

Scoil Náisiúnta Baile an Phiarsaigh – A Celebration of Our School Building 1954-2019

It was on Sunday 19th Sept 1954 when the doors of the current school building of Piercestown National School were officially opened and blessed. On June 26th, 2019, an event was held to cast our thoughts back to this time and how our much loved school building has grown over the past 65 years. Invitations were extended to the whole school community, both past and present, and we were delighted to have such a wonderful turn out on the day. The school PE hall was transformed into a ‘museum’ of sorts, with artefacts and timelines on display all around the room for our special guests to enjoy.

If you can close your eyes and imagine being transported back in a time machine, I want you to picture yourself in 1954. You are entering the building, but the building comprises of just four classrooms! It was another 20 years, 1974 before the next four classrooms were built onto the school. Three years later, 1977 saw the first phone being installed in the school. I wonder how many times it rang compared to how many times it rings in 2019! 1980 saw two more classrooms being built, with additional land being given by the county council. 1982 was the year the much-loved mural on the gable end as you enter the school grounds was painted by a group of children from Belfast. If I catapult you back to 2019, this mural is still played with EVERY morning with the children playing colours! While time passes, thankfully the wonderful concept of free play doesn’t!

1987 saw the PE hall being built to replace the old PE hall and kitchen and these were converted into two classrooms. It must be acknowledged of how forward thinking and proactive the management at Piercestown were, with some schools in 2019 only aspiring to have a PE hall and surrounding play spaces like us today.

2014 saw the latest extension, one classroom, two special education rooms, staff toilet, disabled toilet and a staff room. Not to let standards fall, with the departure of one principal Mr. Barrett and the arrival of another Ms. Laura Walsh, the works in Piercestown N.S. continued.

2016 saw Summer works scheme, upgrade and add toilets to all classrooms with the exception of 5th and 6th class having their own toilets in the corridor upgraded. 2017 saw play panels being added to the playground, 2018 saw a successful application for emergency works with the work on the upgrade of fire safety taking place at Easter 2019. 2018-2019 saw the completion of two new amazing spaces ‘Tranquillity room and Tranquillity outdoor Space’.

The passing of time brings the ‘coming and going’ of old and new faces. 1954 – 2019 has seen new principals, from Mr. Matthew Cleary who ran the boys’ school and Mrs. Sheila Stafford who ran the girls’ school, to Mr. Tim Galvin who took over in 1962-1983. He was then succeeded by Mr. Eamonn Barrett, who hung up his chalk in August 2014 and the arrival of Ms. Laura Walsh.

On display at the celebrations, the managers, who through the years had to oversee all elements of school life, were also documented. There have been eight managers in the last 65 years starting in 1954 with Fr. Patrick Quaid and bringing us up to 2019 with Fr. John O'Reilly.

While it was the 65th anniversary of our school building, it was indeed also the 65th anniversary of one of our school managers. Fr. Jim Curtis was manager of Piercestown N.S. from 1977-1990, and it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge not only his contribution to Piercestown N.S. but his 65 years of service in the Church. And not forgetting our current manager, who goes above and beyond the call of duty, we acknowledge Fr. John O'Reilly also on the celebration of his 40 years Jubilee celebrations.

These managers had the weight of the school on their shoulders until the introductions of the first Board of Management in 1975. At this point, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all members of the Board of Managements over the past 44 years. The work completed in a voluntary capacity is to be commended and 2019 is not different. To all of you who give up of your time so willingly we salute you. 2019-2023 sees a new Board of Management in situ from Dec 1st and we look forward to working with them.

Fr. Curtis summed up during his role of Manager or what we now call Chairperson of the Board of Management in the following lines

“In the midst of pleasantness, there is always a fly in the ointment. Every silver lining has a cloud! I found the ‘fly’ and the ‘cloud’ in dealing with the department of education. For example, if one were not prepared to be patient and to have a sense of humour, organising the building of a school extension could be a most frustrating experience”. I am sure elements of this ring true in 2019!

John Price over the years has been a pupil, parent, member of the Board of Management and undeniably a stalwart of the community. An extract that he wrote out of the 150th anniversary book for Piercestown N.S. was included on the day to create a snapshot of school life in 1954. One element of this snapshot recalled the passing of a pupil Robbie McGuire. Family members of Robbie were present on our day of celebrations and this allowed us a special moment to acknowledge and pray for past members of our school community who are no longer with us. Ar Dheis Dé go raibh a n-anam. Grace O’Connor (6th class 2019) then shared her memories to create a snapshot of school life in 2019.

