

THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
SCHOOLS OF DERBYSHIRE

ST ELPHIN'S DARLEY DALE

Story and pictures by
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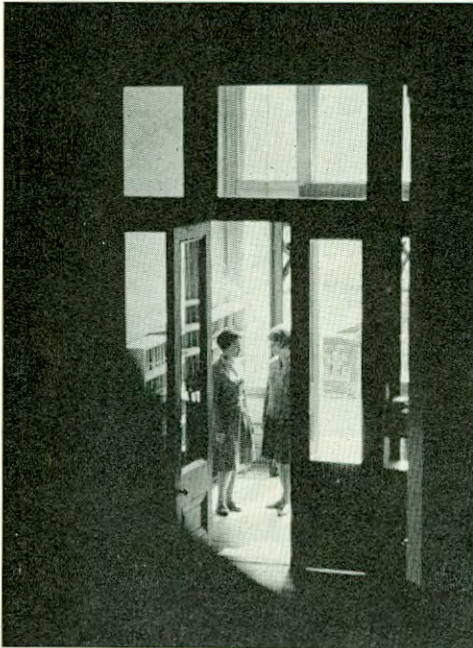


Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, whose elder daughter's name ('Emma Cavendish') figures in the school's roll of academic honours by virtue of her entrance to St Anne's College, Oxford. Their younger daughter, Sophie, is at present in the school's Junior Department.

St Elphin's claims its origin to 1697 when the clergy of the Archdeaconry of Chester first decided to provide for 'ye widdows and children of such of ye poore clergy as within ye said Archdeaconry at their deaths left their families in very narrow circumstances'. For more than a century, although the members of the 'Warrington Institution', as it became known, met regularly, the foundation of a school remained a smouldering ideal. Then came Horace Powys.

There can be no better historian of St Elphin's today than Canon J. C. Longbottom, present Rector of Warrington. A tall, slightly stooping figure as he spoke with me in the school chapel, his eyes beneath their bushy white eyebrows glowed with the fervour of the enthusiast. 'A most remarkable man Powys—years ahead of his time', he told me. 'As soon as he was appointed Rector of Warrington he set about building the school'. Powys called together all his influential friends (including the five ex-Prime Ministers) to found a 'female orphan school' and in 1844, only a few years after his appointment, the school opened its doors to five pupils.

'Not content with the quality of his first staff', the Canon continued, 'he realised the need for proper training facilities and in a further short time had founded the Chester



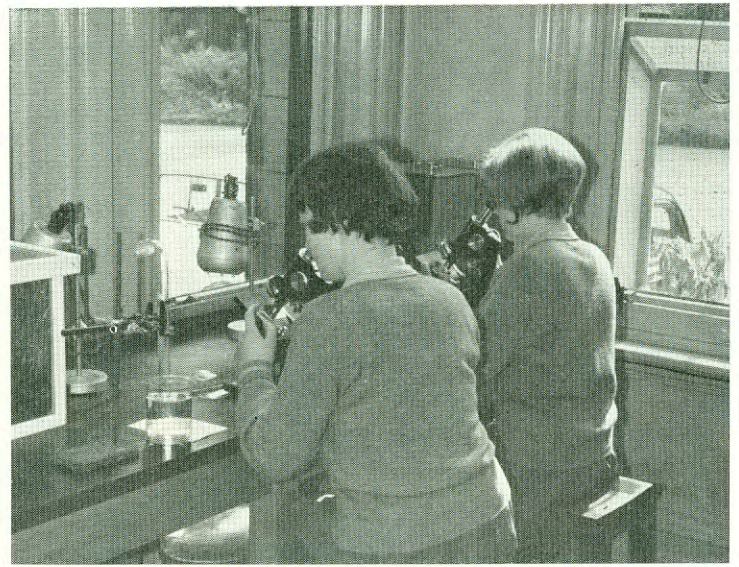
OUTSIDE THE MAJOR public schools there must be very few schools in the country that have enjoyed more solid support from 'the Establishment' than St Elphin's, Darley Dale. No fewer than five former Prime Ministers attended the meeting in 1837 called by the Rev Horace Powys to found the school. More recently, a £150,000 appeal for funds was supported, among others, by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, by two dukes and nine bishops, and the new school hall which the appeal provided was opened by Princess Margaret. The present Board of Governors, of which the Chairman is the Bishop of Blackburn, includes the Duke of Devonshire and six bishops. School functions are regularly attended (and occasionally opened) by the

