

22/05/2001

Humble beginnings

Elizabeth John

ST NICHOLAS Convent was named after Father Nicholas Barre, a 17th-century French priest who spent his life seeing to the needs of educating the poor. He opened several free schools in France.

Such schools were then established all over France and worldwide by the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus.

The first such school to be established for girls in Malaysia was the Convent Light Street in Penang in 1851.

St Nicholas Convent in Alor Star was established in 1934 as an annex of Convent Light Street.

The school, according to Tunku Datuk Ismail Jewa who studied there for a year while waiting to be admitted into Sultan Abdul Hamid College, was significant in Kedah history because it was the first private English school for girls opened by the Catholic Mission in Alor Star and the second in the State after Father Barre's Convent in Sungai Petani.

It opened on Feb 6 that year in a building just off Jalan Langgar, now known as Jalan Merpati, with an enrolment of just 58 students, consisting of both boys and girls of different ages.

It also had a staff of four - Mrs Bently as the Supervisor, May Augustin, Freda Foong and Madeline Choong.

In July 1934, Mrs Bently and Mary Augustin were transferred, and in August the same year, Miss M. Lawrence came from Bukit Mertajam to become the new Supervisor and later its first headmistress.

In December 1934, the school was relocated to the Royal House in the Kanchut area in Alor Star with the help and consent of the royal family who helped tremendously in the early development of the school by providing financial assistance as well as moral support.

When World War II broke out, the school was forced to close as the Japanese occupied most of the English schools and converted them into Japanese schools.

St Nicholas Convent was closed between Nov 15, 1941, and Oct 28, 1945.

After the war, the school was again relocated to the residence of Che Menjalara's daughter, Tunku Habsah at No 6. Kampung Perak, and had an enrolment of 144 students.

Within a year, this number had grown to 275 but the year 1946 also saw the end of a co-educational Convent as the boys departed due to a lack of accommodation.

In 1948, the enrolment shot up to 340 students and Miss M. Sibert joined the staff with two other teachers.

On April 7 the following year, the school moved to its present site. It had a block of six classrooms and 416 students.

In February 1950, it became a Government-aided school, and two years later, its students began wearing the first pleated pinafore and white blouse uniforms.

The primary and secondary schools now have a combined enrolment of 2,012 students.

The all-girls school has been the choice of many daughters of the Kedah royal house including the present Sultan of Kedah's daughter, Datuk Seri Tunku Intan Safinaz, and the Ruler's sister, Tunku Bishara.

It has educated Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir, the daughter of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as well as the niece and nephew of Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Another student who passed through its halls is Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail.

(END)