In 1962, Catherine McAuley High School did not exist. Up till that time, most parishes provided a primary school and kept the girls on for three years of secondary education leading to the Intermediate Certificate, which was the exit year for a large majority of the girls. In this case the location was St Patrick’s School in Ross St, Parramatta. The secondary boys were housed on Victoria Rd Parramatta, at Marist Brothers High School, that offered five years of secondary education through to the Leaving Certificate.

The introduction, to the 1st Form (Year 7) cohort of 1962, of the Wyndham Scheme of NSW secondary education set in train a revolution of the curriculum which had been much the same for years. Now that ‘Junior Secondary’ was to last for four years, the Catholic educators saw that each parish could not hope to provide all that was needed for junior secondary education. So was born the Catholic Education System of schools, which arranged for secondary classes to be provided for both boys and girls (usually separately) on a regional basis, each school serving several neighbouring parishes.

The new curriculum posed many challenges. The Wyndham Scheme recognised that students needed a core of learning which was much broader than had been set previously. A major component of this was Science for all - and most parish-based schools were not equipped with the facilities or with teachers skilled in that discipline. The Commonwealth Government funded the building of science laboratories in schools designated to offer the School Certificate courses; the teachers set about training to deliver the curriculum. Some parish schools continued to prepare their students for the Intermediate Certificate, which was replaced by the School Certificate in 1965, and then most of these schools reverted to being primary schools only, while the secondary students moved on to whatever regional school could be accessed in their area.

Parramatta’s needs could not be met in the existing locations, so the Catholic education system decided to build a purpose-built regional secondary complex in Westmead, on land owned by the St Vincent de Paul Society. There emerged twin secondary schools - Parramatta Marist High for boys (Forms 1-6) and Catherine McAuley High (Forms 1-4 only), as it was thought that the nearby private school Our Lady of Mercy College Parramatta could house the small number of girls wishing to go on to study at senior level (Forms 5 and 6) - and sit for the new exam known as the Higher School Certificate.

While the buildings were under construction at the Westmead site, 3rd and 4th Forms were housed in demountables on another part of the site, while 1st and 2nd Forms were retained at St Patrick’s Parramatta.

In November 1966, the new buildings at Westmead were blessed and opened, and soon after, the staff and students, housed thereto in St Patrick’s Parramatta, made the trek to their new school, Catherine McAuley High, which seemed like paradise after the cramped conditions at the Parramatta campus.
Above: Screen Shots of film reel from Marist of blessing and opening 6th November 1966

SCHOOL NAME

The school is named after Mother Catherine McAuley, a courageous, compassionate woman who dedicated her life to serving the poor, sick and uneducated. She was born in Ireland in 1778 and established the Sisters of Mercy in 1831.

In 1888 her community in Callan, Ireland were invited by Cardinal Moran to work in Australia and some of the Sisters arrived that year. When a new Catholic school for girls was opened at Westmead in 1966 under the charter of the Sisters of Mercy it was a fitting tribute to name the school in honour of Catherine McAuley. The values of the Sisters of Mercy still guide the school and its community today, as the school motto encourages students ‘to strive for higher things’.

Above: 1966 - Program from official opening front cover

Above: 1966 - Program from official opening
Snippets from posts on Facebook page asking what people remember:

“T was there and remember the ladies with stiletto heeled shoes were not allowed to walk on the parquet floors.”
Louise Northey

“I remember the official opening with the bishop in 1966 on the lawn outside Marist.”
Lynda Knight

“I was at the opening of Marist and also remember the warnings about the stilettos!”
Marlene Lennon

“Yes I was there with my sister and mum.”
Suzanne Dalziel

“I was there and remember the ‘open air’ Mass.”
Vicki Baiada