

# Copsewood College

**I** first set foot in Copsewood College in 1976 when I spent the night there before flying out to work in Swaziland, Southern Africa. Some seven years later I came on the teaching staff there. It is a special place, in a beautiful setting with a wonderful history. This article aims to present my readers with the 'Copsewood Story'.

## The Parish of Chapel Russel

In the twelfth century the church in Kenry was re-organised and divided into six parishes. The one I'm concerned with is Chapel Russel, consisting of the townlands of Ballydoole, Shanpallas and Pallas, a total of 633 acres. Copsewood is situated in the last mentioned. On the townland of Shanpallas there stands the ruins of an old castle with a long history. Here many centuries ago Gaelic rulers, the O'Donovans, built a dun. The Normans took possession and built a castle associated with the Fitzgeralds of Desmond. A chaplain to the ruler, his family and his servants, was appointed. Income from the townlands of Ballydoole, Shanpallas and Pallas was assigned to the chaplain.

Nearby the castle in Shanpallas stood the church, just beyond O'Dwyer's today. Adjacent to the farmyard in the college is an old burial ground and ruined building. The area is called Killurach, a short form for Killashura. This former monastic site in Gaelic days became the chapel for the new Norman baron. Later it passed into Protestant possession. The ruins are no longer evident. There is small reference to this Parish in the calendar of Papal registers for the 15th century, where it is described as "A free chapel without cure." The chaplain at this time was Gerald de Sancto Jacoba, who had studied Canon and Civil Law at Oxford for more than seven years.

In the post-reformation period, the Catholic authorities re-organised the parish structure in this area. Ardcanney and Chapel Russel were merged with Kildimo in the parish now known as 'Kildimo and Pallaskenry'.

## Founding of Copsewood

In August 1845 a deal was completed in Dublin between James Thomas, Townley Tisdell and associates on the one hand and James Caulfeild on the other. The subject of the deal was a dozen or so townlands in the Barony of Kenry, amongst them Pallas. The new owner had a London address and was a Major General in the service of the Honourable East India Company. Like many other English Adventurers he had built up a

by Fr. Martin McCormack S.D.B.

substantial fortune during his stay in this outpost of the empire. The sum paid for his new estate was £51,592 and 3 shillings. The estate was 2,000 acres of Bury Lands. He looked on this as a good investment, knowing he was assured a substantial income on rents. He looked forward to a life of luxury, but first he had to build a residence and plan a suitable setting.

James Caulfeild carried out a survey of his newly acquired property and chose a spot for his house and grounds in the townland of Pallas. Here he erected a Georgian mansion. Reading the records of the time it is interesting to note that the main road to Ringmoylan through Ballydoole ran on the same line as the present avenue from the main gate of Salesian College to the wicker gate onto the Bothar Ard. Where the main and older portion of the College complex now stands was sited Copsewood Cottage and a number of other dwelling houses scattered around. The thatched cottage belonged to Fr. Michael Copps, the Parish Priest who had died in 1817.

The tenants of this area were "the representative of Wainright", Mark Skeiton alias Benny, William Christle, Christopher Crowley and William Waller.

## Landlordism

In those days the landlord was the law. He decided to divert the main road to the line it has today. An area of 170 acres, 3 roods and 14 perches was selected and the tenants living within it were ordered to leave. This area is easily discernible today.



All that remains of Fr. Copps' grave stone.

Photo: Fr. McCormack.

It is surrounded by a wall along the Bothar Ard, continuing by the back road past the farm towards the village and by the road from the village connecting Bothar Ard on the way to Ringmoylan through Ballydoole. The house, as we see it today, was built. Trees and shrubs were planted and the main entrance laid out to the point where the road from the village meets the road leading to the Foynes-Limerick road and the back road by the farmyard. The entrance was, and is still today, known as the "Grand Gates".

Life continues to change and then as now history asserted itself. The Land League agitation forced the reforms embodied in the Land Acts and the Caulfeild's tenants became owners of their holdings. The former landlord's property was reduced to the area within the walls as mentioned above.

## Local Stories about the Caulfeilds

The Caulfeilds were very strict Protestants. They came from Cavan and Dublin. James Caulfeild joined the British army and saw service in India. While there, he married a rich lady named Muirson. When he retired he came to Ireland looking for a suitable place to live. In Dublin one day he met a man named Westropp from Co. Limerick, who informed him that a large estate lying along the river Shannon and bordering the village of Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick, was being sold. The two of them set out for the estate agents office and examined maps of the estate. The place had not been surveyed for many years and the maps described the lands immediately adjoining the Shannon as floody and marshy, while the lands around Pallas-



Fr. Pat Donnellan and Ann Marie and Rupert Travers on a recent visit to Copsewood. Ann Marie is granddaughter of George Caulfeild and lives in Norfolk.

