

Final chapter of history for Carriglea nuns as they leave Dungarvan after 120 years



Sisters of the Good Saviour

“Across the valley of the Brickey River and over the slopes of Knockaun, the Angelus bells of Carriglea ring out their call, and in the fields, the farmers stand with heads bared in silent prayer. For over a hundred years now, the Angelus bell of Carriglea echoes throughout the countryside of West Waterford, and my wish and prayer is that this Angelus bell will continue to ring across the valley for many years to come.”

That is the wish of the last two remaining Sisters of Le Bon Sauveur (Sisters of the Good Saviour), who are to depart from Dungarvan to Waterford after 120 years next month. It’s exactly 120 years since the Sisters established a convent and private psychiatric hospital at Carriglea, in Dungarvan, County Waterford.

There are only 4 sisters left in Ireland. Sr Teresa and Sr Margaret have moved already to more suitable retirement accommodation. Sister Mary and Sister Rita are the last two remaining nuns based at Carriglea in Dungarvan. Founded in 1904, the last 120 years have seen the Sisters create a well-loved facility, renowned across the country. Speaking to Sr Mary, who has been local leader in Carriglea convent since 2002, it is clear the final weeks spent in Carriglea are bitter-sweet, as an emotional farewell to the place they have called home for many years looms on the horizon.

Last week, Waterford County Council held a Civic reception to thank the Sisters, past and present, for the work they have done in the area. It was a wonderful celebration, according to Sr Mary.

The local St. Mary’s Parish, Dungarvan and the nearby GAA club are planning to hold events to thank the Sisters, for their involvement in the surrounding areas

According to Sr Mary, who joined me on Zoom. "The biggest thing, is the Thanksgiving Mass at the start of July. We are expecting a very big crowd. It will be past, present, and future service users, and those who will be involved with keeping the mission going into the future."

Sister Mary: her 65-year story in Carriglea started in 1959 when she came here to attend boarding school. She entered the Sisters as a postulant straight from school at the age of just seventeen. She made Final Profession in 1975 albeit with ten of those years spent in North Wales, the rest were lived out in Carriglea. “In a way, Carriglea raised me,” she muses. “It’s given me every opportunity. I’ve blossomed here, to be honest with you.”

Sister Rita, the other hand, entered the community in North Wales, which established a boarding school in Holyhead in 1907. This was closed in 1984. She is originally from Dublin, after her profession she spent years teaching in Holyhead and was local leader Carriglea in the 70’s. In 1987 she returned to France to take up the role of bursar general of the congregation for the next 30 years. Sr. Rita was happy to return to Ireland in 2019.

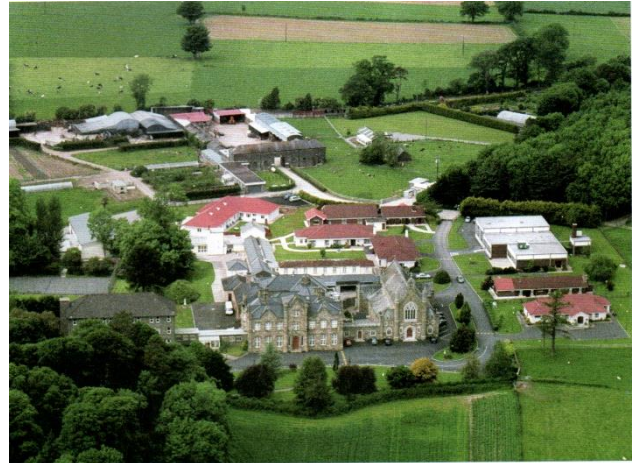
The journey of the nuns in Ireland began in 1903, after the Bishop of Waterford and Lismore at the time, Bishop Sheehan, visited the Bon Sauveur convent in Caen, France. He was struck by the wonderful work being done there, and asked the authorities of the Mother House in France to found a branch of the congregation in his own diocese in Ireland.

On 24th February 1904, the deal to purchase Carriglea estate owned by the Odell Family was signed and sealed.

The following year, the main building, was transformed into a small psychiatric hospital. From 1905 to 1970, Carriglea cared for women with psychiatric health issues. In the late 1960s, Carriglea was developed from a psychiatric hospital to a Centre caring for adults who had intellectual disabilities, with funding secured from the Department of Health. It was in the late sixties that the first service users with intellectual disabilities came to live in Carriglea. The 1970s and '80s saw the expansion of community services, with buildings constructed for day and residential services, while the first community-based houses opened their doors in Dungarvan town in the eighties.

The 1990s saw the service flourish, with the expansion of community services, and the development of more houses and the Anne Le Roy Centre in Dungarvan.

It was in 2006, Sr Mary recalls, that the Bon Sauveur Services became known as Carriglea Cáirde Services, with the appointment of its first lay CEO. The golden thread or ethos has, however, lived on daily through Carriglea's Mission, which is to continue the work of the Bon Sauveur congregation and to provide comprehensive and quality services for those with intellectual disabilities in line with Christian values and the principles of the congregation.



Carriglea 2004

Sister Mary explains to Gript that the mission has always been to ensure that each person who walks through the doors of Carriglea is granted as full a life as possible – including healthcare, education, training, housing, and leisure. Empowering those with intellectual disabilities to integrate into society and reach their full potential is also a goal the sisters hold dear. It is the mission of Carriglea Cáirde services, Sr. Mary explains, to provide an individual and holistic service to each person availing of the services in so far as funding levels will permit.

To achieve this, the sisters have worked collaboratively with families down through the years, along with the relevant agencies, the community, and the voluntary sector.

The values that have guided the mission have always been person-centred, and extend to justice, creativity, hospitality, respect, and compassion. It has always been important, too, Sr. Mary stresses, that the values and ethos of the sisters is not lost in busy schedules and workloads, but remain a key part of the day to day work.

