwriting and sums. Geography was how people lived and what missionaries did to help them.

In good weather we occasionally went onto the racecourse. Everything was ‘occasionally’. We seemed to have reading, writing and arithmetic and everything else came as extra.’

The pupils would take part in Church processions and

‘The school had a chest which had been there from early in the century. It may have been provided by Mrs Emmett. There were dresses and veils for girls, and white sashes for boys. It was always there so poor children would be dressed well.’

What effect did the Second World War have on the school?

The head teacher wrote in the school log book, 4 September 1939:

‘Due to the condition of war in which the country finds itself, schools have not reopened. Teachers reported as usual. Instructions from the Department of Education to close until further notice.’

This closure lasted for 8 days then the school partially reopened:

‘No children under 5 allowed to come. Children under 7 only if accompanied by a parent or guardian...the school should be run in two shifts, alternating morning and afternoon each week, the reason being the safety of the children which will be better assured if the numbers are thinned out in the schools. This arrangement until adequate shelter from air raids has been provided.’

Normal, full time school attendance finally resumed on 31 October 1939, though the school’s air raid shelters were not completed until July the following year, and they were built behind the school in the Castle grounds, through a door in the school wall. One shelter was for infants and juniors, and could hold 50 children, while the other was for seniors and could hold 30. Each was equipped with:

‘2 chemical lavatories and 3 hurricane lamps.’

However, it seems that the Air Raid shelters were only ever used for practice. All children had to carry their gas mask and Identity Disc with them wherever they went.

Sheila Thumwood also recalls how:

‘There were Italian and German Prisoners of War billeted on the racecourse. The Italian POWs made the small organ in the church, and after the war, Miss Joan College, who was our teacher, married one of the POWs.’

As the war came to an end the school was given two days holiday, 8-9 May 1945 to celebrate ‘Victory in Europe’.

Miss Mannion was appointed Headmistress in 1947 and stayed until 1963. Mrs Thumwood was in Juniors when she arrived and remembers her as:

‘from a child’s point of view, very much a Margaret Thatcher figure. We were absolutely terrified of her. She was probably lovely; she just terrified us!’

The late 1940s and 1950s

(The following notes are taken from the Head teacher’s log book:)

27 September 1947: ‘Princess Elizabeth’s wedding day – school closed’.

June 1949: Leamington Musical festival. The school choir competed and won first place out of five schools (see photo)

6 February 1952: ‘Death of His Majesty King George VI. Today at noon we received the tragic news of the death of His Majesty. Princess Elizabeth, (now Queen), and the Duke of Edinburgh, returned home from Kenya’.

8 February 1952: ‘Royal Proclamation. Ten children, representing the school, were taken to the steps of Shire Hall to hear the Royal Proclamation of the Accession of the new Sovereign.’

June 1953 ‘Formation of a second Junior class, owing to increase in numbers. The Club Room in West Street is to be used as a classroom...The building is very old and not at all satisfactory for use as a classroom. There will be a constant noise of traffic and the door opens straight on to West Street.’



By the 1950s the school was becoming increasingly overcrowded. According to the Headmistress’ notes in the school log, an HMI Inspection in July 1954;

‘stressed the unsuitability of the school building generally and of the annexe as a classroom. The outdoor space was deemed wholly inadequate for any effective physical education. They also stressed the fact that the considerable shortcomings of the building, the numbers of children in the small space provided, plus the many recent changes of staff had made the running of the school a most difficult task; but that in spite of all this, a happy and well ordered community in the school had developed.’

To deal with the overcrowding, in 1957 a second annexe had to be built at the far side of the church grounds to house the senior class of 36-40 pupils.

Lis Armer was at St Mary's from 1959:

'My memories are mostly of the annexe. We worked in the corners on three sides, with the teacher's desk in the fourth corner of the room. There was an old fashioned heater in the centre, opposite the door.

We went to Mass on Wednesday mornings, and Benediction every Wednesday afternoon. The Mass was in Latin then, so we had a nun in the classroom most days to help us learn the prayers. She also came into school to prepare the children for their First Confession, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. After each of these events there would be a 'breakfast' in the school hall. We were presented with prayer books.

The playground was on two levels. The toilets were outside. They were cold, dark, damp and scary!

I may not have enjoyed my time there, but when I left I took with me many valuable lessons. The educational standards were high, we were taught honour and morality, and it had the same caring ethos that still remains in St Mary's today'.



First Holy Communion Breakfast 1964

Photo: Tony Melton

An overcrowded school: the 1960s

Mr Tony Melton was head teacher of St Mary's from 1963 to 1967. The school was growing rapidly at this time. When he arrived there were 120 children on roll, but there were about 200 when he left. He remembered the time at St Mary's as 'the happiest time of his teaching career, though conditions were dreadful'.

