**Memories of Ilminster Girls’ Grammar School – 1955-63.**

Elisabeth Downes (nee Powell)

I grew up in Chard and was a student at **IGGS from Sept 1955 to April 1963**(Everyone else in my year left in the summer of 1962 but I was persuaded to stay on for a third year 6th, to increase my chances of getting into Uni. In the end I didn't stay the full year and left at the end of the Easter Term in 1963)

My older sister Susan was at the school from 1951 to 1958.  Our class of 1955 - all born in 1944 - pre-dated the baby boomers but nonetheless was the first to show signs of the bulge in the birth-rate which began as the war reached its final couple of years. It was because of this that, for the first time at the school, our cohort was split into two classes. Initially we were divided alphabetically by surname but after our first year we were divided according to ‘ability’, creating a bit of tension between the two groups. By the time we got to 5A (our “O” Level year) we were one class again.

The way the classes/grades/years were numbered was a little strange. For some reason there was no "1st form". When we started in September 1955 following that year’s eleven plus exam, we were in the 2nd form, progressing then to the 3rd and 4th forms followed by form 5B, 5A, Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth. I can’t explain the absence of a “first form” perhaps, in the days before the eleven plus, the school had taken girls at a younger age and this had been the "1st form” which was later dropped. Nor do I know why the school chose the terms 5B and 5A rather than the more usual Lower 5th and Upper 5th for those years - it was just the way that it was!

The regular classrooms were all identified by letters of the alphabet, but because of overcrowding the science lab and the library were both used as home class-rooms as well as for their other purposes. I began in Room C which was at the top of the main flight of stone stairs, and then up a further short staircase on the left. We overlooked "the court” - the school’s only on-site recreation area. The next year I was in Room G, which was level with the court and opened directly onto it (the room used by the Upper 6th formers was directly above us). In the 4th form we were in Room B which was the first classroom you came to after entering the school and walking past the senior girls' cloakrooms and before you got to the main staircase. We all thought it was the least attractive of all the classrooms - and to be honest I think our behaviour matched it! In our 5B year (ie Lower 5th) my half of the cohort, known as 5B1, occupied the Science lab as our home-room, I don’t know where 5B2 ended up! But in our O-Level year (5A or Upper 5th) when we were all united in one class, we were in Room F - the traditional home classroom for that year, which was also the Geography room, presided over by the fearsome Miss Langford. This was a separate, more modern, building at the rear of the main building. In the Lower Sixth we were housed in the library and in the Upper Sixth we occupied the traditional, and to our mind elite, L-shaped room at the top of a flight of stairs leading up from the Court (as I’ve said, this was directly above Room G). We considered ourselves somewhat superior in both senses of the word.

That accounts for Rooms B, C, F and G. But there were also Rooms A, D and E.  Room D was more usually known as “the schoolroom” - it was the large room which could accommodate the whole school, and had a slightly raised dais at one end, so it was here that we gathered for our morning assemblies and prayers, where singing lessons took place (as it had the piano), where parent-teacher gatherings were held, and where we gathered at lunchtime when it was too wet to be outside. I’m confused about Rooms A and E - one of them

certainly belonged to the classroom beyond the main cloakroom and Schoolroom. This was used as a quiet room during the lunch hour and must also have been used for other classes though I can’t remember being in there very often. And beyond the Geography building (Room F) was a Biology lab which was built during my time at the school, but I don’t remember it being assigned an identifying letter.

There was a dining room with three tall windows on the left of the school’s main entrance but this could not accommodate the whole school and so mostly we walked to a nearby church hall (St Mary’s, I think) where our pre-cooked school dinners would be delivered in aluminium “hayboxes” to keep them warm. I think they cost 1 shilling per day and we had to remember to take our dinner money of 5 shillings on Monday morning.

The headmistress’s study was on the right as you entered the school, and beyond that a staircase led up to the teachers’ staff room. The boarding accommodation was also up there but day-girls weren’t allowed there and I never remember seeing that part of the upstairs. I don’t know how many boarders the school accommodated at any one time, I would guess at maybe a dozen, more likely less. I think they were usually girls from single parent families as, with that parent working, it would have been considered inappropriate to allow girls to go home to an empty house. There was no after-school care in those days, latch-key kids tended to be frowned on; generally society was quite disapproving of children being allowed to look after themselves. As we now know, part of that culture stemmed from the wish to get women *out of* the workforce in order to allow men to find employment after returning from the war; the idea that married women should stay at home even when their children reached secondary school-age persisted at least until the 1960s or early 1970s.

Just around the corner from the school buildings was Court Barton where there were two attractive, semi-detached cottages built of the local Ham stone. I believe one was the Headmistress’s residence, and in the other there was an upstairs room with a piano where I used to go for my weekly lessons with music teacher, Mrs Salt. I don’t know what the rest of the building was used for. There was also a garden with a gingko tree - or maidenhair tree - which rather fascinated me. It had unusual foliage and a prehistoric lineage. In the weeks leading up to A-Levels I remember we Upper 6th-formers were allowed to go round to the gardens for some peace and quiet to revise for the exams.

