

Archive News

NEWSLETTER OF THE IBVM, INSTITUTE & IRISH PROVINCE ARCHIVES

Childhood, York, vocation, novitiate, foundation in Ireland



Welcome to our second newsletter to mark the bicentenary of the branch of Mary Ward's Institute established by Frances Teresa Ball in 1821.

In this issue, we decided to focus on her childhood, education in the Bar Convent York, novitiate and return to Ireland.

Much of this will be familiar to many, so we have tried to root out new sources, and use some of the archival records in our care to illustrate the newsletter.

We hope you enjoy it, and welcome any feedback on our newsletters. Don't forget to check out our online exhibition!



Frances Ball—Childhood

Frances Ball was the fifth and youngest child born to John Ball and Mable Clare Bennett on 09 January 1794.

The Dublin into which she was born was a city of rapid change, and vast wealth. At the end of the 1700's, Dublin was the second city of the British Empire, and boasted an impressive street architecture and cultural life. Her father John Ball, (d. 1804), was a wealthy merchant, described as a ribbon weaver, silk merchant and haberdasher. Initially working in partnership, under 'Ball & Woodhouse' at 5 Werburgh Street, he later operated on his own. By the time of Frances Ball's birth in 1794, he owned three separate premises in Dublin: Castle Street, Nicholas Street and Werburgh Street.



John Ball (d. 1804) father of Frances Ball.
Portrait by Comerford

As laws preventing Catholic participation in politics and civil society were repealed, John Ball took advantage of his wealth and growing position in society to exert his influence. In 1792, he was a member of the Catholic Convention and a year later in 1793, was the first Catholic to be a grand juror for Dublin.

His wealth can be assessed by his decision in 1793, to move his family from their home above their merchant premises at 5 Werburgh Street, to the newly built and upmarket Eccles Street, occupying 47 Eccles Street (now 63). It was in this house on 6th January 1794 that Frances Ball was born. This was the happy home of Frances and her siblings for many years.

A typical merchant building of Dublin in the 18th century, consisted of a shop at ground level, and accommodation above, where the merchant and his family resided. The upper floors were accessed by a separate door on the street level. John Ball probably lived and conducted his business in a similar house on Werburgh Street.



4 Castle Street Dublin

Frances and her siblings enjoyed the trappings of wealth and privilege that their father's business acumen provided. However, they were part of the emerging Catholic middle class that began to exert its social conscience, and throughout their lives remained engaged in social work.

Biographies of Frances Teresa Ball highlight the important role played by her parents in instilling in their children an awareness of the needs of others.

Frances Teresa Ball—Education

The education available to young women like the daughters of John and Mabel Ball, in Dublin in the late 1700's/early 1800's, was limited, at home with governesses and tutors; day schools of varying quality run by schoolmistresses. There was only one female boarding school in the city of Dublin which remained open during the penal laws, run by the Dominican community at Channel Row, Dublin, although enrolment 'rarely rose above fifteen students.' (M Hatfield p. 139) There was a limited number of convents in Ireland in 1800; there were 12 convents and 4 religious orders (M Hatfield, p 140).

John and Mabel Ball decided to send their eldest daughter, Cecilia to the Ursuline Convent in Cork for schooling. In 1800, in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, the 24 hour journey by coach to Cork was deemed too dangerous to undertake, and like many other wealthy Catholics, John and Mabel decided to send their three younger children Anna Maria 15, Isabella 13, and Nicholas 9, to England for their education. Anna Maria and Isabella enrolled at St Mary's Convent (Bar Convent), York while Nicholas enrolled at Stonyhurst, a Jesuit College in Lancashire.

Three years later in 1803, 9 year old Frances followed her older Sisters to St Mary's Convent, York, where she would remain for five years. In contrast, her older sisters had only remained 3 years, which was probably the average amount of time a pupil spent in the school. There were no visits from parents or holidays home during this time in school, and it must have been a relief when they greeted their mother and youngest sister again in 1803.

The curriculum in York included Theology, Latin, French, Spanish and Music; the inclusion of Latin reflecting the programme of studies outlined by Mary Ward in the 16th century. French was the language of the school and spoken freely by both pupils and teachers.



A tableau vivant of Anna Maria Ball and Frances in the garden at York, 1903 Loreto College, Ballarat, Australia.