Photo: Fr. McCormack.

kenry were described as first class. The General invested only in the good land, leaving the marshy lands to be acquired by his friend at a much cheaper price. When he came to Limerick he discovered the marshy lands had been reclaimed and cultivated since the maps were drawn. He was not amused and according to local stories never spoke to his friend for the rest of his life.

Like others around he built a mansion, but with a large glass dome, a feature of Hill Houses in India, incorporated in the roof over its entrance. This was a useless innovation, given the Irish climate.

### Landscaping

When the house was completed, the General brought over a landscape gardener from England, who was in direct descent from the famous Capability Brown, the landscape artist who changed the face of England's demesnes. This gardener was given a free hand, and regardless of cost, he laid out the entire place, wiping out entire woods with one sweep of his hand, and changing the whole aspect of the place. A great deal of Copsewood's present day charm, and many of her pleasant and sweeping vistas owe their origin to this unknown landscape gardener.

The principal entrance was through the Eagle Gate. But this did not satisfy Mrs. Caulfeild. She thought it was too far from the Limerick road and did not blend with the new layout. So, at enormous cost, a new entrance was built which was called the grand entrance and the gate is still called the "Grand Gates." The drive passed through two lakes, and a special sort of fancy bridge was constructed, which swayed with the carriages as they crossed the lakes. The drive was decorated with flowers and shrubs, and the lakes were planted with the most exotic lilies and plants. The Grand Entrance enjoyed a notoriety all over the countryside and it was a wonderful

experience to traverse it. But, like all fancy things, it did not last long. The upkeep was too expensive and it gradually fell into desuetude, and was abandoned altogether after the death of Mrs. Caulfeild.

### Kindly Landlord

The General was a kindly landlord and was on excellent terms with his tenants. One evening, however, his wife Anne and himself were sitting in the parlour when a shot was fired into the room. Luckily no one was hit, but Mrs. Caulfeild, who was a nervous woman, was very upset at the occurrence. The attack was condemned by the whole neighbourhood but the General was so vexed by it that he refused to give a portion of ground adjoining the village, to the then Parish Priest, in which to build a new Church. But his wife made representations to him, and not only prevailed on him to give the site free, but also to give a generous subscription towards the building. When the General died soon after, he had one of the biggest funerals ever seen, and a tablet was put over his grave in Chapel Russel which bore the following inscription:

*To the memory of  
Lieut. Gen. James Caulfeild,  
E.b. and M.P.,  
who died at Copsewood,  
4th Nov., 1852, aged 67 years.  
This tablet is erected  
by the tenantry on his Estate  
in grateful remembrance of  
his many acts of kindness  
towards them.  
Deo Duce Ferro Comitante.*

The latter phrase is another version of "Trust in God and keep your powder dry". Very puritan indeed.

### Cricket

The General was succeeded by his son, George, who was keen on cricket. He had

a special pitch laid out in the ground at the back of the village. He picked his team from his workmen and from the men of the village, and he not only coached them in rudiments of the game, but fitted them out in "whites" from head to toe. The Pallaskerry Cricket Team became an institution, travelling all over Munster, in brake and sidecars, playing matches and giving an excellent account of themselves, both at home and abroad.

He was succeeded in 1897 by a son, also George, who left Pallaskerry in 1916 and died tragically in India in 1943. His daughter Anne Marle Travis, with her mother Loma Caulfeild, visited Copsewood and dined with our community, in that same room where her father as a youngster used to dine, during Halloween 1990. They told us that Gen. James Caulfeild's grandfather, also a James Caulfeild, was earl of Charlemont, with estates in Cavan and Dublin, where he had built the Casino Marino (now a national monument) in 1762.

### The arrival of The Salesians in Copsewood

The story of the acquisition of Copsewood by the Salesians and the first arrivals is now best known from a long letter written by Fr. Aloysius Sutherland (granduncle of Peter Sutherland, present head of GATT) from Battersea to Fr. McElligott, Rector of Copsewood, in 1947. There are some claims that the foundation was made by Fr. McConville. He had been doing much work in spreading the Salesian name in Ireland previous to 1919.

