



## David McCarthy-Smith

**Campaigner for the foundation of Ashbourne Community School and Chairman, Board of Management 1993 to 2000**

One of the greatest advocates of a Post Primary school in Ashbourne was Mr. David McCarthy Smith who worked to bring this project to fruition for twenty years and more.

What follows is an extract from a conversation with David in April 2015 when Madeleine and I visited his home and browsed through documents and meticulous records which David has since given to the school's B.O.M. for safe-keeping. We spoke about the times and the challenges faced by the people of Ashbourne during the early years when they struggled to provide for second level education in the area.

Áine O'Sullivan, Principal, Ashbourne Community School (ACS).  
Madeline Harbison, ACS School Secretary.

### When did the local community of Ashbourne first consider the provision of second level education as a necessity for this area?

The "Ashbourne Parents Association" was set up to assist with financial contributions as required for St Declan's N.S., which was the only NS in the Ashbourne area at the time. In the minutes of one of its meetings in 1977 a discussion about the need for secondary education provision in the area is recorded. At that time the Committee decided to contact the Department of Education and the Bishop of Meath about the possibilities and practicalities of such provision. From October 1977 the item 'Secondary Education' was a fixture on the agendas for all meetings.

### When did the real work commence?

The first official document outlining the projected enrolments for a second level school in Ashbourne was a report entitled '**Ashbourne and District Second Level Educational Needs**' and this was commissioned by the APA in 1981. It was written by Noel McEvoy (Milltown-nephew of Ned Nulty) and included projected enrolments from eleven primary schools who were consulted in relation to numbers of students who might avail of a Post Primary School if one were available in Ashbourne.

The findings of the study report, *"All the indications are that the Ashbourne Post Primary School will remain viable into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond."*

It was also noted as early as 1980 that the figures showed *"that the new school will reach and indeed exceed its capacity (currently set at 650) in a very short time."* In the early 1980's it was believed at an official/ministerial level that the growth in pupil numbers could be catered for in Dunshaughlin School. At this time the VEC had made an application for an extension.

In a letter from the Minister for Education, Mr. John Wilson to Richard Bruton MCC responding to a request for a second level school in the area, he writes,  
*"...the need for a second level school in Ashbourne is being considered in the light of enrolment trends in the schools in the area, in conjunction with the application from the Dunshaughlin school for an*

*extension, and in the context of the effect the provision of such a school would have on the Dunshaughlin school. A substantial proportion of the pupils in the Dunshaughlin School come from the general Ashbourne area. Parents in Dunboyne are also pressing for a second level school and such a school would have a further significant effect on the enrolments in Dunshaughlin...." (June, 1980).*

Shortly afterwards (January '81) the first formal meeting regarding a Secondary School for Ashbourne took place in the Parochial House, Dunboyne (halfway between Mullingar and Ashbourne for convenience because 'parties snowed in') between Reverend Bishop McCormack's Secretary, currently Bishop Michael and myself, on behalf of the Ashbourne Parents Association (A.P.A.). It concluded that a project proceed as quickly as possible to initiate the provision of a secondary school in Ashbourne and its catchment areas.

## **Who were the main people involved in the struggle for the 2<sup>nd</sup> level school and how was the APA established in the early days?**

In February 1981, the Second Level School Committee was established as a sub-committee of Ashbourne Parents Association. The APA had been previously established in 1977 as the Parents' Committee for St Declan's NS, which was the only school in Ashbourne. The sub-committee was formed to develop a strategy for a submission for a 2<sup>nd</sup> level school to the Department of Education.

In 1981, St. Mary's NS and Gaelscoil na Cille opened on the same day. The Gaelscoil was located on various temporary sites including the old parochial hall and some prefabs around the town. St. Mary's NS set up in St. Declan's NS library on a temporary basis and it was proposed to build a national school on the north side of the town. At that time, Garden City was established and the houses surrounded St Declan's NS. The ADCC was also in existence in 1981 and both APA and ADCC Committees had common members.

Those were busy days in the late 70's and early 80's as we worked to ensure that we would meet the educational needs in the area. I was already heavily involved in the APA working on the strategy, which would secure the 2<sup>nd</sup> level school and Fr Cassidy, the local parish priest approached me and asked me to sit on St. Mary's NS Board (last for twenty years) which, at the time, was looking for a permanent school building. The only 2<sup>nd</sup> level school in the area was in Dunshaughlin and at the time there was no other Community School (not college) in Co. Meath.

