

A College in Trying Times

Annus Horribilis!

Looking back at one of the most bizarre years in the recent history of the College with family tragedies, disrupted education and the anxieties of the pandemic, many have asked: 'According to College records, has anything like this ever happened before?

The opening of the College coincided with the first great cholera epidemic of 1832-33 which was so severe that a portion of the 'new' burial ground across from the gates was set aside for victims. When the Great Famine struck in the 1840s cholera came back as Belfast became crowded with refugees. [Founder of the College, Archbishop William Croll died of cholera in 1849]. Outbreaks of Flu, Typhus, and Smallpox were also common in the mid-19th century. TB was a major problem well into the 20th century. A talented young Mathematics teacher, Edward Keys was a victim. Records show 21 deaths (18 students and 3 staff) between 1904 and 1915 although not all were attributable to TB. No record

survives of College victims of the Spanish Flu of 1918, but we can assume there were some as the school had to close in November of that year.

The Great War, the 1916 Rising and subsequent War of Independence all claimed the lives of ex-College men which, no doubt, took a terrible toll on families. The same was true of the Great Blitz of April 1941 although the College itself had a miraculous escape (cf. War Diary of Patrick Rodgers). The flu epidemics of the mid 1950s caused much havoc in Belfast

schools and after the Christmas break in 1956-7 President Fr Patrick Kerr did not reopen the College until late January. The horrific civil disturbances of the 1970s and 80s are still painful to recall – two young students murdered, families threatened or burned out and frequent bomb explosions.

Despite all these appalling situations, the College staff and students, then as now, maintained a stoic attitude in the face of each adversity, supported each other and refreshed their commitment to future success.



Trying times: bomb damage near Carlisle Circus, April 1941

The best of Neighbours – St. Malachy's and The Mater

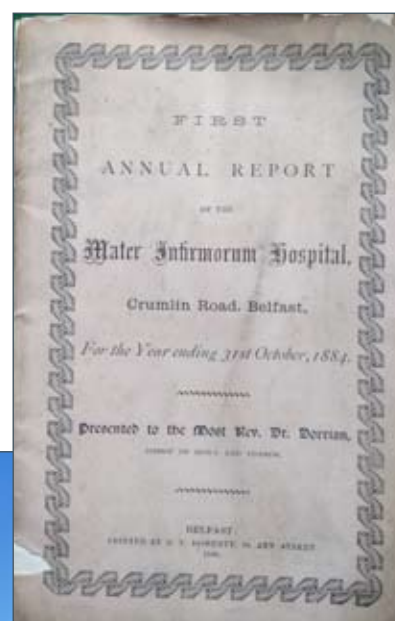
When part of the Vicinage estate was given to the Sisters of Mercy in 1854 it was for educational purposes but by 1876 the nuns were determined to establish a hospital 'for the relief of the sick and dying poor of the city'. Bishop Patrick Dorrian, founder of the College, purchased Bedeque House in 1883 and the 'Mater Infirmorum' was born. Ex-students of the College were involved in the development of the new hospital from the start including consultant surgeon Sir Alexander Dempsey and Dr James Bernard Moore. Through the 20th century and up to the present day many distinguished medical alumni of the College have served 'over the wall'.

A priest from St. Malachy's invariably served as chaplain to both hospital and convent while the Sisters provided a part-time nurse for the school until the late 1980s. When an incendiary destroyed part of their living quarters during the great 'blitz' of April 1941 the College provided temporary accommodation for some nursing staff.

Fundraising for the Mater, independent until 1972, was a common feature of school life up to the 1960s.

The presence of early annual reports in the College Archives underlines a unique relationship. College Principal Mr Paul McBride had no hesitation in agreeing to provide facilities for NHS staff from the Mater during the Covid 19 crisis in the summer of 2020. After all, as he pointed out to RTE, 'We have a shared history.'

**The first
annual report
of the Mater
Hospital,
October
1884.**



The new link gate into the hospital grounds.

