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1955 - 1962.

So far as I know, in the 19th century there was no school in Ballygowan village. The nearest school was Drumreagh National School — later this building became St. Mary's School, now replaced.

The first reference to a school noted was in Newtownards Chronicle 30/8/84 where a report is given of "School building in course of erection through the munificence of A. O. Reid Esq. The Lecture Hall when completed will be one of the best in Ulster. The article referred to the work on which Mr Reid was engaged and which was "sure to be fraught with manifold blessings to the district".

Tradition in Ballygowan says that the building was erected in memory of Mr Reid's only son who died suddenly.<sup>1</sup> Mr Reid, who lived in the house now called "Ardmore"<sup>2</sup> at Ballygowan — later occupied by the Dickson family, was partner of John Robb in the large shop in Belfast City Centre. He was a very wealthy man and his will in 1886 shows that he left a sum of £63,089.

The building was reported to have cost £7,000 and was constructed of the very best material. But the building material was the local stone which people call a "weeping stone" and over the years damp seeped through.

It was to have been a secondary school, capable of accommodating a large number of resident pupils. There were dormitories at either end of the building. It was intended that it should be "more or less closely connected with the Ballygowan Presbyterian Church", but for some reason — it has been said there was a bitter quarrel between Mr Reid and Rev. Woods, the local minister — it became completely severed from all connection with that congregation. The Belfast Telegraph said that Mr Reid offered the building to Rev. Dr. Johnston as a Presbyterian orphanage, but the offer was declined.

In the event the building became a orphanage under the sole management of a Scotsman who was a lay preacher well known for his charitable work among young people in Belfast.

He was director of Elim House, Crumlin Road, was held in high esteem by many people and as a result Mr Orr entrusted the building to him. There were 7 acres of land attached and the idea was "to train young people in agricultural pursuits". Certain prominent men were named as trustees, along with the manager.

In 1886 a public protest meeting was held in Ballygowan Church "to consider the origin, erection and alienation of the Ballygowan school buildings and lecture hall" and at which resolutions were to be proposed "in vindication of the congregational and public rights in these buildings". A Rev. Alexander was



in the chair and he said Mr Woods and his congregation were looking for a matter of justice. It had been understood that the buildings were intended to be intimately connected with the congregation and "the whole Presbyterian church had great interest at stake. . . ."

...In fact the general educational welfare of Ulster had a large stake in these buildings. Rev. Woods said that for years they had been looking forward to a meeting where M.P's, moderators, presidents of colleges etc. would be invited to assist at the inauguration of what was to be the *Reid Memorial Institute*. Mr Reid had said he would erect an institution of a higher order than any of the surrounding national schools — the building at Ballygowan was to be part of a scheme which was sure to give great impetus to elementary and higher education over Antrim and Down. It was understood the buildings were to be Public Schools for the district. Then came the startling announcement that Mr Reid intended to devote them to another purpose. These schools belonged to the Presbyterian people and their children".

Mr Wm. Gracey moved a resolution that "in view of the history of Ballygowan school buildings and of recent proceedings in connection with them, we declare that in our opinion, morally these schools belong to the Presbyterians of Ballygowan". It was resolved that the claim be pressed.

However, moral law has no standing in court and the building had been legally entrusted to others. Ballygowan Church resolution came to nothing.

Mr Reid left £100 a year to help with the upkeep of the "buildings which I recently erected upon my property . . . and which the trustees have since converted to an Institution (which they call the 'Olivet Home') for the support and education of destitute boys and girls . . . ."

In 28.9.1890 a reference in the Newtownards Chronicle says that "the choir of Westbourne Presbyterian Church visited and entertained children at "*Olivet Home For Destitute Boys and Girls*".

Three smart little maidens, inmates of the home, deftly waited on the guests. The building was described as a "fine big house which is such a happy home to many a poor little waif gathered from our city streets and slums and which could accommodate four or five times the number of inmates (about 40 at present) if the necessary funds were forthcoming".

In 1891 there was a report of a presentation of prizes and the annual summer festival in connection with the "*Elim and Olivet Homes*". A Mr Wm. Scott was in the chair.

Up till 1897 the superintendent published balance sheets and he had decided to pay himself a salary of £300. He also issued an annual report. In 1892 he wrote, "a new source of income had been offered to us in our visits to other towns and districts with a party of children". He wrote of "the cordial reception everywhere, together with generous gifts. . . ." He said there had been an increase in the numbers admitted.

The following year he was even more enthusiastic about raising money by transporting his orphan children around the country to aid his appeals. He wrote in his report "I am arranging to visit with a party of children not only Northern towns, but those in the South". Boys and girls from all over Ireland were received. He thought a good name would be "*The Orphan Homes of Ireland*".

