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John Kennedy has a long connection with the Good Shepherds in Limerick. His family were, for many generations, involved with the Good Shepherd Order. He visited his aunts who were Sisters in the Order in Limerick many times as a child and in adulthood John managed the Good Shepherd Laundry from the mid-1970s. He eventually took over the business as a private enterprise in the 1980s. He has an immense knowledge of the laundry, the women who were there and the nuns. Here John shares stories of the women, gives a detailed account of how the laundry operated and shares a unique insight into the Good Shepherd institution and how it functioned.

[Interview begins]

My name is John Kennedy. I am a County Limerick man born and bred. There is an awful lot of history, a sad history, and a happy history tied up in these walls and I am acutely aware of a lot of it because my family were, for many generations, involved with the Good Shepherd Order.

My maternal grandfather had an aunt in the Good Shepherd Convent called Sr Veronica Hughes [pseudonym], who came from [location removed] and she was the first member of my family to join the Good Shepherd Order and she was in charge of what they called 'The Class'. 'The Class' was primarily the group of women who were working in the laundry or associated with the laundry, in maybe working in the kitchen or working in the Lace Room etc. and they used what was referred to as 'classrooms' for recreation. They were downstairs in the St Mary's building adjoining the laundry. They were never used as classrooms in my time. Also being in charge of 'The Class' meant she was in charge of writing up the records on the background of the girls coming in. These are all on archive with the Good Shepherd. So Veronica Hughes was the first member of my family in the Order. In turn her two nieces Sr Kathleen and Sr Maria joined up. [Pseudonyms] They were sisters of my grandfather. I have vague memories of being taken to visit Sr Kathleen in Waterford when I was a child. She was Reverend Mother in the Good Shepherd Convent in Waterford and they also had a laundry. She was seemingly a small woman and very jolly. My mother was very fond of her. Unfortunately Maria – Birdie as she was called by the family – contracted TB and died young. I have the newspaper cutting of her funeral in 1914 in Waterford. So her other sister Kathleen went on to become Reverend Mother and did a lot of good work in Waterford and modernised the laundry there. In the early days when these laundries started they were very primitive and they literally were a big basin of hot water with a bar of soap and a scrubbing board and that is literally how the laundry was washed. It was tough hard work until mechanisation came in. The real advances in mechanisation didn't take place until after World War II.

The next connection then was with my parent's generation. My mother had one older sister Caroline [pseudonym], and Caroline followed in her two aunts footsteps and she joined the Good Shepherd Order here in Limerick. I had two other aunts in the Order as well, sisters of my father. One was my auntie Gráinne, Sr Benedictus [pseudonym] and she entered at 29 years of age with her younger sister Hilda who was called Sr Therese [pseudonym].

Limerick was the Motherhouse for the Good Shepherd in Ireland and at that stage they were a very strong Order in the country. They had a large convent in Cork with a laundry attached. They had a large convent in Waterford with a laundry attached. They had a convent in New Ross with a laundry attached. They had three convents in Northern Ireland with laundries attached. When these laundries closed they had very good quality equipment, which I purchased from some of them to upgrade the plant in Limerick. I am told around the 50s when their numbers peaked that there would have been about 200 Sisters here in Limerick. It was a big complex covering a few acres with a whole lot of support systems. For example they had their own bakery here. They had their own farm here supplying their own vegetables, cows supplying their own milk etc.

My aunt Caroline qualified as a teacher in Carysfort and she taught in St George's, which was a residential primary school (the children slept in dormitories above the school). St George's is a building slightly removed from the main building. The Health Board now occupies it and it is a little known fact but when the school was closed down it was given by the Good Shepherd Sisters as a gift to the then Bishop of Limerick, Jeremiah Newman for the diocese. He quite promptly turned around and rented it to the Health Board as an income for the diocese. Now the Good Shepherd Sisters could have done the very same thing and spent the money on their social work [at the time they had purchased private houses in Roxboro and Southhill]. I thought it was quite ironic. Now in St George's the sisters taught children in the primary school system. I am led to believe that some children came from The Mount convent in O'Connell Avenue in Limerick where unmarried pregnant women were sent to have their babies. Seemingly the babies were kept in The Mount convent or fostered until they were approximately three to four years of age. And on the ground floor in St George's were the classrooms where they were educated. And if they were promising they would go on to a secondary education. Very few went to third level. It was my understanding that the unmarried mothers had their babies in The Mount and they were then sent down to the laundry. Their babies were not brought down to St George's until they were around four years of age and that it was a nursery/school. Now you will have to verify those facts. I am going back now to the 40s and 50s. St George's also got in orphans and children from broken homes or children that had been fostered as babies.

Some of the women who worked in the laundry then would have had children in St George's school. The only time they could catch a glimpse of their children was at morning mass as they were not allowed any contact. Standing in the nave facing the altar the church was in the shape of a cross and the left hand arm of the cross contained the women from 'The Class' and the right hand side of the church contained the children from St George's and their mothers would have a crick in their necks my aunt said at communion to watch the children going up to the rails to see which one of them was their child. To the right of the church between the St George's side and the nave there was a small room looking on to the altar that was reserved for the residents of St Joseph's. A similar room on the left hand side of the church beside St Mary's was used as a mortuary. Underneath the church there was a large basement, which contained the boiler house for central heating, a room for the air blower for the organ, a storeroom for the painter and the entrance to the tunnel leading to the front garden and to St George's. This was used on a daily basis by the Sisters going to and from the school and by the children going to and from the church.

I always assumed that any children that came over to the laundry from the orphanage to work were over 14 years. I always assumed that. In later years 'Shalom' and number 60 in Clare Street replaced St George's. The children in these houses were cared for in a family type atmosphere. First of all brothers and sisters were kept together. You had children going to national school and secondary school living in the same house and very importantly the ratio of children to carers was very small. The carers lived in the house with the children. Outside visitors were encouraged. Some of these children came from homes where they had been abused and would be there under the auspices of the Health Board. I know of one family where the children were badly traumatised from neglect – one had a Roches Stores bag on him as a nappy – when they were sent in to Shalom. They went through national school and secondary school and went on to lead normal lives. I gave some of the children in Shalom and 60 Clare Street summer jobs in the laundry when they were in secondary school. The St Mary's women doted on these children.

So how did I get involved with the laundry? Well in the 40s my father's two sisters, Hilda and Gráinne were being professed in Limerick. On the same day my mother, Deirdre Delaney [pseudonym] had her only sister Caroline being professed. And my Dad met my Mum, they are both dead now, in the Good Shepherd and love blossomed. Seemingly I was brought in here as a baby in a Moses basket and they said I was the first male ever to enter the Novitiate amongst all the virgins even though I was only a baby. While my aunt Caroline was in the convent in Limerick, my mother and my three brothers would

bring my grandmother to visit my aunt Caroline many times. I have fond memories of the lovely afternoon teas in the convent parlour, running around the front garden, chasing the goldfish in the pond. I could hear the children in St George's playing in their playground over the railing. The difference between their lives and mine never crossed my mind. And we used to be taken by my aunt over to the laundry and Boiler House to visit the women there. Initially when we were very small they used to frighten us because they would all crowd around us and all we could see was a sea of faces. But as we got older we got over our shyness and used to love running around the place.

My aunt Caroline was actively involved in recreational activities with St Mary's. They had a very fine hall and stage built on to the classrooms where they had their own plays and musicals and also brought in many by outside groups. And they would show films there and so on.

So I knew a lot of these women as a youngster coming in here already. The one thing that I noticed as a child initially was that they were always singing hymns in the laundry when we came in and it frightened the wits out of us. But they were lovely people. When the oil crisis came in the 70s the nuns weren't really prepared for the change in the running costs of the laundry and their tradition was they had very cheap labour but they charged very little for what they were doing. So the people of Limerick were really subsidised in the prices they were paying for their laundry and the hotels were being subsidised. They did all the hospitals – they did St John's, Barrington's [hospitals] etc. and suddenly they had to raise their prices because the price of oil went over the moon and the biggest input in the laundry is oil for to make steam, for heating the water and for the ironing, tumble drying and pressing. They were also faced with the fact that the women in St Mary's were not getting any younger and that many of them were facing retirement age and for a good many years there were fewer young women coming in. They were looking around for a solution to their problem and my aunt suggested to the Reverend Mother that I take over the running of the laundry. So I agreed to come in and run the business for them – see if it could be turned around and made profitable on the promise that if I could make a go of it commercially I could buy it from them.