A shortish walk from the school, down Wharf Lane, were the domestic science and art rooms - a single building, divided into two for its different purposes. We shared the gym and the swimming pool with the boys’ school (although not at the same time - heaven forbid!) both of which we accessed from Wharf Lane. Because the gym had a proper stage and could seat quite a large number of people, it was also used for our speech days and dramatic productions, such as they were. A walk to the end of Wharf Lane brought us to the sports field, tennis and netball courts. We came here every lunchtime when it was fine.

Apart from the three towns of Ilminster, Chard and Crewkerne, many of the girls came from villages, hamlets or farms in the area - Donyatt, Ilton, Horton, Hatch Beauchamp are ones I remember – perhaps because girls from these places would join our Chard to Ilminster bus at different points along its route. The same would have happened along the Crewkerne to Ilminster bus route.

The four Houses were: Blake, Hanning, Speke and Walrond - all named after ‘famous’ (?) explorers, male of course. Blake (red) and Speke (yellow) were the two stand-out houses in

my day as regards sports and vied with each other for top honours. Hanning (blue) usually came third and, sadly, my house, Walrond (green) usually seemed to be last!

**School uniform**

When I started in 1955 the school was just transitioning away from the traditional school tunic, to a simple gaberdine navy skirt, and a cream or white blouse, with blue and silver(?) striped tie, so I escaped having to wear the bulky, unflattering tunics. In summer we wore gingham-check cotton dresses (blue and white) but about half way through my time there we were given the option of a polka-dot material, with white polka dots on either a navy, royal blue, green or pink background! A strange decision which I don’t think went down very well with either the girls or their mothers! I think I chose green out of loyalty to my House, Walrond, but later regretted it. The navy or royal blue looked a lot smarter. My favourite item of the uniform was the navy school blazer, with school crest on the pocket, which we wore in summer and looked very smart – and it was nice to wear the summer straw or Panama hats, rather than the navy velour or maybe felt (?), winter hats. In summer we wore white ankle socks, in winter it was supposed to be grey socks up to the knee. This could still leave us feeling cold and we were jealous of the boys who wore long trousers. I remember a group of us (myself included) got into trouble after going out one day after school and buying black stockings or tights and wearing them to school the next day. I still can’t understand why they were so objected to – it was not as if they were fishnet!

**My classmates**

I have made a list of all the names I remember from my year (including my own - thank goodness I can still remember that!). Several girls left at the end of the first year - in a number of cases I believe this was due to the closure, or down-sizing, of a manufacturing business in the town and the need for some families to move elsewhere for the ‘breadwinner’ to find work.  Standard Telephone Works is the name I remember being talked about at the time. Of the names, only eight went on to the Upper 6th. Between us we studied for “A” Levels in a variety of only 4 subjects: English, French, Geography and History. No sciences and no maths for any of us!

**Teachers I remember were:**

**Miss Ripley** (Head in 1955, she had succeeded Miss Earle who had been HM when my sister started in 1951) She was followed by **Miss Hatfield** (Head from about 1958 or ’59 until the school closed)

**Miss Staveley** (Religious Instruction and History) - later followed by Miss Hilda Lee

**Miss Erica Wilkinson** (French)

**Mrs Hardy** (English) followed by Mrs Hiles and Mr E Williams. (Mr Williams took the senior classes)

**Miss Patricia (?) Langford** (Geography)

**Miss Quick** (Latin)

**Miss (Olive?) Wallace** (Biology)

**Mrs Daley** (Domestic Science)

**Miss Wherry** (Maths- fierce) later followed by **Miss Timberlake** and then **Miss Pollard**.

**Mr Gareth Thomas** (Chemistry)

**Mr. John Williams**  (Physics)

**Mrs Sawyer** (PE)

**Mrs Salt** (Music – this was not taught as part of the curriculum, but Mrs Salt took our singing classes, organised the choir, and gave individual piano tuition as requested)

There was an art teacher but I have no recollection of her or her name - I was “hopeless” at art so perhaps that’s why!

Interesting to note that, as was usual at that time, most of the teachers were unmarried women. Of those who were married Mrs Hardy, Mrs Daley and Mrs Salt were in their fifties at least and if they did have children, they would have been grown-up. Mrs Hardy at least had several grandchildren. Mrs Sawyer was a bit younger (forties?) but didn’t have children. The exception was Mrs Hiles who joined the staff when I was about half-way through my time there, she was probably still in her thirties and had 2 school-aged sons and for many of us she was quite a ‘breath of fresh air’ as she was tall, rather good-looking, usually quite colourfully dressed, encouraged our dramatic efforts, and would talk to us about controversial topics of the day - like the death penalty or what was then quaintly known as “the colour bar”.

The arrival of two male teachers **Gareth Thomas** and **John Williams** to teach Chemistry and Physics caused quite a stir. They were both quite young, John Williams probably still in his early to mid-twenties, sandy-haired and fresh-faced, quite a few girls had a crush on him. Mr Thomas, tall, dark-haired with dark-framed glasses was more serious in looks and manner. Unfortunately my efforts in these subjects were abysmal and I dropped the subjects at the end of 5B (Lower 5th). The third male teacher **Mr E. Williams** was very different, we thought of him as much older but I suspect in fact he might still have been only in his forties. He also wore specs, but had a very awkward or shy manner and was not the type of male to attract crushes from any of us. He taught senior English and those of us committed to taking English at A-Level rather dreaded the idea of having him as our teacher, but in fact I found him an excellent and came to like and respect him.

*Liz Downes (nee Powell) Feb 2004*

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