Fr. Sutherland's account, however, is first hand. He was the first Rector and claims to have negotiated the Foundation and laboured at its opening. He claims to have made approaches for a foundation, in Dublin, Cork and Cashel, to no avail, but Copsewood house was for sale ever since the departure of the Caulfeilds. whose agent, Sir Vincent Nash, was known to Fr. Sutherland. Fr. Sutherland's brother, John, was legal adviser to the Irish Land Commission in Dublin. So, with Fr. Sutherland becoming the first Rector, his version seems unassailable.

Indeed there may have been no foundation at all in Copsewood, or elsewhere in Limerick, had not Dr. Hallinan, Bishop of Limerick, whose permission was necessary, not been known to Don Bosco. He had spent the year after his ordination with Don Bosco in Turin, but was then told by the Saint to go back to Ireland and to be good to the Salesians when they would come. Dr. Louis Hallinan was true to Don Bosco's request and was glad to have the Salesians open an Agricultural School in his diocese.

Fr. Sutherland had approached Dr. Hallinan seeking permission to establish a Salesian foundation in Ireland. This permission was granted and some time later he reported back to the Bishop that he had found a suitable property in Mount Shannon, Co. Clare. The bishop's reply was brief and to the point "Mount

Shannon is not in my diocese. There is a nice property available in County Limerick. The Copsewood Estate is for sale. Please contact Canon O' Donnell, P.P. of Kildimo, Pallaskenry. He will arrange for you to inspect Copsewood House and the Estate."

The advice was followed and Copsewood was bought for a nominal sum. On the feast day of the Immaculate Conception, 8th December 1919, the first Salesians took possession of Copsewood House and, on the octave of that feast, offered the first mass in what is now the Community dining room. It was only then that the little community, Frs. Sutherland, Brownrigg, Devine, Leaver and Bro. Connie Grey, dared to sleep in the house. Through the previous week they had stayed in Limerick by night and came out to work each morning, the four priests in a horse-and-trap, and Connie Grey riding ahead on a bicycle.

### What's in a Name?

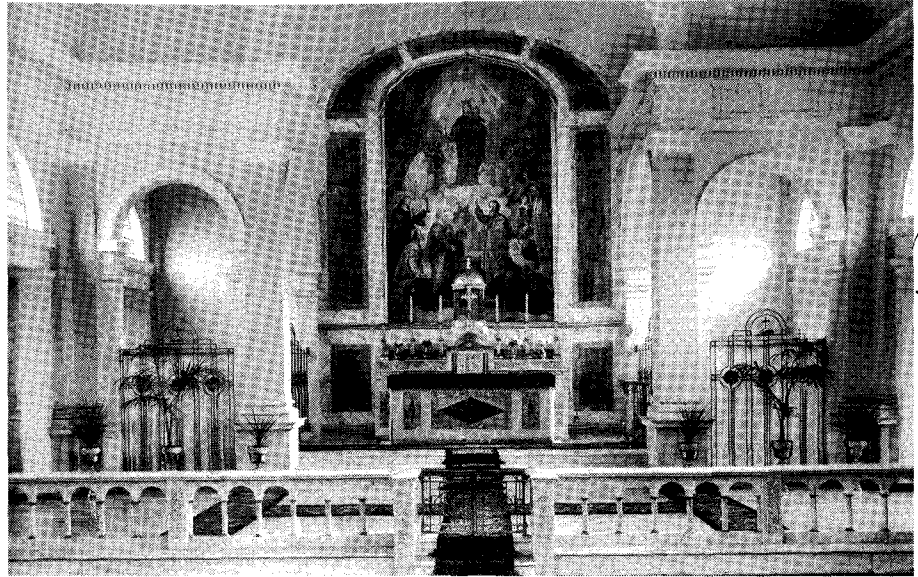
In the obituary column of the *"Freeman's Journal"* of 11 March 1817 we read that Fr. Michael Copps, P.P., Ardcanney, died on March 3rd 1817, and in the local graveyard of Killure, adjoining the college farmyard, is a flat stone slab on the grave of the priest. The headstone bears this inscription:

*Fr. Michael Copps, D.D., P.P.,  
Ardcanney, Chapel Russel and Kidimo,  
Died at the Cottage, 3-3-1817.  
Aged 80 years.*

### Copsewood Cottage

The local tradition is that Copsewood gets its name from this Fr. Michael Copps. The cottage in which Fr. Copps lived became part of the present buildings when the property was taken over by the Caulfields, who built Copsewood House. An ordnance survey map of the locality made in 1841 gives us a good idea of the Copsewood surroundings of Fr. Copps' time. It is interesting to note that on the map Copsewood Cottage, (where Fr. Copps died), is marked as standing on the site of the present house. The older people in the locality can still point out the place where the cottage actually stood.