## **So, what was the strategy employed to secure the attention of the Department of Education to the plight of the pupils in Ashbourne?**

The 80's were a time of recession and all dealings in relation to securing this kind of investment were "sluggish". There was no money in those days and we lived in a time of regular announcements about "Government cutbacks in relation to Capital Expenditure". No land had been purchased for a school site in the area. We really had to campaign hard with the local politicians and to present hard facts to the DES in order to even be considered by Department Officials.

## **So many Ministers of Education ...**

We started with John Wilson in 1980 and then when John Boland replaced him we moved our attention to him. We contacted John Boland in September 1981 congratulating him on his appointment and apprising him of the Ashbourne situation. We included a copy of the statistics on projected enrolments, suggesting a suitable site adjacent to the new Community Centre in Ashbourne, which was nearing completion at the time and finally, requesting a meeting with a delegation of the Committee.

That meeting actually happened in January 1982 when the Minister met with members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> level Committee, Eilish Brett, Brenda Jones, Tom Keenan, Noel McEvoy and myself. Also in attendance on the day were public representatives, Sean Conway Meath Co. Co (FF) and John Farrelly TD (FG). That was an important meeting because sanction for the school was given on the day. The size, location and date of provision were to be agreed by the Department within a few weeks but alas, the Government ‘fell’ that evening!

In September of that year we received a letter from the new Minister, Martin O’ Donoghue, and follow on correspondence from the DES, advising that the decision had been made to make provision for 800 pupils subject to review as planning proceeds. The letter stated,  
*“Consultants have been appointed for the project. The question of a suitable site for the school is under examination in the Department’s Building Unit at present.”*

However, by November 1983, the negotiations were still ongoing and a request was sent to the new Minister, Gemma Hussey, *“to endeavour to bring these negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion.”*

Moving this project through the required stages from site acquisition to actual construction was to continue for quite a few years more as Ministers moved in and out of power, only coming to fruition during the late eighties with Mary O’ Rourke in power and later on, in the early nineties working with Noel Davern and finally with Niamh Bhreathnach.

Of course at a local level, County Councillors, local TD’s and Senators worked tirelessly alongside the Committee. These included, John Bruton, (Minister for Industry and Energy), Donal Creed, (Minister for State, Dept of Education), Joe Bermingham (Minister for State, Dept Finance and Public Works), John Farrelly, T.D., Frank Mc Loughlin, T.D., Colm Hilliard, T.D., Jim Fitzsimons T.D., Frank Fahey (Minister of State, Dept. of Education), Mary Wallace T.D.

### **Talk to me about the process of acquiring a suitable site for the second level school in Ashbourne.**

The negotiations for the land were drawn out and protracted and two separate locations were considered, one on Hunter’s lane and one adjacent to the new Community Sports Complex. In August 1984, the DES and Meath Co Co settled on land belonging to Mr. Hoste, a tillage farmer who farmed 200 acres in the area south of the village. The agreed site had the advantage of being adjacent to the new Community Sports Complex, which had already been constructed with substantial funding from the Department. It noted that, “to locate the school elsewhere would entail considerable additional building costs for the provision of P.E. facilities.”

Meetings and correspondence continued all through 1985 with the various parties, including Meath Co Co and the Department of Education. Eventually the sale of the site was agreed and documents were exchanged in relation to this in June 1985, and, after a third meeting using the same agenda with Department of Finance – a precedent as Finance in known never to re-visit it’s given position.

By February 1986 the original second level school to be built for 800 pupils was being designed for 650 pupils (using more recent figures) and a decision had been made by the Department to situate the Gael Scoil on the Deerpark side of the site allocating just over 3 acres for the building with play and surface areas.

In the years that followed, the target opening date of September 1989, was delayed as lengthy discussions took place regarding the routing of the Ashbourne by-pass through the site. By November 1987, when the Book of Estimates was published, there was no money allocated for any second level projects, which had not reached contractual stage. The future of Second level education in Ashbourne was looking remote again.

## At what point did the Committee decide on the school type for Ashbourne?

While all the work was going on with the agreement of a suitable site, the Committee was exploring the options available to it and the local community regarding the management of the new school.

