

Chapter 6 – East London

Early Expansion

It is now necessary for a moment to look back to 1847 when, as a result of the report made by Sir Charles Forsyth to Governor H Pottinger, it was decided that the mouth of the Buffalo River be used to land troops and stores for the War of the Axe¹ which was being waged in the Amatola Mountains, fort Glamorgan² was established to accommodate 300 men. Civilians then began to settle on the West Bank of the Buffalo River. These formed the nucleus of the modern town East London.

To encourage the men to remain on the dangerous frontier the Government brought out on the “Lady Kennaway” young Irish and English girls. These married and made homes at Panmure, as the East Bank was then called. Over 2000 Germans arrived in 1859 who settled on the East Bank near the river mouth.

Thus in 1870 there were three villages: Fort Glamorgan, the German Village and Panmure; these were merged into one municipality under chairmanship of Mr John Gately.³

The call for the Sisters’ services to open schools for white children was, in 1880, becoming ever more insistent. Memories of how they had landed in East London three years previously probably inclined Mother Mauritia more favourably to this sea port where her party had been welcomed by Father Edward Coughlan. In 1879 he had been succeeded by Father J Fitzhenry who, in the very first year of his parish duties, opened for East London the first Catholic School for boys. When on 10th February Bishop Ricards visited the school, sixteen pupils were present. Lucky boys to have had so competent a teacher as Father Fitzhenry. From 1881 to 1882 Father P O’Rourke continued the good work, and was succeeded by Father Peter Strobino from 1882 to 1887. However, the onus of teaching when connected with parochial duties was too much for Father Strobino, so he welcomed the Sisters to his parish in 1883.

On the advice of Mr John Gately, Mother Mauritia paid 449 pounds for an acre of ground bordering on Albany Street in 1880. As this plot was too small for a school, the adjoining erg was purchased from Mr Kretzmann for five hundred pounds on 1st March 1882.

By the 13th March, Mr EG Bompas had drawn the plan of the new convent. There were eight tenders and the contract was given to Mr Cooper to erect the building.

On 11th April, the foundation stone was laid, simply and without publicity. An objectionable and unsightly gully ran along the one border of the grounds. The municipality sold this gully to the nuns at the cost of one hundred pounds. The Sisters then transformed the unhygienic spot into a useful garden with fruit trees and vegetables.

The Mother House bore the entire expense of this building. It was a solid brick-and-mortar structure, while at this time most other buildings in East London were of wood-and-iron that could be removed elsewhere when necessity demanded.

For a fortnight before the new convent opened, manual work was the order of the day. The nuns cleaned windows, scrubbed floors and made simple furnishings for the classrooms. They were particularly busy with the chapel. They painted the wooden altar that had been made by the Trappists of Dunbrody. As a background for the altar they hung a large painting of the Sacred Heart after whom the convent⁴ was

¹ *The seventh of a series of campaigns in the Eastern Cape between the British and the Xhosas and other African tribes.*

² *The first Mass celebrated at East London was said in this Fort by Rev JD Ricards in May 1857.*

³ *His son Louis, became a priest, and his daughter, Rosanna, joined the Dominicans as Sister Amanda*

⁴ *This Convent in Albany Street became the ‘mother’ of nine other establishments of the Dominican Sisterhood that were to spring up in and around East London. This number does not include the Boys’ School (St Anthony’s) founded by Father Fitzhenry, and which flourished for a time under the management of the nuns. The older generation of boys spoke with affection of Sisters Alexia Bolton, Annunciata Flannery, Clement Lynch, Gaudentia Steinbeiss and Fortunata Hummel, to mention but a few who taught there. The Sacred Heart Convent was the pivot from which the branch houses in and around East London commenced, directly or indirectly. In*

named. The oil painting was the work of a Munich artist, Mr K Baumeister, who had been commissioned by a priest in Augsburg to paint it for the Sisters.

Mother Clare Huber, as Superior, and the Sisters of the new community travelled from the Mother Convent in two ox-wagons drawn by sixteen oxen. The convent chronicle reads: "...On 29th December, the birthday of our Order's Founder, Saint Dominic, the first Mass was celebrated in the chapel by Father Fagan..." The following Sunday, New Year's Day 1883, a congregation of about eighty Catholics attended Mass in the chapel, which thereafter served as a parish church until the opening of the church of the Immaculate conception, across the street from the convent, in 1894.