Speaking before the council this week during a Civic reception honouring the work of the Sisters, Sr. Mary recalled the bleak days back in 1904 when six French sisters and one Irish sister embarked from Normandy by ship and docked in Cobh. Those were the days before telephones, or the internet or skype, when ordinary post would take weeks to arrive.



The sisters, arriving from France, faced problems she describes as enormous, both culturally and socially, including language barriers. Yet the sisters heard the call clearly – to leave their own country and homes, and come to Waterford. The French sisters, who arrived without the language, and were totally ignorant of the culture in a foreign land, were totally isolated upon arrival in Ireland – with no way to receive news from loved ones back home, before a time of radio and phones here.

However, “they were driven by the spirit, to help create a system that would recognize the value and respect for the less able, the vulnerable of society,” Sister Mary recalls.

“This is the golden thread that has imbued us for the last 120 years.

“But we did not do this alone,” she stresses. “This service was led by the Bon Sauveur Sisters until we transferred it to ‘Carriglea Cáirde Services’ in 2006. Since then, she says proudly, it has grown, developed and evolved into an excellent facility with the support of families, co-workers, service users, neighbours, friends, benefactors, associates, as well as the Church, government and Health authorities.

A special highlight brings her back to 2003, the year Ireland hosted the World Special Olympics. In Carriglea, she remembered with joy, the whole community was proud to share the feeling of poignancy and success with a sense of wonder and awe. The seventeen athletes who took part did Ireland proud, supported by service users, coaches, volunteers, sisters and staff. That event, for the remaining sisters, has gone down in history thanks to the many people who gave of their energy and time to make the games a success.

An education programme jointly organised by Carriglea and the Dungarvan Host Town Committee saw the participating athletes and some coaches visiting and giving talks to children and 25 primary and secondary schools throughout West Waterford. This not only helped to increase the profile and public awareness of people with an intellectual disability, but also increased the athletes’ self-esteem, social skills, and confidence. The programme culminated a number of information days at Carriglea, with one of the days attended by over 300 secondary school children.

The Sisters have always been great supporters and promoters of Special Olympics. A section in the Sisters’ centenary book, published in 2004, carries dozens of happy pictures from that time, complete with the Special Olympics motto: “Let me win, but if I cannot win let me be brave in the attempt.”

Due to the reducing number of Sisters available to continue the services into the future, in 2006, the Congregation handed over the ownership, governance and running of the services to a Company limited by guarantee under a Board of Directors and the service was renamed ‘Carriglea Cáirde Services’, who agreed to continue the Mission of the Sisters. To this day, the sisters have been involved at both Board and Pastoral level.

However, a new opportunity presented itself for the Bon Sauveur Sisters in 2014, when they united with three other French Congregations and founded the ‘Missionary Sisters of the Gospel’, increasing their involvement and presence in Madagascar, Central Africa, Guinea and Senegal.

In 2022, with only one community in Ireland, and confronted with reduced numbers due to ageing and health problems, it was with a heavy heart that the Sisters made the decision to leave Carriglea after 120 years and retire to more suitable living facilities.

Sr. Mary, tells me before the Sisters say goodbye

“We want to thank all our benefactors past and present, local parishes, organisations, families, neighbours, and friends, as well as our staff, past and present. And last but not least, of course, our service users who are the matrix that held us all together as Carriglea Community from 1904 to 2024, and onwards into the future.”

Asked what the reaction of the locals has been to the news the Sisters are to depart, Sr. Mary admits: “People are very sad.” She says the imminent departure of herself and Sr. Rita is something which is only beginning to sink now for us as for those whose lives we touch. “It’s not about me, or Sr Rita. It’s the **Carriglea Sisters** who are leaving after 120 years. That sadness extends to us. It is emotional. We’ve seen generations grow up and move on. Life is really a pilgrim journey for all!

“There was a need, which is why the Sisters came here from France in the first place. And we’ve met that need. In many ways, the Order accomplished what it set out to do, and in a way, we are moving on, with every good hope for the future.”

“I believe in witnessing to the value of presence, the value of being with another person, the value of praying with another, and the value of stopping and being still. In a way, that is what religious vocation is, first and foremost,” she says. Sister likens the role of chaplain to that of Jesus stopping and standing still in the midst of a large crowd, and focusing his attention to one or two individuals.

“That act of stillness and listening was what brought healing and wholeness to those in need.”

“Of course, there is the activity as well. As Saint James said, ‘Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.’ Obviously, the fruits of the Sisters’ work are what you see today.”

The Sisters have created a unique set of values that are relevant to service users, their families, employees and the wider community. Their parting wish is that these values will continue to be respected and guide Carriglea Cairde Services into the future.

“We hand on the baton of mission to the Board of Directors, Management team, staff and the service users. Our prayer is that cooperation will continue, and that the continual interaction between all these organisations will become interdependent to serve the ongoing needs of people with disabilities into the future”.

Both Sr Mary and Sr Rita are moving into Independent Living, with the Little Sisters of the Poor in Ferrybank.

“All that is left to say is - Thank you.”

Those good wishes are echoed by Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Alphonsus Cullinane, who shared:

“For 120 years the good sisters of the Bon Sauveur - the Missionary Sisters of the Gospel have been working in this Diocese. They have lovingly looked after those wounded in their mental faculties, our brothers and sisters with intellectual disabilities. In serving such people, they have also served their families and have given great example and encouragement to the whole community around Carriglea. It is a sad time for them and for us all. I pray that the seeds of love and service sown by the sisters are bearing and will bear much good fruit. I wish them every good wish and blessing for the future and may their inspiration grow and flourish.”

