



*Memories of St James'
R.C. Primary School*

*January 1970 - July
1994*

Philomena Lennon

I was appointed as first Head Teacher of St James' R.C. Primary School at the end of October 1969. I officially took up the appointment on the 1st January 1970. Until that time Fr John Wright, Parish Priest of St James the Great, Petts Wood, with a loyal group of future foundation governors, especially Fr Tobin from St Swithuns, Mrs Ursula Ward and Mr Bill Farrelly had organised coaches to take the Catholic children of St James', and some from St Swithuns, to two neighbouring R.C. schools – Manorfields in Chislehurst and St Anne's in Orpington (now Holy Innocents). For my first term I worked mostly from my home in Beckenham, with occasional days spent at the Education Office in Sunnymead (Chislehurst). I also visited future pupils at St Annes, Manorfields, Crofton, Southborough Lane and Raglan Road schools, got to know the children and put them at their ease regarding their impending transfer to St James' School.

I also ran a number of evening meetings in St James' Church Hall for future parents, informing them fully of the type of school I hoped to establish (in terms of ethos, curriculum, teaching methods, cooperation with parents, etc.). Fr Wright and Mrs Ward gave me such encouragement and support they made my task seem easy.

The school building was finished at this stage, but indoor flooring still had to be laid, walls and ceilings painted, and furniture had to be requisitioned. Bill Duck, a Parishioner, was the main architect (he had also designed St James' Church some years earlier, and a Beckenham firm, Syme and Duncan, were the building contractors. My task consisted of choosing colour schemes, requisitioning furniture, text books, educational equipment, in fact all the essential requisites. I loved choosing two shades of lilac and wonderful lilac curtains for our beautiful Assembly Hall!

But in January 1970 Fr Wright, Chairman of Governors, and I, as Head Teacher, were the only definite personnel, all other governors and staff, both teaching and non-teaching, had still to be officially appointed. The first piece of equipment to arrive at the school was a huge chip basket, ordered by the School Meals Department who supplied all equipment for the school canteen. Neither the Parish Priest nor I had room in our houses for this extra-large chip basket, so it had to be lodged in the Church Hall until the school was ready to receive it!

Finally, the Big Day arrived, the 14th April 1970. I started the school with 180 pupils, 89 transferring with one young teacher, Theresa Borg, from Manorfields R.C. School and 39 from St Anne's. The remaining 52 came from neighbouring state schools and a few private prep schools. Because at earlier meetings I had

advised parents to consider carefully whether to move pupils in the upper years of primary education we had 9 Junior 3, 21 Junior 2s and 22 Junior 1s. We had 128 Infant pupils, over 40 in each class. Some years later a rule came into force limiting class sizes to 34 in each junior class, 32 in each infant class – a very welcome rule as by then we had had 40+ children in every class for quite a few years!

I was very fortunate in being able to recruit very capable staff from the very beginning. Mrs D'Angelo in Reception, who also had overall responsibility for the Infant Department, Mrs Pelter in Infant 1 and Mrs Bevan in Infant 3. Jill Cully took Junior 1, Theresa Borg Junior 2 and 3. Then, in September 1970 when the classes moved up the mixed age group Junior 3 and 4 was taught by Miss Ault for a couple of terms. She was then promoted to Deputy Headship of a large state school and we appointed Peter Whitehead. He was a great asset.

In February 1971 Dr Cowderoy, Archbishop of Southwark, came with his secretary Mgr John Elliott, to say Mass in the school and to open it officially. It was a great occasion marred only by the fact that poor Fr Wright lost his voice (through nerves I think) so Teresa Borg and myself took on much of the strain, but it went off really well, and the Archbishop was delighted with the very successful start we had all made!

