

The Manor House School

Milford's private girls' school

by Paul Mc Manus

In the autumn of 1934 Mrs. R.P Wilson and her husband explored the beautiful grounds of the then empty Manor House, Benburb, Co. Tyrone, and this inspired her with the help of a few people to establish a private company with the object of managing a country-house residential school for girls in Northern Ireland, running along English lines - but not so expensive. Mrs. Wilson was President of the Northern Ireland Branch of Parent's National Education Union, and turned to members for support. The original six members of the Board of Governors were also the principal shareholders.

When the Manor House in Benburb was found to be too expensive, the company decided to lease Milford House, Milford, Co. Armagh from Mrs. Harriette Miller of Drumsill House. Milford House was the former seat of the Mc Crum family, who owned the firm Mc Crum Watson and Mercer Ltd - world famous linen manufacturers. The present house was built in 1880, and was the first house in Ireland to be lit with electricity. It was a

magnificent property with fourteen bedrooms; six bathrooms (which included Turkish baths), a forty acre estate, and gardens containing an ornamental lake and a two tiered fountain. The school renamed the house The Manor House School, and opened in September 1936 with only three pupils (one of whom was the Headmistress Mrs. Shelly's daughter). The house was considered

The artist John Luke taught at the school during the war

too small when the number of pupils reached sixty three in 1939, and a heavy overdraft was undertaken from the bank for additional building. Despite dissatisfaction with the property, The Manor House School Ltd bought the house and estate in 1940 from Mrs Miller for £3,000.

As well as financial difficulties, there were administration problems. These included the staff going on strike as a result of the Headmistress deciding not to continue providing afternoon cream teas for staff in 1940, and a disagreement that the Headmistress Mrs Shelly's daughter

should have a separate bedroom. In 1941 the Headmistress left during the winter term, and was replaced for a short time by Miss Murray. Mrs Jean Killen agreed in 1943 to become Headmistress, and the purpose of providing wide education in a happy environment finally became a reality. Her high academic standards and wise guidance saved the school. Her husband took a great interest in the grounds, and the gardens under his guidance were resplendently restored. In 1955 Lady Wakehurst, wife of the Governor of Northern Ireland officially unveiled new Domestic science and Form rooms. Mrs Killen retired in 1958, due to ill health, and was succeeded by Mr and Mrs Norman Callender from Devon. The last Headmistress was Miss Muriel McGonigle.

An excellent variety of subjects were taught: Scripture, Literature, Geography, Citizenship, Hygiene, Botany, Biology, Mathematics, Architecture, Drawing, Arts and Crafts and Languages. The uniform was considered by pupils to be unique yet old fashioned with its light grey herringbone tweed suits and cloaks. Notable past pupils have included Lady Anthea and Lady Sarah Lowry-Corry (daughters of the Earl of Belmore, of Castle Coole, Co. Fermanagh), Lady O'Neill (wife of Terence O'Neill former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland) and Judge Lancelot Curran's daughter Patricia Curran (who was murdered in the grounds of her Whiteabbey home in 1952). Several members of the Earl of Caledon's family, and the mother of the present Duke of Abercorn also attended the school.

Members of staff over the years included Miss Mary Mellet, Miss Yvonne Hodgins, Miss Enid Powers, and Miss Sylvia Dawds. Three long-standing members of staff who stayed until the school closed were Miss Joan Wilson, daughter



Dance display on parents day 2 June 1961 on south lawn of Manor House school. Left to Right: Philippa Kennedy, Solreig Acheson, Mary Lester, Penny Millar, Joanne Patterson, Sharon Dougan