A letter had been received from Bishop John Mc Cormack in March 1982 lending support to the project and the Committee had met later in the month with Brother Declan Duffy, Secretariat of Second level schools in Milltown Park to discuss school options.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1985, a delegation travelled to Mullingar to discuss a proposed public meeting regarding school types, which would be held on 27<sup>th</sup> June. The plan was to ascertain the preference of the local people at this public meeting. Approximately 2,500 parents were notified through the primary schools. Announcements were made at Masses in local churches and a notice was placed in the 'Ashbourne News'.

The speakers were Mr. Sean O' Beacháin, Principal of Coolmine Community School, Mr. Liam O' Donnell, CEO, Meath VEC and Mr. Liam Murphy, Principal, St Patrick's Diocesan College, Navan. Each speaker made a detailed presentation and a Question and Answer session followed before a secret ballot was held. The results of the ballot revealed a majority in favour of the Community School Model.

This information was relayed all the relevant parties including the Minister's Office and the response offered by Minister Hussey read as follows:

*"It will be taken into account when the time comes to make a decision on the type of management for the post primary school being provided in Ashbourne".*

In October 1985 the Minister contacted Bishop John Mc Cormack enquiring if '*he would propose to participate as a trustee for such a school if it were to be established*".

In a later letter to the Committee the Minister advised that *"if a Community School is to be established a religious order or the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese would have to be willing to act as a Trustee for the Deed of Trust"*. In February 1986, a letter from the Minister of Education, Patrick Cooney, stated, *"I am happy to tell you I have decided that the new school for Ashbourne shall be a Deed of Trust Community School."*

The VEC agreed to act as the other trustee for the school.

## So how did you move the project forward in 1989?

The Committee called a public meeting in the Ashbourne House Hotel on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1989 at 8pm. The Chairperson, Mr. Peter Archer and the rest of us on the Committee explored options and avenues that could be pursued. All public representatives for the area were invited to attend and the meeting saw a great turn out on the night. Options explored included building the school privately and setting up a temporary school in the Community Centre. Fr Burke outlined the second option which involved partitioning the building and scheduling all community sporting activities after 4pm. This proposal would require a plebiscite and might result in taking pressure off the Minister and in turn delaying the project further.

John Bruton T.D. advised that the Committee should keep the pressure on the Minister as so much had been achieved to date.

The Committee was expanded at this meeting and all attendees were reminded to contact the Minister's Office or/ and the DES to highlight the individual stories and difficulties around second level education in Ashbourne.

No money was provided for building the school in the budget for 1989 despite comprehensive campaigning at a local level and at a Ministerial level.

At this stage the design team was exploring the possibilities of re siting the building on the site to take account of the Gael Scoil. These issues were not resolved late 1989 and a meeting was set up on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1990 between Minister Mary O' Rourke, local T.D. Mary Wallace, John Farrelly and John Bruton and members of the Committee in a final bid to move the project on to the next stage. In addition, the Committee had organised a protest march to the Dáil to take place after this meeting. It was expected that approx. 300 people from the area of Ashbourne would attend the march in order to present a petition with 2,500 signatures to the officials in Leinster House. The march commenced in Parnell Square on a miserable snowy afternoon and spirits remained high as the marchers waited outside Leinster House to hear a response to their petition. By the end of this exercise, nobody was in any doubt of the commitment of the local TD's or the unequivocal commitment of Minister Mary O' Rourke to this project.

For the next few years the Committee sought to keep the pressure on at a local level and at a Department level and correspondences between Department officials and the Minister's office continued on a weekly basis. By 1992 the Department was in a position to invite tenders for the construction of a new second level school in Ashbourne. The closing date for this process was set for July 17<sup>th</sup> and the new Minister of Education, Seamus Brennan promised that building would commence in January 1993.

**There is no doubt in my mind as we sit here today, 20 years later, that the people of Ashbourne should be proud of your efforts and grateful for your dedication. You, and all those involved in the Committee, over the years really fought for this cause at every level.**

It had a life of its own in many ways and was something that we returned to on a weekly basis. In all its time the Committee reports meetings with Ministers and Ministers of State on ten occasions. Many hours were spent with ongoing briefings of Opposition spokespersons, 12 public meetings, issues raised in Dáil 38 times, numerous meetings with local public representatives, weekly telephone contact with DES, two marches to Dáil Eireann, and poster and car sticker campaigns, Monthly reports to the local newsletter, liaising with local trustees, Meath County Council, letter campaigns to TD's, letter writing competitions, petitions, float on St Patrick' Day Parade.

