



ST MARY'S HALL – A Brief History

The first on-campus prep school feeding into Stonyhurst College was not based at St Mary's Hall, but at Hodder Place, which took in a small number of the youngest boys as its first students in January 1807 when it was still an (at that time illegal) novitiate for the training of novices for the Jesuit priesthood. In 1821 the novices moved out and so the building became exclusively a prep school except for the period 1827 until 1853, during which time the novices returned. Whilst extensive improvements were made to the building, the Hodder boys were housed at The

College, but by 1855 the work was finished. The most remarkable subsequent change to the building, in response to an increase in the number of pupils, took place in 1870, with the addition of an extensive front with distinctive towers at each end, thus endowing the building with its most conspicuous architectural feature.

The most notable literary figure to be intimately associated with Hodder was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who, as nine-year-old Arthur Doyle entered the school and spent the next two years there. His later writing may have been influenced by the charismatic figure of a young Jesuit scholastic, Francis Cassidy SJ, who enchanted the boys each evening with his adventure stories. Later, as Fr Cassidy, he became Superior of Hodder. He and Doyle corresponded regularly until Fr Cassidy's death in 1915.

After World War Two, the older boys, aged 10-12, moved into the newly-opened prep school of St Mary's Hall. In 1971, the younger boys joined the others at St Mary's Hall and Hodder finally closed as a school.

The original building – now forming the central block – was built between 1828 and 1830, when it was dubbed 'Thin Drink Hall' by the workman because of the poor quality of the ale they were given to drink. It opened in July 1830 - not as a school but as a seminary for young Jesuits training for the priesthood. The number of occupants continued to grow and new wings were added in 1882. It was at about this time that the building was first given the name 'St Mary's Hall' having previously been always referred to as 'The Seminary'. It continued as a seminary until 1926, when the seminarians moved to Heythrop Hall in Oxfordshire, after which it remained empty until the Second World War, except for a short time in the early 1930s when some of the rooms were converted into dormitories and a small number of the younger boys from the College slept there but spent their days and had all their meals at the College.

When Italy declared war in 1940 the community of the Venerable English College in Rome, a seminary for training priests for England Wales, were invited to occupy St Mary's Hall. They stayed until 1946. It was after this that the building became, for the first time, a preparatory school, although for some years really a kind of Middle School as the long-established preparatory school at Hodder continued to accommodate the youngest boys until it closed in 1971. Since 1946 there have been many improvements to the building and the facilities, one of the most noteworthy being the Centenaries Theatre, opened in 1994 as part of the bicentenary celebrations marking two-hundred years of Stonyhurst as a school.

Two extremely prominent literary figures are associated with St Mary's Hall: the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who spent three years there as a seminarian in the early 1870s, and Professor J R R Tolkien, whose eldest son John was one of the members of the English College community who lived there during WW2 and was paid regular visits by his father.

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