

school days on the curragh

by Mick Deely & Pat Flynn

PRIMARY

On May 16, 1922 the British Army handed over the Curragh to the Irish Free State. When the British army left the Curragh Camp they took all their school records with them but we do know that the present School of Signals on O'Higgin's Road was used as a Junior School.

The first Free State School in the Curragh Camp opened in the same building on February 26, 1923. Fifty five pupils were on the school roll that day and everyone was present on that historic occasion.

Ernest McGee of 27 Ordnance Barracks, Curragh Camp, was the first name entered on the roll books. Earnest was born in October 1914 and his father was a painter with the Board of Works. Pat McGee, Ernest's brother was the second name entered on the roll book. Both Ernest and Pat had attended Athgarvan National School prior to coming to the Curragh Boys' School. Victor Hunt was the first person on the roll book who had never previously attended a primary school. Victor's father was



Ernest Magee who was the first pupil on roll in the Boys' School in the Curragh pictured with his daughter Connie

a colonel commanding the Curragh Camp.

One year after it opened, there were 114 on the roll and by 1925 the figure had risen to 173. The number of children continued to grow and in June 1930 there were 336 boys enrolled.

The first principal teacher of the Curragh Boys' School was Mr. Michael J. Sheehan. His pay in

those days was £32 per month. Mr. Dermot Hegarty was the first assistant teacher and his pay was £17 per month. Ms Cait Clancy was the first lady teacher in the Curragh Camp Boys School in 1925. Pay rose slowly in those days and by 1958 the principal's pay was £67 per month.

During the Emergency, due to the risk of attack, it was decided



Senior choir taking part in a concert May 1964

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Left: Ms. Jo Ryall with Cór Fhéile group, mid 1960's

to evacuate all but essential personnel from the Curragh. When this evacuation began on June 21, 1940 there were 336 boys on the roll. On Monday June 24, 1940 there were only 142 boys on the roll.

When the war ended people began to move back into the Curragh Camp. The greatest number of pupils ever on the roll of the Curragh Boys School was 457 on September 5, 1960. Since then the numbers have been gradually declining and to-day there are only 127 boys on the roll. The present school building was opened on Tuesday November 8, 1977. A separate primary school for girls opened in 1962 and in 1995 a *Gaelscoil* opened at Herbert Lodge, the site of a former RIC barracks known locally as the *Stone Barracks*.

SECONDARY

No post primary education of any kind was provided on the Curragh until 1933. Boys and girls seeking second level education had to travel to Kildare or Naas or places further afield. The County Kildare Vocational Educational Committee set up a school in Plunkett Barracks on the Curragh in 1933 at the request of the Department of Defence, but it was only for first year students. They were given free travel to Naas for further education. Except for the Emergency years, when it was

closed because of the military situation, the Vocational School has progressed favourably to the present day and enjoys the unqualified support of the army authorities and County Kildare VEC.

When the school reopened in 1947, it did not return to the fine building it had occupied prior to the war. The school was housed in four different

army buildings until 1959. With expanding courses and increased numbers a much larger building was later provided by the Army in McDermott Barracks. Additional accommodation, in an adjacent building, was added in 1967 by way of a fine science laboratory, art room and general class room.

Since 1969 the school has been providing general education for army personnel with outstanding success in Group Certificate, Intermediate Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Second-chance full-time education for soldiers was originally introduced at the request of some soldiers who asked the principal about returning to school to sit the examinations they missed by leaving school too soon. The OC of the Curragh Camp at that time, Col. J. Quinn, was approached about the scheme. All the army units in the area were notified and 50 men sought permission to return to school. As a pilot scheme 18 men were selected to attend school for a half day, five days a week. They sat Group Certificate examinations after one year and the results were so good that a second class was started on a full time basis in 1970. These classes have continued without a break since 1969. Since 1978 Leaving Certificate Courses are provided for army personnel who are released from their units for two years.

