

Mungret Agricultural School

by Milo Spillane

The need for agricultural education was scarcely realised by anyone in Ireland - apart from the abortive attempt of the Dublin Society in 1765 (1) - till 1832, when the newly established Commissioners of National Education granted aid to two agricultural schools under local management. By 1837 the Commissioners had decided to attach a farm to each model school for training teachers, so that in future years national schools might produce "an intelligent class of farm labourers and servants". (2). In the mid 1840s Lord Monteagle (the former Thomas Spring Rice, MP), now freed from the cares of high office, interested himself in this aspect of education and formulated a plan (3) for its advancement and duly forwarded this to the Duke of Leinster, chairman of the National Board. This plan was acted upon to some degree, for by 1850 thirteen model agricultural schools were in operation in the country. By 1854 Limerick had three such schools: Tervoe, under the auspices of Col. W. Monsell, MP; Trenchard, adjacent to the seat of Lord Monteagle; and Limerick. This latter was the Mungret Agricultural School.

The agricultural school at Mungret did not, however, owe its origin to the National Board. In 1825 there was a partial famine in Ireland and large sums of money were raised in England for the relief of distress. This was known as the Reproductive Loan Fund, and was distributed, free of interest, through some of the larger towns of the country. The loan was called back in 1852, and the amount levied on Co. Limerick was £4,079. 9s. 7d. (4). Some time previous to that date, due to the influence of Monteagle, who had been Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1835 to 1839, a bill had been passed by the House of Commons (11 and 12 Victoria, C.115), which authorised that the debt due to the fund from Limerick should be vested in trustees for the establishment of an agricultural school there. Five trustees were appointed, among them the (Protestant) Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Higgin. It was Higgin who first mentioned to his fellow trustees that some land, part of the Alton estate at Mungret, was for sale in the Encumbered Estates Court, and that this might suit their purposes. Accordingly, a total of 71 acres, in 6 lots, was purchased, for £1,000, on behalf of the trustees, by Dean Keatinge. This sum was paid from the £4,079, which had been handed over to the trustees under the terms of the above bill.

At the time of purchase there was an old farmhouse, some out-offices and a few labourers' cottages on the land. In 1853 the trustees leased the property to the National Board to set up an agricultural school. They also handed over £2,079 from the Reproductive Loan Fund, retaining the sum of £1,000 to provide an endowment for the future school. The Board was agreeable to the proposals and took possession of the property, on a lease of 61 years from September 29, 1853, at an annual rent of £70 or £1 per acre. In 1854 an agricultural teacher was appointed, and a tender of £7,500 was accepted for the erection of the requisite buildings. (5). By January, 1855, it was reported that:

no instruction has as yet been imparted beyond the practical operations and management of the farm, as there are no agricultural pupils, till the buildings and schools, which are now in progress, shall be completed. (6).

In addition to the residential school buildings, which were on a very large scale, a sum of £3,267 was spent on farm buildings. At first it was intended to purchase or rent additional land, and so the new farm structures were sited in what would have been the centre of the entire area, but this plan did not materialise, and, as a result, these buildings were most inconveniently situated. In any event, they were far too spacious and were useless as models for the pupils, who could hardly be expected, in later life, to be in a position to afford such out-offices

on their farms. The new school was expected, like any first class school farm, to set:

an example of skilful cultivation to the farmers in the neighbourhood, to educate and train a class of young men destined for agricultural pursuits, as farmers, agricultural teachers, agriculturists or land stewards. (7).

The dormitories were designed to hold about 75 boarders, of whom 8 would be free, 2 presented by the Board, while the remaining 6 were to be nominated and paid for by the trustees.

The institution was opened in January, 1858. The course of instruction was as follows:

In the Summer season, they (the boarders, who were principally farmers' sons over 15 years), rose at five, and at half-past five, they went to feed the cattle. They went in to study at half-past six, and were engaged in literary and agricultural study from half past six till nine. After breakfast they worked on the farm from ten till two, and again, after dinner from three till six in the long days, and in the Winter from three till dusk - so that they were six hours a day employed at outdoor work, and six at study. The indoor study and teaching principally consisted of literary matter, such as boys receive at an ordinary national school in the third and higher classes. They also receive instruction in practical agriculture for an hour or so each day. (8).

This course was designed to last 12 months, after which the boarders could, if they wished, move on to Glasnevin to qualify as teachers. In 1860, however, entrance to Glasnevin was decided by open competition, without the necessity of having to study agriculture other than that taught in the national schools. Many boarders from then on just entered Mungret until such time as they could secure a place in Glasnevin. Another factor which militated against the school was that the fee, which was £8 until 1872, but rose to £12, and then in 1875 to £25, and later to £26, thereby "almost closing the school against the sons of small farmers, the very class for whom it was intended". (9).