In 1895 he was becoming still more ambitious and wrote "We need more dormitory accommodation. The large lecture hall could be made available at £500". He would also like a gymnasium and swimming bath.

There was a reference in 1893 in the Newtownards Chronicle entitled "Entertainment in the Workhouse". Twenty children from Olivet Homes gave entertainment to girls of the Newtownards Union (the workhouse).

A few weeks later there was a notice of a "Musical entertainment with readings, musical drill etc. to be held in the Assembly Rooms, Newtownards. Proceeds in aid of Elim and Olivet Homes".

The superintendent visited the homes every week, usually Sunday, coming down to Ballygowan by train.

By 1896 complaints were beginning to be made about the home. The N.S.P.C.C. said that letters had been sent to them in 1896 and subsequently about the "deplorable condition of the house". But apparently nothing was done.

The next reference I can find is in 1897 when the Duke and Duchess of York were travelling by train from Newtownards to Newcastle. "A number of the inmates of the *Elim Olivet Homes* were drawn up in a line inside the institution facing the station and as the train passed Ballygowan a hearty cheer from the little waifs and strays attracted the Royal attention".

In these years the school had begun to take in boarders for a fee of three and sixpence weekly, upwards. Older children leaving the home had been settled in Canada and the U.S.A.



The only hint in the press of the sensational story that was to break was a report in the Newtownards Chronicle in which Dr. Wallace reported to the Board of Guardians that there was a pile of old clothes lying outside the Olivet Homes. This was in June 1904.

\* On the 27th June 1904 in the Evening Telegraph under a picture of the "*Olivet Home for Boys and Girls*", there was a two column heading reporting the death of the superintendent of the home, a man well known in religious and philanthropic circles in this city.

He had committed suicide.

Complaints had been increasing about the Home. One man, a widower with three children aged 5, 10 and 13 paid 3/6 weekly to the superintendent at his office in Corporation Street. He visited the home occasionally and was so disturbed by what he saw that he brought his children to the N.S.P.C.C. The children were very dirty and their clothes alive with vermin. An inspector was sent to Ballygowan and he reported on a deplorable state of affairs. There were 21 children in the home at the time, but the only food to be seen was 16 loaves and 2 vessels containing 7 or 8 quarts of milk. There was no butter nor any other food. The bedding was very dirty. In many cases the mattresses were wet and the shelves, walls and stairs showed no sign of having been cleaned for months or perhaps years. The children had sores, scabs, inflamed scalps and eruptions on the face and body. Many were infested with vermin.

A former matron later alleged that while she was there she had the greatest difficulty in obtaining vegetables and other necessities. She said that she had begged from the farmers and others until ashamed to ask for more. She could not get buckets or brooms for cleaning purposes and used a bundle of clothes tied to a stick to sweep the floors. During the two years she was there the manager bought some boots, but never any clothing. Several parents had complained that decent clothes had been removed and ragged garments given instead.

The superintendent was summoned to appear at Florida Manor Court<sup>3</sup> on charge of neglecting the children. The N.S.P.C.C. were also taking separate proceedings.

The case aroused great interest, for the defendant was a very well known public figure.<sup>4</sup> The Belfast Telegraph had made special arrangements to have reports of the case conveyed by motor cycle every hour. In the event only one was needed, but the arrangement was *the first of this kind ever made in this country*.

Before the court proceedings could begin a message was handed in. The manager had been found dead in bed at his address in Belfast. He had gassed himself that morning.

The matron of the home, was also prosecuted. She had resigned her post a month previously but consequent to the superintendent's suicide, the case against her was not proceeded with.

An inquest was held at which a letter left by the manager was read. He said "For thirty years I have tried to help poor children and now I am charged with ill treating them. It is more that I can bear. It is true that one of our matrons drank secretly and her successor was ill most of the time she was at Olivet, so that outwardly things may have been neglected. On account of my own business demands it was impossible to be at Olivet oftener than once a week. I have largely advanced my own money and impoverished myself to keep them going". He went on to attack the N.S.P.C.C. and the trustees.

One of the trustees, Alan McDowell gave evidence. He said that the manager had collected money and distributed it. He had agreed to retire and send in a copy of the accounts. A meeting of the trustees had been called that evening to make arrangements for proper feeding, clothing and medical supervision of the children.

The Belfast Telegraph, as well as publishing a picture of the deceased man and giving career details, ran a leading article on the affair. They were very critical and the article was really scathing. "No part of the country is free from the religious exploiter", they wrote. The manager hailed from Dundee "known as the cess pool of Scotland".

