

MCS School History



MITCHAM COUNTY SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

1929 - 1969.

Workmen were still busy painting the hall and outside in the grounds, a wilderness, thick with weeds, kneedeep in nettles and brambles, builders rubbish lay strewn around. Fools Parsley waved flowery heads and Buttercups gleamed bright yellow on a rough field, that needed ploughing, and was to be, in time, the games area. On a more promising note, the Apple trees that bloomed gaily in the orchard behind the school, and the vivid green leaves which adorned the many Elm trees all pointed to the promise of a lovely summer ahead.

This was the scene on Thursday 2nd May 1929 when 42 girls of ages ranging from 9½ to 14 years; ¾ from Mitcham, 7 from Sutton, and 1 from Wallington with four Mistresses: Miss G.M. Catling, MSc London, BSc London; Miss D. Baxter, B.A. London; Miss F. King, B.A. London; and Miss M.H. Stafford, B.A. London; waited, resplendent in their crisp new uniforms of Blue and Lavender with hats having a cockade instead of the more usual hat bands, for the arrival of the Head Mistress to make her entrance. Miss Elsie F. Dunn, MSc London, BSc London, the school's first & longest serving Head Mistress, was to lead the school from its first day through to her retirement in 1955.

According to the results of the entrance examination the girls were placed in three forms and a new era in the education of girls in the Mitcham area was duly established. A new school offering excellent education chances for its pupils took its first steps to a unique future that was to last some forty years.

The formal opening of the school took place later that year on Wednesday 13th. November with prayers by the Bishop of Woolwich, a speech by Mr. Mizen and then the Opening Ceremony performed by Mr. H.W. Liversidge, Chairman of Surrey Education Committee.

Entrance exams for the first pupils had been held on 29th April and the first 42 had increased to 48 by July, with some later arrivals joining at Whitsun, and when the Autumn Term started on 17th September the numbers had grown to 78. Two extra part-time teachers; Miss A.W. Haddow (Physical Training), Miss M.E. Campbell, (Art & Needlework) joined the school in September and the school's first Care-taker; Mr. Wootton resigned on 13th July being replaced by Mr. V. G. Barber.

Hot school meals were started in September and meat with 2 or 3 veg plus good pudding was available for one shilling per head! The school now had a Choir, plus Historical and Geographical Societies.

All this a far better state of affairs than that seen by Miss Dunn on her first visit to the school when on a bleak winter's day she had made her way, ploughing through deep snow, struggling laboriously, slipping on frozen ruts and having to hop over trenches half filled with ice. She likened it to the experience of an explorer entering uncharted country. The double avenue of trees had been so unmercifully pollarded that little more than ugly stumps remained, shapeless and messy piles of earth lay all around and there were a few little wooden huts that were inhabited by the workmen. The ruler of this "Barbarous country" an immense, burly man of uncertain temper and tremendous obstinacy was known by the title of "Foreman of the Works".

After entering the building and finding to, her relief, the heating was on, she was advised, by this gentleman, that the first room she entered which had stone flooring, no fireplace nor radiator was the "Head Mistress's Room". At least, she thought, she would be able to reach anything in the room without rising from her chair. The rather nice room next door, she was advised, with some satisfaction, was the Staff Room. It was not until some time later she learned, with great relief, the true state of affairs. The first room had been the stationery cupboard!

Those who knew Miss Dunn will understand that this episode did nothing to make a good relationship possible and, indeed, it is reported, a very cold relationship existed between them until the works were finished.

The first year at the school was quite different to those that followed in a variety of ways, more recent pupils may marvel that the first gymnastics of the early years consisted of free standing exercises and arm swinging. (The school had not then learnt to stand on its head!). There were occasional attempts at a form of country dancing but none of the refinements of later years. However the experience of a good education, good friends and a modern, purpose built school contributed to the achievements of these pioneer pupils and helped to form the traditions that live on today, long after the closure of the school in 1969, in the hearts of staff and pupils and in the activities of the Old Mitchamians Association.

By the summer of 1930 the new school was beginning to lose the atmosphere of a building site and newly planted borders blossomed with splashes of colour and the areas of weeds were being converted to nice lawns. The trees were just about recovering from their ravages the numbers of pupils increased.

