

# Gritty nuns build school legacy



The Our Lady of Mercy College Parramatta has been an institution. Pictures courtesy of OLMC

## Maryanne Taouk

IN 1888, nine pioneering and adventurous Irish women arrived in the Australian colony to build a school.

Draped in heavy Irish habits, the nine nuns stepped off a boat at Sydney Harbour 131 years ago and within a year had established Our Lady of Mercy College in the centre of Parramatta.

Principal Stephen Walsh said the school's success was in big part to the foundation those nine nuns built more than 100 years ago.

"I have such an admiration for the Sisters of Mercy," he said. "They commenced a school from nothing and when you read their letters, you can see that when they arrived, it was December and January – the height of summer.

"And I think of them scrubbing floors and building a primary school in those



Former OLMC principals Kitty Guerin, Ailsa Mackinnon, Stephen Walsh, Janet Woods and congregation leader Mary-Louise Petro.

heavy clothes and with not much support and no money, it is inspiring."

Within a month of putting up the walls for their first classroom, the sisters welcomed seven students.

"They had true grit," Mr Walsh said. "Their faith and dedication to helping the marginalised has built a school that can weather anything."

The nine nuns have their portraits hanging in the school during the 130 anniversary year; each one rep-

resenting a characteristic that Mr Walsh hopes today's pupils take on board.

"Mother Mary Clare Dunphy embodied joyfulness, Sister Mary Agnes Kavanagh had a love of doing service. Mother Mary Alacoque Kavanagh was generous and kind," he said. "Others had good humour, were humble and resilient, all things that the girls will take into their lives after they finish here."

•OLMC will hold an open day from 10am-2pm on March 10. Details: 9683 3300.