From the beginning I was determined to establish a very happy, hardworking school, where children would become ardent learners through enjoyment and stimulation rather than through rote learning or over formal methods of teaching. We were very fortunate in our geographic position. The land running up by our lawns and playing field were then Southborough Riding School, and small jumps had been erected to exercise ponies and riders. So, we had as our nearest neighbours lovely ponies, the juniors could converse with them through the front fence. Up behind our top field area it was less cultivated land, inhabited by several foxes and their young who would come to play especially after our lunch breaks, when they might find tit bits left for them by the pupils! So, the children had lots of wild life and natural resources to stimulate their writing, art, etc. Bromley Education Authority was an excellent body in the 70s and early 80s, very encouraging and creative in their thinking and planning. We were blessed with a most stimulating English Advisor / Inspector, who funded Writers in Residence for schools who requested them. Needless to say, I was first in the queue for such admirable support. So, very well-known children's writers and poets, such as Roger McGough, Michael Baldwin and others would spend a day working with our children, going out into our lovely environment for stimulation and inspiration and for amazing follow up work in writing, art,

etc. Then in the evening the parents were invited to the school to work with the same writer. So, they, too, would participate in creative writing sessions and produce prose and poetry at least to rival that of their children! In this way our parents came to appreciate fully the somewhat different curriculum methods their children were experiencing to those they had been accustomed to in their school days.

We also ran other curriculum evenings for parents in Mathematics, Art, R.E. and First Holy Communion Preparation. In fact, I used to amaze myself by running “Modern Maths” sessions for parents, a number of whom were Bank Managers or Deputy Bank Managers, Accountants, Engineers, etc. The audacity of it all, especially as I was basically more a linguist, a lover of humanities rather than of Mathematics, but the parents really appreciated the value of hands on maths – and agreed with Confucius who said “I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.” They, like me, had largely done Maths through rote learning and theorems without really understanding them completely.

St James’ School was always blessed by the devoted work of very willing and competent teachers and by the constant support and day to day help of eager and enthusiastic parents. But, in January 1972, there was a temporary halt to normal operations! As we returned from our Christmas holiday there had been an excessively cold spell and our outside pipes had frozen in the icy spell just before we reopened and so the assembly hall and adjoining classrooms were flooded, our beautiful wood block flooring in the hall and tiling in the classrooms and staffroom were badly damaged and had to be replaced. I didn’t want to close the school so Fr Wright allowed us to decamp to the Church hall and Church area. The Juniors spent over 2 weeks housed in the Church Hall and the Infants in the Vestry, another adjoining room and the dining room in the Presbytery! I spent my days racing back and forth from the school offices to the Church hall area, not a pleasant occupation in the bleak early January weather. However, we had one amusing incident happen during this time. Fr Wright arrived over in my office one day to ask me what I was doing with the children – as he said there was a disagreeable smell in the Church hall. I rushed over to investigate and, after some questioning, found that one little girl, aged about 8, had brought perfume (definitely not Dior!) with her to class and had been over-generous in spraying herself. Anyway, I kept my cool and my sense of humour and pointed out to the pupils that perfume was not allowed in school or Church premises!

After a couple of unusual weeks, we were all delighted to return to our lovely school building once more and take up our curriculum studies in earnest, including lots of town trails and local environmental work which had always interested me greatly. As Headteacher I felt I was particularly fortunate to have tremendous support and active help from Fr Wright and members of the Governing Body who especially in those early years gave up time to come and teach and help the children a lot. They were also very generous in giving me the freedom and backing in creating the school of my dreams. I owe each one of them a great debt of gratitude.

In 1974, as a kind of climax to all the sheer hard work and effort of all concerned, the Chief Education Officer and the Primary Education Officer, Mr John Chamberlain, invited St James' School to mount an Exhibition in Bromley Town Hall showing "Excellence in Cross-Curricular Thematic Work in the Primary School." It was an honour for us, but also entailed a lot of work, but it was a great success and much admired by members of Bromley Council and visitors.

By 1975 I was feeling somewhat "burnt out" and also aware that I needed to know more about children with special educational needs, so I applied for a year's secondment to London University to gain a Higher Diploma in Child Development and Educational Psychology. It was a wonderfully rewarding and informative year. But any free day I had I returned to St James' to ensure all was well. However, the Deputy led the school very ably with the constant help and support of all the staff. I returned with renewed energy in September 1976 to take up the reins once more.