We must remember, of course, that the main road from Pallaskenry ran then just in front of the cottage, where the present front drive now is, and the familiar wickergate in the estate wall marks the spot which was then known as Treacy's Cross. The little church where Fr. Copps and his successors offered Holy Mass was situated about a mile from the cottage at a place called the White Forge. It is beside the cross where the road swings to the left, on the way to Dromore Lake. Samuel Lewis in his *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (1837) lists this church in the following terms: "In the Roman Catholic prebend of the parish (Chapel Russel) is the neat thatched church at the White Forge."



The High Altar at the college in the 1920s.

Limerick Museum.

### Tracing the Connections

The name Copps lives on in the locality. Joe Copps was born in Ballymartin, Pallaskenry and Fr. Michael Copps was his uncle. Joseph married Mary Slattery of Kildimo and a son, Michael, was born to them. The sponsors at the christening were Patrick and Mary Cahill, Kildimo. Joe, who lives in Kilcornan, is Michael's son. The place is known as Copps's Cross.

Joe claims that Fr. Michael Copps and his sister, who was his cook, lived in a cottage rented from the Bury's of Shannongrove. There was a running battle between himself and the local minister over the chartered school. It seems, as Joe describes it, "there was a bit of crossfire between them over the training of youngsters and the established church."

Fr. Copps died and Rev. Waller lived there until the Caulfields purchased the site in 1845. Rev. Waller gave the place the name 'Copsewood'.

Joe remembers going with his father Michael and his aunt Peggy to the opening of Copsewood in 1920. He was 10 years of age at the time. "We went by Killurach and stopped in to pray at Fr. Copps' grave, before going on to the opening."

### 1920 Troubled Times

The first students came with the spring of 1920. Few, at first, writes Fr. Sutherland. The solemn opening and blessing of the college, performed by Bishop Hallinan, took place on 11 July 1920. By the opening of the school year in September, there were 100 students, 20 of them day-pupils. Reading a college publication, *Ceangal*, 1950 one comes across a reference by R.J.C. who recalls sleeping with about a dozen others in a front-of-the-building room and on waking up one night to the sound of voices at the front door below, he looked out and saw a group of men below in trench-coats. He looked around the room and saw several empty beds and guessed rightly the following morning

when he saw these beds filled with innocent-looking sleepers and more especially when he mentioned his vision to some of these 'Innocents', he was told to keep his mouth shut; and he must have done just that, as he lived to tell the story many years later. The big influx of students that September was not so much a pursuit of rural and agricultural lore, as a retreat from exposure to "Tan" fire; they were finding on-the-run too scary, and sought the shelter of student life by day, then rallied forth by night to free the country

### The Agricultural College

The Agricultural school started in the school of 1920 with 12 students; after Easter there were 35 and by September there were over 100 students. On what conditions and for what specific course these hundred or more students came is not recorded. The Department of Agriculture gave a grant of £15 per student for up to twenty students, who would successfully complete the course and be over fifteen years of age. Paddy Hogan, first Minister for Agriculture in the Free State Government, took a kindly interest in the work and gave a grant of £715 per annum to pay for five qualified teachers. These were:

Michael Kirby - General Subjects and Music

Joseph Harte - Agriculture

John Finucane - Horticulture

Patrick Neville - Irish and Maths

Tom Coughlan - Carpentry

All members of the community taught as well.

The pension to be paid by each pupil was £30 per year. This was the chief source of income, though we are told that some of these pensions were never paid.

One of the students 1921-22 was Tom Walsh of Kilkenny who became Minister for Agriculture in 1951. Another student of same year was Bernie Cahill, who distinguished himself with the *Aer Lingus* reform and survival.

## The First Farming

It must be remembered that our first farm was a mere 150 acres, contained within the demesne walls and embracing the lake and eastern half of Pallaskenry village. All this, including the house, had been bought for £7,750, got on loan from the National Bank in Dublin. This debt was to remain and grow into the 30's.

