

# Story of a brief investigation into a short-lived venture.

De La Salle Brothers in St. Boniface's College, Plymouth.

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*The following is Part 2 of an abridged version of an essay on the three years the de La Salle Brothers worked in Plymouth in the early nineteen hundreds. It is based on information sent me by Brother Malachy of the Irish Christian Brothers, Mr. Kavanagh, present headmaster of St. Boniface's College, Plymouth, Brother Francis Ricousse, archivist of the de La Salle Brothers in France and Brother Alain Houry, archivist of the de La Salle Brothers in Rome.*

## PART TWO

The de La Salle Rome archives contain a handwritten account in French of the three years the de La Salle Brothers spent in Plymouth. Brother Francis Ricousse sent a copy of it here, and you might find it interesting in the enthusiasm of its style reflecting a writer of a bygone age. I summarize the French. The text appears to be written by the same person and at the same time, and therefore later than Christmas 1914. Perhaps the writer consulted 1911-1914 records and registers of the school, because some facts seem too detailed to be written from personal memory. Here is then a summary translation of the handwritten account with the very occasional phrase added as explanation.

### **The school in Plymouth from 1911 to 1914.**

In a quiet quarter of Plymouth, Wyndham Square, reasonably close to the city centre, there is a row of handsome private houses, four of which Monsignor Graham, Bishop of Plymouth, had, in 1900, acquired and adapted as a school which he named St. Boniface's College. Several priests and a few laymen were appointed to run the school, which had a section set apart for church students, who would later continue their studies for the priesthood abroad. However as the local catholic population increased, and as more and more priests were needed for parish work, the new bishop of Plymouth, Monsignor Keily, asked the de La Salle Brothers to take over the school. The bishop had known the de La Salle Brothers in Limerick as well as in France where he had studied for the priesthood. The Superior General at the time, Brother Gabriel Marie, decided that the district of Quimper would supply the staff. When Brother Carolius, Visitor of Quimper, presented the group of ten Brothers to his Lordship, the latter declared that he had full confidence that the college would prosper under the direction of such fine educators. In fact, when the Brothers' school in Brest had been closed

by a government decree in 1907, several of its Brothers had gone to America, where they worked for four years, so their English was well up to standard. Other Brothers joined them, some directly from France, others from Spain. The situation seemed quite unique with its foreign staff running an English school in England. There was just one lay teacher in the school and he was to give Latin lessons to the church students, because in those days the Brothers were forbidden by their rule to teach that language. Latin was not even allowed within the Brothers' school proper, so a room in a local building was hired for the purpose.

### **The first school year 30 September, 1911.**

September 30 was the day when, because the Brest-Plymouth crossing was running at a loss, the beautiful liner "La Bretonne" of the Great Western Company, made its last trip to Plymouth. Among its passengers were 23 French boys, who a few days later were joined by others, nearly all students of the closed Brothers' school in Brest and now destined for St. Boniface's College. Thirty seven English boys were still in the school from the previous year, and some others joined that year making a total of 98 students. The bishop was more than pleased at this beginning because the number of pupils had more than doubled. Two classes were opened for the French boys, who continued to be taught in French for their French exams. They were also given extra English lessons and, as they mixed with the English boys in their games, they soon mastered the language. At the same time some ten Spanish boys, anxious to learn English, joined the college and they soon forgot their homesickness, when they realised there were several Brothers there who knew Spanish and could cheer them up. There was no disadvantage for the English students in having so many foreign boys with them, because they had their own classes, and the first year's results were excellent, with one boy passing the London Matriculation exam, a kind of English Baccalauréat, and others passing the senior, junior and prelim Oxford exams, making a total of 38 successes in official examinations. Some French boys even passed the London Chamber of Commerce examination. All this can be put down to the excellent teaching they received and the good spirit reigning in the school. Nowhere was the Entente Cordiale more in evidence than in St. Boniface's. Piety was on a par with academic studies, for the boarders went to daily Mass and frequented the sacraments. As well as monthly confession for example, the pupils could go to confession whenever

er they liked, especially on Saturdays and on the vigil of big feast days. Religion lessons took first place in the school, and even Protestants, of whom there were about twenty in the school, worked as hard at their catechism as the Catholics.

