

History of Downey House

During the latter part of 1953 there were frequent occasions when a car entered Pirrie Park and slowly drove to Downey House School and round as much of the grounds as could be reached. This car brought Mr. William M. Fullerton, then in advancing years, and it was his great joy to be able to see the fruits of bold action he had instigated over twenty years earlier. In a very real sense William Fullerton was responsible for founding Downey House, rather than John Downey after whom it is named.

Mr John W. Henderson, the then Principal of the Methodist College Belfast, threw himself with zeal into the founding of the new school. He liked nothing better than having a blank sheet on which to work. The December 1932 issue of the M.C.B. magazine contained a long paragraph that revealed his outlook and attitude. "Few, if any, schools can have set out on their mission with auspices as happy and favourable as will the Downey House School when it opens in February. Its buildings are a joy to the educator who desires to experiment soundly with idealism and experience, and the last possible thought and the deepest possible care have been spent in beautifying and furnishing its magnificent rooms with comfort, dignity and brightness to make a joyous home for a school of the future which aims at giving its children zest and artistry as their knowledge and pleasure and individuality for their ways....".

Downey House was opened in 1933 following the purchase of Pirrie Park, from Harland and Wolff, as the College playing fields. The existing buildings were modernised and extended to provide excellent facilities in an ideal setting.

The opening school day was Wednesday, 1st February. Eleven were in attendance that day, with one more definitely enrolled who could not attend until the following Monday, by which time a further two joined with two more the next day, making 16 in all. The number increased to 22 before the end of the school year.

The big event of the year in 1954 was the celebration of the 21st Birthday of Downey House School. "Coming-of-age" was still at 21 years then and so this marked quite a stage in the life of the school. On Thursday 28th January, exactly 21 years after the official opening in 1933, Mr W. M. Fullerton was chief guest at a short commemorative ceremony. There was a short service of thanksgiving conducted by the College Chaplain, the Rev S. Douglas Dunlop, and the Benediction was pronounced by the President of the Methodist College in Ireland, the Rev. Dr. R. M. L. Waugh.

Extracts from: "Downey House School - The First Fifty Years 1933-1983", by Mr. Frederick Jeffery (Master-in-Charge 1945-1966)