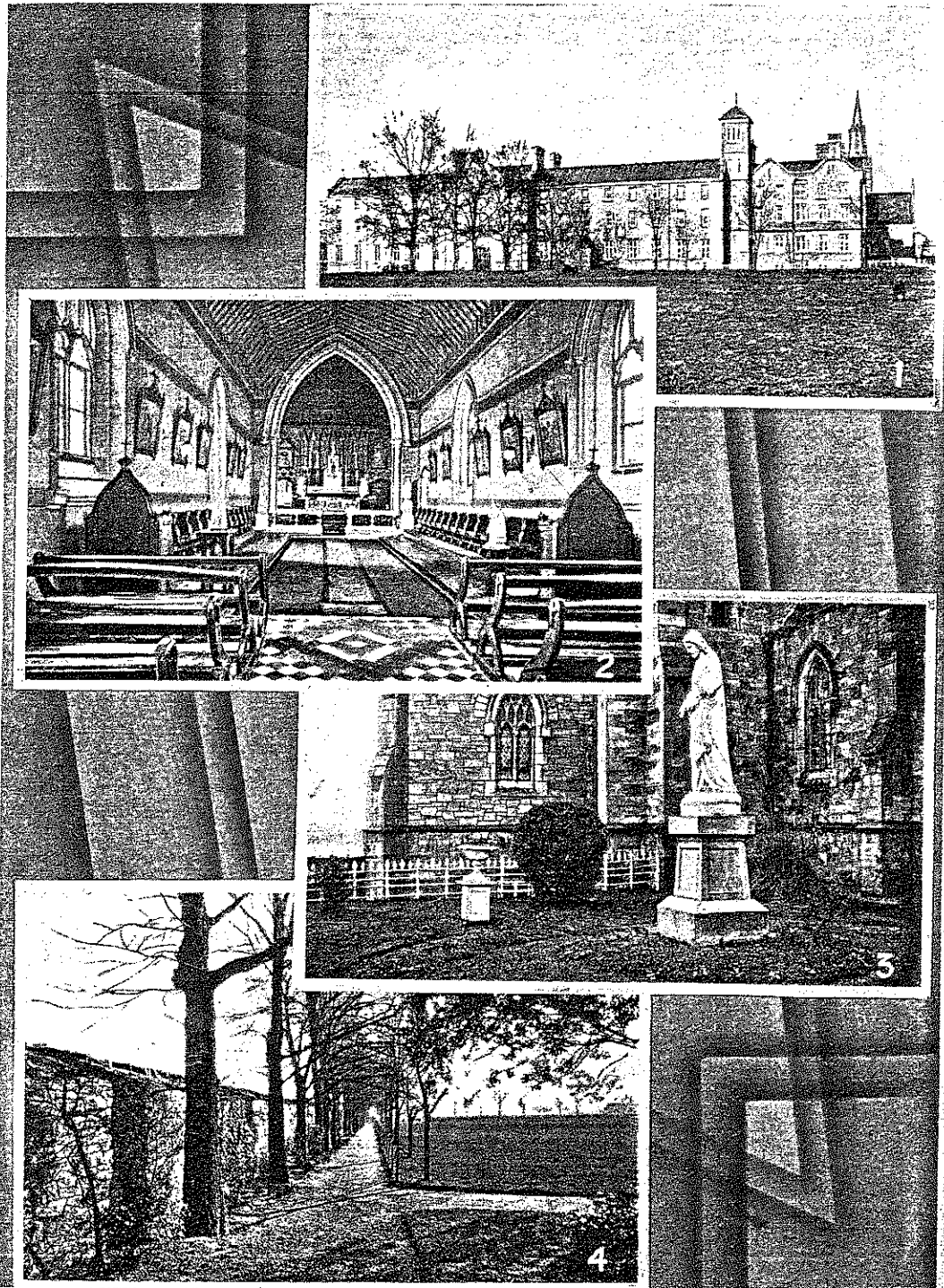


CONVENT, MOUNT ST. VINCENT.

### MOUNT ST. VINCENT.

On the 5th April, 1850, a branch house was opened at a place known at the time

Quay. Immediately before this took place the "Ecclesiastical Titles Bill" and "Bequest Act" made by the British Parliament, on the Pope's creating Dr.



1—Mount St. Vincent Industrial School. 2—Chapel, Mount St. Vincent. 3—Part of outside of Chapel. 4—In the Grounds, Mount St. Vincent.

**MOUNT ST. VINCENT**

On the 5th April 1851, the school was opened at a place called Mount Kennett on the west side of the city. The purpose was to establish an orphanage.