(We thank Robin Scott, Australian Province Archivist for this photograph)

'Seek First the Kingdom of God ...'

Reunited after 3 years, Frances aged 9 must surely have relished the brief opportunity to spend time with her two older sisters, Anna Maria and Isabella before they returned once again to Ireland with her mother. According to stories Frances re-told her companions in later years, at this reunion in 1803, she walked in the gardens in York with Anna Maria who gave Frances hints and tips on surviving boarding school. During this conversation, Anna Maria urged Frances to adopt as her motto in school, **'Seek First the Kingdom of God**

Frances Ball—Vocation & Novitiate



Frances Ball remained in York until 1808, when she returned home to Dublin to act as companion to her widowed mother. Her father had died in October 1804, aged 76, a year after she had left for York. Frances had grieved her father's death in York, and the loss of a loved one at a remove from friends and home, left an indelible mark on the adult Frances would become. According to her biographers, ever afterwards Frances had great difficulty in telling anyone of the death of a family member.

A return to the life of wealth and privilege awaited the 14 year old Frances, and she eagerly embraced the social life available to a wealthy young woman. The social awareness and action which had been a feature of early childhood remained, and she joined her mother and married sisters in acts of charity and philanthropy.

During this time, Frances gradually understood that she was to follow a vocation into religious life.

In September 1814, Frances returned to St Mary's Convent (Bar Convent) York, where she was received as a novice.

Frances was professed in 1816, but remained in York for a further five years until 1821.

Her novitiate was a momentous time on which the future of the proposed undertaking of a new house or branch of the Institute depended. Her biographers claim that the Mistress of Novices in York, tried her in every way and left nothing undone to create a perfectly formed religious.

At times Teresa's confidence wavered, and she confided her doubts about her ability to undertake the role of founding a new house of the Institute in Dublin, and her own greater happiness if she remained in York.

'I cannot admit the accuracy of your calculations respecting your greater prospect of future happiness in your present state [in York], compared to what your situation here [in Dublin] would afford.'

Throughout her life, Teresa regarded York and the community in York, as the birthplace of her vocation and a 'sister house' of those that she would found in Ireland and later abroad.

Photograph: miniature portrait of Frances Ball, encased in locket with plaited lock of her hair. This portrait was most likely painted in 1814 prior to her return to York and kept by her mother throughout her lifetime.

The establishment of the school and community were arduous tasks, in which Teresa Ball excelled, her skills for administration and financial management coming to the fore. Aware of her responsibility for the pupils in her care, letters to parents were frequently sent from Teresa Ball's desk. Letters to parents were written for a variety of reasons, reporting on pupil progress, seeking payment for outstanding bills and with accounts of childhood illness. In 1825, Teresa Ball wrote to Mrs Irwin, mother of pupil, Margaret who had been struck with scarlet fever, but was recovering. Teresa recommended that Margaret take a glass of wine daily and suggested that Mrs Irwin arrange for bottles of suitable wine to be sent to the Abbey to assist in her daughter's recovery!

The success of the first foundation and school can be measured in the number of invitations Teresa received, from 1833 onwards, to open new schools, including a foundation in Navan. This was swiftly followed by schools in Dublin, and throughout the country.

In 1821, a tough task lay ahead of Teresa Ball, training the young Sisters, overseeing the refurbishment of Rathfarnham House, and organising the school. It fell to her to create the spirit and atmosphere in the house, to instil in the young Sisters the skills to train and form the characters of the young children under their care. Devoted to education and the relief of the poor, she was reluctant to expand the Institute beyond Ireland, but was persuaded to establish communities in seven countries before her death. By her death in 1861, 37 houses had been established throughout seven countries. Regular correspondence with each new community, informing them of events in other houses, helped form a strong and lasting bond between all houses of the Institute.



Irish Foundations made by Teresa Ball 1822—1860

Dublin Foundations: Rathfarnham 1822, St Stephen's Green 1833, Dalkey 1841, North Great George's Street 1846, Clontarf 1847, Bray 1850



Pupils from Leeson Lane National School, c. 1903—1906. Photographed by M. Michael Corcoran IBVM

The National School was the successor of the 'free school' opened on the St Stephen's Green campus in the 1840's.