So the year my son was born in September 1976 I came into the laundry as a raw recruit. And the agreement was that after 12 months they would review the situation, look at the figures and I would put a proposal to them. But the nuns being tough as they are dragged it out for six years. And they got the six best years out of the business before they would agree to sell but I was happy with it and they agreed that I would take over the business from them under very generous financial terms. They allowed me to pay it in stages. I took over the business and I ran it for 27 years. To allow me time to

recruit outside staff and train them properly the Sisters agreed to a very generous one-and-a-half-year transition period. I was delighted with that arrangement and the phasing out of the St Mary's women went very smoothly. It was a lovely time with them. During the transition period I paid the Sisters at the going rate for the labour of the St Mary's women. I took over the business on the 1st of November 1982. The thirteen or so Sisters who had a full or part-time involvement with the laundry finished working for me on the 27th of May 1983. They never charged me for their labour during that last 6 months but their contribution in helping me get established was immense. The last of St Mary's finished on the 1st of June 1984 – roughly twenty women. Some of them then came to work for me independently on a full-time basis. During the summer holidays I continued to employ the teenagers from Shalom and 60 Clare Street.

Now I should say that when I came in here in 1976 there were over 90 women in what we call 'The Class,' that is, St Mary's. Now there was a stigma attached to the name St Mary's because it was St Mary Magdalene, giving the impression that they were 'fallen women'. A lot of them had never been pregnant. And I don't refer to a woman who gets pregnant as a fallen woman anyway. A lot of the women who came in here were taken advantage of in a very horrible way. I was told of one young woman who was hired out to a farmer on an 11 month 'fed and found' contract basis with one payment at Christmas. She was made to sleep on straw that she would put down in the front hall when everyone was gone to bed at night. She was expected to be up first in the morning, have every trace of the straw cleaned up and have the fire lighting in the range before anybody else in the house moved. She would then have to go out and bring in the cows for milking. She was taken advantage of by the so-called man of the house and then sent in here.

Many of the women who were sent in to St Mary's were not sent in for so called 'sins of the flesh' and had done nothing out of the way. The reason why families allowed this to happen in the first place and then did not want them back, escapes me.

A good percentage of the women sent in here were, as Gaeilge [in Irish], *shimplí* [simple]. And they were easy prey for men. I know of one woman in the 60s that went back out and got pregnant again and she was brought back in again. She has three children. The woman was intellectually challenged and needed to be accommodated in a sheltered environment for her whole life. These women needed protection so they were given a sheltered environment here. And the Good Shepherd had a very good mentoring system. They watched the person when they came in and saw whom they would pal with and they would pair them off with a capable person who would take them under their wing. So that in

their work in the laundry or if they went up town shopping there was somebody to mind them. So the system worked very well. And they were like one big family, all these women. They really looked out for one another. Now they had their rows like anyone would but they were one big family and they looked out for one another.

So to go back to the reasons why the women came in here. Some were horror stories. Some had been made pregnant by their own priest. Some had been made pregnant by their own father, their own brother. And at the time the Catholic Church had enormous power in the country, especially in the rural areas and they were loaded up sometimes in the dead of night, shipped in here and they were never heard of again. These poor women were whipped away from their neighbourhood, their friends, their neighbours, their acquaintances and in many instances they were never heard from again. They were given an assumed name. The trauma must have been incredible. And the pity was that when the good days came after Vatican II in the 60s and they got their freedoms and they were allowed to go in the world very few took the opportunity because they were institutionalised and they didn't have the qualifications or the social skills or the courage to go out there. Some who did go out became alcoholics and some ended up badly. Some ended up in broken marriages. Few enough of them succeeded. Some of them came back. One lady was a receptionist for many years in England and when her employer died she came back here. But she had nobody. She had no family. She had no friends. She had nobody out there because she had been shunned so many years ago. So I say shunned is a good word for it. They were shunned by their families and by society.

To go back to the laundry, that is my background to qualify me for what I am saying about the operation. I will be able to give you a guided tour of all the buildings and of where everybody worked and so on at a later stage.

Just to tell you about some of the stories, all of these women, I loved them all. They were saints, every one of them. Now some of them were bold. Some of them had their moments but I loved them dearly. They were all characters. I could write a book on them and I will just give you some snippets of some of them. One particular woman from the North West was sent in here as a young girl. And the reason being was she was thought she was a bit flighty. She was an orphan and her aunt I think was raising her. And she was sent in here and she told me herself that she was so small they had to put her up on a butter box. In those days the creameries had butter boxes for storing the butter in – and you turned the butter box upside down to get up to the sink to wash the collars on men's shirts on the washing

board. And she was here all her life and never got as much as a postcard from her family not to mention a visit.

I remember there was a swing outside in the yard belonging to the young children in St George's and it was never used and beside it was a thing called the Ocean Wave and it was kind of a circular seat on a frame suspended from a central pole and when you sat on one side the other side would tilt up. And one of the old dears was sitting on one side one day and the person on the other side got up in a hurry and it tilted up and she fell down and broke her hip. So the Sisters requested that I get my fitter to cut down the ocean wave with a gas torch because it was a danger to them in case another one would break their hip. So we put in a fishpond there with goldfish but a wily old seagull began to steal the goldfish. They were easy prey in the pond. One of the older women took it upon herself to mind the goldfish. So every day you would see her sitting outside at the edge of the goldfish pond with a stick in her hand in case the seagull would come. But apart from washing men's collars, her job was washing teddy bears. And women would have teddy bears that were heirlooms in the family in Limerick and they would be filthy with an ear missing or an eye missing and they would be sent down to the Good Shepherd to be washed. And she would lovingly wash these teddies and bring them into the boiler house to dry them. Because the problem with the teddies was they were stuffed with all kinds of materials - There was no foam rubber then – little bits of cloth and so forth. They would stink to the high heaven if they weren't dried quickly. So she would dry them on the boiler and then she would comb them and brush them to get the fur and the little teddy like new. That was her favourite job and she was a lovely lovely person.

There were many more people like that. A Sister in the packing room told me one day a man came in to her. Now the Packing Room was at the end of 'the cycle of the laundry'. The soiled laundry came in at one end and then you had the marking and the sorting process, then the washing process, then the ironing process and then you packed the laundry into a parcel with the persons name on it and that was in the packing room. And that is where the public had access. And this man came in with a grey suit and a black armband and she could see that he was very emotional and that he had been crying. He had buried his father that day in West Clare and he discovered he had an aunt in St Mary's that he was never aware of. He was very good to her and regularly took her home on holidays. Now she was a little bit *shimpli* but a lovely, lovely person. There was another woman who ran the tumble driers in the Crescent room and she had an uncle in the Columban's and he visited her when he got out on holidays. I could replicate those stories many times.

What was it in the people in the past that made them shun these lovely people because of what the priests called 'the greatest sin that man could commit, the sins of the flesh' was so wrong. It was cruel. It was awful. I will never get over it. But thank God now things have changed. The Good Shepherd Sisters come in for a lot of stick for certain acts of cruelty. I don't deny that there were certain Sisters that were overzealous and were cruel. But the vast majority of them were wonderful people. They worked in the laundry side by side with these women. They also went through very tough times with them. They were also in some instances treated very harshly by their Reverend Mothers. Some were sent home as postulants in disgrace for not behaving, for merely asking questions for why things shouldn't be done differently. I should say that these nuns were subject to the local bishop and they were in fear and dread of when the local bishop would come. They were also subject to government inspectors and the big question I have is why didn't the government take more interest in these places. Why didn't these inspectors take more of an interest? They just didn't want to know because these nuns were fulfilling a huge social need. These people were in need of help. The government should have given them that help. The nuns were there. They were given no financial assistance and they filled the void and the government were quite happy, thank you very much, and didn't want to know about it. Only for the generosity of certain benefactors here and from the income from the laundry the nuns would not have been able to make ends meet. And the question I ask is – had the Good Shepherd Sisters not been there at the time, what was available to these poor women? They would have been put on the mail boats to England and they would have ended up on the streets in England or worse. Simple as that. They were being cast out of their family homes, never to be seen again. Their families didn't care a whit what happened to them or where they went to and the government of the day had the same attitude.

