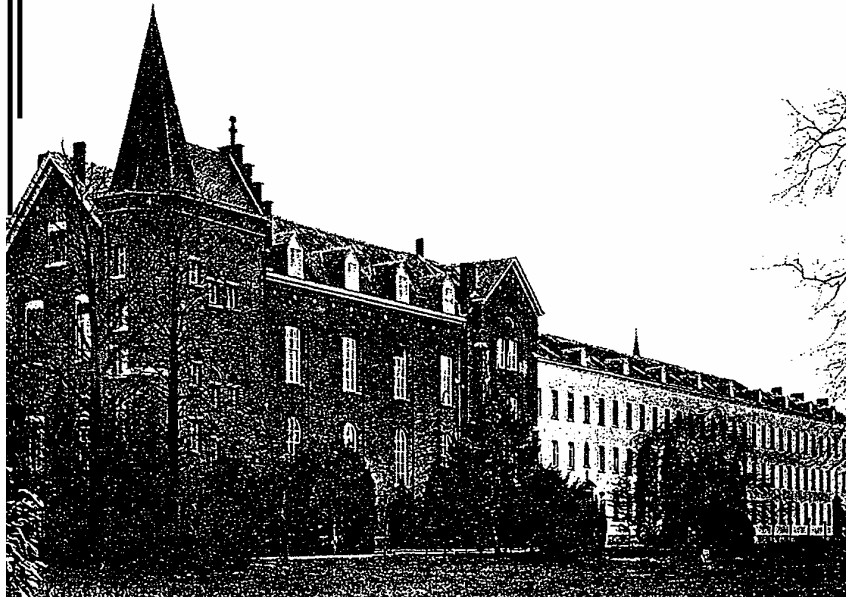


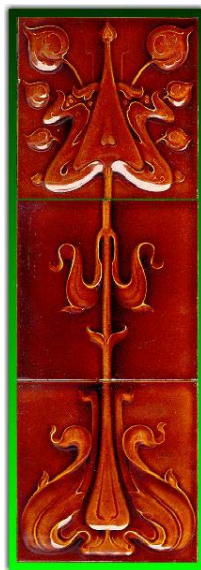
*TILDONK*  
*Echo 2003*



## ANNUAL REUNION

This took place on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003 at the Charing Cross Hotel. It was a splendid occasion: 70 Old Tildonkers were there, some with relatives, and two had come all the way from the States! There were three special guests: Barbara Bliss, who for many years typed the "Echo" for the printers, and Bob and Ann Powell who brought the sampler made by Bob's grandmother when she was a pupil at Tildonk, together with an album of contemporary photographs which we all found fascinating. We were also very glad to welcome back Sœur Bernadette after an absence of two years. She came over with Rosette and Vic and brought news of Tildonk.

The next Reunion will be held at the Charing Cross Hotel on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2004 from 2.30pm to 4.30pm. Do come if you possibly can and encourage any Old Tildonkers who might feel shy or think they won't know anybody to come all the same. They will be welcomed with open arms.



## GENERAL NEWS

### The Community

The general news, I'm afraid, is not good. There are now only 13 nuns in the Community. In the 1920s and 1930s there were about 150. There are 7 Tildonk nuns at Melsbroek: Sœur Stanislas, Sœur Rita, Sœur Paule (Tildonk and Laeken), Sœur Dionyse, who lectured in English at Ranchi University and later was on the staff of the Generalate and Sœur Elise, who was also a missionary in India, but she was a nurse. The other two, Sœur Margriet, who did parish work in Louvain and Sœur Barbara, who was a missionary in India, did not settle in Tildonk until well after the closure of the International Section, so most Old Tildonkers will not know them.

When Joan and I were at Tildonk in the second part of August, Sœur Marguerite-Marie was at Melsbroek too; she was expected to return to Tildonk fairly soon. A few days earlier, just before her 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday, she fell flat on her back as she went into her room and damaged a vertebra which somehow got "pushed inwards". After a few days in hospital in Louvain, she went to Melsbroek because no one at Tildonk could look after her properly. There was no vacancy at the Home Merici, so the M.S. Kliniek next door gave her hospitality and she was very happy there. She was due to move to the Home a few days after our visit.

Sœur Lutgarde, Sœur Hildegarde (Sœur Stanislas' big sister) and Sœur Ignace, who entered at Melsbroek, came with us. As usual, we were all warmly welcomed and joined the nuns for their mid-afternoon cup of coffee and biscuits. Sœur Stanislas and Sœur Paule were having a good day. Sœur Elise, who knows she is very seriously ill and is in a wheelchair, was extremely jolly. Sœur Margriet and Sœur Barbara were at another table: both were quietly happy.

Sœur Dionyse is over 90 and Sœur Rita must be getting on for 80. Both are far too frail to leave their rooms so we went up to see them. They were as pleased to see us as we were to see them and in spite of being unable to move around were their usual lovely selves.

Joan and I were once again struck by the wonderful atmosphere at Melsbroek. I was deeply touched by the obviously genuine love in the eyes and smile of the young lay nurse who came to take Sœur Stanislas back to her room. She was like a mother dealing with a small and totally dependent child.

### Problems

Small communities like Tildonk have big problems. One is that their chapels are too large. So a change has been made in the nuns' chapel at Tildonk: a carpet has been laid in the centre aisle right up in the front and three prie-dieus and three chairs have been put either side so that the nuns are together, instead of being dotted around like islands in an archipelago. For some reason, Sœur Hildegarde and Sœur Godelieve sit at the back and Sœur Imelda takes Communion to them. Sœur Ann and Sœur Benigna and their visitors are usually at the convent Mass; so are a number of ladies from the village.

That chapel problem was not hard to resolve but there are other, more intractable, ones. The nuns are all ageing and have not the physical energy and strength they once had. But there is still work to be done. As the number of able-bodied nuns decreases, their share of work increases: their turns of duty in the réfectoire and "à la porte" come round more often and they have long duties "à la porte" because Mme Jeannine is there only on weekday mornings.

Another problem is the "de rigueur" annual retreat. In the past there were 2 retreats, one in French and one in Flemish. Later, as the Community shrank and most of the nuns spoke Flemish anyway, there was just one, in Flemish. But this year, none of the priests who lead retreats could spare the time to give one to such a small group of nuns: the priests too are ageing and are not being replaced as they were in the past. So this year, the nuns had a choice: they could make a retreat on their own, or with a few other nuns or at another convent or in a retreat centre.

In spite of all the problems, Tildonk is still a Community but it is sad that the nuns who, in the old days, would have been enjoying an honourable retirement, are still having to be very active and often wear several hats. For instance, Sœur Marguerite-Marie's absence means that Sœur Imelda has added a sacristan's hat to the others she wears. Sœur Bernadette also has a fine collection of hats: she drives the minibus, she does the catering for breakfast and the goûter-souper, and for lunch when Annemie is away; she does a lot of the shopping and finds relaxation in looking after the flowers in the Jardin des Parloirs and in the garden behind the refectory. Sœur Ignace is kept busy dealing with everyone's medication; I think her shoes would immediately go to the chemist's if they found themselves outside the front door!

The Convent cars have all been sold so visits to consultants or to anyone in hospital have to be made by taxi. Fortunately, Dr. Birgit, the Community's GP, lives and has her surgery less than 100 yards from the gates. Every other Friday afternoon she has a

session at the Convent so, except in an emergency, no one needs to go to the surgery. There is also a dentist in the village, which means no more trips to Louvain or Malines.

### **Celebrations & Excursions**

In spite of all the problems, life has not been dull. Any major church feast days are “celebrated enthusiastically”; so are others like those of St. Angela and St. Ursula and the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows – September 15<sup>th</sup> in the Tildonk Ursuline’s calendar. There were no jubilees at Tildonk this year but on May 14<sup>th</sup> all the jubilarians from other convents and most of their “consœurs” had a celebration at Tildonk.