The first field to be tilled was the Forge Field, so called from Hourigan's Forge that stood this side of the village at the turn for the College front gate. Kindly neighbours came with their machinery and horses to do the tilling and sowing. Fr.Sutherland did not forget it for them: "In these dangerous times we were like one happy family. I always remember them in my daily Mass, for the help they gave us when we had nothing." These were the Sheehys of Shannongrove, the Staffs, Lynches, Enrights, Downeys, Halpins, McMahons, Sullivans and Fitzgeralds of Dromore. A small herd of less than twenty shorthorn cows was acquired. Some milk was churned to supply butter for school and community, and this practice of churning was to continue almost to 1950. By then the dairy herd had grown to sixty cows and milk was supplied to local people and to Limerick Dairies.

## Copsewood's Charm Enhanced

In 1927 there were 57 students, forming three categories: 20 agricultural students, 25 commercial, and 18 church. This is the first time we have a church group officially listed, though such a group seems to have been there from the beginning. Copsewood continued to grow and develop through the 30's.

## The White House

In September 1940 all places in the agricultural school, 38 in all, were filled and the church, or aspirant school, was in the region of 100. In 1942 there were 83 applicants for the agricultural school, but only 40 could be accepted. Further room was needed. In 1945 despite the constraining scarcities of wartime, the new building known as the White House was officially opened by the then Minister for Agriculture, Mr. James Ryan. Credit for this development must go to Fr. T.P. O'Connor. The new building provided dorm room for 100 students, classrooms, staffrooms, a science laboratory, a library and a recreation hall. The two handball alleys that we know today were built from the leftovers of the White House in 1946.

## The Quad

The quad was laid in concrete in 1945 as a kind of extended apron to the White House. It is bedded with stones and mortar drawn by horse and cart from the ruins of the Blue School by the road to Ringmoylan. One old man in Pallaskenry said "This was an exorcism of the Blue School".



Church of the Salesian College.

## The Secondary School

In 1948 the missionary school, comprising 70 pupils, was recognised by the Department of Education as a secondary school, subject to Department regulations and examinations and teachers paid by that Department. The school became open to day-pupils and this was significant for the locality, and also required the permission of diocesan authorities.

For a time scholarships were offered, and this attracted pupils, especially the better ones. In 1956 there were 114 pupils. Aspirants (missionary students) were phased out by 1957 and in 1960 there were 137 boarders and 30 day pupils.

The argument used with the diocesan authorities to allow the school become a full-blown secondary school, without the missionary element, was the need of a feeder school for the Agricultural College. It was argued that students coming to the Agricultural College with little or no grounding in agricultural-related subjects, such as Technical Drawing, Woodwork, Metalwork, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Economics, did not derive much benefit from the Agricultural Course. These subjects of course were not common in many of the secondary schools of the time, hence the development of well equipped physics, chemistry and botany laboratories in our secondary school in the late 50's and 60's and the boost they gave to that emerging school.

## From Boarders to Day Pupils Girls and Boys

The Secondary School remained through the 70's very much dependent on boarding pupils, drawn largely from the farming community throughout Limerick, Tipperary, North Cork and Kerry. The day-pupil

numbers were slow to increase, awaiting, as it were, the upsurge of population in the area consequent on Alcan industrial development beyond Askeaton, some industry in Askeaton itself, the ever presence of the cement works on the way to Limerick and the possibility of further development in the Shannon Estuary. Houses sprang up like mushrooms in the locality, and families followed. Day-pupils from the locality and from the ends of the catchment area, Foynes to Ferrybridge, and from beyond, from Ballybrown, from Patrickswell and even the city itself, increased rapidly through the 80s and into the 90s so that boarding has gradually phased out, ending in 1995 and dormitory space is converted into classrooms. The big Junior dormitory, with sixty years tradition behind it, is now a computer-room with 23 computers, and, beside it, a language laboratory. The secondary school is now a top centre in learning for the World of Information Technology.

The admission of girls as pupils was quite a venture. It has proved very successful, and now seems the better way. The first lady-teacher, Mrs. Nuala Frost, now Vice Principal, came with the first girls in 1972; the first past pupil teacher, Paddy O'Neill, came as Physical Education teacher in 1981, succeeding Mrs. Mary Breen, (wife of a past pupil), who took over for a term from none other than Denis (Ogle) Moran, All-Ireland Kerry Captain.

## The Future

Copsewood continues to grow and as I write we await permission from the Department of Education for a new extension to the Secondary School. As we enter a New Millennium, Copsewood continues to adapt to the changing educational world it finds itself in.

The past is gone forever but there is a future which is still our own. The Copsewood Salesian Colleges - agricultural and secondary, will continue to walk gentle in the lives of the Young, taking care where we thread, for everything that ever was is essential to what is.

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