To go back now to the laundry end of things, now the old laundry was very primitive by today's standards and the machines were what we would call washing machines only. They had no spin. They were driven by a pulley system that in turn was driven by an engine. There were a whole series of pulleys along the wall and each pulley had a belt coming down from it to drive each individual washing machine. The wet clothes were then transferred to a spinning machine called a hydro which was also belt driven, and you had a lever system with an idler pulley so if you wanted to stop the washing machine or hydro from rotating you pushed the lever against the belt and it pushed the belt across onto an idler pulley so the shaft stayed spinning the belt while the machine came to a stand still. The machines had very few safety systems and there were some bad accidents. I am told one woman lost an arm. Another woman lost fingers on a hydro [spinner]. They were very primitive but they did wash the clothes. They had no programmers, no automatic valves and no safety system. You let the water in

by opening a tap. You let the steam in by opening a valve. You put the soap in out of a bucket and you estimated how long you should wash. Then you opened a lever and the water flowed out full of the suds, dirt, lint etc. You closed the outlet valve. You filled it with cold water again to a high level to give a rinse and then you gave a second rinse and a third rinse. And you gave a look in to see did the rinse water look clear. If it did you let the water drain out again. You then had a spinning machine, which was like a washing machine turned on its back and they were called hydros and they were a very powerful centrifuge with four pockets, which had to be balanced by weight.

So these poor women – nuns also – had to lift out this dripping mass of clothes; cold, wet, and very very heavy. You had to lean in over the side of the washing machine because I should say these washing machines were like a cylinder turned on its side and unlike the modern washing machine didn't have a door seal with a rubber on it. There was no door seal. The bottom half of the cylinder retained the water. And the upper half had a door that hinged upwards. So you had to lean in over the side to lift out the clothes. You put these dripping wet clothes into a trolley, which was made of wood. Plastic wasn't heard of then. The modern trolleys are lightweight, about four feet by two feet and about three feet high. And these old trolleys had heavy cast iron wheels that were rather squeaky with rust from all the water leaking on them. And you pushed these heavy trolleys down to the hydros. And you had to balance the four pockets. Now if these four pockets weren't balanced properly the hydro could be very dangerous if the out of balance switch wasn't working because it could go out of balance at high speed and do serious damage. So you'd give it a spin and if it went out of balance you had to stop it, open the safety lid, open the inner lid and put more clothes in again.

And one day one of the women was trying to stop the hydro because one of the brakes wasn't working and the safety lid wasn't working. It had a brake but the brake used to burn out very quickly and she used her hand tipping off the divider of the four pockets, caught her hand and whipped a few of her fingers clean off. Now there should have been a safety interlock on that hydro to prevent that door from being opened until it was at a complete standstill.

In the late 50s the Reverend Mother brought in a consultant to look at the entire laundry operation and give her advice on how to modernise it. She got funds and she got it modernised - the entire laundry including the building. The large new machines were a revolution in those days because they washed and spun the clothes like our everyday machine now. The one difference being these machines took in a 200lb weight of clothes instead of the aAngelage 8 or 9lbs of the domestic washing machine. They were gi-normous. And the second revolution they had was they were fully automatic with a

programmer. Now this was in the days before electronics so these programmers were mechanical timers and they were very sophisticated for their day in the 60s. And they worked very well. I remember they were Fisher – the kingfisher was their emblem. They were Fisher controls and they were marvellous because what they also did was they automatically dosed in the correct amount of liquid soap.

In the old days the girls could get burns from pouring in soap, splashing into their eyes or pouring in bleach, raw bleach, which they would dilute by 50 percent in a bucket and then pour onto the clothes to bleach them. Now this bleach came in huge big containers called carboys, which held 10 gallons. They were made from glass and they were inside a wire cage with a sort of raffia fibre between the glass and the cage. And sometimes these carboys would break and the bleach would go everywhere and it was a nightmare. And the fumes of the bleach alone were dreadful. And it was no good if the bleach wasn't active, in other words if you didn't have fumes from it. It was sodium hypochlorite. It wouldn't work otherwise. Anyways these machines were a revolution. She then went to the ironing end of things and she brought in Tullis from Clydebank in Scotland, steam heated roller irons, which were a revolution as well as the automatic folder for folding the sheets after ironing. She got an automatic machine for pressing the white coats and another one to fold them.

Now there were huge amounts of cotton white coats coming in from the meat factories, hospitals, butchers and doctors surgeries in those days and they were dreadfully hard to get the meat and blood stains out of number one, but number two to iron them. So in the past the women had very old rotating tables that were steam heated for pressing the white coats. It was like the cuckoo clock, one heated side of the table would be facing you and you would position the coat on it for pressing and it would rotate in under a hot plate, which the table with the outstretched coat was pressed up against. Meanwhile the other pressed garment would rotate out. You then removed the garment, which was piping hot with steam from the table, which had rotated out. She got modern automatic ones of these, which were a revolution as well. She got a shirt unit which at the time even when I was there, was processing about 2,000 shirts a week from all the schools and so on and all the professional people sending in their shirts. And this machine pressed the body in one go and the collars and cuffs on a different machine and lastly the folding on a different machine. In short she revolutionised the laundry to make it as modern as any in the British Isles.

She also got in marking machines called polymarks which put a little piece of material with an indelible ink code number on it to identify each customer, which also was a revolution because in the past this

was very labour intensive. Because every item coming in be it a sock or an underpants or a sheet or a shirt or whatever had to have a thread marking put on it and sometimes two or three thread initials on it to identify it. Now this permanent marking system was great if it was the same customer coming in again and again. It saved the marking a second time. The boys from Glenstal, Pallaskenry, St. Munchin's, Villier's all had to have cashes marks on their clothes on specific places for identification. So all that labour intensive work of stitching the code marks on the clothes was done away with over night with the polymark machines. She also put a non-slip very strong industrial vinyl covering on the floor, which cost a fortune. In the old days you had a lot of slippages because of wet floors, clothes on the ground etc. These were huge improvements in safety. Nowadays you have health and safety inspectors. You didn't have them in those days. And this was a dramatic improvement and also in the working conditions for the women. It was a huge improvement because prior to that it was hard working conditions and what I say is the nuns worked in the very same environment as the girls as well but they all survived it funny enough. But my God it was hard hard work. It was men's work – physical, and they all came through it but it was tough.

So from the 60s on things changed dramatically. They also became more open. The women were allowed out. They were accepted home on visits. Many of the families had the next generation in the home and, I couldn't put a figure on it but I would say the vast majority of the people remaining then were welcomed home for a holiday once a year. It never went beyond that. And a lot of them never went home. Some went home for 12 months or a year and realised they were being used for babysitters or as help on the farm and so forth and they would come back. So it was kind of a mixed blessing for some of them. But there was always an open door here for them. Then in the 70s on to the 80s the Sisters were constantly making improvements in their living conditions. A big improvement about the 50s or early 60s as well was the dormer type accommodation was changed into cubicles. Now that was huge. It gave them their own privacy, their own sense of place.

There were a whole lot of other changes made too. They purchased in the 50s a holiday home in Foynes. The flying boats used to come in to Foynes from 1937 to about 1946. And in 1947 Shannon airport was opened. The pilots and crew from the flying boats when they would come ashore from these aircraft had to be accommodated. So there was a place called Boland's Meadows outside Foynes where nine or ten concrete chalets were built for accommodation purposes. Anyway these houses became available and they had been idle for a few years and the Good Shepherd Sisters bought them and renovated them as holiday homes for themselves, St Mary's, St George's and St Joseph's. Not alone for the women and children, this was also a big step forward for the Sisters. For example when

my grandfather died in 1961, my aunts were not allowed home for the funeral. I remember when these nuns were allowed home for the first time. So until then they were like pretty much an enclosed Order for all intents and purposes. So they purchased Boland's Meadows and built a recreation hall etc. I remember going there as a child of four or five. They even built a little paddling pool that the tide would come in and fill every day for the children from St George's so they could paddle in and so on. And for years, I suppose 30 years or more they used that as a holiday home for the girls and for the Sisters as well. They all loved going out there. Of course my aunt Caroline in particular because it was home from home for her.