Since St. Vincent's was an orphanage, the place was named Mount St. Vincent and has since been known as Mount St. Vincent. The Sisters of the Holy Family, who were in attendance of the caretaker, took in the children who were, at first, put up *pro tempore*, and were transferred to their own out-houses and schools for them as was possible. The Sisters did not have when

Early in 1851, Mr. Michael, a descendant of a family long identified with the diocese in his death illness, was Bishop—then Father of St. Michael's. Mr. Michael conceived the intention of establishing an orphanage in the city, and he raised him to propose it. He established it, leaving a corner to the Mount, which was built with a new building. The income derived from



# Memories of a Limerick institution

■ Mount St Vincent Convent orphanage gave help and refuge to generations of children across the city and county

**T**HE purchase by Mary Immaculate College of the Mount St Vincent Complex in O'Connell Avenue has thrown up fond memories of a historic building in the heart of the city.

Generations of children have been brought up in the 4,000 square-foot building, which was run as an orphanage by the Sisters of Mercy until the 1970s.

Although the sisters finally moved out of the building five years ago, the complex still holds fond memories for people across Limerick.

Indeed, the story of the convent reflects the life of Limerick city and county since its opening more than 160 years ago.

The Mount St Vincent Convent, originally known as Mount Kennett House, housed children left destitute from the famine, and ill from the outbreak of cholera.

People were poor because they were sick and sick because they were poor.

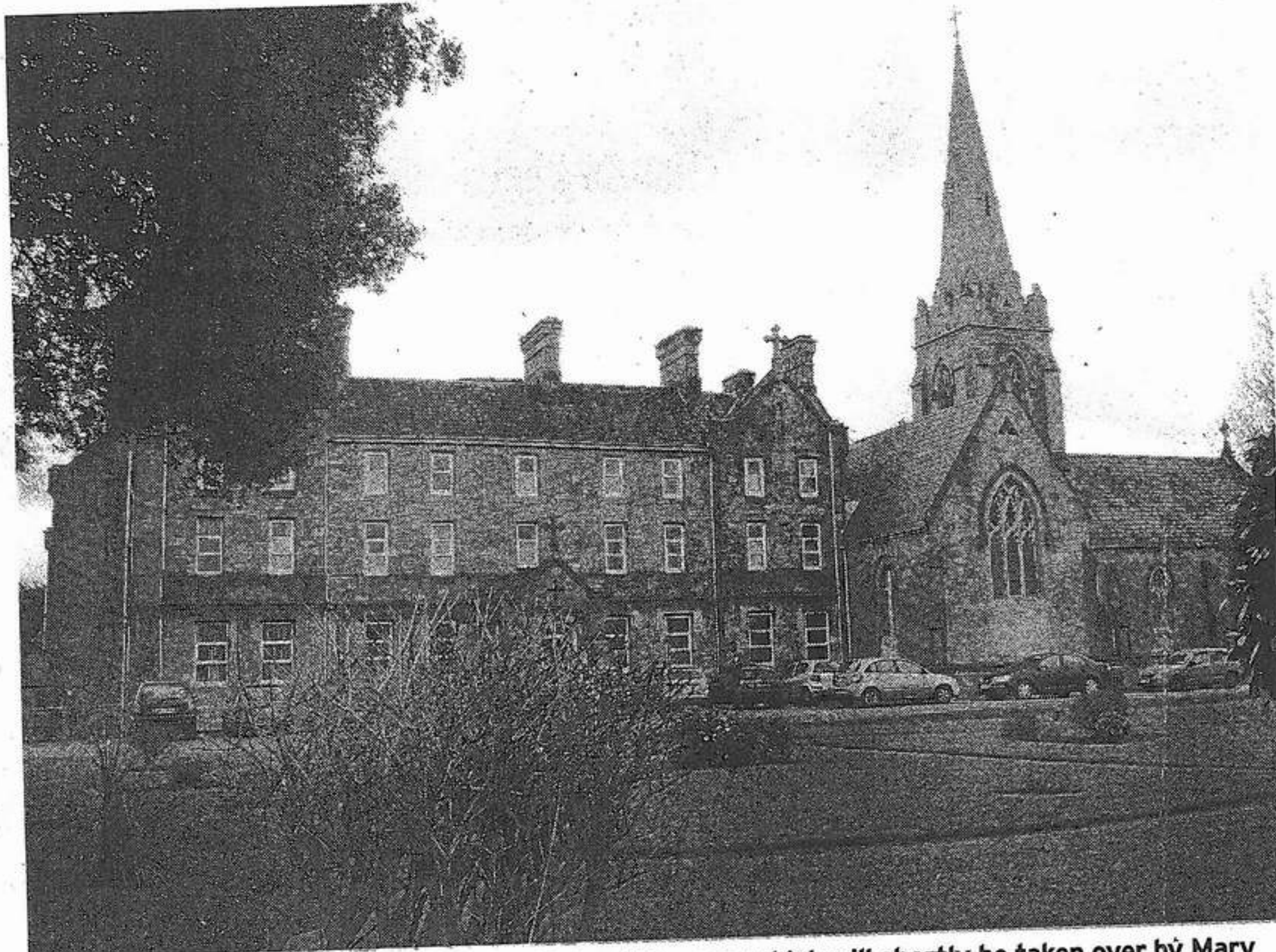
Government agencies now take care of the poor, sick and needy.