However the conditions inside the school could not totally block out all the harshness of the outside world. A world without antibiotics and the advances in modern medicine and surgery that we enjoy today. Tuberculosis, Diphtheria & Polio were then serious problems and operations now considered minor surgery were an undertaking fraught with risk. The first pupil to be cut down in the prime that is youth was Joan Ewind, who died aged 16, on 8th March 1931. Later that year a second tragic loss occurred on 5th October when Nancy Underwood, aged 12, passed away after an operation for appendicitis. She had been at the school less than a year.

Sadly, in the years ahead others were to suffer untimely deaths from illness & from the hostilities of the 1939-45 War.

It was about two weeks after the start of the Autumn term of 1931 that Miss Dunn announced in an Assembly that the school was to be divided into houses....
CRANMER. Named after Thomas Cranmer who bought the Manor of Mitcham in 1656 and on whose estate the school was built.

CAESAR. Named after Sir Julius Caesar. Not the Roman but the Englishman who was Master of the Rolls to Queen Elizabeth and lived in Mitcham.

RALEIGH. Named after Sir Walter Raleigh. He married a niece of one Sir Nicholas Carew and owned a house in Mitcham in the right of his wife. It stood at the corner of Wykford Lane (later Whitford Lane, now London Road) and was sold in 1615 to raise money for his expedition to Guiana.

THROCKMORTON. Named after Elizabeth Throckmorton. (Sir Walter Raleigh's wife)

*Sir Julius Caesar's full name was in fact Sir Julius Caesar Adelmare and it was to his house, "Cranmer" on Tuesday 12th September 1598 that Queen Elizabeth I. visited and stayed the night. She was presented with "A gown of cloth of silver richly embroidered; a black net-work mantle with pure gold; a taffeta hat, white, with several flowers, and a jewel of gold set therein with rubies and diamonds". The cost of entertaining Her Majesty being recorded as £700 sterling, plus his own provisions and whatever was provided by his friends.

The first House Captains were:- Cranmer, Kathleen Ferguson. Raleigh, Doris Hott. Caesar, J. Sweetinburgh and Throckmorton had two Captains, Marion Stacey & Irene Palmer.

The first school magazine was "Unofficial" handwritten and illustrated but in October 1931 the Official No.1. was published in printed form complete with a compliment of adverts that showed some curious anomalies.

BASSETTS entreated "You fellows dont know what you have missed if you've never had Bassetts" and suggested "You'll vote them ripping"

Mae J. TROIS FONTAINES offered "expert professional training" "by French experts" "which equips the pupil to enter the profession" (Dressmaking!)

E.J.RILEY Ltd. Offered free catalogues & claimed their sports requisites to be of the utmost dependability however arduous the service, had amazing long life, gave more satisfaction and ensured greater pleasure from any outdoor or indoor pastime!

GAMAGES invited hikers to purchase their needs from their Holborn store and in their advert showed a young man wearing "strong khaki drill shirt 3/6d and a pair of hiking shorts 2/9d. (The pair ordered together only 5/9d)" Rucksacks in the same advert were 4/11d to 32/6d.

GUNN & MOORE Ltd., showed two male footballers and advised that they were the manufacturers of "Right Wing" and other "WELL-KNOWN BALLS".

*Could these advertisers have been foreseeing the time in 1940/41 when some of the boys were to share the girls school during the evacuation period?.

LUCAS offered "King of the Road" Cyclealities including Bells 9d to 6/6d, Lamps from 2/- to 27/6d. (Including the "Silver King" oil lamp at 16/6d and Dynamo sets from 17/6d to 27/6d.

RALEIGH offered "All-Steel" Bicycles. "Ride a Raleigh and learn how really enjoyable it can be, rigid, rapid and reliable" From £5-19-6d. Ladies Models £6-9-6d Brooks saddles and Sturmey Archer 3 speed gears were 20/- extra.

Some eight pages of text in this, first, issue were devoted to urging girls to become "Masseuses" where the earnings could be up to two thousand pounds per annum.

"To help those with neither the physique nor the willpower necessary for normal function" "The patient lying in the bed having everything done with no cares". Candidates were required to produce a certificate of physical fitness, signed by a doctor, to have a strong healthy outlook on life, kindly nature, strong, commanding personality, a supple body, and hands which have the power completely to relax. Weight and height being an advantage. Preference being given to girls good at games and educational gymnastics with a well-set-up body being desirable.

*Except that I have no malfunctions, just the sort of girl I am looking for. All suitable applicants please do not hesitate to write or phone!