The Sisters had a minibus for transporting them to and fro and this minibus had to have curtains on the window imagine in case the local people would see the Good Shepherd nuns out driving. I was told that the St Mary's girls were transported in the laundry vans. Now there would only be back windows in the laundry vans. Can you imagine the conservative nature of the public in those days? Oh it wasn't seen as fitting to see nuns driving in public out to Foynes in a minibus. So the minibus would have curtains on the window and it would be the laundry van driver or the gardener that would drive them. And my poor aunt had to beg of him one day would he make a detour to drive past her mother's house so that she could get a look at it. But she couldn't go in. They couldn't stop and she couldn't go in. Anyways that was Boland's Meadow and it worked extremely well. Then as the years went on and the nuns got more progressive the women were getting fed up going to Boland's Meadow every year. It was getting boring for them. Then they started to take holiday homes in Ballybunion and so forth and it progressed from there. But in the 50s this was a huge thing for these people. It was a nice thing for them and they looked forward to it so much.

If I came back then to the laundry end of things, when I came in here the laundry was very well equipped and they turned out excellent quality work. To tell you the type of people these women were – when the Glenstal boys and the Glenstal priests laundry would be finished they would stay back in the Packing Room at night and if a boy or a priest had a hole in their sock they would darn the hole in the sock or they would sew in the button of a shirt if a button was missing. This was the kind of dedication these women had. I never, before that, or since then came across it and I have been around. I have run 12 different types of businesses. I have employed many many people and I have never seen the dedication that the women and the Sisters had here to their job. And their job was to turn out commercial, industrial and domestic laundry. They did all the mental hospital work; all Limerick Prison and the shirts from the prisoners in Limerick Prison were treated the very same way as the shirts from Glenstal or anyplace else. Hospital work would be treated very carefully – work that would have to be

sluiced and so on in case of cross-contamination with the general public. They were very good on that. And also of course the ironing process had a sterilising role to play as well in that you knew the high temperature of the steam had that effect.

Now to tell you about three lovely women in the Boiler House. The Boiler House was the powerhouse of the laundry because that generated the steam and without steam you had no laundry. The old boilers were just literally a large tank, which was filled with water and heated by a coal fire to make steam. They were generally made in Scotland in Clydebank where all the ships were built and of course the ships all had steam boilers as well and the original boilers would have been vertical but the later ones were horizontal because you could fit them into buildings much easier than the ships' vertical boilers. And in these boilers, you had a coal fire in a separate steel chamber surrounded by water inside a bigger container – the boiler. But the danger was when the boiler got up to say 100lbs pressure and the fire was still burning vigorously you had to have a safety valve and the safety valve would spring open to release the pressure – otherwise the boiler would burst.

So you had to have a very astute person minding the boiler that could gauge the demand of steam and gauge the heat of the coal so the safety valve wouldn't lift. Because first of all you'd wake the dead with the noise of the steam coming out but number two you would be wasting coal as well. So the reason why you have the tall red brick chimney here is you needed oxygen for the combustion and to burn coal to that temperature to get that much steam you needed one heck of a draft. And how did you get the draft? The height of the chimney dictated the draught. So that was the highest chimney in Limerick and this had a beautiful corbelled big top on the chimney, a most beautiful chimney and unfortunately I had to get Collins' Steeplejacks to take it down. I took about 30 feet off the top of that chimney because the bricks came loose and began to fall and one of them was found one morning in what we call the 'Long Can,' that little lane at the back of the boiler house and we were terrified one could fall on one of the public so we had to make it safe.

But anyway you had a damper and the damper was the steel shutter at the front of the boiler so you controlled the draught with this shutter and if you wanted steam fast you opened the shutter. And the draught would literally roar in because that chimney was so high. The second tricky part – if you have a boiler and it's at 100lbs pressure and you are drawing off steam the water level will go down. If the water level goes down below the level of what we call the furnace chamber, which is lined with bricks you will melt the steel in the furnace chamber and the boiler will blow up so you have to keep the water level above a certain height. Now you can pump water in to it at zero pressure no problem but at 100lbs

pressure how do you pump it in? So there was a special pump called a weir pump and the weir pump was for all intensive purposes like a gi-normous hospital syringe. This was operated manually, So Fiona [pseudonym] had the job of opening the steam valve and the pump would go tchit, tchit, tchit [noise of pump] because you would exhaust the steam every time to allow the piston to go back up and down again, and she then had to manually check the water level to check the level didn't go too high because if the water level went too high you got water coming over in the steam and you got spots of water coming out in the form of boiling water on the clothes you were supposed to be ironing. That was Fiona's job. Fiona was a dear.

Then you had Angela [pseudonym]. Angela was as strong as any man and her job in the old days was shovelling the coal into the boiler. And during the war they couldn't get coal and had to use turf. And I am told the turf man said when they used to deliver the turf from County Clare, that she was as good as any man unloading a truck. Angela's job was to shovel in the turf or the coal and take out the ashes and also to go up on top of the boiler to open and close the big steam outlet valve. So when the steam was up in the morning and maybe 10 or 15 minutes before the women would start work she would turn in the steam so that all the machines would be pre heated. The problem with Angela was she was so strong she would turn the steam in too quickly some times and you'd get what you call 'water hammer' and literally what it is – you'd have a plug of water in the pipe which would be the steam that would have condensed from the night before and if you get 100lbs pressure behind this plug of water its called 'water hammer'. You drive this two to three kilos of water at 100 miles per hour down the pipe and when it reaches the end of the pipe it could blow it off. I was once inside of what we call the Plant Room, which had a storage calorifier (for heating and storing water), which we used as a small workshop. I was out of it about five minutes when she blew the pipe off the wall with water hammer. But anyway that was Angela.

And then you had Mairéad [pseudonym] and Mairéad's job was to provide the food for the other two women in the Boiler House and do the cleaning. You could eat your breakfast off the tiles on the Boiler House floor. In the old days the women had to be up at six in the morning to put up steam for the laundry and the central heating for all that building and the *bain maries* and the pressure cooker in the kitchen. A *bain marie* is a large basin which had steam outside it for cooking. You could make soup in it. The potatoes and vegetables were done in the steamer. They had a very fast way of cooking because they had steam. They had a huge big pressurised steam chest with a door on it and you would put the potatoes or vegetables on a tray and it was used like a pressure cooker. You put the spuds in close the door, squeeze down the wheel to tighten the seal, turn on the steam and in fives minutes the

spuds were cooked literally. The *bain marie* is very similar. Now you might have 20 gallons of soup to feed all the women. So for the porridge for breakfast you had to have steam for the *bain maries* as well. For the hot water for the washing you had a calorifier which is only a huge big cylinder with a coil in side and through that coil you had the steam and the water was outside and you had boiling water in no time – as much as you wanted. So that was the job of the three in the Boiler House and they were an absolute institution.

But lovely lovely times, that was Fiona, Mairéad and Angela in the Boiler House. And the Sisters then when they bought a new boiler in 1966 they thought so much of Fiona they got the foundry in Scotland to cast the water level bar – now you have two glass pipes to the front of the boiler and they are called sight glasses and at the top of the glass pipe you have the steam inside and at the bottom you have the water and across in the middle you'd have two pointers pointing at the low level and the high level of the water in the sight glasses. And this is what Fiona had to watch every day to watch the level of the water in the sight glasses and to turn on the weir pump to pump in more and they got the name 'Fiona' stamped on the casting and a man from Kerry bought the old boiler and he insisted on taking the name Fiona on the brass sight glass. It was a pity. It was beautifully cast in Scotland in solid brass. I suppose it was the scrap value he took it for. But then they changed over to oil and that of course was dramatic. This was part of the modernisation. They brought in the automatic oil fired boiler, which is like your domestic boiler now at home only on a much much larger scale. And of course you needed no red brick chimney. You needed a chimney six meters high just to take the hot gasses above the level of the flat roof. That changed Fiona's job completely. She had an automatic burner, which could have been set to start up on a time clock but no, they continued to get up every morning at 6 o'clock and they manually turned on the boiler, which then of course took over automatically.