From The Archives :

Surgeons and Sportsmen – *The Blayney Brothers*

The dedication of our local NHS and resolute leadership of Chief Medical Officer Dr Michael McBride during the virus crisis reminds us of the strong tradition of students from the College who became distinguished physicians and surgeons.

One early example is Alexander Blayney. In 1880 Alexander came to board at St. Malachy's College, followed not long afterwards by his brother, John. They were the sons of a Captain Alex Blayney, a shipowner from Cushendall. The boys quickly gained a reputation for academic brilliance and sporting prowess, particularly in football. Later in that decade a third and fourth Blayney arrived – William and Daniel.

Soccer football remained a passion when the boys left the College. In



Bohemians FC 1891. Alexander is on extreme right in back row and John extreme right in front row.

1891 three brothers – Alex, John and Daniel founded, with some other students, Bohemians F C, one of Dublin's first 'Association Football' clubs with Alexander appointed the first chairman.

Alexander gained first place in Ireland in his medical exams and in 1903 became Surgeon at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Dublin and Chief Examiner in Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland. During Easter week of 1916, according to contemporary accounts, in a hectic schedule with little sleep, he never left the hospital operating on injured civilians, IRB volunteers and soldiers often by candlelight (as there was no power).

John Blayney (6th of the seven Blayney children, also known as Neil) was an ardent Gaelic League supporter. He worked in both

'Maters' in Dublin and Belfast before becoming a ship's surgeon, visiting many ports around the world. He eventually settled in Portlaoise and married the daughter of Patrick Meehan, MP for Laois. He died in February 1919, probably a victim of the Flu pandemic. His brother William Blayney, a late vocation to medicine after a career in the RIC and as a Major in the British Army during WW1, settled in Hertford, England where he died in 1948.

The next generation of Blayneys have been no less influential in the medical and legal professions. John, son of Alexander, became a Supreme Court Judge and co-authored the controversial 8th amendment. He scored a spectacular try for Ireland against Scotland in 1950. He died in 2018.



Alexander Blayney

Project News

Books

- The last batch of 33 historically significant books are receiving conservation treatment in Sean Madden's Lurgan workshop. The foil-stamping of 180 newly rebound volumes will conclude this phase of work.
- The catalogue of O'Lavery Library is now complete and with the website manager.
- Work is expected to begin shortly on new cabinets to house the Garron Tower and McAuley collections.

Heritage on Social Media

- The College is now featured on the Great Place North Belfast Heritage Trail (no. 10). [accompanying booklet in preparation] This can be accessed at: <https://greatplacenorthbelfast.com/north-belfast-heritage-trail/>
- Listen to Adrian Fulton's reflections on the College and his family history at: <https://greatplacenorthbelfast.com/projects/telling-our-story-through-our-people/>



Bronagh (Alumni Officer) and Eilis (Practice Manager) with picture

Visual History

- An inventory of portraits, photographs etc is almost complete.
- The restored Bishop McAllister portrait (part of a demonstration project for Art students last year) is on loan to the Diocese.
- The restoration and reframing of 18 black and white photos is now complete.
- The award winning 'Clifton Street Shops' (1981) by Conor Mulvenna has been conserved and presented to Clifton St. Medical Centre on behalf of the Mulvenna family. This is one of a series of works by talented students in the early 1980s which depicted the fascinating tapestry of a changing city.

Coming Soon (le cúnamh Dé!)



Clifton St c. 1900

The John Hewitt Society have invited the College Music Department to participate in "a high-quality three-day multi-arts festival" in Spring 2021 (7th-9th May) to celebrate the rich literary and arts heritage and talent of North Belfast. This will clearly depend on favourable conditions re. Covid 19 virus situation.

A series on the 'Great Women of North Belfast' will shortly feature articles on influential women in history on Great Place North Belfast website.

A centenary photographic exhibition 'The View from Vicinage' is planned for the spring. This will include rarely seen photos from the McCaughan Collection of images of north Belfast and the College from the 1921-22 period.

Thanks to: Marie McCrory and Bronagh Goudy