He came to a very overcrowded school. The infant teacher had 63 children in her class and one of his first actions as Head was to appoint a second teacher and divide that

group. By 1967 the school had six classes; 3 in the main building, one in the black and white building up the hill from the school, one in a portable building beside the presbytery and another in a portable building in the playground. Each class had 35 to 40 pupils:

‘The school was described in the press as the black hole of Warwick, though the place wasn’t that bad. But it was difficult. The school was very cold and the children and staff kept their coats on most of the time in the winters. Even the ink used to freeze in the inkwells. But staff didn’t moan but they tried to do their best for the children.’

‘We had an old, coke boiler in the school. We didn’t have a caretaker, but a cleaner in charge. She came to the school at 6am. to light the boiler, but it had often already gone out before I arrived at 8am. One morning the boiler went out again. I’d only been in the school about three weeks at this time. I put on overalls and went down to the stoke hold and got the boiler going again. While I was there, there was a knock at the door. It was the Director of Education for the area! At first he thought I was the caretaker but when he realised I was the Head he said, ‘You’ve got the right spirit, lad,’ and after that he was very helpful to us at St Mary’s!



Prize Giving by Fr Copsey and Mr Melton

‘The school had an arrangement with the Earl of Warwick whereby we paid one shilling a year to use part of his land as a football pitch and sports ground. This was the area that is now Castle Close, but previously had been the kitchen gardens. The photos of the football match and sports day were taken there, and you can see the old glasshouses were still standing. We used to get into the grounds through a door in the wall in what is now the presbytery garden, though the door is now bricked up.’

David Prescott was a pupil at St Mary’s 1960-1967, and recalled:

‘Infant 2 Classroom, having to pack up the lesson before dinner to put the dinner tables out, and the lovely smell of the school meals, sitting in the large, silver canisters.

Walking over to the racecourse to play football, getting changed on the steps of the grandstand- it

always seemed to be freezing cold!

Junior 1, with the big south-facing window, which would send you to sleep on a sunny afternoon.

Junior 2 Classroom is now the private house on the other side of the car park to the school. It had wooden floorboards and large Belfast type sinks in the back room where we would make papier-mâché.

The outdoor recreation and sports days were held in what is now Castle Close. We would change into our sports clothes in school then line up to go out. There was a door in the wall of what is now the presbytery garden. On the other side of the door there was a path, which was a bit overgrown, and there were some large

greenhouses. It seemed to take a long time to get to the field! With high walls on two sides, the sports field felt miles away from houses and was a very special place to be.



I have very fond memories of the Head teacher, Mr Melton. He was what I thought all adults should be like, firm and strict, but fair. If there was someone waiting outside his office, you knew they were in for a severe telling off!

Tom Sheehan was a pupil at the same time, 1960-1967:

‘Not all schools had what St Mary’s had! Beyond the standard Edwardian building of confined

spaces, musty smells and tradition, was hid a world of colour.

It was not a modern colour of laptops and plasma screens of pixel and liquid. It was a colour of light; real light, not technology.

The entrance to this world was through an oak door, set in a Norman arch, which grew into an enormous stone-wall, that to us ‘Lilliputians’, seemed to reach the sky itself!

On the school side we may have been whatever the adults wanted us to be, but on the other side we were children! Put your hand on the metal ringed handle, twist and open...’

St Mary’s was dealing with the problems of overcrowding as best it could, but clearly something more permanent needed to be done.

In January 1969 the Member of Parliament for Warwick and Leamington, Mr Dudley Smith, along with many reporters, photographers and Midlands BBC Television, visited the school to inspect conditions there. He said he was perturbed that such conditions were allowed in the latter part of the twentieth century and promised to do all he could for the school, by raising the matter in parliament. He did so and the official report of parliamentary debates (Hansard Vol. 776 No. 47) on 30 January 1969 reads;

‘St Mary’s Junior Roman Catholic School, Warwick

- Mr Dudley Smith asked the Secretary of State for Education and Science if he is aware that some 80 infant and junior pupils at St Mary’s Junior Roman Catholic School, Warwick, have to be accommodated in a small, narrow cloakroom for half an hour daily while their classrooms are being prepared for the serving of school dinners, and cleared afterwards; and what proposals he has for including improvements to this school in the building programme with a view to ending the overcrowded conditions....
- ..it is remarkable in this day and age that these ‘Black Hole of Calcutta conditions’ should be allowed to exist, even if only for a few months.’



St Mary's School Nativity Play 1971. (Photo: Barrow)

1972: A new school at last!

St Mary's was eventually given funds for a new school and work began on the new St Mary's building, at Priory Pools in 1971.



Mr Paul Capper was Head from 1967 to 1984, and had the task of overseeing the smooth transition from one site to the other. The school opened in two phases; the juniors transferring first to the new site in April 1972, and the whole school being complete when the infants moved in during February 1973.

The prospect of a new school, and the huge increase in the size of the grounds brought new possibilities which could not have been considered at the West Street site. The school's Parent Teacher Association spent two years raising £3000 to build a swimming pool for the pupils.