‘Tranquility Spaces’ are officially opened

The 65th Anniversary provided us with the opportunity to acknowledge all that has gone before whilst also celebrating all things new also. This celebration gave us the opportunity to officially open our new ‘Tranquility Spaces’.

2016 saw a Piercestown Parents’ Association led by Jessie Harrington as Chairperson embrace a wonderful fundraiser called ‘Who wants to be a Thousand Aire’. Alongside Jessie were Claire O’Rourke, Ann O’ Mahony, Lisa and Bobby Kenny, Jenny and Keith Cullen, Emma and Philip Jeffares, Irene and Ger Kelly, Miriam Stafford and anybody else who helped in this mammoth task – this was no sponsored walk, or cake sale, this was a huge event, that took months of organisations, co-ordination and sponsorship. It culminated in an amazing night of fun, facts, and above all major fundraising in the region of €15,000and with such funds raised consultation around the spend was required. After much consultation and consideration with all stakeholders, it was agreed to ring fence the money for children with special educational needs within our mainstream setting and so ‘Tranquillity’ was born. It grew from initially the idea of a small sensory room to an amazing space where children and all who entered it could relax, take a break from the quite often sensory overload that exists in day to day life and just simply be. But we were not satisfied with just one space, we dared to dream. We dared to dream of expanding Tranquillity to include both an indoor and outdoor space. And in the words of Walt Disney, “If you can dream it, you can do it”!

A timeline of photos on the day illustrated the ‘Tranquillity journey’ from that fundraiser in 2016 to its official launch on 26th June. Some things are worth the wait. We were also delighted to announce that in what appeared to be the lining up of the stars, Piercestown N.S. was approached in January 2019 by the Special Education Needs Officer in Wexford and asked if our school would be interested

in establishing a class for children with Autism. Both staff and the Board of Management were delighted for our school community to embrace this opportunity and we opened our doors on this classroom in August 2019! Another landmark for the year 2019 and our school!!

We took inspiration from the mural originally painted by thirty-six of Mrs. Barrett's 4th class pupils in 1995. This opportunity had arisen as part of a partnership with the Wexford Arts centre and a rural arts project. The original mural was that of a jungle. It took several months to complete. In 2014, former student, Michelle Howlin noticed that the mural could do with an update! And being very proactive, she came up with the wonderful idea of getting in contact with her former classmates involved in painting the original mural 19 years previously and all agreed to return to redo the mural. On 25th June 2014, the updated mural was complete, and the new underwater theme was unveiled. Classmates who contributed were Michelle Howlin, Sarah Thorpe, Aoife McGuire, Helen Monahan, Sharon Stacey, Nicola Curran, Ciara Boggan, Claire Juggins, Karina Browne, PJ Byrne, Paul Cullen, David Doyle, Ronan Berry, Niall Butler and Andrew Doyle. This underwater theme was the inspiration for the Tranquillity room. This indoor underwater theme was designed and painted by 6th class pupils of 2019 and members of our very own school staff, Miss Julie Sinnott, Miss Grainne Taylor, Ms. Susan Ryan, Ms. Fiona Roche, Mr. Bryan Barnes and Ms. Michelle Hearne.

We were delighted to have an audience to officially launch our 'Tranquillity Room and Outdoor Tranquillity Space' and not only that but to have one of the original artists Michelle Howlin Bradley and her then 4th class teacher, Mrs. Mary Barrett, on hand to officially open the outdoor space having played such a part in its creation five years ago before our tranquillity dream was born. Fr. O'Reilly cut the ribbon to officially open our 'Tranquility Room' and Michelle Howlin (Bradley) and Mrs. Mary Barrett did us the honour of cutting the ribbon on our 'Outdoor Tranquility Space'.

So from start to finish, through mass, speeches, music and ribbon cutting we were transported back in time to 1954 and returned to 2019 within a matter of hours. It was a wonderful event, allowing old connections to be rekindled and new connections to be made. But above all it allowed our school and the various milestones to be celebrated.