The year 1977 proved to be an eventful year. Her Majesty the Queen celebrated her Silver Jubilee. Father Wright and I celebrated by planting two little oak trees – tree grandchildren of the Goodcheap Oak famously mentioned in the Domesday Book of William the Conqueror fame. Unfortunately, one poor little sapling was accidentally mown down by an over enthusiastic school groundsman a year or less later. The remaining one is still hail and hearty near the main entrance to the school.

Our first Deputy was promoted to a Headship in Kent in 1978 and we appointed Mr Nick Williams to replace him. He was particularly interested in environmental work and with the top class concentrated a lot on our top field which was a great source of wild life and plants. They discovered that a few large craters in the ground there held peculiar rounded metal pieces, buried deep in the soil. Through study of local history, the class learned that the site had been used as a munitions storage depot in the second world war and there had

been a few bombings nearby. We requested the local authority to look into the possibility of unexploded bombs or mines. In the coming holiday period a specialist team came and removed all even slightly suspicious objects. The ground was then levelled out – so all was well. But the children were very disappointed indeed to have missed the excitement of the occasion.

The children undertook other environmental projects including a study of the underground streams and little rivers feeding into the Ravensbourne River and its course through to the Isle of Dogs and the Thames Estuary. We enlisted the help of the Geography Department of Ramsden Secondary School. The Head of Department and two senior students would accompany our Deputy and class on field trips.

We also had a very good working rapport with Architectural Students from the Southbank Polytechnic who would accompany us with Junior classes to study famous historic sites in London. The help of these more “specialist” educators was much appreciated by staff and children as they had very in-depth knowledge of their subjects! We were also regular visitors to working farms, old working windmills, art galleries and museums, taking Infant and Junior classes. Such outings produced great impetus and stimulation to produce work of a very high quality.

In 1977 we sadly lost our much-loved Parish Priest, Fr Wright. His death was a great blow to all in Petts Wood. I particularly missed his gentle and wise guidance and constant encouragement. We had a supply Priest for about eight months. In early summer 1978 we were delighted to welcome Mgr John Elliott as our new Priest. He had visited a few times with the Archbishop so he wasn't a stranger. He and Tressa, his Pyrenean sheep dog settled in happily, becoming much loved daily visitors to the school.

As the end of the decade approached we continued our interesting, environment-based curriculum. The juniors were taken to see the demolition and demise of the local cinema, later replaced by Morrisons! We lost the much-loved ponies and the riding school as our neighbouring area became Jubilee Park to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. Thankfully it still remains a lovely green area. We had thrills and spills in our school life also. I was hospitalised for 11 days in early June 1979, and had an operation. Mgr Elliott, teachers and ancillary staff were very loyal and frequent visitors. But calamity struck in earnest! Our two female pet rabbits at school gave birth to numerous baby rabbits within my first two days in hospital! The staff were distraught, what should they do with those 19 tiny creatures?! I suggested they find willing parents and pupils to take them to their homes (parents had given me the parent

rabbits as gifts in the first place). But it proved a difficult task to find so many homes for them! I was somewhat relieved to have escaped this task at least! My reason for having pets at school (hamsters and rabbits) was because I felt it was beneficial for children to have pets to care for! My poor staff must have despaired of me and my peculiar “foibles,” but I think they knew I always had the children’s interests at heart!

As I mentioned earlier, I was blessed by having fine teachers, dedicated and loyal to an extraordinary degree. Inevitably they moved on for promotion. We were so fortunate in being able to recruit other skilled young, and not so young, staff. As we progressed through the 1980s I observed that the newly trained teachers had received a somewhat different training – more formal, more structured than hitherto, a little less creative and inspirational perhaps. So, in line with changing emphasis and priorities in educational thinking and planning, we too adopted a slightly more structured, less spontaneous creative curriculum. We still managed to retain great creativity and enjoyment in music and drama, still managing to protect those ‘x’ factor elements in Education so important to the all-round development of the individual! The school continued to go from strength to strength. The top class still went on school journey each year, to interesting locations, again producing excellent follow up work!

