

COLÁISTE MUIRE

COBH

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History

A History of Coláiste Muire

Coláiste Muire is a post-primary, co-educational, Catholic school located in Cobh, Co. Cork.

The Trustees are the Presentation Brothers Schools Trust. Coláiste Muire is the amalgamation of two schools, St. Mary's Girls' Secondary and Presentation College for boys which took place in 1976. Beginning with approximately 400 students, there are now 650.

The 42 years to the present have seen four principals directing the implementation of the national curriculum that is required for acceptance to third level education and also providing whatever co-curricular and extra curricular activities that are necessary for the education of the whole person. To facilitate this there are 52 teachers, special needs assistants, secretarial, administrative and care-taking staff, as well as volunteers, concerned parents, clergy and the Cobh community as a whole, all directed by the Board of Management. Over the years the overall goal is unchanging: the whole-person education that the school provides is imbedded in the Christian view of the Catholic Church.

Every school has its own flavour that makes it unique and Coláiste Muire especially so. Unlike schools in the mainland that reflect particular socio-economic locations, Coláiste Muire is on Great Island, a smaller island which has for its students the young people of the community who know each other from childhood into adulthood and will continue to do so. Coláiste Muire is a microcosm of Cobh society.

Beginnings

On the 23rd May 1850 three Mercy sisters arrived from Cork in order to set up a Primary and Secondary school to be located in Belvedere. They were

also to visit the sick and the poor of Cobh and provide “a home of mercy for the protection of young women”. The first principal was Mother M. de Sales and St. Mary’s was the school they founded. These were different times as can well be imagined; poverty and filth for the many and few able to avail of a secondary school education. Every week saw the influx and outflow of emigration and the transient population of navy and military. Old sepia photographs show many ships in the harbour, stiffly posed groups and indistinct crowds. One does not hear the noise of drunken celebration or brawling, the confusion of strangers milling about, not the sadness or bravery of farewells. How did these three sisters react? Certainly they prayed but also in a practical way, did the best that circumstances would allow.

The Presentation Brothers arrived later in 1886 and after altering the former pro-cathedral, where Coláiste Muire now stands and turning it into a college and residence, were able to open in 1889. The first Principal, Bro. Joseph O’Callaghan was assisted by two brothers and one layman. 65 students enrolled initially. The curriculum at that time was for junior, middle and senior grades of the old Intermediate Board; qualifications that would equip one for acceptance into professions and further study. For girls the emphasis was somewhat different, in light of their roles at the time. Looking at photographs of students from the 1950’s and 1960’s one must agree that those three sisters in 1850 and the three brothers in 1889 would be well satisfied. The class numbers were small by modern criteria, but every face is smiling, healthy and confident.

Towards Amalgamation

In the Autumn of 1975 Sr. M. Fachtna Murray was Principal of St. Mary’s and Br. Bede Minihane was Principal of the Presentation College. Initially it might have been hoped to expand each school separately but the Department of Education would permit only one secondary school in Cobh. In October 1975 the decision was made to amalgamate both schools into one new co-educational secondary school to be known as Coláiste Muire and this was to take effect from August 1st, 1976.

It was decided as a preliminary step that boys and girls would remain separate until the final two years of school. For the short term, the facilities of St. Mary’s would be used together with the existing Presentation Boy’s National school suitably renovated in time for August 1976.

Great credit is due to the teachers who commuted between both schools between 1976 and 1981. In addition to the existing subjects, the new subjects were Technical Graphics, Woodwork and Computer Studies.

The long term creation of a new building for Coláiste Muire then took place. To make a site, the old Presentation College with its residence was demolished in 1976 and a new residence built nearby. By 1981 the school

proper was built and the renovated Presentation Boys National School became its 'west wing'.

The move to the new building was on 19th February 1981. All of this cost money, €2,000,000, a huge amount at that time when an average house cost €20,000. Approximately half came from the Department of Education as grants. The parents of the pupils contributed and a very committed and successful Parents Fund Raising Committee was set up. The remainder was paid by the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Brothers by means of bank loans, overdrafts and by covenanting a large part of their salaries for many years. They, Sr. Fachtna and Br. Bede at the helm, tirelessly committed themselves to paying off the debt. On May Day 1981 the official opening of Coláiste Muire took place, Bishop Aherne gave the solemn blessing at the ceremonies and Bro. Bartholomew gave the speech.

Sr. Ann Lenihan took over as Principal in 1985 and served for 20 years. She introduced many changes in this time and in particular oversaw many new curricula and courses. Some of the main innovations were the introduction of Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the involvement of special needs assistants to support students. Sr. Ann with the support of Chairperson of the Board of Management, Fr. Denis Reidy, negotiated the purchase of the land behind Coláiste Muire to provide excellent sporting facilities. The Millennium Stadium comprises of a full size AstroTurf pitch, a full size GAA / Soccer pitch, two tennis courts and a running track. It was officially opened in 2001. The Spanish project which Sr. Ann also introduced brought many young Spanish students to Cobh – they stayed with local families and attended school.

Sr. Ann spent 20 years as Principal of the school taking early retirement in 2005. Mrs. Paula Sweeney then became Principal, with Mr. Fergus O'Brien as Deputy Principal. This senior management team oversaw many developments including – a revision of the Code of Behaviour, opening up of the admissions policy, provision of teaching and learning technology in every classroom, introduction of a school management information system, expansion of Transition Year, introduction of an online Learning Hub.

In March 2014 Mrs. Sweeney retired and Mr. Fergus O'Brien became Principal with Mrs. Maureen Kenneally as Deputy Principal. In this time the school has seen expansion in numbers to 650 pupils, the introduction of new subjects, the introduction of the new Junior Cycle Programme

The various Boards of Management and members of the Boards including religious, teachers, parents and members of the community, have given a very high standard of service to the school. The Staff has played a vital part in the success of the school over the past 34 years and are truly "in loco parentis" in their care of students. Parents have made an enormous

contribution to the school, both formally in the Parents' Council but also in almost every aspect of school life. Students have had a Student Council for many years and this gives students an opportunity for leadership, as do the other student groups, Meitheal Team, the Green Committee and Faith Friends.

The Sisters and Brothers no longer teach in the school, but they remained Trustees. The core aim of the school is as it was at the beginning, the provision of the highest standards of Catholic education to the young people of Cobh. Staff is committed to this core purpose. The trusteeship of Coláiste Muire passed to the Presentation Brothers Schools Trust on 1st September 2009.

The CEO of the Presentation Brothers Schools Trust is Mr. Michael Sexton

The Chairperson of the Board of Management is Mr. Sean Culhane