



Stonyhurst College
JESUIT BASTION IN AN
ANGLICAN LAND

*Born in exile in Saint-Omer, this great institution of English Catholicism
in the heart of the Lancashire countryside, perpetuates the excellence of
the educational principles laid down by Ignatius of Loyola.*

By our special correspondents Jean-Marc Gonin (text) and Marc Roussel (photographs)

The façade of Stonyhurst College as seen as one drives down the Avenue, the main approach to the building. It is one of the largest buildings in Europe.

Stonyhurst College occupies one of the largest buildings in Europe after Versailles.

This is not a place one finds by accident. Sixty or so kilometres north of Manchester, and about 400 kilometres from London, in the heart of the verdant county of Lancashire, nestled in the Ribbles Valley and dominated by the great Pendle Hill, Stonyhurst appears to be in the back of beyond. A long way off the main road network, one makes one's way along charming lanes which wind through farmland in order to reach the entrance to the estate. Then a few hundred metres under overhanging foliage lead to a statue of the Virgin Mary on a high pedestal, perched on top of a hillock. Turn to the right, and there is a surprise: at the far end of a dead straight driveway – 'The Avenue' – behind an iron gate and bordered on either side by two lakes, stands a majestic grey stone façade, surmounted by two turrets. It is like arriving at a royal palace, but in fact one is entering the most prestigious Catholic educational establishment in England. 'Stonyhurst College occupies one of the biggest buildings in Europe after Versailles,' points out John Browne (51), headmaster of this venerable institution. 'With 900 rooms and 2000 windows, the heating bill is £30,000 (£33,000 per week!)' But there would never be any question of leaving this ruinously expensive dwelling, for it is the living incarnation of the resilience of Catholicism in England, for so long persecuted by the Crown. Last year the College celebrated its 425th anniversary. Over the course of more than four centuries the College shared the trials and tribulations undergone by English Catholics following the split from Rome in 1534 and the creation of the Anglican Church. In fact the foundation of the College owes itself to the Jesuit

Act, a law passed in the reign of Elizabeth I in 1584 which paved the way for the persecution and execution of Catholic priests. In 1593 Jesuit Father Robert Persons founded an educational establishment on the far side of the Channel in Saint-Omer, then part of the Spanish Netherlands. On the town maps of the period the house is named as that of the 'English Jesuits.' The school started with a handful of pupils – seven to begin with – sent in secret by their parents to receive a Catholic education. Registered under false names in order to protect their families back in England from royal reprisals, these young people also had to beware of spies sent to Saint-Omer to denounce them.

GIRLS SINCE 1999

As time went on, difficulties for the Jesuits, first in France and then with the kingdom of Spain, forced the College to move to Bruges (1762), and then to Liège (1773), before returning to England in flight from the perils of the French Revolution in 1794. It was then that a former pupil, Thomas Weld, cousin of the Duchess of Norfolk, grateful for the education he had received, gifted the Stonyhurst Estate (a large house and 12 hectares of land) to the Jesuit school he had attended in Liège. The College has not moved since, although its buildings have grown considerably. And girls, who were admitted in 1999, now make up half the pupil population. 'Quant Je Puis': Stonyhurst College's motto encapsulates all its educational ambitions in these three words. Every pupil must do 'as much as they can'. The 750 pupils – 460 in the secondary school, aged from 13 to 18, and 290 in the primary school aged from 3 to 13 – undergo a complete educational experience which combines, especially for the boarders (who make up 63% of the children), academic work, various sports, →



Pupils meet up in the Quadrangle, an historic interior courtyard, adorned with the cross of Saint-Omer, erected in honour of the 21 former pupils killed for being Catholic priests.



The Arundell is a library containing a collection of thousands of volumes and artefacts, left to the College by the 'Lord' of that name.



Amongst the activities on offer to pupils, the Combined Cadet Force, a form of military training conducted by under-officers of the British Army.



That English sport 'par excellence', cricket – like rugby – is a prominent feature of Stonyhurst life.



Jesuit Father Brendan Callaghan, former pupil, welcomes students at the entrance to St Peter's Church, before celebrating the end of year Mass.



Stonyhurst is a sort of autonomous educational community where everybody, pupils and teachers, benefits from living together in a close-knit environment.

arts, music and a project to 'serve' the community. Not forgetting, of course, religious education and compulsory Mass every Sunday even for those, and they are numerous, who are not of the Catholic Faith. 'We ask a lot of them,' explains Peter Ansell who runs the French department and who will have taught at Stonyhurst for twenty-eight years when he retires this summer. 'They are very busy all day long, right up until bedtime.' It must be said that the setting lends itself to this. Far from any conurbation, Stonyhurst is a sort of autonomous educational community where everybody, pupils and teachers, benefits from living together in a close-knit environment. All of the teachers live either in the College grounds, or in the neighbouring village – it owns 68 houses. Bernard A., a pupil in 'Poetry' who comes from Biarritz, appreciates the difference. 'When I was at a lycée in France,' he says, 'the teachers just taught their lessons and we had no other contact with them. Here they are around a lot more. We even see them at weekends. At Stonyhurst I genuinely feel surrounded by teachers who give up their

free time for me and give me support.' A practising Catholic, the young Basque also finds at Stonyhurst an ambience in which he can live out his faith. But above all he cherishes the values of Jesuit pedagogy: 'they push us to give of our best.'