One of their fundraising events was a Donkey Derby, held in St Nicholas Park in 1973, which was so successful that it became an annual event for several years. The pool was installed in 1974 with parents and staff doing the building work themselves.



The Opening of the school swimming pool by Mayor, Agnes Leddy. 28th September 1974

Unfortunately, after some years the pool suffered serious vandalism and eventually fell into disuse, finally being demolished in 2004.

Sean Wesson (1966-1972) moved to the new school for his final year at St Mary's:

'Living in the Packmores, I had grown up playing in the Priory park and the neighbouring Priory pools and I remember the area where the school now stands as being a wild and overgrown place. It was quite damp, although this is not really evident now, and a brook ran along the back of the houses on Wathen Road, opposite what is now the Head's office and the staffroom, eventually joining up with the main brook in what were the allotments, where Trueman and Sharp Close now stand.

In West Street, sporting activity had been limited due to the confines of the school and the total absence of any grass. The idea of having our own playing field and a swimming pool to follow shortly afterwards at the new school, was the source of great excitement and anticipation. The football pitch and playing field did not immediately materialise, having to be seeded then left to mature, but an interim pitch was made in Priory Park. Whenever we played, all the posts and crossbars had to be carried across from the school by the children, assembled prior to the match, then taken down and carried back afterwards! They were heavy and made of wood!

As a team, St Mary's were generally good sports but not very successful. In those days the school kit was red shirts and red shorts, with white collars and cuffs and white socks. Sadly the red in the kits 'ran' in the wash changing the white to pink!

From the 1980s to the present day

Matthew Statham moved to Warwick in 1980 just six months before he moved on to senior school, and so attended St Mary's for only two terms:

'St Mary's was without a doubt the most friendly and welcoming school I had been to, and I really enjoyed my stay there, despite being sent to the head teacher twice in my first month!

I remember the old, out-door swimming pool that we used for swimming lessons. My best mate at the time was asked to demonstrate diving to the rest of the class during one of these swimming lessons. When he dived he must have underestimated how deep the pool was and managed to break one of his teeth on the bottom of the pool!'

Barry Prescott (1987-94):

‘One of my favourite memories is of our beloved football coach, Mr Dilworth. We thought he was brilliant at the time, when I was 10 years old and dreaming of one day becoming England Goalkeeper.

It was the last year of my primary school life and one of the things my mates and I looked forward to was playing football. Unfortunately, only a handful of players actually enjoyed it or were any good at it. I think Mr Dilworth handed out House points to others who played so that we could form a whole team!’

Jane Slemensek (1989-1996):

‘An Egyptian headdress with black plaits and white beads’.

That was the challenge that I presented my mum with when my teacher, Miss McHale, told our class that we were going to perform ‘Joseph and his technicolour Dreamcoat’. Our first attempt at the headdress turned into nothing more than a crochet doily, but the second attempt was successful. I remember desperately trying to learn lines and then on the night, being decorated with gold and blue make-up. It was one of my favourite memories of many happy times at St Mary’s.’

The Easter Flood 1998.

Sam Tunnicliff was a pupil from 1997- 2004:

‘It all started one evening at the end of school. I was in Year 1/2 at the time. It was Maundy Thursday, 9th April. It rained and rained; one month’s rain fell in just twelve hours! By midnight all rivers were put on ‘Red Alert’. On Friday, the ‘Long Good Friday’ they called it, the river Leam burst its banks.



We watched out of the window and saw Wathen Road filling up! I pretended to fish outside.

Our school had to be closed until 11th May. We were relocated to other schools, though I can’t remember which one I went to. Work went on to repair thousands of pounds worth of damage

done in the school. Almost a foot of water filled our school that night, when the Grand Union Canal overflowed. They had to replace almost everything. It was a night I’ll never forget!’

The damage to the school was so extensive that cleaning and restocking of furniture, books and resources took weeks. The children had to be given an extra week of Easter holiday, and then local schools generously helped out by offering classroom space.



Flood damage in the dining area



Lower Juniors arrive by bus at Newburgh school

Each day buses arrived at St Mary's to take the Infants to Coten End school, the Lower Juniors to Newburgh, and the Upper Juniors to Trinity. This arrangement continued for three weeks. The children then returned to what must have felt like a brand new school!

Since the school first opened it had always been known as St Mary's although it belonged to the Parish of St Mary Immaculate. However, in 1999 the Governors agreed to change the name formally to St Mary Immaculate School.

St Mary Immaculate School has seen many changes over the last hundred years; location, styles in education and, of course, children! Who knows what the next hundred years will bring?

Information for this booklet has been taken from:

British History Online.

Source: The Borough of Warwick: Public Education. A History of the County of Warwick: Volume VIII, W.B. Stephens (Editor)(1969)

St Mary's School Log Books: 1905 – 1988 held at County Archive Office, Warwick.

We are particularly indebted to the many former pupils who contributed through interviews and notes. The full texts of their contributions are filed in school, should readers want more detail.