And when I came then the blower on the boiler was horribly noisy. So they spent such a long day there, television had come in, and they loved their television programmes and so on – so I put a silencer on the boiler to silence the noise of the blower and I got them a television in the Boiler House and Sr Philomena came up to me and 'John Kennedy' she said 'I'll never forgive you'. 'Why?' says I. 'I can't get them women to bed. They won't come up out of the Boiler House'. They could flick you see themselves. They had RTE 1 and RTE 2 [television channels]. You only had the two channels then. So if there was RTE 1 on over in the communal television which was in one of the class rooms and if some of the women wanted to watch something on RTE 2 they would come over to the boiler house. So [Sr] Philomena would often come over and there may be 10 inside of the Boiler House all around the television. Now this Boiler House I should tell you, normally boiler houses are filthy with soot and smut

and everything. The floor was tiled and the walls were painted and those tiles were washed by Mairéad every morning and Mairéad went over to the kitchen and she got her tray with lunch, dessert, everything – they made the tea themselves and she brought the tray over and she laid the table for them in the Boiler House with an oil cloth, serviette, knife, fork, everything and they dined in style in the Boiler House and then they had their own electric kettle – they originally used the steam to boil the water. Then they had an electric kettle and they would make their own tea. And they were renowned then for if a visitor came you were invited into the Boiler House for tea and biscuits. When my kids were small they loved going in to the Boiler House to the women. As far as I know Fiona was here all her life, well from a very young age. I'm not exactly sure. Fiona was here a long time.

The real characters for me from here were the older women and they are all buried above in Mount Saint Lawrence and I am delighted that lately their names have been inscribed. They weren't given names and people thought it was unfair on the Sisters. It wasn't the Sisters' fault. These people wanted to remain anonymous because of the shame of being there and the families wouldn't want it known they had a member in the Good Shepherd. So there was an awful can of worms there in putting the names there. Now that they are all dead or most of them are dead it doesn't matter. Then when that grave was full the Sisters purchased graves above in Mount Saint Oliver's – the new cemetery – and I suppose there's 20 or 30 possibly buried up there as well. Everyone got their own names on those graves from day one. It was I that coined the phrase for the Sister-in-charge that put the stone on the grave for the St Mary's women in Mount Saint Oliver's. I said call them 'The Ladies of the Good Shepherd,' because that's what they are. In 10 years time you will have very few of these women left.

Now I must digress. The Limerick Lace was founded here before the Good Shepherd came in 1848. It was the Lancastrian School of Lace and seemingly it was for destitute women in Limerick to help them. Now my aunt wrote a book on the history of Limerick Lace and I don't know where you'd get a copy of it and I'm hazy on the history of it but the Good Shepherd Sisters took it on again as a means of generating income. And in my time the American tourists' buses used to pull to the front door for many years to see the women making the lace and purchase the lace. I mean it could take a week to make one lace handkerchief for which they were charging the Americans peanuts. What they were very proud of was when John F. Kennedy met Frances Condell, the former mayor of Limerick, in Limerick Racecourse. She presented him with a Limerick Lace christening veil. Now many families have Limerick Lace christening robes still. Now what they also did was embroidered table linen. So any one of the women who had a gift for needlework would be in the Lace Room. They also had the old type manually operated Singer sewing machines; you know the ones that you tilted the footplate to make it

work. They were geniuses with their hands at needle craft those women. Many of them went out then to the outside world with the crafts they learned here. My observation was that their skills were very limited. Their skills were limited mainly to housekeeping.

The other small little aside as well that I will tell you about. If you go down the Long Can and you look at the wire mesh gate with the high level platform that is where the trucks pulled in with the soiled laundry. It was during the modernisation that this doorway was opened up onto the Long Can. To avoid cross-contamination you should always bring the soiled laundry in one door and it should have no connection with the clean laundry going out. In the old days the soiled laundry came in at the top door where the clean work went out. So it was only in the 60s that change was made. So you had a straight-line production system. I will show you when we go over there and at the Boiler House end it was marked and then sorted, the polyester white coats, the cotton white coats, you know, shirts all in their own piles. They were weighed on the weighing scales to balance the machines. In the old machines it was just by look but I got the weighing scales to balance and so on and it then went to the ironing machines or tumble dryers from washing and then the packing in a straight line.

But the women going down the town hated going out the main gate. They always went through the Boiler House door because the women in the Boiler House had a key. But the problem was the step was the height of the table. It would be height of the floor of a truck. In Pallaskenry College where I went to secondary school, John O'Grady [pseudonym], he is dead now God be good to him, used to drive the college truck for bringing in the laundry in big baskets and the truck was exactly the same height. It was a Thames Ford rigid truck, exact height as the floor. You only slid the basket off the floor to the truck, straight in to the marking and sorting area. I got a man to cut a step into the concrete so the women could catch the gate and put a foot in the step to come in. And it was a great help to the women and the nuns because otherwise you see they'd have to lift their knee up over three feet high to get up on the floor and you can imagine the comments of the fellas walking up the footpath at the nuns lifting their knee up to get up on the floor. The priests from St John's had a special knock when entering the convent via the boiler house. It was three knocks on the big wooden doors.

Another woman from County Clare was brought in here in her mid-teens. And she told me that she never did anything out of the way and that she was very lonely and she used to stand in the toilet before going to bed at night for ages listening to a dog barking because it reminded her of home. Somebody must have reported her because she said that sometime later the window was nailed shut. She said she was put standing on a wooden butter box to scrub clothes on a washing board which was

sticking up at an angle out of the sink – they used to call the sinks ‘a mash’ I don’t know why – white porcelain sinks, big deep sinks and again the most basic job with a deck scrub. Do you know what a deck scrub is? A scrubbing brush with hard bristles. A corrugated wooden washing board and the collars and the cuffs of the men’s shirts, and men those days would wear the shirts a long time and they would be black. And her hands she said used to be raw and bleeding from the soap.

The soap was in block form and was called ‘common bar soap’ and was corrosive to skin. The soap powder and bars came in bags and it came in by the tonne and I will show you where the soap house was. You can imagine, to get an idea of the volumes they were handling. The sheer volume they handled of the sheets was incredible they were handling thousands of sheets in the week through the premises. Again the Soap House had a high level door for the delivery trucks. Soaps in powder form were heaved into a tank of water in the middle of the washhouse floor and dissolved. They used a venturi system to pump the liquid soap solution up to a higher tank so it could gravity feed into the washing machines. The venturi was literally a pipe extending down into the liquid soap with a jet inside it for steam. When opened the steam created a venturi effect which pumped the soap solution up into a higher tank which was about two meters up on a frame. And this was a marvellous breakthrough for the women. They had no handling of soap at all for the machines. And basically what was done then was they used to soak badly soiled laundry in strong detergent prior to washing. The odd collar still needed hand scrubbing. So you never had the red hands situation.

What I found sad was in the past when the relatives of the women would come to visit. Some of the relatives, you see, would be the children of the women here. More of the relatives would be close family. There was a door below the chimney and Soap House into a corridor, which had a door at the other end leading out to the Long Can and this door had a grill on it similar to the one on the main door of the convent. At the end of the corridor on the left was a small toilet with a ventilation window onto the Long Can and on the left hand side were two small parlours, which were heated by steam from the Boiler House. These two rooms were where the St Mary’s women could meet their visitors. When I started in the laundry things were different, the place was opened up and they could bring visitors in and walk them around, bring them through the laundry show them where they worked and everything. I think it was in the 60s the big improvements were made.

I don’t want to single out particular women because I was mad about them all but there was a particular person that I was very fond of and she died of cancer. Her name was Sue [pseudonym], and Sue was in the Good Shepherd in Waterford and transferred to Limerick to Mary Crest. The Sister-in-charge

asked could she come to work for me in the laundry even though she had no previous experience. I was cautious initially about taking her on but I was delighted I did. Sue loved it in the laundry and fitted in extremely well and was the life and soul of the Crescent Room where the two-roll Tullis ironing machine was. Unfortunately she got cancer and died about 10 years ago. But she had a great sense of humour and she was great for nicknames. One of the nuns was very vain and loved the best of everything and so on and everything had to be just so, and very precise. She spoke very grand. Sue's nickname for her was Quality Street – you know the sweets, quality streets. It was an affectionate nickname. Ah but Sue was wonderful. She could sum everyone up so well. She had some too, a bit derogatory for people. Now I never found out what my nickname was, nobody would ever tell me but I know she had one for me as well. But that was Sue. I could go on and on with the stories about them.

A sad story I was told about one of the women. One of the women wanted to meet her daughter one day and a certain person organised the meeting, without the knowledge of the Sister-in-charge. There is a back gate behind the sacristy and from St George's the little girl was brought up to meet her mother who came down from the laundry side. And she was told on by someone. And that mother was treated badly for just disobeying the rule by that Sister. Seemingly her hair was cut. All her hair was cut off and she was kind of shunned and so on. That was cruel you know. There were some Sisters that were absolute saints. But there were the odd few, and you get that in all organisations, that were seemingly overzealous. The same goes for the women on the St Mary's side. There were some that were absolute saints but there were the few as well and they were difficult. They would put you to the pin of your collar. They really would.