While the struggle was going on, our young people were leaving Ashbourne each school day by (up to 18) buses or car and would not return until the late hours each evening. That meant that there was no life in the town during the school day and that drove us on in our determination to see this through to a positive final conclusion of the Committee's single objective – to witness Ashbourne Community School open its doors to the local second level pupils.

Mr. Noel Dowley, the appointed architect for the entire project was later to receive a number of awards for the Building Design and Planning from a greenfield site to the most purposeful built second level school structure in Ireland.

**David McCarthy-Smith**  
in conversation with

**Áine O'Sullivan, Principal, April 2015**  
**Ciarán Ó Maithiú (General Editor)**

**Scéal Na Scoile 20, 170-page book, available Eason's (Ashbourne) or School Reception**



## Ministers of Education.

John Wilson	15/07/1977-30/06/1981	Gemma Hussey	14/12/1982-13/02/1986
John Boland	01/07/1981-09/03/1982	Patrick Cooney	14/02/1986-10/03/1987
Dr. Martin O'Donoghue	09/03/1982-06/10/1982	Mary O'Rourke	11/03/1987-13/11/1991
Charles J Haughey	06/10/1982-27/10/1982	Noel Davern	14/11/1991-11/02/1992
Gerard Brady	27/10/1982-14/12/1982	Seamus Brennan	12/02/1992-12/01/1993
		Niamh Bhreathnach	13/01/1993-17/11/1994

## A.C.S. BOARD OF MANAGEMENT HOLD FIRST MEETING

*The inaugural meeting of the Board of Management for Ashbourne Community School was held in Ashbourne House Hotel a week before Christmas. This was a very successful and historic meeting with considerable progress being made since towards the opening of the new Community School this September 1994.*

Building of the 650-pupil school commenced last May and despite the weather, progress is 'on line' according to the Department and accommodation will be ready for September next.

The Board's most immediate concern was for the appointment of a Principal and Vice-Principal. Interviews for Principal are expected to be held in the first week in February. On selection of the Principal, the Board will invite applications for the Vice-Principal and then, the teachers. A brief resumé of the main progress to date is:

- Insertion of advertisements for the Principal's position in the national papers.
- Selection of the two teacher representatives to complete the composition of the Board.
- Setting-up of the school's catchment area with the Department of Education and Bus Eireann.
- Confirmation of the likely enrolment from the parents with children to be placed in

1st, 2nd and transition year classes next September (with the kind assistance of the Ashbourne Second Level School Committee).

- Setting-up of enrolment procedures for the issue (shortly) of an Application Form for each child directly to their parents.
- The pursuance of a number of local issues with the appropriate authorities such as main road lighting, access traffic lights, etc.

### CATCHMENT

The Department of Education and Bus Eireann assisted the Board in establishing the catchment area covering children living in the vicinity of the following schools:

Ardcath N.S., Ashbourne - St. Declan's N.S., St. Mary's N.S. and Gaelscoil na Cille, Curraha N.S., Cushenstown N.S., Garristown N.S., Kilbride N.S. (shared), Kilcoskan N.S., Rathfeigh N.S., and Ratoath N.S. (shared). The 'sharing' provides that Bus Eireann school buses will be available

to Kilbride and Ratoath covering separately Dunshaughlin Community College and Ashbourne Community School to eligible children.

Most parents of children in 6th class have already been contacted by the Ashbourne Second Level Committee requesting an 'intent' for enrolment and the confirmations so far indicate a tremendous interest by parents to send their children next September. There are also a number of parents expressing an interest in sending present 2nd level children to 2nd and transition year classes from this September. It is the Board's intention to accommodate these additional classes if the interest is sufficient, which is likely to be the case, and enrolment forms will issue.

The Board is presently finalising the listing for enrolment forms for 6th class. A separate form will be issued directly to each parent early in February for completion and immediate return.



The Board of Management of Ashbourne Community School pictured at the first meeting in Ashbourne House Hotel (from left) Liam O'Donnell C.E.O., Nicholas Killian, Mary Wallace T.D., Liam King, David McCarthy-Smith (Chairman), Fr. Martin Burke P.P., John O'Sullivan, Meg Houlihan. (Pic. Joe Fanning)