But of course, back then, centres like this, were the only refuge for desolate youngsters.

Sister Nora Wall, a keen historian, and 61 years with the Sisters of Mercy, said the children loved playing in the green fields of the Mount Kennett Estate.

It was this which predated the opening of the Mount Convent itself in 1861.

"There were four beautiful fields around here, and the kids were delighted with themselves; they did not



The historic Mount Convent building in O'Connell Avenue, which will shortly be taken over by Mary Immaculate College.  
Pictures: Michael Cowhey

know themselves. This is where the orphanage began. There were no grants, no anything," she recalled.

The fields lay largely undisturbed until 1867 when a pub was opened in the area.

But in light of the cholera scourge, the need for a built orphanage was clear.

The foundation stone of the Convent building was laid in 1851, with funds from then Bishop of Limerick, Dr John Ryan, and Helena Heffernan, billed as the "co-foundress" of the Sisters of Mercy in Limerick.

Incredibly, there were no delays in construction: the imposing building was complete in 12 months. This is mainly

because no contractor was put in place.

Local trades people all agreed to help out on its construction, meaning by July 1852, it was ready to welcome its first residents.

The children lived on the top storey of the convent, while the nuns' residence was on the middle storey, and the bottom floor was reserved for common and dining areas.

But as time went on, and the number of people needing to be housed in the orphanage increased, the 'west wing' was built, taking in classrooms, used until Scoil Mháthair Dé opened in the South Circular Road.

Sr Wall - formerly the principal at nearby Scoil Carmel - likened the



The Sisters of Mercy have provided comfort and support to children across Limerick throughout the years.

Mount to a "boarding school" rather than the orphanage it was.

They were never left wanting when it came to books, uniform, or anything else of that nature, she said.

The most memorable time at the convent came around the festive period.

Every Christmas on Radio Eireann, children from the orphanage sang carols on air to the

delight of the nation.

"They were lovely singers, they were beautiful. They were on the national airwaves every Christmas singing carols. I was talking to someone lately, who told me they always looked forward to hearing the carols at Christmas," Sr Wall recalled.

In return for their contribution to the radio, the children there enjoyed comedy from iconic city duo Tom and Paschal, who made sure to pay a visit to the Mount every Christmas.

They bought a present for each child, and the Limerick Chamber of Commerce followed suit.

Sr Wall said people in the city have "good hearts" - and she joked that it was good news for the nuns too - because when gifts were brought for the children, they received gifts too!

As an extension to the generosity of Limerick folk, many local people 'adopted' children from the convent for the holiday period, taking them on trips.

But the nuns ensured those behind did not lose out: with visits to the seaside and walks in the countryside just two activities.

Dancing and singing lessons were two other extra-curricular activities on offer.

When it came to secondary education, the nuns were very careful in the number of children sent to each school.

They did not want too big a group going to one school, for fear of them being stigmatised, as 'the children from the orphanage' and unable to fit in.

Instead, schools

across the city welcomed small groups of children to their ranks.

The sisters endeavoured to give all children in their care the best possible start in life.

Many have never forgotten this, popping into see the nuns in their new building each year.

"There is a lady in the city, who was brought up here. She brings her children to see where she was brought up. Every Christmas, she brings us a huge bunch of flowers. She is a lovely person," Sr Wall

“They were lovely singers - they were beautiful

recalled.

Other children of the orphanage have since left and married in England. The nuns have attended many weddings, and photographs of these line the stairs of the Mount Convent building.

Despite a declining membership - now just 18 - the Sisters of Mercy still do Trojan work in the community. They visit people in the community, run prayer groups, and provide support to schools across the city among other activities.

But their lasting legacy will be the care, love and support they provided to thousands of city children over the decades.