There have also been two pilgrimages, one to Montaigne in March, the second to Banneux in July. Four or five times a year, there is a Day of Recollection for the whole Province at Tildonk and last October the nuns went on a guided tour of the headquarters of the World Missionary Aid Society at Boechout.

The Saint Curé sent nuns out to what was then the Dutch East Indies in the 1850s. A couple of years ago, a group of Indonesian Roman Union Ursulines went to Tildonk to “see where it all began”. Another group came last March. I think the Indonesian Sisters who went to Tildonk must be having a year in Rome, as part of their “training”.

Sœur Suzanne, who usually gives me the details of what has gone on in the past 12 months, did not mention the “Interursulinendag”, which is attended by Ursulines of the Tildonk Congregation or Institute (I don’t know the difference, but there is one!), Ursulines who belong to the Roman Union and, I imagine, by those who belong to neither group but are under the authority of the local bishop. It was held in Belgium last year and I think it was Holland’s turn to host it this year. I have a feeling that the different groups are growing closer to one another; after all they are all in the same boat: ageing communities and no vocations. The Tildonk Congregation now has representatives in Rome, but the Superior General is in Brussels.

There were two excursions this year, both arranged by the Provincialate. Just after Easter, the nuns had a guided tour of the Zoo at Plankendael near Malines. I seem to remember from a previous “Echo” that Fiona Sismore was bitten by a monkey there, but I may be wrong. The second was a guided tour of the city and harbour of Antwerp. That took place in June.

### **Election**

The most important event of the year was the Provincial Chapter which meets every 3 years, I think, to elect a Provincial Superior and her Assistants (also known as her Counsellors). It was held at Wilrijk from 16-18 June. To everyone’s delight, Sœur Ann was elected; the “sitting” Provincial remained in office until August 31<sup>st</sup>. Sœur Ann was Assistant to Sœur Benigna when she was Provincial, so she knows what is involved. For the past 3 or 4 years, she has been running the parish because there has been no parish priest at Tildonk since M. le Curé Ooms’ sudden death. Nor is there likely to be in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the priest who used to say Mass in the village 3 times a month can no longer do so, and the Dean of Haacht has had to take on the job, though he has 3 other parishes to look after. So Sœur Ann has been doing practically everything that a parish priest does, except say Mass, hear confessions and administer

Extreme Unction. Luckily, she has a dedicated team of helpers who do not limit their efforts to matters spiritual but will pop in to see if any shopping is needed or if there is any odd job to be done. Sœur Ann could not possibly go on looking after the parish and be Provincial as well, so she has resigned. Luckily, her team will be able to carry on, probably with advice and guidance from her and from Sister Benigna.

The Provincial has 4 Assistants: Sœur Rombaut, Sœur Lydwina, Sœur Georgette and Sœur Myriam. Sœur Rombaut (Andrée Segers) is an “ancienne”. She was at school when Belgium was invaded in 1940 and it was her father who persuaded the nuns to re-open it less than a month later. She went as a lecturer in the French Section of the Ecole Normale in Laken and, when that closed, worked at the new French Catholic University at Louvain-la-Neuve. She is a member of the Tildonk Community but does not come back every day. Sœur Lydwina, From Hoogstraten, was at Tildonk for 2 years as Assistant to Sœur Georgette. Sœur Georgette is from Wilrijk and Sœur Myriam from Borgerhout, the retiring Provincial’s “home” convent.

In the old days, all of them would have moved into the Provincialate but small communities cannot afford to let their members go off on jobs elsewhere. But there are now fewer convents and they are not too far from one another, so what with motor transport, telephones, emails and the Internet, communication should be no problem.

Sœur Ann was installed as Provincial on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> August. Joan and I were fortunate enough to be at Tildonk for the occasion. There was no morning Mass but at 4 p.m. nuns from all the other convents gathered for Mass in the church. There were other visitors apart from Joan and me; these are “Associés”, that is laymen and women who try to live up to St. Angela’s ideals and who help the nuns by their prayers and by living a really Christian life. The members of the choir came from a number of convents; they practised at home of course, but managed to have a joint rehearsal earlier that afternoon. They did splendidly with Sister Benigna as conductor.

During the Mass, Sœur Ann and her Assistants made a solemn promise to carry out their duties to the best of their ability. Sister Judith, the Superior General, administered the vows, much as a minister of religion does at a wedding. It was impressive and moving because the Province is facing enormous problems and Sœur Ann and her Assistants will certainly not have an easy ride.

But on the day of the Installation such worries were pushed aside. Everyone was delighted that Sœur Ann had been elected and the nuns from the various convents were glad to see one another. Thanks to the “General Post” and the shared excursions as well as the Interursulinendagen, they are likely to have met more than once in the past few years. By the way in the year’s “General Post” Tildonk was host to Lierre in July and was due to visit another community some time in September.

There was a splendid cold buffet served in what I think was the Novices’ refectory, which is under the sanctuary of the church. There were over 80 people there – a sad reminder of the days when there were almost as many novices. The meal was planned and served by Serge who had his business premises near the Gemeentehuis, and who for some years provided the weekend lunches for the nuns. He and his wife moved away and Serge was eventually persuaded not to work all weekend. But he made an exception for this special occasion at Tildonk. It was a wonderful spread: poached salmon, roast chicken, various cold meats, eggs, all kinds of salad, lovely fresh bread with real butter – not the health spreads the nuns usually have – with wine or beer, a

wonderful array of desserts with tea or coffee to round it all off. Everyone, I think, had two helpings, some maybe had three! There was still so much left over that Sœur Ursule, the Superior at Tildonk, invited all the visitors to take a “food parcel” home to share with those who had stayed behind to “mind the shop”. Sœur Bernadette disappeared into the cellar and reappeared with rolls of cling film and kitchen foil and a great pile of plastic boxes with lids, a bit bigger than our ice cream boxes. As you can imagine, Serge and his whole team were given an enthusiastic vote of thanks for all their hard work and for their expert and willing help as we went round filling our plates.

When all the visitors had gone, they did the washing up before setting off home. They must have been dead beat. There was still so much food left over that some of the Tildonk nuns were busy till after 9 o'clock putting it into airtight containers or on dishes which they covered with foil or film. We had a day of luscious left-overs on 1<sup>st</sup> September for lunch and for the goûter-souper. It was a happy coincidence because 1<sup>st</sup> September was Sœur Ursule's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I suspect there was a second luscious left-overs day, but as Joan and I left after breakfast I cannot be sure.

### **The Building**

So much for what concerns the community. What about the building? There is nothing to report, except that the ramp to the front door has not yet been built – the piggy-bank is probably not yet full enough. Nor has the old “buanderie” been demolished to make way for new classrooms. Lack of funds, I am afraid.

### **The School**

The Secondary School is really flourishing: there are 600 pupils and there is a waiting list. The Headmaster, however, is adamant: he will not accept any more pupils (though they would attract extra government funding) because he believes that teachers should really know the youngsters they teach and that he, as Head, should know every single pupil personally. It appears that one boy tried another of the schools in the group, one which is geared to the real academic high-flyers, but came back because, he said, the teachers did not really care about their pupils as people, but just as brilliant examination candidates. While at Tildonk, he said: “the teachers really know us and care about us”.

Like all school headteachers, the one at Tildonk is short of money. He is able to raise some by letting the Salle des Fêtes for weddings or family parties. The school owns the Salle and is responsible for its maintenance. Costs are heavy because it is almost 100 years old and is a remarkable example of Art Nouveau. The nuns wanted to hire it for the celebration of 31<sup>st</sup> August but it had already been booked for a wedding party. In the end, it was probably easier to have the meal in the Réfectoire des Novices because it is more easily accessible than the Salle des Fêtes.