A reception of novices took place at this convent on 14th January 1883; the first ceremony of its kind to be held in East London. Among the neophytes were two young Sisters still in their teens, who were destined to be leaders among their fellow-religious: Sister Mary Lucy Kaltenstadler who would steer the little barque of the Congregation through deeps and shallows for seventeen years; and Sister Mary Joseph Ryan, a future Prioress General of the Oakford Dominican Sisters.

The new school opened on 23rd January 1883. On the first day 63 pupils of both sexes were admitted and by the end of the year the number on the roll had risen to two-hundred. The Sisters conducted two schools for girls and one for boys. They were called High and Mission Schools respectively. The latter was State-aided but only one teacher received a small salary. The schools were visited by Government Inspectors who, with expert advice, were a great help to the teachers. Non-Catholics began to come for religious instruction and the Catholic children were assiduously prepared to receive the Sacraments.

In June 1883, owing to an outbreak of smallpox, King William's Town was in quarantine and the Sisters could not spend their vacation at East London Convent. Some of the boarders were taken to the sea for an outing. On this 21st June, one of the girls, Charlotte Adendorf, aged seventeen and an excellent swimmer, got into difficulties and drowned while some of the others had to be helped out of the water. At the inquest Mother Margaret McConville and two senior boarders had to give evidence.

- Five years later a similar tragedy occurred. All the boarders and most of the Sisters went for a picnic to the Blue Quarry on the Grahamstown road. Mary Ryan and Molly Collins strayed from the group. When their companions missed them a thorough search was made, but to no avail. The bodies were finally found in a deep pool near the Quarry. Mother Eleonora Petitpierre recorded in the annals on 1st October 1888; "What an indescribable shock and grief it was for the Sisters to see the two girls lying dead on the grass while we waited for the arrival of the ambulance cart..." -

Father James Kelly laid the foundation stone of his new church of the Immaculate Conception on 2nd December 1894. Meanwhile the Sisters had improved their own building in East London and had erected a fine hall dedicated to St Joseph, which was also used as a chapel on ease on Sundays, pending the completion of the new church. The hall was not insured; but it was also lent to outsiders for evening entertainments. Alas, in the early hours of the morning after one such amusement, police whistles – there was no fire brigade in those days – announced that the hall was on fire. Two railway lads going off duty had given the alarm. Captain Corcoran and another gentleman found a hydrant in Buffalo Street which gave enough water, but the flames had taken too firm a hold on the hall to save it. All the police could do was to prevent the fire from spreading to the Sisters' quarters and thus jeopardising the entire establishment. The loss was great – two valuable pianos, a number of string instruments and many accessories to the work of a busy school were devoured by greedy flames at a time when the nuns were struggling for their very existence. Yet they blamed no one for the devastation and calmly started to rebuild.

A report in the Daily Dispatch of December 1910 claimed that the Convent's needlework and art were second to none in the Cape Colony.

about 1904 the De La Salle Brothers arrived to found their boys' school in Hill Street, King William's Town. Some years later the Brothers also took over the St Anthony's School from the Sisters at East London. Maris Stella Convent, St Francis Xavier's, St Peter Claver Mission, Cambridge Convent, Mater Dei Nursing Home, St Anne's

The school that had opened with 63 boys and girls reached the roll of three hundred before the end of that first year. Boarders of both sexes were accepted until it was found convenient to accommodate only girls. Later it was decided to move the boys to a school of their own: St Anthony's – at the time still staffed by the Sisters and financed by the Cape Department of Education. This school was afterwards taken over by the De La Salle Brothers as a primary school.

At first the Sacred Heart School was situated on the fringe of the town, but as time marched on the business centre of the city spread around it and threatened to engulf the Convent. The school continued to grow and traffic noise increased so that teaching in the locality became virtually impossible. The Congregation now bought a small private hotel known as "The Red House Hotel" and a new day school was erected in the grounds. The former hotel was adapted as a residence for the Sisters. When the Sacred Heart Convent in Albany Street closed Sister Mamerta Hermann received an illuminated "Papal Blessing" for having served the Church of the Immaculate Conception as sacristan for forty years.

