

St Joseph's Riverwood

The suburb of Riverwood (then known as Herne Bay) developed rapidly after World War II as a haven for refugees from Europe. Because there were many Catholics amongst these, the parish of St Joseph, Herne Bay, was established in 1949, with Fr Patrick Kerwick as first parish priest. There were no parish buildings, and the first church was Hut 120, one of the army huts located near Washington and Roosevelt Avenues. These huts would also accommodate St Joseph's school in its early years.

The Sisters of St Joseph, who already had some nearby schools, such as at Punchbowl, agreed to staff the parish school, this began in 1949 in the former army huts. Because the huts were also used as a church, they had to be cleared each Friday and made ready for Sunday Mass. The original enrolment is unknown, but the Catholic Directory for 1950 records 68 girls and 62 boys.

In 1950 the present school site in Thurlow St was purchased and construction of a permanent school building began. This required parish funding and much voluntary labour, in a period when there was no government assistance for private schools. The Foundation Stone shows that the school was blessed and opened by His Eminence, Norman Thomas Cardinal Gilroy, Archbishop of Sydney, on September 27, 1953. In 1954 the pupils, by now numbering more than 300, were moved to the present site. The school catered for girls from Kindergarten to Sixth Class and for boys to Third Class, the older boys being directed to Brothers' schools.

This was a period of strong demand for Catholic schooling, and enrolments increased rapidly to 516 in 1960. The staff then consisted of five Josephite Sisters and three lay teachers, so it appears that classes were crammed, with an average of over 60 pupils. By 1969 the enrolment seems to have peaked at about 550 students. From the 1970s substantial government funding was provided, and this helped towards the improvement of buildings and resources and the employment of more teachers. In 1986 the pioneering Sisters of St Joseph ended their leadership of the school. Since St Joseph's was part of the Archdiocesan system of schools, the Catholic Education Office, Sydney then appointed the first lay principal, Miss Janis White.

Enrolments have eased somewhat since the 1960s, but they were boosted in 1995 when boys were retained to Year 6. St Joseph's remains a substantial parish primary school, which in 2000 had 427 pupils from Kindergarten to Year 6.

The school community has created an educational environment of excellence and dedication. The present school community remembers the vision, courage and labour of all those who founded this school and struggled to bring quality Catholic education to its pupils.

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