The Primary School is flourishing in spite of the delay in getting its new classrooms. So is the Nursery School. Sœur Dorothée, who is 96 but looks a well-preserved 60, still gets enormous pleasure watching the tiny children at play: she can see them from her room. She has a lot of pain – osteoporosis probably – and cannot walk far. But she gets herself into her wheelchair and round the corner to the lift where Sœur Emmanuelle collects her and takes her to the Chapel or the Refectory. Like those other nuns who

can no longer work as they used to, she spends a lot of time in prayer and that, the Church says, is vital for the spiritual wellbeing of any community.

### **The Village**

There is nothing new to report about the village. The houses that were built last year have not yet all been sold. The one-way system which had to be set up because they block the view of the road from the canal is working well. Nelly is still busy with her grandchildren. Her husband is retiring this year, so they will have more time to travel for pleasure and to enjoy life.

### **Ursulines Worldwide**

The Ursulines in India outnumber several times over all the Ursulines in Belgium, North America and the Congo. There are over 600 of them; there are well over 100 convents and three if not four Provinces. The Sisters, all Indian now, are in great demand for all kinds of work: teaching, nursing, social services. They never refuse their help if they can possibly give it. Yet life is not easy. There is strong and possibly growing opposition from fundamentalist Hindus who regard any Indian Christian as a renegade, even if the family converted to Christianity 3 or even 4 generations ago. The government has tightened the rules for Indian citizens who want to work abroad. Understandably, it does not want to lose its experts in any field but one would expect it not to make life difficult for them at home, simply because they are Christians.

In the Congo, as we know from the news, life is still far from easy, financially and otherwise, because there is still no real peace. But in Goma the people are courageously rebuilding their town after the volcanic eruption in 2001. The schools are functioning again so, I believe, are the hospitals. I don't know whether the novices are still living in 3 separate places or are now able to be together in a new building.

### **The Garden**

What is happening in the garden? It looks very nice from the gates, though one misses the colourful flowerbeds that were there in the past and which enhanced the beauty of the grass and the trees. As you know, part of the orchard was made into a football field some years ago and there are tennis courts as well. There are still a lot of apple trees and some pear and plum trees. The plums were especially good this year. There is also a walnut tree but the nuts were not quite ready when we were there. The peach trees along the wall at the far end have all died and the greenhouses that were Mère Marie's pride and joy are literally falling down. So no more luscious grapes on feast days! No more home-grown vegetables either; everything has to be bought. The school uses that part of the grounds for cross-country training: it must be a good half mile from the Cour des Grandes, up the Allée du Calvaire, past the greenhouses, along the wall by the canal and the one by the road and back to the Cour des Grandes.

### **The Future**

What will the future bring? No one really knows. Perhaps those of us who love Tildonk can remember the Community and the whole Province in our prayers, not just the

“proper prayers” but what a friend of mine called “action prayers”; things like housework, or tidying up, or gardening, or waiting for public transport, especially if the job to be done is one of our pet hates! The Saint Curé was a very prayerful man – he used his rosary so much that the figure of Christ on the Cross was quite worn away. Having prayed hard and done everything he could, he would say in effect “Over to you now, Lord!” Could we try to follow his example.....

### Tarka the Otter

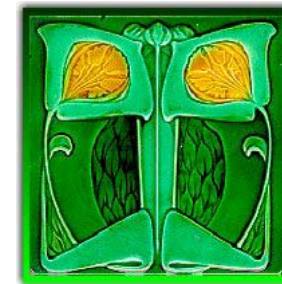
**PS:** Earlier this year, I was rung up by a Mr. Jowett, an Englishman, married to a Belgian lady. They live in Drongen, near Ghent. He had been given my number by Sœur Bernadette. How did he come to know her? I cannot answer that question until I have given you some background information. On one of his visits to the United States, Mr. Jowett bought the complete works of Henry Williamson (author of “Tarka the Otter”) and became a fan. Later, when reading “The Young Phillip Maddison”, one of the autobiographical books, Mr. Jowett discovered that one of Williamson’s sisters was a pupil at a Belgian convent school, Tildonk. So he decided to go exploring. He found the convent but wondered at first whether it could possibly be the right one. He decided to ask. Sœur Bernadette was summoned and took him on the traditional “Tour de la Maison”. He told her that Mère Ambroisine is mentioned in the book and that the family, including the author, had visited the convent. He was fascinated by what Sœur Bernadette told him about the Saint Curé and the history of the school. So, because I had written about both for the “Echo”, she gave him my telephone number. Later she found the entry in the register: Williamson’s sister was a pupil in 1913. There were other pupils with the same surname – some, perhaps all of them, may have been relatives.

Mr. Jowett gave Sœur Bernadette a copy of the book and she has very kindly lent it to me. I have started reading it but have not yet reached the section where Tildonk is mentioned. I understand that Mr. Jowett has written a paper for a historical association about Williamson’s connection with Belgium. He would like more information about the Saint Curé and the history of Tildonk. I hope, one day, to let him have it.



## NEWS OF OLD GIRLS

Not very many Anciennes anglaises have called at Tildonk in the last 12 months – inevitably I suppose. We are getting no younger and, on the whole, no longer have such itchy feet and, of course, there are no youngsters bursting with wanderlust to replace us.



Nevertheless, 6 Old Tildonkers and the daughter of another have been to the school. Two of them live in London, not all that far from each other, but they are not contemporaries and do not know this; another lives near Canterbury. One has her home in Italy but does not say where her sister, who went to Tildonk with her, lives; one lives in Canada and the mother of the lady who came to see her mother’s school lives in California.

“Oh, do get on with it!” I can hear you muttering. “Who were the Anciennes who made it to Tildonk?”

Well, the first to arrive, a few days after Joan and I returned to England, was **Priscilla Stille** (Mrs Robinson 1956-62). She brought members of her family and/or friends because she thanks the nuns “for their hospitality to all of us”. They enjoyed the fascinating “Tour de la Maison”, but Priscilla found it all “a little confusing” (her words) because there have been so many changes. Yet “it was essentially the same”.

There was a gap of 6 months before the next Ancienne anglaise arrived in the spring of 2003. **Susan Dixon** (Mrs Mancini 1957-64) came with her sister **Philippa**. She lives in Florence but did not say where Philippa lives. She gave no information about her family. Like Priscilla, she felt that, in spite of all the changes, the “essential feel” of the school had not altered.

**Gillian Barnes** (Mrs Crépeau 1970-77) is married to a French Canadian and lives in Canada, in Candiac; she gives no other details. She has 4 children, 3 girls and 1 boy: Natasha, Philippe, Sophie and Geneviève, but she does not say how old they are. She came with her husband Louis and some friends. She said it was wonderful to be back to share her memories with them. She also said that “the education and the upbringing she had received at Tildonk had served her well” and that she could not really find words to express her appreciation. Wouldn’t the nuns and lay staff of her day be delighted to hear that tribute! Gillian was at Tildonk in May.

About 2 months later, **Sally Gibbs** (Mrs. Muir-Litte 1971-73) called at the school. She lives near Canterbury. There is nothing to show whether she was on her own or with family or friends, but she does mention her husband, Hugh, and her 2 children: Toby, who is 12 and Harriet, 10. Her visit brought back many memories but she has unfortunately lost touch with her contemporaries.

The last to arrive was **Elizabeth D’Arcy** (Mrs. Thompson 1966-70) who lives in London. She and her husband Michael have 5 children: Miriam (17), Ruth (15), Zoe (13), Daniel (11) and Joseph (8). She expresses her gratitude to the nuns “for their kindness and for taking the time to show us around”.

While Joan and I were at Tildonk, Mrs. Evika Kelton came with her husband to visit her mother's old school. Her mother is **Dorothy Crook**, who was a pupil in the middle to late 1930s. She said her mother was delighted that she and her husband would be going to Tildonk. She did not give her address or her mother's; she just said that her mother lives in California.

I'm afraid that is all the news of the Old Girls. In the past, when there were pages of it, it was impossible to give any addresses but now there is so little, it can be done. Perhaps having them will help to renew ties with people you "knew at school and were quite friendly with".