## Key dates: a history of the Mount Convent

**June 1851:** The foundation stone of the Mount St Vincent Convent was laid, with funding from Bishop John Ryan and Helena Heffernan.

**July 1982:** In a little over a year, the convent was opened

**March 1858:** The foundation stone of the neighbouring chapel was laid. It was heated by stove until 1880, before the Bishop installed a heating system.

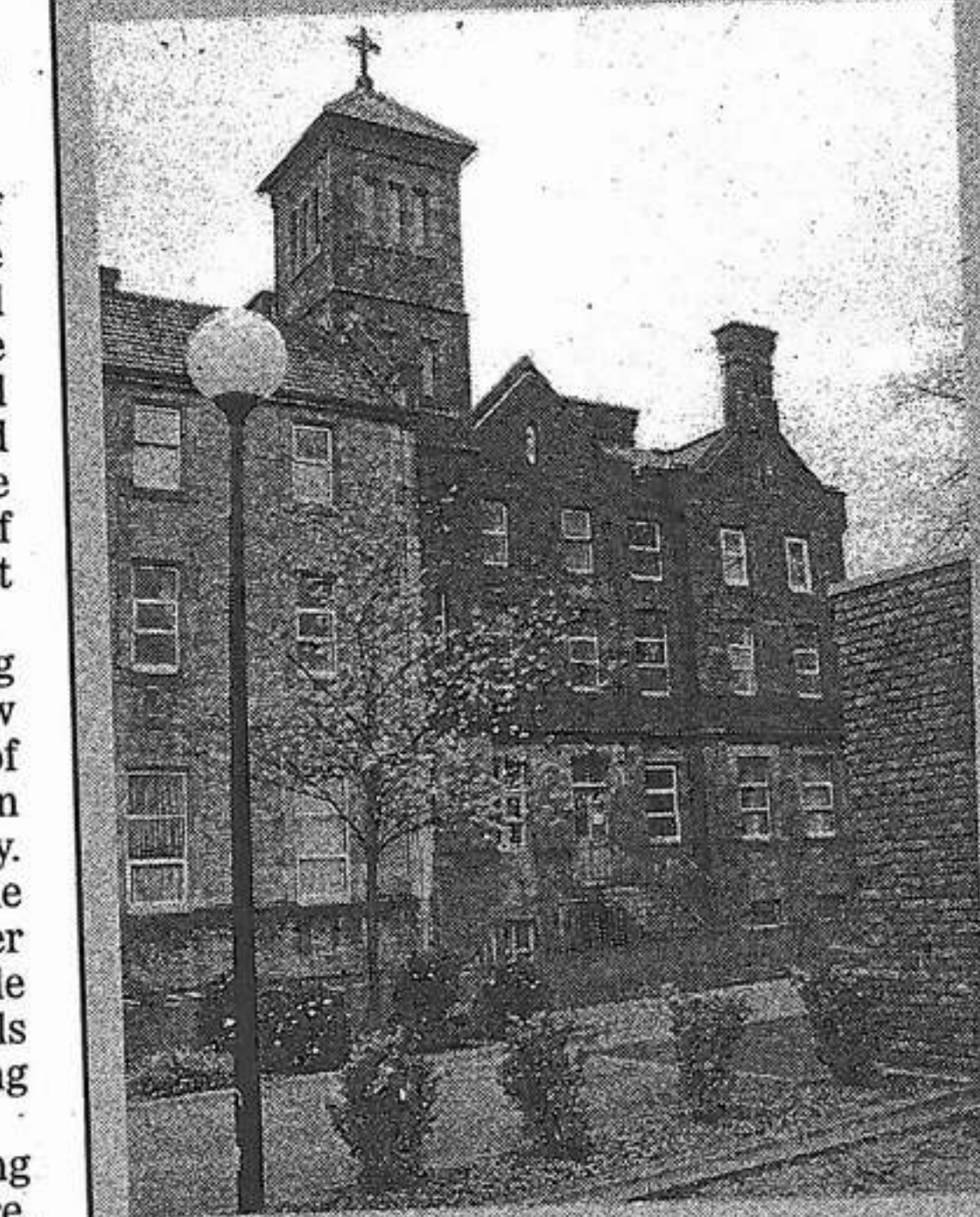
**1869:** The boundary wall was erected around the site.

**1877:** The West Wing was built, to provide teaching facilities to the children of the orphanage.

**1924:** Electricity installed in the buildings

**2007:** Sisters of Mercy moved from the old Mount Convent building, to a new purpose-built complex adjacent.

**2013:** Mary Immaculate College to take over building for use by its post-graduate students.



The Mount St Vincent convent building started life as Mount Kennett House