Pageantry and colour marked a gala occasion for the Sacred Heart Convent on 25th March 1960 when Right Rev. Bishop E.A. Green of Port Elizabeth blessed the new school and hall and the Mayor of East London, Cllr. W.P. Osmond, officially opened the newly erected R200,000 building in the suburb of Vincent. The Bishop said: "The magnificence of the whole building is an indication of the very powerful value and importance the Catholic Church places on education.

Pupils and their parents, old girls, friends and the Clergy in "Full force" thronged the palm-fringed grounds as a colourful procession, led by the De La Salle pipe band, emerged from the school proper. Behind the band came the senior pupils forming a guard of honour to the main entrance of the new school..

After the opening of the hall, now packed with guests, Mr J. A. Yazbek, chairman of the Parent-Teachers' Association, paid tribute to the Sisters and the parents of the pupils. Councillor Osmond said the building was "opened by the courage and determination of those who, by the grace of God, were given the faith to overcome every obstacle for His sake..."

During the tea interlude the school orchestra entertained the guests. Congratulatory telegrams included one from the "1959-head-girl", Ruth Landauer, who was then studying at the University of Cape Town.

After the ceremony guests toured the new buildings. Old girls of the school voiced their envious appraisal as they nostalgically remembered their school days at the old Albany Street Convent.

The Primary Section which was subsidised by the Department of Education was transferred to St Mark's Road and was at first called St Raymond School. This site was formerly the De La Salle Brothers' School which the Dominican Sisters took over. Later it was named St Anne's School, and the former residence of the Brothers forms the convent to house the Sisters who staff the new school.

The annual concerts organised by the Torch and Grail Society were always well supported by the pupils of all the Catholic Schools in East London. The proceeds of these functions supplied Christmas cheer to underprivileged and elderly citizens of the town.

Mention should be made here of Sister M Cletus Lampka, the very gifted music teacher, who spent the last 27 years of her life at the Sacred Heart Convent. Often she delighted large audiences in the Colosseum Theatre with her orchestra and the concerts she staged. Her pupils invariably attained remarkable success in examinations and other contests. In 1963 her school choir, consisting mainly of Standard Six pupils, gained for the Sacred Heart Convent the much coveted Challenge Shield at the local Eisteddfod.

On Monday morning the 24th August 1970, a soft rain set in over East London. It all began so innocently and every one gave thanks for the heavenly drops... But it was not to stop before 800 mm of rain had fallen in the space of six days, causing terror and havoc all around. Hundreds of families in the city were very hard hit while the stately homes in Torquay Road suffered irreparable damage. Mrs C R Williams clung to the guttering of her house for 90 minutes while swirling waters rose ever higher around her home. She was rescued by canoe, tied to a rope held by people on high ground. The Nahoon River burst

its banks and violent waters in their headlong rush to the sea swept away bridges, tons of earth, entire gardens, cars, furniture and other valuable possessions. The whole of East London was blacked out for two hours on the night the flood waters reached the power station. The dry dock was flooded with brown debris-laden water. Tons of racing drift rubble, carried by the torrent, thundered through the harbour. A fishing trawler sank, another was driven aground and a third, plus a hopper barge and dredger, were swept right out to sea. Movement inside the harbour was badly restricted by floating trees. Railway men had to work feverishly to repair washed out lines both in the city and in various parts of the border.

In modern times the number of women entering religion are few and the number of lay teachers at the Sacred Heart School had increased every year. These teachers, of course, had to be paid adequate salaries. This expense together with the cost for the upkeep of the buildings became too great a burden for the Convent to bear. The pupils on the roll had also diminished because of the high cost of living which made it impossible for parents to find school fees for their children's private education. During 1974 there were only 165 pupils at the Sacred Heart School; and during 1975 only those scholars remained who were completing a course: just thirty-nine of them.

Looking at this small remnant of pupils it seems difficult to believe that literally thousands of children had been taught by the Sisters in this institution, and that now only St Anne's School remains of the Dominican Schools in this city.

So the Convent of the Sacred Heart at 24 Hudson Avenue was sold to the Department of Education. From January 1976 these fine buildings were to be known as the Hudson Park Primary School. Only the classrooms would be used for teaching the children. The Sisters' former residence will probably become a teachers' centre where lectures and meetings can be held. The Chief Inspector of Education for the Border area, Mr B D Kleyn, said Cape Town and Port Elizabeth already have such teacher centres and he hoped East London would become the third Cape city to have such facilities for teachers.