Mrs. Priscilla Robinson: 23, Warwick Road, Ealing, London W5 3XH  
Signora Mancini: Via Frabuittone 28, Florence 50133, Italy  
Mrs. Muir-Litte: Nash House, Nash, Nr. Canterbury, Kent, CT3 2JX  
Mrs. Thompson: 37 Julian Avenue, Acton, London W3, 9JE

I am totally illiterate where Internet and emails are concerned, but those of you who are at home to these, to me terrifying creations, might be inspired to go surfing – or whatever the term is – and renew contact with long-lost "compagnes de classe".

## Nell

Thank you once again, Nell, for all the news from Tildonk. Like any family, its members are growing older and we are sorry that they are not all as well as we would wish. However, it is good to know that they are cared for with such loving devotion in their family of "sisters", whether at home or at Melsbroek. Having visited the Home Merici some years ago with my family, to have tea with Mère Claire, I can confirm Nell's positive impressions. It is a place of great peace and tranquillity, the staff look after the nuns with loving care and there is a feeling of calm contentment about the place. A rich and well-earned reward for the nuns after a lifetime of service to so many of us in our early years.

Quite a few of us comparatively younger members of the "family" are finding that, as our short-term memory gets ever shorter, so our memories of childhood are getting much clearer! Surely I can't be the only "old girl" who finds herself quite unexpectedly reminiscing fondly about aspects of school life which at the time seemed grossly unfair. "Oh, it wasn't all that bad", I tell my daughters of 11 and 14, having once horrified them with stories of early deprivation:

"what, no sweets except on Sundays? / no talking at mealtimes? / Mass every morning before breakfast? / no TV? / only cold water for washing?" they exclaim indignantly. "Didn't you hate it?" "Oh no", I assure them airily, "I don't regret it at all.

It toughened us up. And anyhow, we made such good friends there, so I'm really happy I went." And it's true...in addition to those friends, I remain eternally grateful for the small pleasures of life, such as constant running hot water and a full fridge to raid at any time of day or night. Bliss!

On the subject of memories, you'll be pleased to see that we have included a new

section entitled "Tildonk Tartines, Slices of Convent Life", in response to your requests for more reminiscences about schooldays. Although they each represent a different period, it is surprising how much remained the same for many of us, until well into the Sixties.

It was good to see so many of you at the Reunion in March. Meeting up with old friends is a very rejuvenating experience. It knocks years off your life and it doesn't damage your health in the slightest (unless you count the calories) though I should report that it can become quite addictive!

Just a few months later we were on a half-term holiday in Rome and visiting the beautiful Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano. We had just sat down for a few minutes to admire the altar and recover our energy for the next sight, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned round to find the beaming faces of Vic and Rosette Haesaerts, visiting Rome with a party from Mechelen! Five minutes earlier or later and we'd have missed each other...I wonder how often that happens? Rosette, you'll remember, was my counterpart running the Belgian version of TOGS and also my contemporary at school. She and Vic come to our Reunions regularly and make a weekend of it. Such serendipitous encounters make one feel that we do perhaps live in a global village after all.

Another mini-reunion, this time planned well in advance, took place in the summer when we returned to Catalonia for our family holiday and enjoyed the effervescent company of Senorita (Remei) and her husband David. Unfortunately our rented villa did not have a piano as part of the deal, but there was plenty of laughter and singing and it was lovely to see Remei blooming in her native landscape. She has had another busy year teaching and has given two major concerts, both at the Auditorium Kaufmann in Brussels, where her programme included Bach Preludes and Fugues, Beethoven Sonatas, Brahms Rhapsodies and works by Mompou. She is currently rehearsing for her next concert, to be held at the beautiful Astoria Hotel, where she will complete her cycle of works by Mompou, the famous Catalan composer, whose oeuvre she has recorded in full. She sends "un grand bonjour" to all her friends and former students and hopes to be at the Reunion in March.

We were also lucky enough to enjoy once again the company and hospitality of Gay (née Sudbury '58-62) and Nigel Harris in their lovely old house outside Foix. They are spending their last year in Oman before "retiring" back to the Pyrenees in the Spring. They now have four grandsons in England and are likely to be kept very busy, should they have time to spare.

## More news from Old Girls:

**Kate Hackett** (Mrs Pim '57-62) has good news to share: her daughter, Captain Lucy Pim (Royal Signals) married Captain Philip Ritchie (Royal Logistics Corps) on 16<sup>th</sup> August at St.Peter's Church, Hayling Island. After a week's honeymoon in Italy, Lucy was posted (in good army tradition) to Canada for two months, while Philip was sent on a staff course. They are currently back together and enjoying life in Marlborough, half-way between Brize Norton and Tidworth. For those of us familiar with life in the services....plus ca change!

**Penny Leefe** (Mrs Spiers '57-60) now has a granddaughter Saskia, born to her son Mark



(28) and his wife Kate, who are living in Zurich. Nicholas (20) is studying history at University College London and still singing in various choirs, having been a boy chorister at Kings College Cambridge. Penny and her husband Jean live in London, where she is teaching German, French and English as a foreign language at a Further Education College. Her sister **Angie** ('57-59) is living in Darien, Connecticut, with her husband and children, son Brooks (16) and daughter Victoria (20) both at college. Penny and Angie would love to hear from anyone who remembers them. Penny and I were at primary school in Rheindahlen before we ever got to Tildonk and it has been lovely to catch up with her at previous reunions.

**Carol Rawet** (Mrs.Nunneley '55-62) has also had a wedding in the family. Her daughter Iona (30) married Paul Service on 21<sup>st</sup> June, the summer solstice, in the beautiful church of St.James, Chipping Camden, the 'pearl of the Cotswolds'. Iona's sister Lucinda (23) was one of 3 bridesmaids. The sun shone brightly on the happy couple and the mother of the bride says she was delighted and relieved...as she puts it so succinctly, one down and one to go!"

We hope you enjoy the new enlarged Echo. Please do share your memories with us and send us more Slices for us to include in the next issue. As the news from Tildonk is limited, we really need you to take this opportunity to see yourself in print! I am sure you will find these memoirs fascinating, as we did. Nell's section on Food at Tildonk made us realise how lucky we had been to be brought up on a truly organic diet! Her mention of "boulettes" did remind me of the as yet unsolved mystery of the early 1960's - The Boulette that Fell behind the Radiator- any clues on a postcard, please. If not, we shall have to call in the famous Belgian detective....

Many thanks again to the Echo's Editorial Team of Nell, Dee and Vivienne for all their help in writing, typing and printing the magazine and for making my job so much easier. It's over to you now. Light up your laptops and get writing! Venez nombreuses a la Reunion! We really look forward to seeing you all in March and wish you all a merry Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

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## TILDONK TARTINES - Slices of Convent Life!

From **Sheila Hay** (Mrs. Bynoe 1935-36)

Having just spent five years at an Essex High School, I arrived at Tildonk in September 1935, aged 16½. An only child, I had never been away from home before, but was looking forward to the experience – initially it was rather a culture shock!



At that time, there were only 15 English pupils in the "Grandes", but 105 Flemish girls. Our headmistress was Mère Ambrosine (Ambro to us all) an 80 year old Irish nun – who was very strict. For some reason, she did not like me very much! I was put into Preparatoire A, whose teacher was an elderly (so I thought) Flemish nun, called Mère Kostka. She spoke very little English but she was helpful to us and I was fond of her.

I had extra lessons in German from a Swiss nun, Mère Martine. Her sister was working in the kitchens – one of the "Suissesses" – I became friendly with her and in 1938 I was invited to visit her and her parents in St. Gallen.

Mère Angèle was Head of the whole school. We did not have a great deal to do with her except for "Proclamation"! I am sure every pupil will remember that.

One or two memories: The early mornings – a cold wash and then to church for mass at 7 a.m.; the weekly bath, about 8 minutes if you were lucky, before Sister would open the door and start to clean the bath for the next occupant ; the beer; the sweet milky tea; the tartines and the occasional wonderful Feasts. I especially remember 1<sup>st</sup> May – a feast of Our Lady when we sang .... "C'est le mois de Marie, C'est le mois le plus beau!"