THE GIRLS NATIONAL SCHOOL - FORTY YEARS ON

by Colette Behan

The year 2002 marked the fortieth anniversary of the opening of the Curragh Girls' National School. Far from 'forty years a growing' – we are indeed 'forty years a shrinking'.

The school was opened by the then Minister for Education Dr. Patrick Hillary and was blessed by Right Rev. Monsignor W. Miller. The Minister for Defence Mr. Bartley and the Chief of Staff Lieut. Gen. Sean McKeown were among the attendance.

The roll books show us that there were 346 girls enrolled at that time. The Curragh at that time had a total of 460 families and a population of 1,300 children.

Mary Rowley, who later became principal of the school recorded her memories; "We were on the move at last, word had come through – we had waited weeks. Boxes packed, cupboards empties, tables tidied, all *fearaisti* (the tools of all teachers) stacked ready to leave the old school – moving on to the new girls' school. Up and down to the new school we travelled and then walked back to march our classes up.

Our first glimpse of the new school – how exciting, the reports we heard of it were nothing compared to what we walked into – entrance doors in solid mahogany and plate glass panels. The sight of the assembly hall thrilled us.

Plum coloured velvet drapes on a stage worthy of Abbey actors. Every teacher started planning ahead for the best Christmas concert ever as they feasted their eyes on the lovely new ebony piano! More treats to follow – the cookery room was fully equipped with all kinds of utensils needed to make a meal fit for a field marshal. We were 'gob-smacked' looking at the 'goodies'.

Next for our inspection came the toilets or 'rest rooms', the staff were ecstatic viewing the state-of-the-art toilets. We had left behind the communal chipped old toilets. Indeed there were rolls of linen towels supplied – would we ever have dirty hands again!



The Staff of Curragh Girls' National School in the mid 1970s.

*Front: Colette Behan, Ita Kavanagh, Frances Fitzgerald
Middle: Máire Kavanagh, Peggy Lawlor, Mary Kempton
Back: Angela Cox, Colette O'Riordan, Mary Rowley*

Photo courtesy of Colette Behan

THE GIRLS NATIONAL SCHOOL



School photo of Patricia & Kathleen McBride, 1960s.

Last but not least came the classrooms – Oh the joy of seeing the wall to wall blackboards, floor to ceiling windows all facing south and into the sunshine. Little did we guess that pupils would be complaining about the blackboards and the ‘glare’. Floors were shining and slippery – a ballet course was needed to keep us upright and so for the years ahead in the bright sunny Scoil Bhríde.”

One cannot imagine the feelings of excitement the children were experiencing forty years ago on their move to their new school. Kathleen (McBride) Sage and Mary (Dolan) Byrne remember the move clearly. “We remember the old girls’ school, which was next door to the boys’ school. Break times were different so that boys and girls were not playing at the same time. There was a sloped yard, which was gravelled and caused many cut knees and hands. Each classroom had the old slanted desks, and of course the outside toilets!

The new school took the children’s breath away and we remember Mrs. McCormack marching us all down. It was gorgeous, airy, bright and warm. There was a cookery kitchen where

Kathleen learned how to make scrambled eggs!

Mary was delighted as she lived in McDonagh, and with an hour for lunch, she could go home for dinner. The radiators were a far cry from the open fires, which were fed from a big bin full of turf. The desks and new inkwells would inspire any scholar. We were the first class confirmed from the new school by Dr. Keogh on 20 May 1963.

Incidentally, there was a curfew in the Curragh at the time – when all lights in the Camp had to be extinguished by 11 p.m., but the heavy grey blankets were great for hiding the light in the windows! At that time too there was a soldier on duty at both ends of the housing blocks all night. Of course now there is no need as the ‘blocks’ are gone!”

In 2002 the number of students on the school roll was ninety. As the old adage goes “Quality is better than quantity”.



Pupils of girls’ national school planting a millennium tree. Back : Danielle Byrne, Sarah Ryan. Front: Emma Furlong, Nicole Gallagher, Christine Redmond, Mairead Corr

Photo: Oliver McCrossan



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