

A GROWING LEGACY:  
A Supplement to  
SISTERS of MERCY  
of St ALBANS, 1899-1999  
by James Corbett, 1999



The Union of the Sisters of Mercy  
of Great Britain  
St Albans, 2025

This booklet is a supplement to a commemorative booklet published in 1999 and republished in 2022, to celebrate a century of service. This is the history of a collaboration between the Maryland Mercy Associates, the Sisters and their schools.

## A GROWING LEGACY

THE enduring legacy of the Sisters of Mercy in St Albans was marked in a very special way during 2022 to 2024. After the publication of their history written by James Corbett (1932 – 1999) to celebrate the Sister’s centenary in 1999, James’s wife, Mary Corbett OBE (1942 – 2023) made a suggestion in the months before she died, that the proceeds of the sale of the booklets could take the shape of a tree planted for the benefit of future generations in St Albans, who were, in many cases, the offspring of those families who had been directly helped by the Sisters of Mercy. Planted at the base of each tree could be a plaque engraved with words to remember with gratitude, the work and the help of the Sisters of Mercy, becoming a visible sign linking the past with the future.

In 2020, St Adrian’s Catholic Primary School reached its 60th year, but the celebration of its Diamond Jubilee was postponed due to the necessary restrictions of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic which began in January 2020. This led to prolonged quarantine and restrictive measures in churches, schools, hospitals, homes and all sectors of society in Britain and around the world. After twenty-four months of such restrictions, by the summer of 2022 it became possible to safely hold indoor assemblies.

On Wednesday, 5 October 2022, Mrs Aideen Porter, Head Teacher of St Adrian’s Catholic Primary School and Nursery in Watling View, invited Bishop Paul McAleenan (Auxiliary Bishop in Hertfordshire), Brother Nelson Dionne of the Sacred Heart Brothers, St Columba’s College, and Fr Michael O’Boy (Parish Priest at St Alban and St Stephen’s Church), to celebrate

the belated Diamond Jubilee Mass. Former Head Teachers, Sr Margaret Jones (the last Sister of Mercy Head Teacher of St Adrian's), Mrs Yvonne Hawkes and Mr Dominic Bedford attended. Several of the "original" Pupils were also welcomed. These included Mr Thomas Short, Mr Bernard Napper, and Mrs Cath White, who began school in 1960. Cath White is now secretary to the Maryland Mercy Associates in St Albans. Other special guests attending were the Head Teachers of two other Catholic primary schools in St Albans: Mrs Clare Moore (St Alban and St Stephen) and Mrs Patricia O'Donnell (St John Fisher). Governors, staff, and parents were also welcomed.

Bulletin boards were covered with photographs from each decade, and every aspect of the school and the special celebration liturgy reflected the ethos of the Mercy Charism of Truth, Peace and Justice. During Mass, Bishop Paul spoke about ways to live out the mission of the school, "to learn, to love, to live as a community of God, with Christ as our teacher". He emphasised the virtues of kindness, sensitivity to others, and enjoyment of life. The children's singing and accompanied dancing and their attentiveness throughout echoed this. Mercy-inspired gifts taken up by Sr Margaret and Cath included the Mercy Cross and an image of Venerable Catherine McAuley. A pupil from 1960 carried up the school's very first register of attendance to be placed on the altar.

After the Mass, the guests gathered in front of the school on the cool autumnal morning for the service of planting of an ornamental *Malus brevipes* "Wedding Bouquet" tree. Ribbons of red, blue and yellow were tied to the tree to represent Truth, Peace and Justice, the motto on the school badge. Bishop Paul said "We gather here today and as we plant this tree, we think about the life and growth of this great school through the

last 60 years. We reflect on the many happy times that have been shared and pray for many more happy memories to be made in the future. We thank the Sisters of Mercy and the Maryland Associates for the part they have played in the history of this school. We ask Lord, that you bless the school, this tree and this community. We pray that the branches will grow tall and the tree and the school will flourish for many years to come.” On the wooden plaque below were the words, “In grateful memory of the Sisters of Mercy and their work in St Alban (1899 - 2014) and to celebrate the 60th anniversary of St Adrian’s RC Primary School (1960 – 2020). Maryland Mercy Associates, October 2022.”