Having taken a lighthearted glimpse at this first issue which, overall, did not achieve the high standard of subsequent editions, and at the risk of a lynching from male O.M's, I must declare that in researching the Girl's school magazines, professionally printed using smaller type and margins, I find that they included more facts and interesting articles in their issues than those printed at the Boy's school. Mostly the latter were produced by the Staff and pupils on a hand press with an annoying practice, as far as using them to trace missing O.M's, of merely using surnames.

One item in this first magazine that impressed me by its purity, charm and its simplicity of description was the following:-

"SNOW"

Winter is the time of snow,
Watch the skaters how they go,
The snowman with his pipe and hat
Grows bigger with each childish pat.
See the snowflakes whirling so!
Winter is the time of snow.

Having read through magazines in chronological order I reread and reflected on these few lines several times before I found in a later issue that the author, a Jean Kinloch, was a third form pupil who had joined the school in Sept. 1929 and had written them only a few days before entering Brompton Hospital in the summer of 1931 where she remained until passing away on 8th March 1932 "Having shown the utmost patience and good spirit throughout her long and tedious illness" Sadly a third tragic death in the early days yet leaving behind a delightful poem to be read and enjoyed and reprinted over 50 years after it was written..

Perhaps we should all reflect that in the greater context of time all our lives are also like snowflakes, uniquely formed in the heavens & yet all too quickly melting away. A.O.F.

In the magazine of April 1932 Miss Dunn wrote "We have one advantage in being a new school. We are not hampered by tradition" "The school cannot remain perpetually traditionless any more than it can remain perpetually young and as it grows older it must perforce acquire tradition. We must see to it that the tradition we are helping to build is a good one" "There lies our opportunity, the chance to make it a great tradition"

* I think that were she still with us today she would feel that even though the school is no more a "Great Tradition" remains and will continue for many years ahead.

In 1933, perhaps prompted by Mitcham's new Public Library resplendent with beautiful Austrian oak woodwork, the school installed a new bookcase in the upper corridor to house the Junior Library! A great improvement on the old shelf that was fixed in one classroom. The library began to grow with the help of donations from pupils departing at the end of their time at the school. A statue of Mercury was donated by Miss Farewell-Jones.

The school also took advantage of the facilities at newly opened Public Baths. Swimming lessons became part of the curriculum in Summer Terms. School numbers had risen to 283 and a school inspector reported "There is every reason to look forward with confidence to the future of this school"

The original Girl's O.M.A. was inaugurated at 8-00pm on Tuesday 31st. October 1933. Miss Dunn was elected President. Mrs Smith and Miss Dixon, Vice Presidents. Doris Flott, Secretary. The Committee was made up of Miss King, Miss Hadow and former pupils Irene Palmer, Kathleen Ferguson, Doris Robson and Joan Yates.

Twenty-two former pupils attended and the aims agreed included enabling members to keep in touch and to give opportunities for social and friendly intercourse with past and present members of the school. Subs were fixed at 2/6d (12½p). A fairly high sum when Wills Woodbines were 4d for 10; Maynards Wine Gums 4d qtr and a pair of school shoes 7/11d.

In 1934 another milestone in the life of the school was reached when on the night of Tuesday 27th March a party of 15 girls, whose numbers included E. Ericson and B. Stammers, were accompanied by Miss Baxter and Miss Connah via Newhaven, to Dieppe and then to Paris and the final destination Tours. The visit was for a period of 10 days and the outward trip involved three train journeys plus a very long 3½ hours spent rolling in the English Channel in "Very rough weather" plus a taxi journey across Paris. The party arrived at Tours at 11-00am Wednesday.

This was the first of many foreign visits to be made by pupils at the school.

The year 1935 was a year marked by the Jubilee of King George V. Also by the granting of the status of a Borough to Mitcham. And by the "Skipping craze". It may be that this was the first of the many crazes that have followed since but it was none the less one that spread across Great Britain in 1935/6. Different areas and schools had their own chants and the lunchtime hockey lost all appeal, as even the prefects joined in the craze on the netball courts, forsaking their normal upper corridor haunts. No one actually saw a member of the staff chanting "Up came a Chinaman and said to me, How many apples growing on the tree" But who would be prepared to say that not one of them did?

The first Alexandra Day collection in 1929 raised the sum of 9/4d. The School Fete held in July 1929 raised a sum of Fifty-five pounds.

