

England

The need for more English speaking Sisters in Singapore and Malaysia (the then British colony of Malaya) led to the arrival of the Sisters in England in 1892. Today the Sisters can be found in Smethwick, Wolverhampton, Burton -on-Trent, London, Liverpool, Weybridge, Crawley, Eastbourne, Southwick and Horsham.

In collaboration with other Ministries including teaching, working with refugees and asylumseekers, visiting and supporting the 'Travelling Community', running a pony centre, bereavement counselling, awareness raising in the field of ecology and care of the earth, catechetical formation of children and adults, pastoral leadership in parishes and many activities in the promotion of Justice, Peace and Integrity of creation.

Have a look at one of their projects www.wormwoodscrubsponycentre.co.uk

March 2010: The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales released their pre-election document 'Choosing the Common good' written in the light of Catholic Social Teaching and the key issues that affect life in contemporary Britain. The full text is available on www.catholicchurch.org.uk

It is 1892 and the Institute in Malaya and Singapore has been growing. Surprisingly, we know that side-by-side with the other European missionaries, 67 English-speaking sisters were already on mission there: 23 from the UK and 44 from Ireland.

How did these women get to know of our Institute? Some would have gone to study in France as was common at the time. Others heard the call through family contacts or French missionary priests who came to England seeking help for the mission abroad. Their stories would make fascinating reading. No doubt they influenced another remarkable woman, Mother Gaétan Gervais, who was then in charge in Singapore. She was convinced that more English-speaking sisters were needed to ensure the continuity of the mission in Malaya, which was then a British colony. She decided that the best thing to do was to set up a community in England in the hope of attracting young women to the Institute. In spite of poor health she set sail for Europe accompanied by Sr Augustine McSweeney, a native of Cork, Ireland. They arrived in London on June 9, 1892. Their faith and absolute dependence on Divine Providence was amazing. They had no knowledge of London and no resources. There was no one there to welcome them or help them settle in. So, passing through Victoria Station, they first checked into a hotel near Charing Cross. Sr McSweeney contacted a family acquaintance, a Mr Chadney, who sought them out and took them to his own home where his wife and daughter welcomed them. Mother Gaétan, already very ill, stayed with them until she died there some weeks later.

Their first contacts with the archbishop and parish priests were not very promising. They had come with the hope of opening a boarding school, and of attracting and training English-speaking sisters for their schools in Malaya and Singapore.

When they went to speak of their desire to Archbishop Vaughan of Westminster, he informed them that England had plenty of boarding schools, staffed by competent teachers! He did, however, hold out some hope. He invited them to visit a parish in Wood Green. There was no convent in that area so the parish priest reluctantly agreed to have them and directed them to the small town of Southgate. Of its 1,500 inhabitants, just one married couple and 10 other people were practising Catholics. A building was rented for three years and permission given to open a day school. Six sisters were sent from France to complete the community. They arrived during

the month of August. The first Mass was celebrated in their house in Southgate on August 21, 1892. The following morning, news came that the intrepid missionary, Mother Gaétan, her mission accomplished, had died at 2.45am on August 22. Her body lies in a lonely plot in Kensal Green cemetery in London. The mission did not develop as hoped, so the sisters thought it better to move to Streatham, a town in another diocese. Having faced many difficulties, the sisters finally settled in Weybridge, Surrey.

The bishop of Southwark was approached for permission to open a boarding school and the sisters this time had a letter of recommendation from the cardinal in Paris.

Having waited two months for the reply, they were disappointed to learn that they could not be accepted at Streatham. However, true to their missionary spirit, they did not give up. They were encouraged by the vicar general to request permission to open a day school. This they did. Sadly, a month later they received another negative answer. It was not possible to open a day school because none of the sisters was qualified to teach in England! Another door closed.

Then, surprisingly, hope came in December 1893. Another religious congregation was leaving its mission in Camberwell and the clergy invited the Infant Jesus Sisters to replace them in the school. Here, it seemed, was a viable mission at last. It did not work out that way; they stayed there for just five years. Then, in answer to another call, the sisters moved again, this time to settle, finally, in Weybridge. This last move came about through their parish priest in Camberwell, Fr McGrath, who moved to a parish in Weybridge. There was no Catholic school there so, having recognised the sisters' valuable work in education in his previous parish, he invited them to come and open a school. They came in October 1898 and remained for almost 100 years, carrying out a fruitful apostolate in the school and neighbouring districts.