One now for example, she had to be committed to the mental hospital. If she had a row with you, she could turn vindictive or if she was told to do something she didn't want to do. For whatever reason, I don't know, she crept back into the laundry one evening and tried to light a fire underneath the floor in the cellar where all the fluff is. The Crescent Room had all the tumble driers in it and the tumble driers were heated by steam flowing through a battery with the steam on one side and the cold air coming in from the other. The hot air coming out of the dryer was blown into a cellar because it was laden with fluff, lint we called it. And this lint, you couldn't have it blowing out in the atmosphere. It was a terrifying fire hazard. It was red-hot fluffy wool and one spark and the place is gone up. Where did she go? Down into the cellar to set fire to the lint. Had she not been seen on time the whole place could have gone up in flames. There were a few other instances as well so she was assessed and ended up in the mental hospital.

Some of the women who were sent in were in modern parlance 'intellectually challenged' and an odd few may have been borderline mentally unstable. Long before my time I was told a story about the woman in charge of the roller ironing machine in the Crescent Room. These rollers were big long cylinders heated by steam. They'd be three meters wide. They'd be half a meter in diameter, mechanically driven and they were like a big drum, like a long coke can, three meters long and a meter in diameter with high pressure steam in the inside. They were covered with special clothing that wouldn't burn and rotated by an electric motor. And a half moon shaped steam heated bed underneath kept the sheets pressed against the rollers as they rotated. When you fed in the sheet rotating belts carried it down into the bed and the action of the roller carried it out the other side and it came out ironed. One of the women from another department had washed something small and she wanted to dry it quickly on the side of the calendar [roller iron]. A normal double bed sheet wouldn't cover the width of the calendar. Now a king-size [sheet] would or a large table cloth would so there was room to spare and she put it in and I am told the woman hit her a slap and said, 'how dare you go at my machine without permission'. But your one had it fed in at this stage. The woman in charge jumped up on the machine and she put her hand in beside the hot roller to pull it out before it could be properly ironed. The machine severed her arm below her elbow. So you had those episodes as well you know. It was a horrific accident.

I don't know of any incidences here of physical abuse at all, maybe there was I don't know but I never heard of any. Now maybe the women wouldn't say it to me, I don't know of any physical abuse. There are ways of demeaning a person, which could be as hurtful as physical abuse.

You had bullying amongst the women as well. I had incidents of that, like that one with the ironing machine. Sometimes the nuns picked up on it and sometimes they didn't. I should explain to you how the Sisters managed the workforce in the laundry. The entire operation was zoned into certain areas with a Sister in charge of each area. These Sisters reported directly to the Reverend Mother. All the women working in the laundry were under the control of the Sister in charge of St Mary's Class outside their working hours and she liaised with the Sisters in charge of the various sections about the women.

They operated a demarcation system. The laundry work coming in was segregated into departments. For example St John's and Barrington's hospital was counted and sorted for washing by the same person who counted it and packed it for dispatch when it was washed. Shannon Airport Hotel School and flight kitchen was handled in the same way. Glenstal Abbey and Pallaskenry School etc. were handled by another section in the same way. In between the Washhouse, who had its own specific

group of women with a Sister-in-charge handled the washing from all of these sections. Then in turn the washed work was segregated. All the sheets went to the three roll Manlove ironing machine with its own team – who had to shake out the work prior to feeding in to the ironing machine – who after ironing had to pack it off onto the correct trolley according to its destination, be it a hotel or hospital etc. Church work, table linen and pillow cases etc went to the two-roll Tullis ironing machine in the Crescent Room where again all the finished work had to be put on the correct trolley for whatever section was doing the counting and packing prior to dispatch. Towels, underwear, football gear etc went to the tumble dryers in the Crescent Room. Shirts and white coats went to their specific machines and irregular flat work went to the rotating Dupress pressing machines. Wedding dresses, christening robes, vestments and other delicate work went for hand ironing. There was a separate Sister in charge of the Crescent Room and another Sister in charge of the Ironing Room. All this ironed work was brought in trolleys to the Packing Room. There was one Sister in charge of the most labour intensive part of the laundry that is, the personal laundry be that from the colleges or the general public etc. All this work had to go through the polymark system, which had three marking machines at the soiled end prior to sorting and washing and three rotating racks at the Packing Room end. The idea of the rotating rack was while the person at the table at the front was packing one batch of personal laundry the person at the rear would be putting the laundry from the trolley onto the shelf under its correct number. The nightmare was if polymark numbers were not stuck on properly and came adrift in the wash how could the unmarked laundry be assigned to its correct owner. The Sister in charge of hotels had her own special room off the Packing Room where the trolleys of finished laundry were brought for counting and packing. Once this work was done that Sister and the two women in her charge were finished for the day. The Sister in charge of Shannon Airport had her own office and when that work was done she and the women under her went to work in the Lace Room. The lists of all the work done be it personal, colleges or contract were all sent to an office in the Packing Room for pricing by some of the sisters from the convent who came over in turns to do pricing. The priced lists went around the corner to the accounts office where another Sister entered them in the ledger if they were monthly accounts or they went to the packing tables for attaching to the parcels if they were cash customers at the door.

Sometimes what was a cause of a lot of aggravation amongst the women was if the people in the Washhouse or the Ironing Room gave priority for example to the hotel sheets instead of the hospital sheets and all hell would break loose because it would mean whoever was last in the queue would be last to finish in the Packing Room. What was unique in its day and way before its time they operated what is now called 'JIT' system of production, which means 'Just in Time'. That is the work that is needed the soonest gets priority. So for example the hotel work and the hospital work that was going

out the following morning got top priority and the school contract or mental hospital work that was going out in a week's time got the least priority.

Some of the women were praying morning, noon and night. They were as religious as the nuns. Some of the Sisters had their favourites and these women would do odd jobs for them and run errands for them up town etc. and in turn the women were given little favours in return.

And long ago they used to call them the 'fallen women' and when they went out people would jeer at them as well. They went through dreadful times. Now to give you an example of the times in that street called the Long Can there was a walkway, a high walkway across that street into a recreational area, St James's Park they called it, on the far side. Now it wasn't a playground it was a recreational area. They could play netball and they could walk around the gardens. The gardens had a high wall like a prison and they had galvanised sheeting and a galvanised roof covering the walkway. The women weren't visible to the public and vice versa. I never saw it used in my time. One day a CIÉ [State-owned transport company] truck had a heavy load on board and drove down the Long Can to deliver it. When he drove back up the street the springs had risen about six inches higher and the container hit the thing a wallop and it shifted about two feet off the wall making it a danger to the public. As it had been obsolete for years and in order to make it safe CIÉ removed it at their own expense.

Prior to changing over to oil for the boiler, you can imagine they had tonnes of ashes from the coal boiler, and even more so during the war years when they burned turf and timber and anything else they could get their hands on to make steam. The horse and cart from the farmyard was used to take away the ash. The Sisters owned the swampy land across Clare Street from the present college, where Dawn Dairies is now and the industrial site behind it. The People's Park is where the town dump was in my childhood and I can still remember the smell coming from it.

Now down below here where the high wall ends you will see where there was a doorway. You had glasshouses, beautiful glasshouses in that garden. Joe O'Rourke [pseudonym], Lord have mercy on him, was the gardener and he was a good gardener. He grew beautiful tomatoes and flowers for the church and so on in those glasshouses. Outside the high wall, which is now dividing the student car park from Good Shepherd Avenue was the farmyard, sheds for the laundry vans, cars and tractor and the vegetable gardens. So there was a gardener and an assistant to the gardener down there and the Convent had a minibus and three or four cars at that time as well.

In the laundry you always get vast amounts of fluff coming out of clothes in the wash and they had a metal grill on the main drain from the washing machines to catch that fluff and it would also trap metal objects etc in it from people's pockets and so on. When choked with debris it was very heavy. One of the workmen would have to be called to lift the grill out. And there was one woman who worked in the washhouse at the sinks and she came from Tipperary. She allowed nobody else clean this because she saved all the coins she got in jars. When this was cleaned out once a month you'd have pennies and halfpennies and all sorts of coins and she always wanted to do that job. She would wash all the slime off them and she'd be days soaking them because they'd be jet black and she'd fill jam pots with all these coins and then she'd go up to the post office with one jam pot at a time to change the money and she'd give it all to the son whom I am told was drinking it.

