

SUMMER SCHOOLS IN CORNWALL

The moving force behind the notion of Summer Schools in Cornwall originally came from a community holiday, led by Sr. Mary Cuthbert, and the school community which was then located at Shirley Court in the grounds of Coloma Convent Girls School. Prior to the move from central Croydon to the Shirley Hills, the community, which was quite large - about 30 Sisters - used to go to Seaton in two batches for two weeks' holiday. We stayed in a boarding school run by some Sisters who kindly allowed us to use their accommodation for our holidays. There was easy access to the beach and a very interesting Nature Reserve at Lyme Regis, which could be accessed from the beach, provided the requisite permission had been obtained beforehand. As I was a geology student at the time that wasn't difficult to obtain.

I'm not quite sure why it was decided that we should go further afield to the next county from Devon, namely Cornwall. Sr. Mary Cuthbert was very keen on Padstow as a location because at that time there was a church, a little wooden one in the High Street where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, served on Sundays by the Canons Lateran from Bodmin. On weekdays we went to Mass at what was then the oldest Carmelite foundation in England, called Lanherne.



Looking at Sr. Mary Cuthbert with her blue eyes, ruddy complexion and very strong features, it was easy to imagine that she might have had forebears who were smugglers, if not actually pirates! Her mother had been housekeeper at Lanherne and she had attended the Teignmouth Convent as a boarder.

The first time we went to Padstow we stayed in Flagship House, a three-storey property on Duke Street. I think the first time we went there, there must have been 12 of us. I remember sharing a room with two sisters from Ireland, the Mahers, who were also blood sisters. They slept in the double bed and I slept in a single bed jammed across the bottom of the double bed. However, we were on holiday and nobody minded. After 8 o'clock Mass at Lanherne we returned to make a picnic lunch and then sallied forth in the minibus with our swimming things and, having parked somewhere suitable, we were foot-loose and fancy-free until it was time to return to prepare the evening meal and celebrate Evening Prayer together. Often we went for a walk on the cliffs after supper and in lieu of our early start we were happy to be in bed by 9.30. At that stage we were still wearing the full habit. I remember one morning we were sitting on the cliffs above the Padstow estuary, about 5 of us. A car stopped, a lady got out and asked if she might take our photograph - she found us so picturesque! She took our address and actually sent us a copy.

As a result of going regularly to Mass at Lanherne, Sr. Mary Cuthbert became acquainted with the parish priest there. He asked if we would consider coming for longer and holding a Catechetical Summer School for the Catholic children in the RAF camp at St. Eval, as well as others from the surrounding villages. So it was agreed that the following year we would go to Padstow for 4 weeks. The first two would be devoted to giving Catechism classes to as many Catholics as could be assembled in the Primary School on the base, where the

married quarters were located. (The last two weeks would be holiday time). Sr. Sheila Moloney, then known as Sr. Mary James (Sheila Moloney), and myself used to go round and pick up children from the outlying villages whose parents had no access to transport. Those in Padstow came in on the RAF bus that served the married quarters there, and other children came from as far afield as Truro and St. Mawes, and were brought by their parents. All in all, there were nearly 80 children and the camp was a resounding success. Every morning we taught the children and ended with Mass. After everyone had been returned home we had a quick lunch and then in the afternoon set off to visit the families of the children we were teaching. It was an eye opener to find out how lonely some of the RAF wives and mothers were. Although on a sunny day the camp looked quite attractive, we also knew first-hand that it was one of the few places in England where it rained horizontally, and where you would have fog or rain or unremitting sea mist for days on end.



Mothers confined to the house with small children felt very isolated during the long Summer. Later, an enterprising Station Commander's wife did quite a lot to improve conditions for the wives of the airmen and non-commissioned officers. She organised activities and generally made life in the married quarters a lot more pleasant. During the fortnight we prepared children for first Confession, first Communion and for Confirmation, within their appropriate age groups. The first Communion was a great event and at the very end of the Summer School there was a day's outing to Bude. Sr. Sheila never ceases to remind me of the time I reprimanded a child for his behaviour at the pool. Unfortunately I didn't have my glasses on and Sr. Sheila hissed in my ear *"He's not one of our's"*. In turn, I never cease to remind her of the time that she climbed on the coach full of children ready to depart for home after their day out, held aloft triumphantly a small pair of knickers and demanded in brisk terms that their owner identify themselves. Needless to say, no-one did so some parent will have found her child minus their underwear, which must have raised some questions.

One incident that stands out in my mind was the time I managed to lock the keys of the minibus in the van with all our clothes inside and we, in our bathing suits, standing forlornly around. Rather than wait for the AA to come, Sr. Sheila, clad only in her bathing costume, accepted the kind offer of a gentleman to drive her back to Padstow to get the spare key. The street in which we were staying was jam packed so she had to abandon the car at the top of the town, run the length of the High Street in her bathing costume, go into the house, fetch the keys and run back up the street still in her bathing costume. It never occurred to her to put some clothes on whilst she had the opportunity! About an hour later she made it back to the car park where we were still waiting. Were we glad to see her, but were full of mirth to behold her still just in a bathing suit! Once reunited with our habits we were new women, and of course totally unrecognisable from the bathing-suited bevy of young women who had previously adorned the car park on the cliff.

After the success of the first year we continued to run the Summer School for the next ten years and that was how a permanent community came to be founded in Cornwall in the late 1970s. The DMJs ministered there for another 30 years until lack of personnel necessitated the closure of the Padstow community. However, we still have a small

presence there in the shape of two Sisters, one living in St. Columb and one living in Bodmin, both serving their neighbourhoods according to their individual talents.

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