There was, however, another difficult chapter in the story of this pioneering community. In 1904, Bishop Edward Ilsley of Birmingham invited the sisters to replace a congregation that was withdrawing from their mission in the town of Wolverhampton. A group of sisters went to live first in Waterloo Road and later in Merridale Road. They took over the school but government regulations made it increasingly difficult. The school needed extensive renovation and competent, qualified teachers, both a heavy drain on the resources of the Weybridge community. The Catholic school was placed on a lower scheme of grants because it did not accept the conditions that would have made it non-denominational. Other problems followed. The Wolverhampton community sustained all kinds of hardships and privation, even lack of nourishment for the sisters. Finally, after six years, it was decided to close the school, and the sisters returned to Weybridge in 1912. The Institute would come back again one day to Wolverhampton, as well as spreading to many other parts of the country.

The difficult beginnings in England led to the establishment of the school in Weybridge in 1898. However, the school did not provide the number of vocations that Mother Gaétan had dreamed of to help the mission in Malaya. This fact led the Institute to think of Ireland, where English was also spoken and from which some women, as we have seen, had already travelled and joined the Institute in Asia. We will return to that story. Meanwhile, political events in France were once again bringing about changes that led the sisters to open a community in another country.

The stories of our Institute in England and in Ireland are closely linked, since within the Institute both countries come under one administration.

During the 1960s and '70s a large number of sisters who had worked on mission abroad for many years recognised that the time had come to return home and pass on the baton to our local

sisters. Although these were often painful transitions, entered into with great courage, those who returned brought with them new life and enthusiasm, and contributed greatly to the opening up of new forms of ministry in both England and Ireland, at a time when enormous changes were taking place in both church and society.

One of the first visible signs of change in religious life at this time was that the sisters began to diversify their ministry and live in smaller communities, leading to a very different lifestyle. Gradually, the almost monastic form of community life and prayer that was traditional in the larger houses gave way to a lifestyle more suited to 'apostolic institutes'. The emphasis on working more collaboratively with lay people and other religious called for greater flexibility. Answering the call to ministry in areas of greater need sometimes meant that sisters no longer lived under the same roof. This led to a new understanding and experience of community living.

Apart from the fact that the number of sisters began to diminish, it was also clear that the days of running institutions ourselves were coming to an end. This led to the closing of Drishane convent and school in Cork in 1992, and St Maur's, Weybridge, England, in 1997.

England

While the number of sisters here is quite small, they are involved in diverse forms of ministry. These include: teaching in primary schools in the state sector; catechetical formation of children and adults; various aspects of parish work; collaboration with people of other faiths; school and college chaplaincy; accompanying people through bereavement counselling; visiting the housebound; and, other local ministries. Two centres for family and children focus on empowering local people to use their potential and to help themselves. Since these centres provide for refugees and asylum seekers, there is a strong multi-faith dimension and a focus on those most in need. The centres liaise with a range of partner organisations and have a team of dedicated volunteers.

A pony centre offers therapy and developmental programmes where children with special needs integrate with able-bodied children and young people. Through the therapeutic value of riding and being with horses, children learn how to work with and relate to each other within a broad, supportive educational experience and in a safe, structured environment. The centre, which continues to expand, provides a valuable resource for people who, through financial, social or ethnic disadvantage, may not otherwise have access to such opportunities.

Ireland

Many of the sisters who served generously in mission over the years, abroad and in the home countries, are now resident in houses in Ireland, where they live their lives with dignity and a continuing apostolic spirit. Their supportive presence and prayer is a source of strength for the more active members at home and abroad.

While the number involved in traditional education is now limited, some sisters continue to deploy their educational skills in other ministries: in adult literacy; in the formation and training of parish groups; in human development; and, in the teaching of language skills to the new ethnic and cultural groups recently arrived in the country. Pastoral care is provided through school chaplaincy; various forms of prayer groups; counselling and psychotherapy services; neighbourhood support; recreational clubs; and, the service of hospitality.

Aisling, meaning dream or vision, is the name given to a project for children set up in Ballymun, Dublin, which currently operates out of four centres. Such centres provide a safe haven where

children can come after school to enjoy purposeful activities, and where their individual needs and abilities are addressed. An objective evaluation of such a project at the end of 10 years revealed “better school attendance and progress in school, increased self confidence and sense of self worth, and improved social behaviour”.

In both countries, as care for our planet and sustainable living become a necessity, we too try to live and promote these values in our everyday life and work, as an expression of our belief in the sanctity of all creation and a witness to Christian values.

The call to serve on mission abroad is still heard. Despite diminishing personnel, a number of sisters still work full-time in the developing world or go, when requested, to offer their services for shorter periods.