In the front garden there was a beautiful fountain and the Sisters kept fish in it. And that is what gave me the idea for the pond over in the courtyard outside the canteen because the women were not allowed access to the front garden. That was for the Sisters only and the Sisters visitors who had access there. That was out of bounds. It was a beautiful fountain and why the college filled it in I do not know. It was an awful pity. And the other thing that upsets me about the front garden was the original nuns' cemetery and its extension. It was located to the right of the new entrance into the college – there was a lovely cemetery there where all the nuns were buried, beautiful cemetery. And I was up in arms when they exhumed the remains of all those nuns one of whom was my great aunt. It cost them thousands to do it.

Every time there was a funeral the route the coffin took was to exit from the church through the door under the organ gallery down the cloister and turn left into the corridor beside the Reverend Mother's office and through the hall door into the garden. Then down the steps and along the path under the trees down to the front wall running along Clare Street, left at the bottom of this path over towards the St George's playground wall and left again up to the cemetery. The crows always roosted on the tree-lined walk in the garden and it was always covered in bird's droppings. So the gardeners would have to clean this path the day before a funeral. They would sweep up the droppings first and then shake on the unusable soap powder from the laundry, which was kept for him. He would hose everything off and it would come up crystal clear every time for the funeral and people didn't realise it was covered in bird's droppings the day before. But that is where the graves were. The cemetery approach was down that walkway and across the garden and up the other side. That was that end of the cemetery. I have been told that people still come inquiring about the whereabouts of the cemetery.

I remember one day here at a funeral and the heavens opened just as we were in the cemetery. Bishop Newman was officiating and he insisted on saying every prayer in the book even though he could hardly read the book it was so wet in the end. So there were about a hundred mourners at this nun's funeral and we had to bring all their outer clothes, over to the laundry to be dried while they were having lunch. After funerals they were always given lunch here and you know the parlours. I will show you where they are later. They were always taken over for lunches and the worry for the Sisters was, number one, would they have enough lunches cooked and number two, would they have enough seating. It was around the time when the Sisters had purchased the houses in Southhill and Roxboro. I was sitting near the bishop and in a big loud voice he said 'when you join up now you don't join a convent at all, you join a bungalow'.

The Sisters had a teenage section in here in the 60s, which was in the building above the present canteen. As far as I know that teenage section wasn't for taking children from St George's but was for teenage girls that were sent here by the courts. I am told that if some of the women that were sent in here by the courts escaped, the nuns would ring the guards and a guard would accompany a nun and a driver to collect the woman if they got a report of their whereabouts. Some would go back to their home area if they escaped. I was told one story about a woman from Roscommon who escaped. She had been committed here by the courts and had somehow made her way back to Roscommon. Acting from a tip off from the family the girl was identified by the nun. The girl ran off pursued by the guard and the driver. She was wearing trousers and when the driver caught her in a rugby tackle and her trousers came down around her knees and caused a sensation. She was put into the back of the vehicle with a guard and brought back down here. They were horrible things. And that went on. Now that would have been in the fifties. That was the 50s and they were sent in here by the law. So one category was the women sent in by the courts. You also had the types I am told that the family had committed for whatever reason with the help of the local doctor or parish priest.

Seemingly some of the teenage girls who were sent in by the courts in the 60s were very difficult to control and some tried to escape. The teenage section wasn't opened for long before it closed again. The Sisters weren't equipped to deal with these girls. One of them, I am told, fell down a drainpipe trying to escape and broke her leg. Some girls just said I'm not doing something and just sat on the chair bold as brass and didn't want to co-operate. It wasn't like they had prison cells or anything like that. It was an open area. They each had their own cubicle. There was an open dining area and so on. The dining room was attached to the same kitchen as St Mary's. They tried to give them jobs some of

them in the laundry and some of them around and stuff but it didn't work out. I can't tell you exactly for how many years it was opened. It was the 60s.

There was a classification system for the women. Some became 'auxiliaries' and were sometimes referred to as a 'black child' because they wore black. Now when I heard this expression first I thought it was skin colour they were referring to. There is a very funny story of a man repairing the old organ and the old organ had to be pumped manually. And there was a story told that one of the young women was polishing the floor in the organ gallery and the service man for the organ asked her if she would pump the organ for him. 'Oh God Sir,' she says 'I can't do that. I must get a black child for you'. The black child was, they wore a black veil. They were of a different status and had positions of authority. So Fiona in the boiler house for instance was an auxiliary and wore a black veil. This custom did not exist in my time.

When I started working here in the laundry as a manager I was in my mid-thirties. It was a big change for me from the dairy industry, which I was used to. For example in the dairy for the tea break you made your own cup of tea and grabbed a biscuit but here the nuns were great, they spoiled me rotten. I couldn't boil the kettle and have a tea break over in my own office. I had to come over to the convent to be given my tea at 10:45. I was treated royally with a starch tablecloth and china tea set on the table, lovely fresh brown bread from the kitchen with marmalade, finished off with a slice or two of homemade fruitcake. All the women and nuns in the laundry had their break at this time as well. They had a lovely system here, when other factories had a morning tea break, we here had two tea breaks. The work was hard for the women but the two tea breaks helped a lot. One problem with the system was the boiler and all the machines were shut down during the break. Everything stopped. The tea break took half an hour and the same in the afternoon. A funny story about a cousin of my mother's who was a late vocation, she was a very strong willed woman and had great difficulty with the vow of obedience. So one day the Sister in charge of the novices made her scrub the cloister seemingly to teach her humility and obedience. And when my cousin was near the end of it the Sister came along and she said, 'I don't think you did that properly' and she kicked the bucket spilling the dirty water on the clean tiles. 'Well if you don't Sister,' she said, 'you can do it yourself'. She had many such battles with authority during her time in the Good Shepherd Convent.

You may never have been up at the top floor of the Convent, I don't know what the college has done with it now but all the novices were made to sleep in the top floor which was really a converted attic. You had a small little sky light as a window and they said in winter it was freezing up there because the

central heating didn't work properly up that high. They had an old style central heating system here. To the right of the hall door there is a cellar and inside of that cellar is what they call a sectional boiler. These sections were very large. They were as big as a double door and they were about a foot in depth, right and they would fit in the doorway into this cellar underneath the parlours and you took all these sections down and you had big long bars threaded at both ends and you had about 50 bars about four meters long and you bolted all these sections together with a kind of paper gasket in between them which when squeezed tight became water tight. But sometimes it wouldn't heat properly and the poor sisters would be frozen in the winter and that was the story about the boilers and the other half of that attic then, I will take you into it, it had the most exquisite water tanks I have ever seen. The water tanks were the storage tanks for the bathrooms and the kitchens and they were made from timber lined with lead. And the lead sheets were soldered together and these tanks were the same age as the building. There wasn't one leak in those tanks. I am scalded to find out that the college threw them out. They were perfect. They were a work of art.

One thing that I regretted taking down was a most beautiful glass roof over the atrium in the Packing Room to let in daylight, which had gone dangerous, it was so rotten. It was constructed like a glasshouse above the opening in the roof with windows, which could be opened by means of long ropes turning a brass screw mechanism. If you stand in the yard now which is the car park and look up at the building where the present dry cleaners is you'll see a sacred heart image in plaster on the wall on the gable end of the old laundry building. The atrium was on the flat roof adjoining this gable. A curious fact about this extension with the beautiful atrium is there was no window facing the road at all either upstairs or downstairs. The one window that is now beside the entrance door to the drycleaners' covers was originally a hatch through which the customers gave their laundry in to the Sisters. The upstairs windows in what was the new Packing Room, which overlooked the yard, were glazed with hammered glass, one cannot see through it. There is no window in the wall of the laundry building, which faces Pennywell Road at eye level. The gable end of the laundry facing the Long Can and the Boiler House and the Soap House had no windows overlooking the Long Can. There were two exceptions in the Long Can. One was the window of the men's toilet in the laundry gable and the other was the tiny window for the toilet adjoining the visitor's parlour. The Packing Room had an upstairs balcony and its outer walls were lined with shelves, which had numbers on them. All the washed and folded laundry, which was packed from these shelves had to be carried up two flights of stairs by hand, literally tonnes of clothes in the week. The packed laundry was put in hampers or wicker baskets for delivery to schools like St Munchin's, Glenstal, Salesians, Pallaskenry etc.