Weekly Mass in St James’ Church was always the highlight of our week. I personally loved helping the children prepare the readings and bidding prayers, it gave me much-valued time with them. The children grew to love Mgr Elliott’s succession of dogs, first Tressa, then Emil and lastly Joseph, especially the latter two who, in their turn, took up their favourite resting place under the Altar during the Mass. First Holy Communion Masses were always beautiful, moving ceremonies as they continue to be!

In the later 80s my splendid PTA decided to put the spare space over the two offices to good use. A super team led by a Mr Barry Knight (one of our Dads) decided to build two new offices and the lovely stairs leading up to them. My original downstairs office was extremely cold, being at the end of the heating system I believe. So, it was a Godsend for me personally, and really for head teachers who followed me, to have the new office! Again, I was blessed by having such generous support and fundraising by the P.T.A.s – who also raised all the funds to provide our additional office spaces mentioned above.

We had our fair share of sadness in the school too! Not least the tragic deaths of two of our beloved pupils – brothers – within a few years of one another – aged 10 and 11 years. The cause of their deaths was a devastating form of encephalitis. Another lovely boy died in a tragic accident during his first year

in secondary school. Then, during my retirement, one of my most heartfelt sorrows was the death of three of my super hardworking young teachers of the 70s, all three victims of cancer in their mid-fifties! They had all given so much of their great skill and enthusiasm to our pupils, and also their outstanding commitment to taking sick children to Lourdes each year during their school holidays. I feel sure these dear souls will be looking down on us all and praying for us as we approach the 50th Anniversary of the school they, too, loved so much!

In the 80s the advent of L.M.S. ie. Local Management of Schools meant that we Head Teachers were made fully responsible for the financial management of our schools. Hitherto we had only had responsibility for a certain sum of money – depending on the size of the school, to requisition all the equipment and books we needed, but the Local Authority had dealt with salaries for all staff, and other necessary expenses of running a school. Now it all fell on our shoulders and became a heavy, administrative load. I also saw it as a possible threat to my teaching commitments which I so enjoyed – teaching French to the upper juniors, R.E. in at least one class, helping children with special educational needs, and taking any class for a day or two when their teacher attended a course so I decided to employ an additional part time secretary to deal with all the accounting needed for L.M.S to run smoothly. The extra office upstairs, recently provided by our great team of Dads, proved invaluable for this secretary to work in relative peace and quiet. I only had to balance the Budget and try to meet the varying demands and requirements of staff, children and the larger overhead costs of salaries, heating, etc. My Deputy at that time, Pauline Sammon, was a very valuable support to me!

Following closely on this change came computer technology. Firstly, one of my Dads, who had a law firm in Orpington, was changing his computer system and offered us his BBC computers – one for each classroom. I gladly accepted his offer. Within a year or so the Education Authority funded a more up-to-date computer for each classroom, and one each for the secretary's office and my office. As the need for more expertise among the staff became vital, I decided to buy in a series of 4 afternoon courses run by Bromley Technology Advisors for the Staff. So, I would take the whole school for poetry and reading sessions in the hall on these afternoons, thus freeing the teachers to have the expert help they needed. It was infinitely more pleasant and more fun for me to manage and teach 230 pupils for a few afternoons than to tackle one computer! I have never felt confident with technology, but always loved to read poetry and literature to and with children, and they greatly enjoyed these sessions too! In

fact local small book-shops were always very grateful for our pupils and parents who were very good customers!