The school soon lost whatever attraction it might have held for farmers' sons, for in 1870 it contained but 8 boarders, of whom 4 were free. This very low number of pupils aroused the interest of an education commissioner in 1870, who, on inquiry among farmers as to why they were unwilling to avail of the boarding school for their sons, was told:

that too much of their (the boarders') time was occupied at mere brute work, which they could learn as well at home with more profit to themselves... they were rarely afforded an opportunity of learning to plough, or to perform other skilled operations, because a skilled ploughman was kept on each farm (the Tervoe agriculture school had ceased to operate as such in 1862, and the farm was amalgamated with Mungret), who did all the work, so as to make things look smart. (10).

The experiment proved a total failure. Numbers never reached more than 23 boarders in the school, of whom half were male pupil-teachers of the Limerick Model School. In 1875 the number of boarders was 12, and there were 11 agricultural pupils and 13 pupil-teachers boarding in the school. In March of the same year some trustees inspected the school and found only 6 pupils there and were so displeased that they resolved to discontinue the agricultural school and asked the Commissioners of National Education to open a school of

general education there instead. This the commissioners refused to do and expressed a willingness to surrender the lease. Accordingly, the school was closed on September 17, 1878, and two days later the live stock and farm produce were sold. Some furniture considered worth removing was taken to the Limerick Model School, and the land was let to the surrounding farmers. (11).

The trustees came into possession of the place on September 29, 1878, and were bound, according to the trust deed of 1859, to carry on an agricultural school there themselves in default of finding any other to do so.

The subsequent story of Mungret school can be briefly told. Soon after the trustees had taken possession of the property they submitted a report to the Lord Lieutenant which stated:

that as the agricultural school had been a disastrous and irredeemable failure, and cannot be made self-supporting except by a unjustifiable waste of public and private money, there should be a school established in the buildings, holding an intermediate place between primary schools and collegiate institutions, in which a general (not excluding agriculture) education would be imparted. (12).

Subsequently a bill was passed in parliament to enable the Lord Lieutenant to vary the purpose for which the school was set up. The bill stated:

... that it shall be lawful for the Lord Lieutenant or other Chief Governor, with the consent of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Treasury ... to direct and appoint that the said lands, buildings and premises, known as Mungret Agricultural School and Model Farm, with their appurtenances and all trust funds now under the control and direction of the trustees be avoidable to such purposes of instruction as the Lord Lieutenant or other shall seem meet. (13).

The trustees, with the permission of the Lord Lieutenant, decided, on August 11, 1880, to lease the buildings and land to the Rev. Joseph Bourke, president of St. Munchin's Seminary, Limerick, at the yearly rent of £79. 16s. Od., which was later described as "the best rent that could be reasonably had for the said premises". (14). This Limerick school, founded by Bourke in 1869 to serve as the diocesan minor seminary, was situated at 1, Hartstonge Street (on the corner of the Crescent), the house in which the newly arrived Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus had a convent and day school in the early months of 1845, before moving in June of the same year to the property purchased from the Newson family at Laurel Hill. The person responsible for bringing Bourke to Mungret was undoubtedly M. l'Abbe l'Heritier, a French secular priest who had come to Ireland as chaplain to Lord Emly (the former Col. W. Monsell, and then one of the Mungret trustees), and who, in addition, also taught science at St. Munchin's Seminary.

The new boarding college at Mungret, which now became the diocesan seminary, was opened on September 23, 1880, and catered for between 40 and 50 scholars in the first year. It was, in effect, an ordinary intermediate school with some stress laid on the teaching and practice of agriculture and it was provided that, as before, the income of the funds (including the

rent) should be applied for the benefit of the college. It was the intention of Bourke to keep the two schools in operation and during that first year of 1880-1881, the masters commuted between Hartstonge Street and Mungret. Inevitably, the school in Limerick declined considerably and Mungret failed to attract a sufficiently high number of boarders and by summer 1881 Bourke found himself in financial difficulties. He approached the bishop, Dr. Butler, who was unwilling to render any assistance, whereupon Bourke surrendered the lease at Mungret. Once again, l'Abbe l'Heritier turned out to be the middle broker. He brought the situation to the attention of Fr. Ronan, S.J., rector of the Sacred Heart College, the Crescent, who was attempting to establish an apostolic school there. Negotiations were entered into, and, with the consent of the bishop, Ronan, proposed to transfer his apostolic school to Mungret, and the bishop, once a new lease was worked out, agreed to close his school at the corner of Hartstonge Street and the Crescent and send his clerical students to Mungret.

Thus, some 60 boys entered Mungret on September 24, 1882. The trustees, seeing that an intermediate school had already failed there, recommended to Ronan that he confine himself to university teaching. Ronan was given every encouragement to make a success of the venture. The buildings and land were leased for 500 years at £70 p.a. rent, while the trustees gave £700 for the purchase of science apparatus. (15).

The Jesuits, for their part, continued to run a most successful university college at Mungret, until the founding of the National University of Ireland in 1908 put an end to the system of external students preparing for university examinations. Mungret College then reverted to becoming an intermediate (or secondary) school and remained so until the final closure came in June, 1974.

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Mungret College