Games, which can be such instillers of values, were held in honour at St. Boniface's. Football, as is usual in English-speaking countries, was very important. The school had hired a pitch at Beaconsfield and the inter-school matches often resulted in victory for St. Boniface's, the news thereof being enthusiastically described by students in letters home.

### **Solemn Prize-Giving at the end of the first school year.**

This was presided over by his Lordship Bishop Keily, Bishop of Plymouth, and took place in the Prince's Hall which was filled to capacity. The Brother Headmaster opened proceedings by praising his staff, parents and students for the marvellous successes of this first year. He thanked the people of Plymouth also for the warm welcome the Brothers had received from them. Next came Shakespeare's Henry III (sic IV? or Richard III?) in which several French boys took leading parts. When the Bishop spoke, he did so spontaneously and said that every hope he had had in asking the Brothers' help had been fulfilled. He predicted that soon the College would be second to none in South-West England. A buffet meal followed these happy ceremonies.

During the Brothers' annual retreat that summer in Vimiera, Jersey, Brother Dominic, Plymouth's headmaster, was posted elsewhere, and was replaced by Brother Donon Anselm.

### **School year 1912-1913**

An increase in the number of students made it necessary to rent an additional house. Further playing fields were also hired. Sport is after all very important in England. For example, a father looking for a boarding school for his son always begins with "Is there a good football pitch?" He next takes a look at the dining room and inspects the dormitories; it is only then that he enquires about the course of studies.

The bishop was so pleased with progress in the school that he offered further scholarship places to church students. He praised the Brothers, but warned them not to overwork the students: "You give them to many hours of class", he complained. Competition between French and English boys resulted in both sections obtaining excellent results in the Chamber of Commerce exams. In England as in France examination results are an excellent advertisement for a school. In St. Boniface's all the exams were written and then corrected centrally and anonymously.

For sports day, friends of the college competed with one another to supply prizes for the winners, which shows how well the school was considered. As numbers increased space was at a premium, so acquiring a further property was considered by the Brothers and plans prepared for a purpose-built block for the boarders. However the bishop decided that the property under consideration was too far from his cathedral, making it difficult for the church students to attend daily services there. It should be pointed out that in England, Catholic schools, Catholic Society Headquarters etc are always grouped around the cathedral or the parish church. The bishop's decision resulted in the "status quo" and new students had to be turned away.

### **1913-1914**

Towards the end of the school year, war broke out between France and Germany. In England there was a period of soul-searching. "Would John Bull join the fray or would he remain neutral, protected by his defensive sea frontier?" After a week we learnt that England would stand by the side of France against the common enemy. All the Brothers of St. Boniface were French, so they were soon sailing across the channel to enrol with their fellow-countrymen to defend their threatened borders.

### **Closure of the school**

The Brothers' establishment "was closed" (that is, the de La Salle Brothers left), and the bishop called on lay persons to help in the school. The Superior General allowed two Brothers to remain on until 25 December 1914. After 31 December 1914 there is no further mention of the school in the De La Salle Brothers' archives.

Note: Brother Alain Houry sent a list of Brothers on the staff of St. Boniface's in each of the three years 1911-1914. Their subsequent stories are not in the English De La Salle archives because St. Boniface's was part of the French District of Quimper. Brothers who remained in the order would have had their obituary notices distributed throughout the institute in a series of books in French titled: "Notices Nécrologiques". Recently it has been left to each de La Salle Province (known as "Districts") to write brief lives of the deceased members of their Province.

Clarification: In the De La Salle congregation there are many Irish members. Other Irish Brothers are members of the congregation of "Christian Brothers of Ireland", founded by Blessed Ignatius Rice.

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