EDUCATION MADE TO MEASURE

A tradition of the College, the nomenclature of the various classes is specific to Stonyhurst. The 13-14 year olds are in Lower Grammar, the 14-15 year olds in Grammar, the 15-16 year olds in Syntax the 16-17 years olds in Poetry and the 17-18 year olds in Rhetoric. And the boarding house is divided into Playrooms, one for each age group, who share dormitories, games rooms and study areas etc. This excellent education, a sort of made to measure education, comes at a price of course. And it is no modest sum. Parents have to shell out £35,000 (€39,000) for one year as a secondary boarder, and £28,000 (€31,000) as a day pupil. 'But we have a big bursary scheme,' quickly interjects Stephen Withnell, 38, Director of Strategic Development. Formerly with Goldman Sachs, and educated by Jesu-

its, he made the leap last year: from merchant bank in London to Stonyhurst in deepest Lancashire. He was recruited, amongst other things, to establish a foundation which will enable Stonyhurst to award even more bursaries to Stonyhurst pupils. He hopes to emulate the structures of this sort which exist in the United States and enable children to study in the most prestigious schools and universities. Even before bringing this plan to fruition, Stephen Withnell defends the existing system. 'Our bursaries are extremely generous,' he says, 'They amount to 2.8 million pounds (3.14 million euros) per year. Around half of our British pupils receive some form of fee assistance or scholarship, some of them of a value of 50% or greater of the total fees.' Until this new manna falls from heaven, which Stephen Withnell hopes will be before the end of the year, most of Stonyhurst's children are from rich families. Whilst 50% of pupils are British, the other half come from all over the world: Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The Director of Strategy explains that there could be a lot more. 'Many

prestigious English private schools, often the most famous ones, are accepting more and more international students,' he points out, 'That is not what we want to do. At Stonyhurst we want to remain a predominantly British school, because that is also what foreign parents are looking for.'

CONCERTS AND RECITALS

Too often, in fact, these prestigious institutions have thrown open their doors, for essentially financial reasons, to the offspring of global millionaires at the risk of altering the historic image of their school, as has been the case at Harrow, an illustrious, high-society school.

When we visited Stonyhurst the College was celebrating Great Academies, the end of year festivities. An opportunity for the parents to be on campus and to watch a whole series of events from sporting challenges to cultural displays and, of course, the formal presentation of prizes. Parents from Germany, Russia, Nigeria or Mexico, strode across splendid lawns to watch their children take part in athletics relays, cricket matches or rounds

of golf. Later, seated in the theatre, they were able to listen to concerts and song recitals and applaud a drama production. 'My daughter plays the cello and my son does ballet', says Serge Acker, a Franco-American founder of a start-up in England. 'I have never come across anywhere better than Stonyhurst for them to take part in these artistic disciplines.' Other parents see another slight advantage: the isolation of the College in that Lancashire countryside shelters their children from the temptations they might come across in towns. Twenty years ago the old boys, clutching rigorously to tradition, became exercised by the arrival of co-education. Today their reproach has been forgotten, and pupils flirt here just as they would in London or Manchester. 'I have often had to advise in affairs of the heart,' admits Janet Graffius, former girls' housemistress, today curator of the museum's precious collections and the Stonyhurst library.

THE FOOTSTEPS OF CONAN DOYLE

The teaching staff aspire to excellence, but do so within the Jesuit spirit of Quant Je Puis. The Headmaster, John Browne, —————>

is of course delighted that pupils get into the best universities, notably Oxford and Cambridge, when they leave Stonyhurst. But he feels an equal sense of achievement when he sees young people who have developed their personalities and improved their abilities thanks to their time at the college. *'We are here to turn them into better adults and to send them out into the world, as Ignatius of Loyola tells us.'* An organist and music teacher by training, he is sensitive to the need for harmony and good humour to reign in his establishment. For there have been eras of greater austerity at Stonyhurst. Preserved as a relic, an

old desk carved with graffiti over generations bears the mark of one of the most famous pupils: Arthur Conan Doyle. Arriving at the College in 1868, at the age of nine, the grandfather of the detective novel was not always happy. It is said that in particular he came into conflict with strict and intransigent Jesuits. Traces of Stonyhurst can be found in his work. The name Moriarty, the sworn enemy of Sherlock Holmes, was that of some Irish twins who were fellow pupils of Doyle. And it is said that for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* the author was inspired by the surrounding countryside and especially a valley near to

the College where he is said to have set the death of Sir Charles Baskerville, attacked by the famous hound.

Amongst its former pupils Stonyhurst also counts servicemen, clergy, and even a former number two at the CIA, General Vernon Walters, a key player in the Cold War. As one reads the list one's mind recalls the saying of Ignatius of Loyola: *'Show me a child of seven, and I will show you the man.'*

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