I have vivid memories of my seventeenth birthday, which was on 21<sup>st</sup> January. On that morning, we were given the news that our King George V had died the previous day. Needless to say this rather put a damper on any celebrating I might have wanted to do. We were all so sad. The Belgians were very sympathetic because the previous year their beautiful Queen Astrid had been killed in a car accident.

We went on "congé" outings. I remember going to Antwerp and visiting the Cathedral.

I made some very good friends. There was Diana Smith, Vera Mason, Mary Wilson, Daphne Hunter, Joan Saward (for only one term) and others. Also, the Holy Trinity as we called them: Flora Napier, Betty Mortimer and Audrey Edwards, they were always together.

Looking back on my short time (only 3 terms) at Tildonk, I believe that it was invaluable for me, and the spiritual experience set me on the right road to the Christian faith I have today. Thank you Tildonk.

From **Margaret MacKenzie** (Mrs. Twinn 1924-27)

I was unable to attend the last Reunion. At 90+ and a victim of osteoporosis, a visit to London is sadly no longer on the cards, and incidentally I should be greatly saddened to see so few of my contemporaries. I have very happy memories of my 3½ years at Tildonk, in fact I have no recollection of ever having felt homesick. Maybe returning to England for every holiday, and then being thoroughly spoilt, softened the blow of being away from home.

In those days one didn't travel in jeans and trainers. We were met at Victoria station, usually by the daunting Mère Ambroisine, dressed in our very best. I can still remember an embarrassing occasion wearing a new and probably very expensive black velour hat, which on the boat suddenly blew off and rapidly disappeared in the distance.

I started at Tildonk at the beginning of the summer term and, as far as I can remember, was the only new girl in the lowest class of the "moyennes". Mademoiselle Virginie was the teacher and knew as little English as I knew French! This proved to be an excellent incentive for me to apply myself, with the result that in the autumn I was moved up to "quatrième". While still in the "moyennes" I can remember roller-skating round and round the playground and pausing by the window of the kitchen where Mère Piat was teaching the élite of the Cours Supérieur the delights of French cuisine. Those delicacies never appeared on our refectory tables, but we were at least able to appreciate the aroma!

My favourite meal appeared regularly on a feast day during the summer term, I think it must have been a veal cutlet, but to my mind was spoilt by being accompanied by a cherry conserve. Huge bowls of "moules marinière" were occasionally served, something I had never tasted or ever seen before, but I was immediately smitten, though even now I would only eat them in Belgium. Otherwise I can't enthuse about the food but it was evidently a very healthy diet because there was very little illness other than the odd case of measles and the like. It was always my ambition to get to the infirmary but unfortunately unfulfilled! The nearest I managed was when feeling squeamish after being given raw red currants for breakfast, but not squeamish enough!

At half term, when most of the Belgian girls went home, we English were given "paquets" containing an assortment of sweets, some of which we stuffed up the blouses of our sailor suits to eat in bed. On Sundays we were allowed access to the tuck boxes we had brought from home. Books were also sometimes stuffed up our blouses, "Fabiola" being a great favourite.

I can remember at some time, probably in the "dortoir Ste. Marie", having a "chambrette" next to Nell but as she was several years younger I don't think we had much in common. Another memory is "Aujourd'hui c'est jeudi, donc pliez les couvertures" and "Mardi, donc visite de propreté" etc. Baths are something I prefer to forget, they were very few and far between, and I don't know how we ever managed to wash our hair. Although at that time I wasn't a Catholic, I was greatly impressed by the sung Mass and much preferred the French version which we had on Thursdays to the Latin we had on other days. I can still remember Mère Mechtilde's beautiful soprano voice.

Other memories: supervised walks along the canal, always with hat and gloves and never two by two because then the devil would make a third! Proclamation: everyone on their best behaviour and hoping for a gold card, each class in turn forming a semi-

circle in front of the nuns and being led by the smallest (to my embarrassment always me, "la petite MacKenzie"). Musical accompaniment was provided by several senior piano players. Occasional excursions to other places, mostly churches, but a particularly memorable one to the "Grottes de Haan".

There are so many memories, in fact I can recall events which occurred eighty odd years ago and often not what happened yesterday! So much for old age!

From **Nora Hills** (Mrs. Fillyar 1929-34)

Now I'm 85 I realise that my 5 years as an Ursuline taught me respect, amazing confidence (lacking my first term), happiness, friendship, appreciation for the way we were looked after at the school. It's amazing that we can still recall the names of nuns of 1929-34, e.g. Mères Ambroisine, Anselm (sisters), Thérèse, Gonzague, Adelaide, Lawrence, Laurentine, Victorine, Agnès (the youngest at that time) who took Moyennes Cours in my first year and we all loved her. How well we remember disasters: Sheila Bernheim tripped over a ladder in the Cours and put her arm through a window – shock, blood – good recovery. I can always remember the weather in summer: terrific thunderstorms and being able to watch from my chambrette in the "Moyennes" – Mère Marie Blanche came to pacify us!

Why Tildonk I am asked. The word gets around, parents listen to doctors who knew a friend (the vet's wife: Mabel Carwardine – an Old Girl with her 2 sisters). So I was on my way across the Channel – nasty shock! Victoria Station – boat train – Mère Ambroisine sailing along with the station master and porters galore. They all treated her like a queen – Dover station, on the boat, Ostend, the train to Wespelaar, there to be greeted by Mme, from the Tabac (an English lady married to a Belgian during the First World War). Mère usually brought news from (Dorothy's?) family in the UK. The camion would be there for Mère and we walked to Tildonk.

First impressions: Belgium, a different world. The smell of strong tobacco, the brewery at Wespelaar, coffee etc. Cobblestones, dogs pulling milk carts, the canal, strangely built houses, the rather frightening entrance to the Convent. The walk past the pond and the entrance at the rear – I did wonder what I was doing there! Two days settling in, many tears but life took on a new meaning and many Belgians befriended me. I am eternally grateful. A uniform was next – skirt below the knees, sailor collars, plastrons, tabliers, a beret which I wore at an angle (we all tried to be very feminine in those days).

My biggest shock was having to wear a dreadful tent affair, tied at the neck, to wear in the bath! I was told not to look at my body! This rule soon changed when I went to the "Grandes". I finished in the English dorm., St. Angèle, creaking boards, noisy radiators in the middle of the dorm. Mère Patrice tucked away in the corner – our torch lights would occasionally flash on the ceiling and she always knew who the culprits were! Those Irish eyes would flash and she would try to be serious. Fridays were inspection for tidiness – armoires, stockings properly rolled, handkerchiefs straight, shoes clean and tidy – gold cards, blue and mauve I remember. They kept us on the straight and narrow!

We were a jolly crowd and looking back I can truly say they were some of the blessed days.

My life without Tildonk would have been a very poor show. A secretarial course in London with extra French took me to the American Red Cross during the Second World War and working at "Rainbow Corner" with Adèle Astaire – what fun. She wrote letters for the troops to their folks back home. The Yanks at the club had everything. I made a lot of friends, very happy with cartons of cigarettes, Hershey bars etc. but I did work hard – their food was amazing: doughnut machines, pinball machines – even given money to use them! Visiting generals, film stars etc shown round.

Married for over 50 years. One son, Ted – took him after the war to Charing Cross to meet Ambro and my friends. Here it is 2003 and I am living on another Continent, widowed, but able to enjoy what's left of my life. Table Mountain sits on my doorstep. The family live here in the Western Cape. My only grandson is now 19 and studying at Rhodes University. I have no regrets. Life has, in many ways, been good to me.