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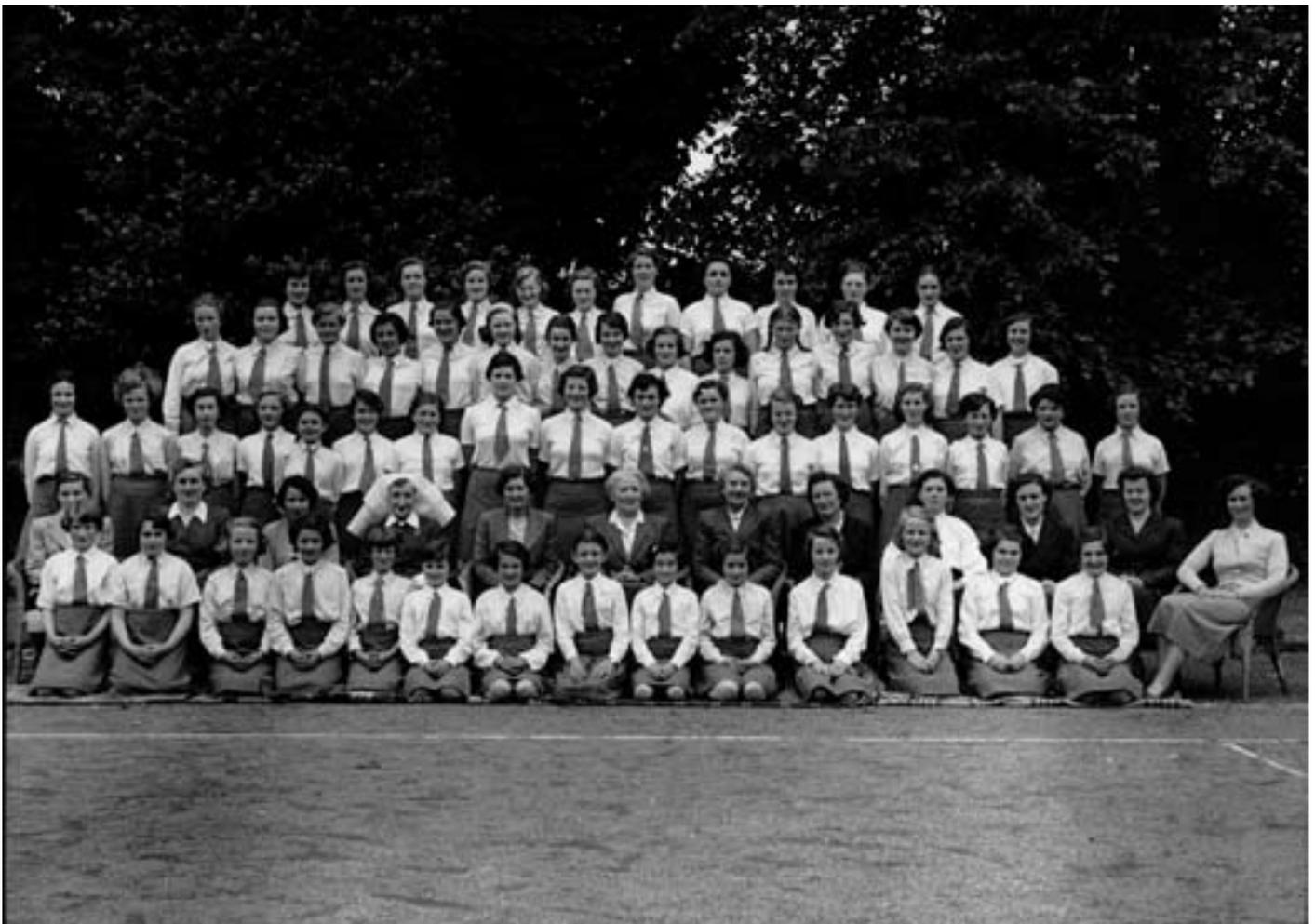
of J.M. Wilson, Armagh, Miss Rene Wells and Miss Massie Dagg, sister of the Archbishop of Connor. The famous artist John Luke taught at the school during the war, while living at Knappagh with the Terris family.

In June 1964 a new wing (built by Armagh contractor Messrs. A.C. Simpson) was added, and this was officially opened by the Countess Roden of Bryansford. The Ulster Gazette reported this was part of a long-term expansion costing £15,000 which was to include a swimming pool, and music rooms. The dream was never fulfilled. In 1965 the number of boarders slumped so significantly that day pupils

were accepted at 45 guineas a term, and the bank was making overtures to Mr. Wilson. On December 19th 1966 Mrs. Wilson announced before the school (who were just about to sit exams) that the school would close, and that there would be no spring term - this was a great shock to all. The property was sold in 1967 to the Northern Ireland Hospital Authority for £22,500. It was the only independent girls school in the North, and a happy home to the many girls who lived there, but its financial instability meant its closure was unfortunately inevitable.

Bibliography

- J. Mc Manus, 'Red Bricks and Golden Memories – A Village History', 2002
 Manor House School Magazine – Jubilee Number, April 1961 (By kind permission of the Milford Buildings Preservation Trust)
 Manor House School files at Public Record Office Northern Ireland
 Mc Crum family papers (By kind permission of the Milford Buildings Preservation Trust)



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Manor House School year group 1952

- Front Row** (left to right) Anne Eakin, ?, Anne O'Mayide, Fiona Campbell, Rosemary Glendinning, Susan Regnart, Heken Donnin, Jennifer Corbett, Lynette Fletcher, Pamela Bracefell, Julie Watson, ?, ?, Viven ?, ?
- Second Row** (left to right) Staff: Miss Jean Wilson, Miss Malstead, ?, Matron Miss Hill, Assistant Head Mistress Mrs Mruiel McGonigle, Mrs Jean Killen, Housekeeper Miss Hill, Miss Maissie Dagg, Miss Mary Mellet, Mrs Sylvia Dawds, ?, Miss Pauline McHenry.
- Third Row** (left to right) ?, Gayle McKibben, Marriane Liburn, ?, Jean McCall, Anna Cunningham, ?, Joanne Thorton, ?, Anne McVitie, ?, ?, Susan Rednart ?, ?
- Fourth Row** (left to right) ?, ?, Willma Hanna, Vivian Maxwell, Faith Shannon, Frances McCleary, ?, ?, ?, Joan Eakin, Eve Lauren, Alexina Young, ?, ?
- Back Row** (left to right) ?, Sylvia Smith, ?, Deirdre Dinsmore, ?, ?, Heather Collourn, Anglia Shillington, ?, Jean McCally, ?