About the year 1960 I met an old man who told me that he remembered the day the orphanage was closed. He said that the building was filthy and so vermin infested that he and the others helping had rolled their trouser legs up to avoid picking up some. He said the bedding was not carried out, but pitch forked out the windows into the yard below where it was burned.

However, it seems that the orphanage was only closed temporarily — if the old man was right — for on 29/12/06 there was a report. "This institution was not forgotten in the general merry making on Xmas day and Miss Haines, the lady superintendent was most successful in organising a happy day for the party of orphans who enjoyed their Christmas Fare and games and singing".

In 1907 a Mr Crawford Browne, of Cromac Saw Mills was appointed manager by the Olivet committee. In the same year there is a report of an annual



Sabbath School Conference being held in Olivet Home, Ballygowan. Mr William Buchanan,<sup>5</sup> "a graduate of the Royal University and principal of the daily school at Olivet read a paper on "The Sabbath School and Day School — Some comparisons and contrasts". The teachers were later shown into another large room where tea with edibles was provided by the ladies of Ballygowan. At 7.30 p.m. a public meeting was held in the assembly hall. Thanks was given to a Mr A. W. Vance for granting the use of the hall. He was a true philanthropist and his death a few hours after the meeting gives a pathetic touch to the Olivet Conference".<sup>6</sup> Miss Haines, as superintendent was, with her staff, in charge of the arrangements.

At Xmas 1909 Miss Haines is referred to as an energetic lady superintendent and her assistant was Miss Waddell.

In February 1910 a newspaper report writes of children "going home from Olivet School". In October of the same year a letter was printed from R. Maxwell King, lauding the Olivet Homes and asking for money, toys, potatoes etc. She says, "It is a pity the home is not better supported. There is room for four times as many". Miss Haines was still matron.

Some years later there is a reference to the Cripples Institute managing the home for a few years and a Mr Fulton, solicitor, 44 Wellington Place acting for them.

From 1914 onwards Rev. McClernon of Ballygowan carried on a protracted correspondence with the Commissioners of Education in Dublin. He wrote first of all stating that the manager (Mr Crawford Browne) had volunteered for military service and appeared to have no longer any connection with the school building or the locality of the schools. Rev. McClernon suggested that Mr Browne should be asked to resign in favour of someone living in the locality. In further correspondence the following year (1915) there was a letter from now Lieutenant Browne asking for Rev. McClernon to be appointed manager. Rev. McClernon wrote that "the committee that held charge of the home in 1907 has ceased to exist". However Rev. McClernon was not made manager though he appeared to take great interest in the school. Mr Fulton, the solicitor was again manager pro-tem.

But for all practical purposes the committee of trustees had given up, whether through death or otherwise and the "executors and beneficiaries of the late Mr Reid's will were now held to be responsible for the building".

I don't know when the actual orphanage was closed, but it was probably in these years that the neglect of the building became much worse, so that what had been a fine construction was allowed to deteriorate through damp, woodworm, dry rot etc.

## NOTES

1. Some say he was accidentally killed by a shotgun, others that he committed suicide.
2. Then named "Mourneview".
3. Florida Manor Court near Ballygowan has not operated for a long time.
4. The Belfast Telegraph published a picture of the home and a two column heading on the death.

The Newsletter said the accused man was a lay preacher from Dundee who for some time had carried on work of a charitable nature amongst boys and girls in the Malone neighbourhood. He was held in high esteem.

5. Mr Buchanan's son-in-law then aged over 80 told me in 1976 that Mr Buchanan cycled from his home in Donegal to Dublin to sit his examinations. He lived at Knock from 1902 — 1913 and the matron having gone home in the evening he often stayed behind to put the children to bed, though it was not his job and then walked to his home opposite where Stormont gates are now.

Mr Reid also said that the building was overrun with rats and mice. At one time chickens were kept in the Lecture Hall. He described the home as "like Belsen". He remembered the orphans out walking in twos with the matron alongside and she always carried a big bunch of keys. When the orphanage was closed Mr Reid said there only remained about 20 children in residence at that time and they were taken to a children's home in Bangor.

6. Mr Vance is not to be confused with Rev. Vance, long serving minister of nearby Grensha Presbyterian Church. His daughter, then a very old lady said in 1976 that her father who had been responsible for building the Cripples Institute in Belfast, had so many commitments that he did not want to become involved with Olivet, but he was so horrified by what he saw of the condition of the children that he reluctantly agreed. He may have been a trustee or perhaps he was in overall charge.