

## Hidden gems and Forgotten People

### COUNTY ROSCOMMON ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**Mary O'Flanagan**

Early in the 1940s Castlerea and its surrounding areas were still without any post- primary educational facilities. It is recognised that, at that time secondary education was still reserved for the privileged few. However, Mary O'Flanagan, who was joined by her sister Bea, was to change all that. A native of Cloonfower, Castlerea, Mary O'Flanagan was educated at Cloonbonniffe NS and later at the Dominican Convent, Eccles Street, Dublin. She went on to attend University College Galway where she obtained a BA a B.Com, her H. Dip and an MA. She taught for a short time in Navan, Tubbercurry and in France before returning to Castlerea to set up the first co-educational school in the town, a system of education that was very controversial at the time.

On September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1940 Mean Scoil Iosef Naofa was founded at St. Patrick Street. It opened with 13 students, but by the end of the year the number had increased to 26. Mary O'Flanagan later purchased a building further down Patrick Street which was to become the school's permanent home until free education was introduced in 1968 and then the numbers doubled.

Mary O'Flanagan remained principal until her retirement in 1979. In 1983 it amalgamated with the Vocational School, which subsequently amalgamated with the Convent Secondary School in 1993 to form Castlerea Community School.

Past pupils tell many stories of Mary O's exploits – and she will go down in the history books as the woman who patrolled the streets to make sure that none of her students were out after 5 pm. However, despite her strict and rather unusual approach, at least by modern day standards, she gained the total respect of her pupils, all of whom got a very good education at her school.

Mary O' had a great devotion to the faith and on many occasions she cycled with her pupils to Knock and school retreats were a regular feature of school life. The Pope awarded her the Bene Merenti medal for her services to the church. In the summer of 1942 the school presented its first class for Intermediate Certificate, with the students heading off on their bicycles with Mary O' (as she was known locally) to the exam centre in Roscommon. Students numbered around 60.

On December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1998, at the age of 85, Mary O' lost her battle with a long illness.