From **Anne Preece** (Mrs. Skinner 1947-49)

I arrived at Tildonk on 23 April 1947 (St. George's Day). The journey seemed interminable, starting off from that well-known platform at Victoria Station. There were 4 or 5 of us of similar age. We soon made friends. On that occasion, and ever after, we always bought marshmallows on the ferry, ate the lot, lying on the bunks, and wondered why we felt sick! We eventually arrived at this enormous building – it seemed about 3 in the morning. A meal of bread and jam and coffee was produced in the Refectory. The first introduction to the famous Tildonk tartines. And so to bed, in our curtained cubicle.

The following day, miles of corridors and stairs. All those rules and regulations – no running in the corridors, always walking on the side, nodding to the nuns and curtsying to Reverend Mother. What and what not to put on which shelves in our wardrobes and certainly what not to put in the laundry baskets.

I was introduced to dear Mère Irenée. What a patient woman. I knew about three words of French. They call it "total immersion" now, the way we learned our French. The best way there is, in my opinion. Mère Irenée was a wonderful needlewoman and tried and tried to teach me at least the basic. I still have the tablecloth I enthusiastically started, all pulled threads and embroidery! In the end she had to finish it as it was needed for an end of term display. Some time after this she told us that the Sabena plane carrying our end of term reports had crashed – we, the little rotters, were elated – only to be told that copies would be sent. In fact the original reports were received by my mother, somewhat singed around the edges.

Who remembers Mère Victoire in the other "cours préparatoire" – what a temper she had!

Mère Irenée was the first to call me "Anneke van Paresse": the "van paresse" being a pun on my maiden name of Preece. I am still called Anneke. The van Paresse I keep to myself!

There was quite a culture shock for this lanky, spotty 12 year old. Regarding the spots – I was often sent off to Mère in the Infirmerie who would just throw up her hands and say "oh la la, c'est la jeunesse".

I went with my mother to the Army and Navy in Victoria to buy what we could then. Regarding the black tablier we had to wear – some Belgians managed to have posh looking satiny ones. And some had "biros" – very much a designer must-have in those days.

Dear Mère Agnes and Mère Elisabeth. I worshipped the latter and she was always very kind to me. Aggie called me "girlie" when she was at the end of her tether with me. She and I endured private maths lessons for a term and in the end she gave up! Mère Georgine and I did not have a good relationship. We teased poor Mère Patrice and would get out of lessons by saying we wanted to go and pray in the chapel. Which reminds me, it took me a little time to work out the French 7, with the bar across. I couldn't fathom the hymn numbers chalked up outside the chapel before Mass every morning!

It was impressed upon us not to make friends with the Flemish girls. We were there to learn French after all. What did I do? Make the greatest of friends with a Flemish girl called Andrée van Wassenhove. We are still close friends. She still lives in Haacht and is grandmother to 6, and I am godmother to her youngest daughter. She and I once got a purple card for naughty behaviour. All very adolescent. After this episode I was moved from my desk in the Salle d'Etude (where I sat next to Jeanne de Veoght – whose family still run the local bus company) to a desk underneath where Mère Elisabeth sat above us all. Bliss as far as I was concerned. She would pull one of my long plaits if she wanted something from the desk.

I endured the very cold winter of 1947 and the very hot summer of 1948. How those frogs made a noise in the ponds then. The bath once a week – the peculiar garment we had to wear for PT, reminiscent of a 1920s bathing dress. The chocolate doled out by Mère Georgine on a Sunday, together with any letters from home.

The cigar/smokey smell in the corridor once M. le Curé had passed.

I was confirmed at Tildonk by Cardinal van Roey and was very disappointed not to be able to take a Confirmation name as you can in England.

In 1947 there were very few "anglaises" at Tildonk. Most of the girls had fathers who were posted in Germany in the Occupation Forces. I remember Margaret and Jane Renwick, who were Scottish and very proud of it. Gillian Keeble (whose sister had been at Tildonk), Paula Baron and Eileen Walser. There were a few older girls in the "Grandes".

Excursions were always a delight. I remember Montaigu, Waterloo and Brussels (all those cream cakes in the patisseries). A visit to Aerschott, to a chicken farm – where we were all given a day old chick to bring home. We carried these poor things back home in our hats (those hats). I wonder how many survived. Any survivors were given in to the farm. It was always such a long trek back from these excursions as we had to walk from Wespelaar.

Feast Days were always special – especially the food. There were "good" girls who belonged to the Enfants de Marie and who wore a blue necklet to Benediction. During the month of June we had to keep silent, as a penance, for the month of the Sacred Heart. After "goûter-souper" we had to stand up in the refectory and "confess" if we had

talked or even tried to attract someone's attention by loudly clearing one's throat. Very good for the soul, I'm sure.

I quite quickly got into the routine – early morning Mass and no elbows on the pews so one could doze off. The parallel lessons, except for maths and, eventually, French making sense. French and Flemish were used on alternate weeks for prayers and to this day I can still say the Hail Mary in Flemish. Discipline was strict. We had to sit up straight on the chairs in the refectory. Whatever Mère was on duty would stand at the end of each long table, look along and anyone slouching would have to stand up for the rest of the meal. Andrée and I still laugh about this and still sit straight on our chairs.

An abiding memory and joy was the skating. The playground for the “Moyennes” was especially re-surfaced so that skaters could swoop around and have fun. I pestered my poor mother for skates – remember this was in the days just after the war. She did send me a pair and I was in my seventh heaven. I loved this new found skill. Show off – moi?!

We used to look into the playground of the “Petites” – guarded by Mère Claire – and it always astonished us ‘older’ girls how these little English tots chattered away in French so easily.

Who remembers the Carousel at the bottom of the playground? That long hot summer the May bugs would fall off the trees and down one's back. Much shrieking and friends diving their hands down backs to retrieve these things. It made no difference to be told they only lived 24/48 hours.

Enid Blyton was our ‘guru’ in those days and we all loved the Famous Five. For one whole term we decided to call ourselves by our heroines’ names and planned to escape in the half term. We tried to work out how we would get hold of our own clothes and passports. Memory fades as to details, but the thought kept us going for ages. One friend asked me, seriously, one day if we were really going to escape. It was quite a let down to confess that it was a dream. I have since heard from one “Ancienne”, who will remain nameless, that she actually did run away a couple of times. She did not divulge her escape route.

And oh, the monthly conduct cards. We used to go round to the nuns, when we could find them, and beg them to knock off a point so that we did not get a blue card. I did get a “carte d'honneur” during my last term. I don't know who was more surprised, me or Aggie!

I sadly had to leave Tildonk at the end of 1949 due to family circumstances. I have continued my friendship with Andrée van Wassenhove and, with her, have made a few return visits to Tildonk. Mère Elisabeth was always charming and anxious for my family news.

The crowning glory was my last visit in 1997. We went to a Belgian Reunion. This was to celebrate our 50 years of Tildonk studentship and friendship. I remember how, fleetingly, nervous we were at the “portière”. It was a memorable day – Mass in that unforgettable Chapel; wine and cakes in the wonderfully decorated Salle des Fêtes, all that etched glass and art nouveau on the walls. Just how I remembered it. And the glass corridor above. We were given the run of the place and we found corners we never knew existed. We saw the Curé's heart, the statue of Our Lady with the well

preserved bullet holes around it. Many of the dorms had been refurbished into classrooms, but my Ste. Marie was still intact and there was my cubicle. I remember how I used to time to the second the stripping of my bed every morning – I would be “seen” just pulling it all off just as Mère Emmanuel whisked the curtain open and hurriedly putting it all back again once she had passed. The day ended with a Tildonk “goûter-souper” in the Refectory. All the best china (Villeroy and Bosch), memorable tartines and much gossip. Across the room I saw Mère Emmanuel wagging her finger at me – she had not initially remembered me – but she had now! Andrée and I were presented with a Diploma by Rosette to mark our Anniversary.

It was an eye opener to find out how many things had not changed. The etched glass doors to the classrooms; those spooky pictures made out of the nuns' hair hanging in the corridor outside the Refectory; the science lab. With, I swear, the same stuffed animals that were there 50 years ago. I remember Mère Alberte and her balcon. We oohed and aahed all over the place!