Formerly Darley Dale Hydro, the school stands in pleasant wooded grounds. At left: Prefects chat in the main entrance hall; Below left: Miss P. M. Robinson, BA, Headmistress, with Squadron Leader H. A. Ashton, Bursar; Below: Small classes permit much individual tuition. Mrs Higgins with two of her kindergarten pupils





Senior girls at choral practice and girls at work in a well-equipped biology laboratory



Training College for men and the Warrington Training College for women (now St Catherine's, Liverpool). Until he was appointed Bishop of Sodor and Man in 1854, Powys was treasurer of the school and during his term of office nearly £18,000 had been raised and spent. He maintained his interest in St Elphin's to the last and a suite of rooms was set apart for his frequent visits. 'All the lovely old oak chairs you see in the school today were the gift of Bishop Powys', the Canon told me.

As Canon Longbottom turned reverently through the pages of the school's book of benefactors in the chapel, other names prompted further histories—notably William Quekett, the original of Dickens' model curate, 'the Reverent Mr Milvey' of 'Our Mutual Friend' and 'Household Words', who brought Dickens on several occasions to the school to read to the girls.

Admission to St Elphin's is no longer confined to daughters of the clergy. Lay pupils have been admitted in increasing numbers since 1920 and now form by far the greater proportion. The school moved from Warrington to its present site, the former Darley Dale Hydro, in 1904. The strong ties with its birthplace are still maintained, however, and next

year the school will participate in the Warrington Walk to commemorate its long-standing association with the town.

St Elphin's stands on a hillside overlooking some of Derbyshire's finest scenery. Under the lea of Beeley Moor it hears the calling of the curlew and sees the darting flight of the snipe over the moorland pastures. It sees the sun set over Stanton Moor and surveys the Derwent Valley almost from Chatsworth to Matlock. Behind the school the playing fields roll upwards to Darley Moor. The air is rich with the scent of meadow and moorland.

I followed the winding drive through tall trees until I came face to face with the grey gabled building, its somewhat stark appearance softened by encircling trees. The school bursar, Squadron Leader H. A. Ashton, met me and took me round the school.

St Elphin's is a harmonious blend of Victorian and modern—old enough to have a background of character and tradition and yet contemporary in its extensions and equipment. The single-storey dormitories we visited were light and airy and on this fine summer afternoon full of sunlight. Equally comfortable in winter—'We have underfloor heating both in the dormitories and in the

house rooms', explained Mr Ashton. The exterior walls of some of the junior classrooms are in the form of sliding glass partitions which, even if they did encourage the occasional wistful glance to the outside world, took full advantage of the school's rural setting and the fine Derbyshire air.

'We have a small kindergarten department for day girls', the bursar told me, 'and a Junior and Senior School. All girls entering as juniors from the age of eight are prepared for the Common Entrance and, if required, the Eleven-Plus examinations. In the Senior School studies are directed to the O-level GCE and girls can then continue in the VIth form to A-level. At present we have about 50 girls in the VIth. On leaving here most girls seek further education at university, training college, in hospital or in training for other professions or careers'. Many, of course, return to their homes where their sound education on a wide basis prepares them to be the wives and mothers of tomorrow.

Results are impressive. Latest academic successes include entrances to the universities of London, Edinburgh and Manchester, Hartford University and Wellesley College USA and to several training colleges including Whitelands and Hockerill. Successes in the