The third innovation towards the end of the 80s was the introduction of the National Curriculum. The early years of this project proved both extremely demanding and frustrating as the Government kept changing the targets and content in subjects like Science, Technology, Mathematics and English and History / Geography. We, particularly the more senior staff, then had to write, then later re-write, our curriculum plans over and over again. We felt we were expending too much of our time and energy on paperwork, and worried that we might not have as much enthusiasm and energy left to do the actual teaching, which was, after all, the central work of our lives! No doubt, as the years passed, the frenzy of the National Curriculum moderated somewhat and became more established and more permanent in its content. But by then I was ready to retire! Looking back, I realise that my personal view of education has always been that learning should always be a “cradle to grave” experience for each individual. Surely this ideal could best be achieved by inspiring and enthusiastic teachers, who could lead their pupils, and indeed older students, to fresh, green pastures, thus engendering a love of learning for learning’s sake! From my many visits to St James’ over the years, for Key Stage 1 and 2 Productions, Nativity Plays, Musical Shows, etc. I still see this wonderful joy and enthusiasm so evident in pupils and teachers, that it lifts my spirits to know that St James’ is still such a vibrant and joyous seat of learning!

Now I come to my last year at St James’ School. I found it very hard to envisage a life after St James’. I seemed to wear dark glasses rather frequently, especially in the somewhat changeable weather conditions of the Summer term! The older juniors quickly worked out for themselves the real reason for my new craze for sunglasses, as they too, who had spent 6-7 years in my “tender care” found tears coming into their eyes more frequently than hither to. So, we would enjoy a little laugh together at our soft-heartedness.

As the term progressed a peculiar chain of events began to occur. My deputy would frequently urge me to go out to lunch with Head Teacher colleagues, but I did not accept the offers. Finally, one day, I lost patience with her pleadings, told her I might be approaching retirement, but was not senile, or about to give up my lunchtimes spent mostly with the children. It was the first and only time I had become impatient with Pauline the Deputy, who had come as a probationary teacher at 21 years of age and had always taught most ably with me except for three years at Balgowan School, to gain wider experience. Of course, I regretted my little outburst immediately. What I hadn’t realised, of

course, was that staff and children were preparing a surprise variety concert for me and were desperate to gain access to the Assembly Hall for rehearsals, but I was always around so they never got a chance to rehearse except a few stolen moments in classrooms or outside!

However, the Variety Concert proved to be a huge success. One of the main acts was “Our Phil from Wexford” written and performed by Year 6. Earlier in the year they had interviewed me in order to write a little magazine about me, which they duly did! But now they possessed all necessary facts about my life and could produce a really funny playlet about me. The girl who played “Miss Lennon” portrayed my personality and my teaching techniques so ably, she was so clever and her French lesson with the class was quite hilarious. She even looked and dressed like me – in grey and lilac and grey hair (a wig). There followed a wonderful display of Irish dancing by a large group of our pupils in their beautiful Irish Dance costumes. They attended a wonderful school of Irish dancing in Chislehurst. Then our musicians played a beautiful selection on violins, guitars and recorders. This was followed by lovely choral singing led by our Music Teacher. Finally came the ‘piece de resistance’ – a song and dance act by the staff. This consisted of a song to the tune of “When I’m 64” (made famous by the Beatles) written by Pauline Sammon. It was a tremendously funny account of my quirks, mannerisms and occasional outbursts of irritation, especially when groundsmen ruined our lovely school lawns with over zealous mowing after heavy rains! The staff wore hard hats lovely glitzy pink beaded jackets (all hired), black trousers and patent shoes – all truly theatrical. This super act “brought down the house” as they say, and deserves a place in any history of St James’ School. I made amends afterwards for the difficulties I had unwittingly caused during rehearsal times by taking them all out for a lovely meal on our last evening together! It was the least I could do!! I still have the great video of that last concert – so I can even enjoy watching “myself” teach French to this day!

I will end this little account of my time at St James’ by thanking Our Good Lord, and all the people, Priests, Staff, Children and Parents, who made me so happy and who helped me so much to develop our lovely school in its earlier years. May St James’ School continue to flourish and grow as a place of true learning and happiness for many, many pupils in the years ahead.

Philomena Lennon

25th January 2020