

## Joseph and Matthew: A Tale of Two Academies

By [Terry Collins](#)

In September of this year, Saint Joseph's Academy Blackheath will be replaced by The Saint Matthew Academy (no apostrophe 's' please) specialising in Business and Enterprise. The event will be marked by a solemn opening ceremony planned for the feast of Saint Matthew, September 21. There is a definite appropriateness in the way the name of Joseph will be succeeded by that of Matthew, the Evangelist who gives the most attention to the figure of Joseph in his gospel, and who emphasizes the role of Jesus the Teacher. Moreover, Matthew the tax collector is a very fitting patron for an Academy which intends to stress the Catholic approach to the world of business, as reflected in the teaching of Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum progressio*.

Saint Joseph's Academy began life in 1860 as an extension of the work of the Brothers in Saint Joseph's College, Clapham. Bishop Grant asked them to start a new school in Saint George's parish, Kennington. The Brothers who taught in the Academy initially belonged to the Clapham Community and travelled each day to Kennington. (The Bishop agreed to provide the money for their fares on the omnibus.) Then, in January 1865, they were set up as a separate Community under the leadership of Brother Acheul as the first Director. The Academy operated in Kennington for 56 years. In 1916 it moved to Camberwell for a few years and finally it moved to Lee Terrace in 1919 to become Saint Joseph's Academy, Blackheath.

In 1922, the nearby estate known as The Cedars went up for sale. The Chigwell Sisters bought the house and the Brothers purchased eight acres of the grounds for playing fields. The site was not level and required a lot of work to make it suitable for use as playing fields. The work was contracted locally and took some years to complete. The school sports day was held on the new fields for the first time in 1924. The playing pitches were first used for football matches in the season 1926/27. The Old Boys association was founded in May 1927.

There is a long and distinguished history in the name of Saint Joseph's Academy waiting to be written. The late Brother Austin Chadwick, District Archivist, was intending to write it, but died before he was able to do so. He has left a substantial file of notes and material, especially relating to the early years, waiting for any competent historian willing to undertake the task. However, we have to pass over all that and come straight to the more recent history.

In 1977 Saint Joseph's Academy made the transition from grammar school to comprehensive school. Unfortunately, it was one of those schools that did not cope well with the change. There followed a period of gradual decline from the former glory days throughout the 1980s. Then, starting in the early 1990s, the school went through a particularly troubled period with a series of OFSTED inspections that placed it in a category of either 'special measures' or 'serious weaknesses' for eleven years. In 2002, at the initiative of the headteacher, Peter Stickings, and the chair of governors, Brother Ben Foy, it was suggested that the only remedy for the terminal decline of St Joseph's would be for it to become part of the Academies programme, which was then being vigorously promoted by the government as a way of rescuing schools in serious difficulties, especially in London.

The proposal involved the closure not only of Saint Joseph's Academy but also that of the neighbouring Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School and their joint re-emergence as a 3-16 all-through co-educational Academy. High-level discussions on the feasibility of the proposal took place involving the De La Salle Trustees, the Diocese of Southwark, the DfES and Lewisham Authority. All parties agreed that it was an idea worth pursuing. The co-sponsors of the Academy would be the Diocese and the De La Salle Trustees, the latter providing the lion's share of the land for the site of the new Academy. The sponsors undertook to find the necessary two million pounds between them (by some means or other) and to set up a new and independent trust which would run the Academy. On that basis, the DfEs would sign an agreement to fund the building of a new school costing £20+ million.

The feasibility study began in earnest in April 2003 and continued throughout a lengthy period of consultation, ably facilitated by the 3Es Enterprises agency. The consultations bore fruit in a formal agreement to close the two existing schools and to open The Saint Matthew Academy. After many ups and downs and battles over planning permission, the Funding Agreement was signed by the DfES in June 2005, and this marked the beginning of a process that has taken two more years of monthly meetings to complete. Gleesons, the contractor's started work on the site of the Saint Joseph's Academy playing fields (The Cedars) in December 2005. The dream is now reaching its fulfilment as the new building of the Saint Matthew Academy takes shape ready for the first intake in September of this year, 2007.

Parallel with the planning and building of the new Academy there had to be a transitional plan for the old schools, especially Saint Joseph's Academy, which needed to overcome its serious weaknesses and improve sufficiently to secure its exit from special measures. Without this improvement, the new Academy could not get off to a proper start. That meant above all improving the leadership in the school, and this would require considerable financial outlay. In September 2004, Lewisham Authority and London Challenge (for the DfES) put together an intervention package designed to steer the school through the difficult transition period. The leadership role of headteacher was borne firstly by Liz Lewis and then by Angela Tyler. Their success was soon noted. Already in October 2005, the HMI inspectors commented on the clear signs of improvement, and this has continued ever since.

Things are now at the stage of detailed planning for the 'decanting', i.e. the transition of pupils, staff and furniture from the existing schools to the St Matthew Academy. The new Principal was appointed in January 2006 in the person of Mrs. Monica Cross, a dynamic Liverpudlian with plenty of energy. The Board of Governors has been appointed and meets regularly under the chairmanship of Father Wilfrid McGreal, O Carm, Prior and Parish Priest in Faversham. Both he and Monica Cross are anxious to ensure that the Lasallian heritage of Saint Joseph's will not be lost in the transformation. The Senior Management Team of the new Academy is in place and the interviews for staff are in full swing. About 60% of the existing staffs will move across and the response to adverts for new staff is good in both numbers and quality.

Similarly, recruitment for the new intake of pupils is good. It should be noted that, because of the 3-16 composition of The Saint Matthew Academy, there is a need for two points of intake: the Primary Reception Year and Secondary Year Seven. As of this month, there are 175 candidates for Year Seven and 60 for the Reception Year. The main body of pupils in September will, of course, come from the existing schools. So, from the outset, the percentage of children on free school meals in the St Matthew Academy will be above the national average. The relevance of the specialism Business and Enterprise now becomes apparent. Enterprise education is designed for areas of social deprivation. It aims at improving the locality by changing the culture and encouraging a spirit of co-operative enterprise and a capacity for self-help. This requires the development of a mixture of knowledge, skills and personal qualities. It encourages the identification of opportunities, the imaginative creation of projects and the use of local role models of success. It also implies an ethical stance in relation to wealth and opportunities in society.

The target date for completion of the new building of The Saint Matthew Academy was originally set for July 20<sup>th</sup> 2007. Inevitably there have been delays caused by unforeseen problems, and consequently the handover date has now been adjusted to some time in August. Contingency plans are in place, but we are all still banking on a September 3rd start of term. The children in Saint Joseph's and Our Lady of Lourdes are looking forward to the move, and it must be remembered that they are the ones that The Saint Matthew Academy was meant to serve in the first place.