These memories are nothing compared to the effect my all too short a time at Tildonk had on me. An enduring friendship with Andrée kept my French going. After I was married, my husband and I and our children spent our holidays in France and made great friends with a French family, who introduced us to the long French lunch. That friendship also endures. My son has married a delightful French girl and they now live in France. A first baby is imminently expected. I go to a French conversation group every week and my prof. is very tolerant of my septante and nonante that I still use!

I mustn't forget to recall my first meeting with Joan Ewin. Some years ago I was in University College Hospital having a biopsy and other tests. I was “walking wounded”. One evening, on my rounds, I saw this lady with her leg in plaster and up on pulleys and lo and behold she had a copy of the “Echo” on her locker. Quelle coincidence! She and I went a couple of times to meet and greet Mères Agnes and Elisabeth when they arrived at Victoria. It was always a joy to see them. The next time I met an “ancienne” was also in hospital, this time in Maternity. She was a very young nurse and it was just amazing to talk about the same nuns, the Allée Blanche, and Aggie's lair, the dorms. etc.

From [Nell Turner \(1922-31\)](#)

### Eating at Tildonk:

The food was very good because much of it was home produced; the Convent had a large farm, all the land where the Eikeblok now stands. There were arable fields, not for cereal crops, but for vegetables, and there was grazing for the cows. There were also pigs and poultry. I think flour, butter, cheese were probably bought and I dare say that even eggs and perhaps potatoes had sometimes to be purchased if stocks ran low. After all, there were several hundred people to be fed daily: about 150 in the Community, probably about a dozen lay members of staff, some 240 pupils – perhaps more – resident domestic staff – possibly a dozen and the permanent staff of gardeners, carpenters and painters, as well as the coachman and the man in charge of the furnace



that heated the water and the radiators. These non-resident staff had a midday meal at the Convent. Food was also supplied to tramps and, of course, there had to be some for visitors, expected and unexpected.

Bread was baked on the premises and was really wonderfully good – “les bonnes tartines de Tildonk”. When I first went to Tildonk, I think the bread was sliced on the sort of hand-operated machine which old fashioned grocers had to slice ham and bacon. Somewhere around 1924 or 1925, an electric machine was installed. The first day, there was a hitch and the tartines were not ready in time for breakfast. So, after Mass, we went to our respective refectories and were given cocoa instead of tea or coffee to tide us over until the tartines were ready. This did not take very long. I can't remember whether we had a short recreation or a bit of lesson time as well, but we were soon back in the refectory for a belated breakfast.

Breakfast usually consisted of tartines. There was a rule that unless you were not well, you had to eat 1½ tartines, i.e. 3 slices. Sometimes we would have something like black treacle or fat, rather salty and very crisp bacon. About once a term, we would have “boudins”, delicious black puddings. If we heard the pigs squealing after Mass, on a Monday or Tuesday, we knew there would be “boudins” before Friday. We rejoiced at the prospect but did not know what the poor pigs were going through. We had a choice of coffee or tea – the latter made by putting the tea, the water, the milk and the sugar into the urn and boiling it all up together! During the War, when Tildonk was the Allied Armies' Psychiatric Unit, the men who looked after the patients, especially those who dealt with the food, were horrified and taught the sisters and lay helpers to make tea “properly”! The tea continued to be made that way for two or three years, but since then it has been made as it was before the War. On special occasions, we had cocoa and currant bread for breakfast.

The midday meal, which we had at noon, consisted of various kinds of wonderful home-made soup, meat, fish, mussels or eggs and two vegetables and a dessert or fruit. In summer, we occasionally had redcurrants, served “on the vine”, and we had to “strip” them off with our forks. Dinner was always longer on those days and recreation shorter. We had no meat on Fridays. Sometimes we had boiled eggs. We were not allowed to peel them, presumably because there would be so many fiddly little bits of shell to clear up. We had to hold the egg in one hand and cut it in half lengthways; we then scooped the egg out with our knives. It was fine if the egg was fairly hard but there could be problems if it wasn't! The fish I remember best was stock fish. I think it was salted cod, which looked raw – we all hated it. Sometimes we had mussels – a huge ladleful each. I hated these too and usually managed to pass most, or even all, of my portion to girls who liked them; they gave me their “empties” in return. This business had to be transacted when the nun “en surveillance” was not looking!

On special Feast Days we had a much more lavish meal. It started with soup; it was often consommé, with tiny meat balls or finely cut up vegetables; then we had meat and two vegetables. That was followed by delicious veal or pork escalopes, coated with egg and breadcrumbs and fried but served cold with wonderful “cerises au vin”. That would be followed by fruit: peaches, perhaps, or grapes. Sometimes, before the fruit, we had a slice of “gâteau Tildonkois”, Mère Piat's creation.

We loved the “frites” and, to the great delight of the sisters who served us, we always wanted second or third helpings.

Tea was served about 4 o'clock. Tartines again but we were not allowed to eat more than two tartines – four slices – because supper was at about 6.30 and the nuns were afraid that if we ate too many tartines for tea, we would not be ready for supper and then be very hungry during the night. We had nothing to eat or drink after supper and breakfast was not until 07.30.

Supper was another two course meal: meat or fish, vegetables and fried potatoes – the left-overs from dinner. We might have a milk pudding as dessert or fruit – apples and pears as a rule.

The desserts at lunch and supper were varied. Sometimes we had “floating islands”, or a slice of “tarte tildonkoise” or of “tarte liègoise” or of “pain à la grecque”.

The Belgian girls brought their own forks and spoons, not knives, and each item had to have its owner and “numéro d'ordre”. Perhaps the cutlery had been left behind by pupils. Anyway, each one of us knew the number on her cutlery. The soup spoons were washed immediately and returned to the refectory in time for the dessert. At the end of the meal, all the cutlery was brought back. Each of us had to put her spoon and fork inside her folded napkin, roll this up and put it in a napkin ring. The napkins were not left on the tables but were put on the ledge under the table top. We had our set places in the refectory so there was no problem with finding the right one.

We had fresh vegetables in the winter too. During a stay at Tildonk after an International Reunion, I saw Mère Marie supervising the making of a cabbage clamp near La Chapelle de Notre Dame des Sept Douleurs. A hole about 4 ft by 3 ft had been dug. I suppose it was about 12"-18" deep. The base was covered with perfectly clean dry straw and perfectly round cabbages, stripped of their outside leaves, were being placed on the straw, with a couple of inches between them, and covered with more straw. I did not see the finished clamp so I don't know how high it was, but I should think it would be 2-3ft above the ground.

The trees in the Allée du Calvaire are lime trees and, if we had a cold, we might be given some “thé de tilleul” made from the leaves – maybe with berries as well – I don't know. The other cure for sore throats and coughs was “un bâton de réglisse” (liquorice), not sweet like Pontefract cakes. At one time, having a cough led to having your chest and your back painted with iodine. And we were told to “gargariser” – I can't remember whether salt or iodine was added to the water. Sometimes we were given syrup for a troublesome cough. Rumour had it that the syrup was made from the big fat red slugs that lurked under leaves in various parts of the garden!

Sometimes we had “fromage blanc” – really curd – which one eats with brown sugar or “du lait battu”. Both, even the smell of them, made me feel quite sick – and still do. But most people loved them. Mère Claire was particularly partial to “lait battu”.

One of my clearest memories of meals at Tildonk is of the lay sisters' genuine delight when we enjoyed our meals and of their repeated encouragement: “il faut bien manger, mes enfants”!

Oh – one more thing – ice-cold rhubarb with tartines as a dessert, usually at supper and ice-cold drinking water drawn from the deep well somewhere in the cellars. Tildonk now has mains water, but the well is still there and water from it is still drunk.

