

## **The Foundation of St. Joseph's, Convent of Mercy, Kinsale, Co Cork**

The story of the Mercy Sisters in Kinsale began with a request from Fr. Justin Foley McNamara, Parish Priest of Kinsale. The first Sisters of Mercy arrived from Limerick in 1844. Fr. Justin had acquired a two storey in the Ramparts for the Sisters. His widowed sister Mary Ann Burke who had completed her Novitiate in Limerick, joined the first group of Sisters. She donated all her furniture and silver to them. Mother Frances Bridgeman, was the first Superior, and Mother Mary Ann Burke received the title of Foundress.



*Convent of Mercy, Kinsale, Co Cork*

In 1844, the eve of the Great Famine, Kinsale town was in dire poverty. Little is known of the Sisters early days. However we do know that while waiting for a school to be built, they taught in the national School at the Half Wall.

St. Joseph's School was opened on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1845, with 700 pupils and only five or six Sisters to teach them! In time many young girls entered the Convent – bringing with them large dowries. Their wealth enabled the Sisters to reach out and help the poor of the town. They taught them various crafts and skills: needlework, knitting, making artificial flowers, carding both hemp and wool and of course the 3 Rs. The Sisters helped in the making and mending of fisherman's nets. Most famously, they introduced the renowned Limerick Lace which was made by the local women in the workroom attached to the school. Several prizes were awarded at various Exhibitions of the lace both in Ireland and in England.

Thanks to Ms. Angela Shanahan in the Kinsale Tourist Office and the present Parish Priest, Fr. Robert Young, a service commemorating the Lacemakers of Kinsale was held in the Parish Church on March 24<sup>th</sup> 2016. A plaque is hanging in the porch of the Church in memory of the Lacemakers.

An orphanage for girls was opened for children who were orphaned or in need, also a House of Mercy for women who were in need of a home and security. When cholera broke out in 1849, the Sisters nursed the victims in their homes and in the Workhouse. This was later staffed by the Sisters and became known as the Sacred Heart Hospital – now known as the Kinsale Community Hospital.

Back in 1854, Mother Frances Bridgeman was asked to lead a group of Sisters with a view to nursing wounded soldiers in the Crimea. Mercy Sisters from Charleville, Dublin and England were among the group. Books have been written about the horrors of that war.

Kinsale Convent established nine foundation houses:

- Derby, England in 1849
- San Francisco, USA in 1854
- Newry, Co Down in 1855
- Clonakilty, Co Cork in 1856
- Cincinnati, USA in 1858
- Skibbereen, Co Cork in 1860
- Doon, Co Limerick in 1865
- Ballyshannon, Co Donegal in 1867
- Delray Beach, Florida, USA in 1955