Nine months later with the St Adrian’s School tree in leaf, commemorations of the founding of St Alban and St Stephen’s Infant School on Vesta Avenue, nearly 90 years before, took place on Wednesday, 21 June 2023, the feast of St Alban. Fittingly, Fr Michael O’Boy, Parish Priest and a school governor, presided at Mass, with Assistant Priest, Fr Andrew Bowden from St Alban and St Stephen’s Church. The Sisters of Mercy were represented by Sr Maura Halpin, the last Co-ordinator of Maryland Convent and Community, Sr Margaret Jones, the last Mercy Head Teacher of St Adrian’s, and Sr Winifred Mary Graham, the last Mercy Head Teacher of St Alban and St Stephen’s Infant School, appointed in 1973. They joined Ms Tessa Hackett, Acting Head, and Mrs Charlene Smith, Deputy Head, as well as Mr Peter Keane, Executive Headteacher, and Mr Gerry Dolan, Chair of Governors.

Fr Michael started with the school prayer, “Dear God, bless all the children and staff in our school. Bless all our loving parents, our school community and parishioners. Let us follow the shining examples of St Alban and St Stephen. Help us to be the

best that we can be and guide us as we stay connected to you and Jesus in all that we do. As a school, we are learning and growing with God by our side.” During Mass, children read beautifully the history of the school, founded in 1934, and the story of the Sisters of Mercy: “Today we are celebrating the founding of St Alban and St Stephen Catholic Primary School by the Sisters of Mercy. It is because of the Sisters of Mercy that we have our wonderful school.” They also thanked the church which had kindly donated two beautiful trees to be planted on the school grounds, and a plaque given by the Mercy Associates, carrying the “Mercy Message”.

During his homily on the Gospel message, “your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father”, Fr Michael asked the children about the trees on the property. Originally an orchard, trees were planted for the benefit of others. Likewise, the trees planted today, he assured us all, would provide shade and enjoyment by hundreds and thousands of people that we did not even know, possibly long after we had gone. A growing legacy, surely, if there was one.

On the top of the slope facing the lower school grounds, a Magnolia “Heaven-Scent” was planted that sweltering day, and a Japanese maple Acer tree further down the slope. This would produce green leaves by summer, and scarlet red ones in the autumn, reflecting the school colours. The white blossoms of the magnolia were symbolic of the purity of the Sisters. The plaque was engraved with the words “Remembering with gratitude the Sisters of Mercy for their work in St Albans, 1899 – 2014, and the founding of St Alban and St Stephen School in 1934. Maryland Mercy Associates, June 2023.”

One special past pupil, Mary Blythman Doran, who began school in 1938 was present, along with her husband John. Among the Mercy Associates present were Bob and Cath White, Frank and Bernie Murphy, Marion Burgess, Rosemary McDonagh, Rita Walsh and Barbara Bolgiano. At the end of the ceremony, Sr Maura thanked all for the lovely remembrance of the Sisters' time in St Albans and concluded by spontaneously reciting the poem, "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer in which the words, "Only God can make a tree" were so apt for the occasion.

A Mass of Thanksgiving was then held on Tuesday, 25 June 2024 in St Alban and St Stephen's Church, when the school reached its 90th year. Bishop Paul McAleenan was chief Celebrant with Parish Priest, Father Michael O'Boy and Assistant Priest, Father John Casey concelebrating. The entire school – Staff, Governors, pupils, families and parishioners, many of whom had a connection with the school, Sisters of Mercy, and Mercy Associates attended.

Bishop Paul began by wishing the school a Happy Birthday. Gifts presented at the Altar included an orchid – a symbol of joy and the founding of the school on the site of Sanders Orchid Nursery, the Mercy Cross, and a vintage photograph of a Sister playing the guitar for her class – the latter two as reminders of the School's spiritual foundation.

During his homily, Bishop Paul acknowledged how much the occasion clearly meant to the school – so evident in all the preparation for the Anniversary Mass, the children's impeccable behaviour, and their lovely singing. He spoke about the vision, dedication and determination that had been needed to found a Catholic School in 1934 and described how education

provides a foundation for truth, doing God's work and fostering the values needed for a caring and thriving community. He taught the children to sign "We Thank you, God, for the Gift of our School".

After Holy Communion, Sr Maura Halpin read the prayer for the beatification of Venerable Catherine McCauley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. When afterwards, she and Sr Winifred Mary Graham gathered on the Sanctuary with the clergy and the School Leadership team, Sr Winifred recognised herself in the photograph as the guitar-playing Nun! Through these celebrations, St Alban and St Stephen's School made new memories and regained the precious gift of knowing where it came from and who was behind it.

Barbara Bolgiano, Maryland Mercy Associate, St Albans, 2025

*Sources of history of the Sisters of Mercy in St Albans:*

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Sr Margaret Jones RSM, Potters Bar, 2025