We had “boulettes” (rissoles) and “petits oiseaux sans tête” (beef olives) as well as slices of roast meat (quite often horse meat) and casseroles. There was one casserole, liver or beef, with prunes.

### St. Nicolas

His feast day is on 6<sup>th</sup> December, but the highlight celebration was on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup>.

The Petites, in Sunday uniform (I think) and the Grandes, gathered in the Salle Ste. Marie, with the former near the door and the latter further back. There was a throne for St. Nicolas between the two groups. I don't remember going to this celebration when I was in the Moyennes and I wonder whether, if that was the case, it was because the nuns felt that we were not yet “grown up” enough to appreciate the awe and excitement of the Petites – after all, we moved to the Moyennes at the age of 8 or 9 at the latest.

Soon after we had gathered, St. Nicolas would arrive by sledge – we were not allowed to witness this, of course! A bell was rung near the Salle St. Anne – the bell which the angels had brought from heaven (but it sounded just like the bell from the Grand Quartier de Piano, later the Parloir du Bon Pasteur!). Anyway, the angels, complete with flowing white robes, gold circlets on their heads and large feathered wings, preceded St. Nicolas. They looked surprisingly like some of the Grandes who had beautiful and very long hair. St. Nicolas, every inch a holy bishop, followed. He was in full Episcopal regalia, alb, stole, cope, mitre and he carried a silver crozier. He blessed us all as he passed, his kindly bearded face alight with pleasure.

He went to his throne and sat down. We sat down too. He said a few words about how pleased he was to be with us. Then each class in the Petites went up in turn and stood in a semi-circle in front of him. It was the same drill as for Proclamation, with the same curtsies and bows. St. Nicolas would say nice things about individuals: for instance how so-and-so was really trying to be tidy and had made progress, how so-and-so had said something very wise or very interesting. He might also say that so-and-so was rather a chatterbox but was trying to keep the various rules about silence. Very occasionally, someone who had been really naughty was called for a private chat with St. Nicolas. The rest of us waited in absolute silence – even the rest of the class – and no one moved. We might just catch a “Oui, St. Nicolas” or “Non, St. Nicolas”. The culprit always received encouragement for none ever came back to her place in tears or even upset.

When the Petites had had their turn with St. Nicolas, the latter would tell us the latest news of heaven: what God had said to him as he set off, what Our Lady and St. Joseph's plans were for the day, how busy the angels, especially our guardian angels, were and so on. Then the Petites went up again to be given a little bag of sweets each.

It was time for St. Nicolas to go on to see other children or to go straight back to heaven – it all depended on whether he started with Tildonk or ended with it, or whether Tildonk was in the middle of his ports of call. The bell was rung again to let everyone know that the sledge was ready to go after having had some rest and refreshment. And so St Nicolas left, giving us all his blessing as he did so.

Some Petites were completely awed – speechless in fact. A fair number were so impressed that they could hardly eat their supper. Even if you were suspicious, you somehow suspended disbelief, reluctant to lose the magic of the celebration.

The next day was a holiday for the Petites but the rest of the school returned to normal. However, everyone had a special “speculation” at breakfast. It was about 6” high and showed St. Nicolas, in full Episcopal regalia, standing behind a tub. Emerging over the rim were the heads of three children. The legend is that, during a very severe famine, a cruel and greedy butcher killed his three children, cut their bodies up and pickled them in brine, so that he could sell the “meat” to his customers at hugely inflated prices. St. Nicolas, being very holy, just knew all this and went solemnly to the butcher's shop, made the Sign of the Cross over the tub – and up popped the children, alive and well and all in one piece.

After breakfast the Petites went to their Salle. The little green tables and chairs from the Cours Préparatoire had been brought in and each Belgian girl's presents had been put out, with her name on the pile. The English girls and all the other foreign pupils also had a few little things: a bag of sweets and a couple of crayons or India rubbers, so no one felt left out. We knew our turn would come at Christmas, so we enjoyed our presents and played happily with the Belgian girls and enjoyed their toys as well.

We could not do with playing all day, so the nuns always organised some other activities for us, but to be honest, I cannot remember anything definite. Perhaps we had an active sort of “Jeu Général” or a little “séance”, or perhaps someone read us a story. We certainly had the day off – not a single lesson.

I always thought some old man from the village acted as St. Nicolas, but, as I discovered only a few years ago, it was one of the Grandes. She was always very good – managed to make her voice sound like a man's voice!



## Variety is the spice of life.....

To date we have received 16 questionnaires. From these it seems we are a prolific lot, well travelled, having had a variety of jobs! The percentages below are based on the responses received.

The large majority have had secretarial training (62%) and 19% went to university, with a similar percentage having had nursing training.

After Tildonk we have lived in the following countries, in no particular order: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Abu Dhabi, Germany (Dusseldorf, Nienburg), Belgium, USA (California, Texas), France (Nice, Paris), Malta and Singapore.

81% have been or are married, and between us have produced 34 children! There are also grandchildren ..... As I said, a prolific lot!

The range of jobs has been wonderfully diverse. We have worked at the MoD, in the Army Intelligence Corps, as medical and HR administrators, in HM Diplomatic Service, teaching, counselling, nursing, in the hotel business, as translators (of course!), as airline stewardesses, in pharmaceutical sales, as receptionist and shop assistants, in the charity field, as production assistant, in charity shops, in residential homes for the elderly, as bus escorts for adults with learning difficulties. Some have *only* looked after their families (a full time job in itself you'll all agree) but also given their time to a variety of charities. Within the secretarial field we have worked in publishing, estate agencies, banks, with accountants, the county council, in the computer industry, the media world (advertising, public relations, marketing), libraries. Several people have used or are still using their language skills at work.

Many thanks to everyone for the "extra" information. We wanted to share the following with you all:

From **Margaret MacKenzie** (Mrs. Twinn 1924-27): *"Married in 1939, 3 days before war was declared, by special licence as husband (a territorial) had already been called up. Daughter born in 1941, with twin boys in 1944 (unfortunate with my married surname!) arriving during a flying bomb attack who, until their schooldays, were known as Doodle and Bug!"*

From **Jane Macqueen** (Mrs. Privett 1961-64) *"Tildonkers turn up everywhere! Last year I was at a wedding in my village and at dinner was seated, by complete chance, with 2 other near contemporaries: Penny Little (née Little) and Carolyn Girling (Mrs. Shaw)" "I enjoy telling people about 'proclamation' and how good we all were at varying levels of curtseying and bowing. It is an alien and long departed world we lived in then"*

From **Maria van Aken** (Mrs. Atkinson 1930-36) *"My first job at the age of 45, when my children started work and no longer needed me to be there full time for them was part time work as a shop assistant at Bourne & Hollingsworth. With no experience in this field but having mastered 3 languages and good at needlework, the manager thought I would be a good asset to them" I'm not sure recruiters would view it this way today!*



From **Sue Maness** (Mrs. King 1965-70) *"At first Texas was very foreign to me, especially the language. I went into a grocery store and wanted to buy some orange squash to drink. I couldn't find it so I asked. The clerk sent me to the vegetable isle where she pointed out what looked like large yellow zucchinis! Also I didn't know that I needed a driver's licence or picture ID in order to write a cheque, so I couldn't pay my bill when I got to the checkout and had to leave my shopping behind. Even worse was when I gave a shy young auditor his packing list for a business trip – pens, pencils, notepads, expense account sheets and r u b b e r s. He was so embarrassed as the rest of the office burst out laughing and explained that I really meant him to pack 'erasers'!"*

From **Sonia Pope** (Mrs. Dods 1956-61) *"I lived in St. Georges Hill, Weybridge with my parents. When I was 21 we put our house on the market and sold it to Ringo Starr. I was the only one home when Ringo and John Lennon came round to view it with the estate agent" yeah, yeah, yeah Sonia!*

And all the above from only 16 questionnaires! Where are the rest? Please keep them coming in, or bring them with you to the next Reunion in March. As you see they yield some fascinating information and wonderful quotes.

## Dee