Limerick Corporation supplied the water to the laundry and the Convent and the nuns could tell you stories of the corporation turning off the mains for repairs without warning. The old cast iron tanks on the roof of the boiler house would only have a reserve of water for about half a day's production in the laundry. So a bad break in the supply could result in the nuns and the girls having to work late after their supper to get the laundry ready for the following morning. This was because the hotels and hospitals and other institutions only kept a minimum of covers – three sheets – for their beds. If you are running a hotel you need a minimum of three covers. Those poor nuns and those poor women had to work every bank holiday in the laundry as normal, Good Friday as normal, to give the hospitals and the hotels their laundry back thereby saving them the expense of buying the extra cover or the extra two covers. This was a practice that extended to my time in the laundry.

From the 60s on the various Reverend Mothers made big improvements to working conditions in the laundry by buying modern equipment. When I started there the policy of continued modernisation was continued. This increased capacity in the laundry and made working conditions easier for the women as well. Gone were all the hydros [spinners] and all the wet work washing machines, removing the washed clothes dripping wet. So for example the opening on the new machines were waist high to make it easier to unload them into a trolley as against the old hydros where all the clothes had to be lifted out. It was back breaking. If I had to separate those clothes for a week I'd have a biceps like a weight lifter from pulling and these poor women had to pull these clothes apart so you could feed them into an ironing machine. I still think they were marvellous women to do the type of work they did, backbreaking work some of it. And they did it without a murmur. A good example of their work ethic was a woman from County Tipperary who worked in the Wash Room. She would be in that laundry before her breakfast to have the machines loaded and started so there would be work ready for the driers and ironing machines when the rest of the women started after their breakfast. You know that is the way it worked. And there was nothing thought of it.

Also, proper sorting of the clothes prior to washing was crucial. What I didn't know when I came in to the laundry, with my dairy science background, was a lot of the white coats which came in then from doctors, butchers, meat factories etc. were white cotton and the new thing coming in was a polyester white coat. If you mix a load of polyester cotton white coats with ordinary white coats you'll get a chemical deposit on the polyester which turns them slate grey and if you boil the bejaney or bleach the bejaney out of them you'll never get them white again. I never knew it. And it takes just one polyester coat in a full load of cotton coats to do that. If it happened it was an absolute nightmare. Another problem item we had which was a new phenomenon was the thermal underwear. We had one

individual who always made me laugh because she had a happy knack of putting her own pronunciation on a word, which was sometimes hilarious. The problem with the bloody thermal pants was if they were put into the tumble dryer with the ordinary underwear they would go stiff as a board and they shrink to half their size and the individual concerned used to call them 'the terminals' – 'them terminals' she said 'is driving me mad' if one slipped past her and got into the dryer. And in those days we would have to buy the customer a replacement one, what we'd have to do is to go up town, we'd have to send somebody to get the exact size and everything to put into his laundry so there'd be no hassle about it. They were a nightmare. And of course the other problem was a colour run.

Once we got in a wash that was 'lepping with fleas' and we were terrified that the fleas would get on to us. And one of the old women in the laundry told us to take them out to the garden and throw them on the earth and the fleas will go into the ground. We threw them out in the garden, came back an hour later and there wasn't a flea on the clothes. I don't know how it works or why it works putting them in the ground like that but the fleas were gone anyway and we got them into the machines. The other thing is that handling other peoples soiled laundry can sometimes be quite offensive and especially back in the 50s and early 60s people weren't as hygienic as they are now. Some of the stuff that came in was hard to handle and these women never batted an eyelid, and did it. And it was tough work. Some of the hospital work had to be sluiced. Ah it was quite offensive as well. It never bothered them. That was the other aspect of it that I always marvelled at really. It was something you couldn't mechanise; you had to handle the clothes, polymark them and so on.

Something else I should mention is the Mary Crest building. Now the Mary Crest building has a long history and I was told that there was a convicted murderess there at one time. Seemingly it did have some cells way way before my time. I don't know much about it. It was converted into cubicles and it became Mary Crest hostel for female students in Limerick. It filled a niche for parents concerned about their daughters away from home for the first time.

During my tenure as manager for the nuns I took on some young people to replace the older women in 'The Class'. These were mainly local boys and girls who had done their Leaving Cert. and this would have been their first job. Watching the interaction between these young people, their style in clothes, their taste in music and their chit chat gave the older women a new lease of life. They enjoyed watching the romances and the tiffs and the banter. This was a far cry from when I was a child coming in and they seemed to be always singing hymns and it was before the Sisters brought in the radio first. Now we had music full belt in all sections of the laundry and they would pick their own style of music and

they would bring in tapes and so on. Other people would just take for granted but you know at the time it was a big thing for those people that in their place of work that they had a radio blaring away all day and various types of people coming in and so on. It was just a nice aspect to it.

Mary Crest, prior to it being converted into a hostel, was St Joseph's Reformatory for women and girls. I don't know how many of them worked in the laundry as it was before my time. As far as I am aware they were all sent in there by the courts. I never knew how many of them were there. There were 93 women in 'The Class' when I came here. You had some women working in both kitchens [St Mary's and the convent] and in the Lace Room as well as on other duties. I don't know the routines that were in place for the kitchens and other duties in St George's and St Joseph's. You had women who were doing nothing else but scrubbing and cleaning and so on like that as well. They had no outside staff for all this work. When I came in here there were a few women in their eighties and one called Pat [pseudonym] who was ninety-three and they toddled in every day into the Crescent room for a few hours behind the large table in the Crescent room on a long bench called a form [pronounced *forrem*] where they were 'monarchs of all they surveyed'. On this table all the small church work was folded. The church work included the various garments worn by the priest in the church and the various items used on the altar in the church as well. They might fold a few pieces in an hour but they would be watching the carry on and listening to the conversation and that's how they whiled away their day. I can still see them sitting at that table. And many of the women have lived and are living well into their nineties would you believe.

St Mary's had two infirmaries upstairs, one for each floor. So there was a huge system here and it took quite a lot of managing. I became very friendly with the bursar who was an exceptional nun. She was advanced in years in my day but still very sharp. And because she was so long in that job she was a very good advisor for the various Reverend Mothers who were changed every six years. The bursar was the financial controller in charge of all the funds and it was a hair-raising job for her because she had to ensure they had enough funds to pay the bills and she had to keep track of money so that money didn't go astray and so on as well. And you see you'd have all these suppliers, supplying the laundry and the various kitchens etc. So people would have to sign off in the kitchen for example for a tonne of potatoes or in the laundry for a tonne of soap and all this paper work ended up in the bursars office to be processed and paid.

There is a history of the Good Shepherd Order in Ireland and I think it's called The Annals and it's being written up regularly. And there is also supposed to be a record of all the details of the women from St Mary's. What level of detail is recorded I don't know.

In the old days Limerick was the Motherhouse for the province of Ireland and the provincial (head of the order in Ireland resided here) with all the various activities I described going on within its walls. Now the Motherhouse is in Dublin in a private house in the suburbs with a small community. The community in Limerick lives in the house on Good Shepherd Avenue and in the houses in Roxboro and Southhill. There are now only 11 members left in 'St Mary's Class' who live beside the Convent in separate housing in Good Shepherd Avenue. A huge change from the 50s when, I am told, there were approximately 200 Sisters in Limerick and nearly 200 in 'St Mary's Class' not to mention the numbers in St George's and St Joseph's.

The new houses in Good Shepherd Avenue are controlled by the Bergery Trust and has a Board made up of Sisters and lay people from the parish. The Convent and chapel are on the site of what was 'Shalom' – sheltered accommodation for children and around this on the circular avenue are the houses for the elderly (and not exclusively women). It is my understanding that the Sisters donated the site for these houses and the Health Board contributed towards their building and eventually when there are no more St Mary's women alive the Health Board will control all the accommodation. There is a beautiful recreation hall there, which is run by the Sisters as a day centre for the elderly and it plays a very active role in parish activities. The women from St Mary's are well looked after there.

What I would love to see happening if this Redress Board [Residential Institutions Redress Board] could finish its business, that the women from St Mary's and the older Sisters while they are still with us would be able to speak freely to researchers to give an oral history of their experiences within the walls of the Good Shepherd convent in Limerick. It is no more than all these poor women who lived anonymous lives and who were buried anonymously deserve, that is that their story should be told.

[Interview ends]