Free activity in the kindergarten sand pit

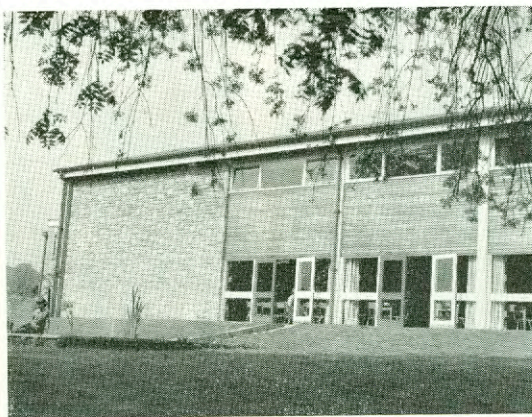


Sunlit dormitories for the boarders





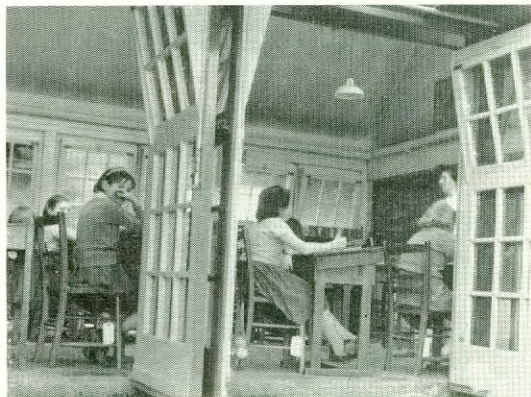
Duane Buranasombati, one of the many girls with no home in this country, studies in the school library



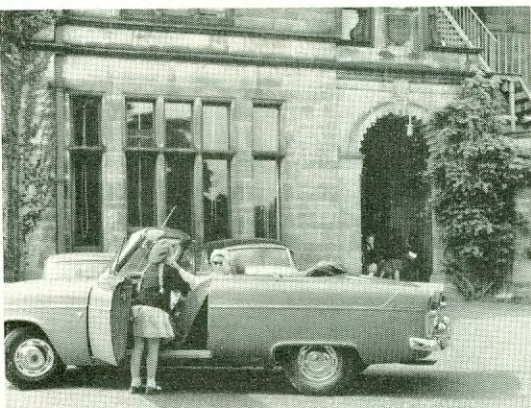
The exterior of the new Dining and Assembly Hall



Canon Longbottom, Chairman of the Finance Committee and fervent authority on the school's history, seen in the Chapel



The classrooms in one block have folding partitions to give maximum air and light on summer days



As the school day ends, mothers arrive to take home their day-girl daughters

Part of the school playing fields where organised and leisure activities are part of the school's many outdoor pursuits



A and O Levels fill two pages of the Speech Day programme.

The basic curriculum includes all the usual subjects. Classes are relatively small and, in addition, Maths and French are taught in divisions so that special attention can be given where necessary. In the fourth year of the senior course girls may take German, Greek or Music with a view to Modern Languages or Classics in the VIth, or they may specialise in Physics and Chemistry to follow a scientific career. In the VIth form, apart from the usual subjects, girls may take a General and Pre-nursing Course leading to examinations in Physiology and Hygiene, Radiography and Physiotherapy, for example.

In the music block—there are no fewer than 7 music teachers on the staff—the voices of a senior class floated out enchantingly through the open windows. Every year the girls compete in the Matlock and Buxton festivals and have a fine record of achievements to their credit. A school concert is given annually and several recitals and concerts by visiting artistes are given in the school hall.

The school has a small indoor swimming pool which is used by the juniors. Seniors use the indoor bath at Matlock Lido during the Summer Term. With such facilities and encouragement it is not surprising that the school has earned a notable reputation for competition swimming and several girls have represented the County in diving and racing. Perhaps more unusually girls can receive golf instruction and, very sensibly, driving tuition with a Matlock driving school. Riding facilities are also available and ponies may be stabled near the school for use at weekends.

In her pleasant sunlit corner room with wide windows overlooking the wooded grounds I talked to the Headmistress ('in the old days we were known as Chief Governesses'), Miss P. M. Robinson. Here, in this room, I felt was the real nerve centre of an institution—not a building, not even confined to the present pupils—but an institution, a way of life almost, that extended its influence far beyond this lovely valley into homes in this and many other countries, into other schools and universities, into the hospital and the laboratory. Here was the initiative, the enterprise and the driving force. Miss Robinson is but one of a long line of well-

loved headmistresses. Educated at Bedford High School, she read Classics at London University gaining a BA Honours degree. Her former schools include Abbots Bromley and St Felix, Southwold, where she was Senior Mistress.

'Our aim', she told me, 'is to give a girl a sound academic education. We have a two-stream system from the age of 11. We have six Senior Houses and one Junior House, each with a Housemistress, Assistant Housemistress and Matron in charge of between 30-40 girls, on the usual public school lines. The A Stream girls take more GCE subjects at both levels and are generally destined for a university career. The B Stream, who work rather more slowly, take fewer subjects and their course is directed towards such careers as nursing and social service. This ensures that the gifted girl can exploit her natural talents to the full without being held back by those not so fortunate who, in their turn, can benefit from the special attention they enjoy in the more leisurely atmosphere of the B Stream'.

Apart from the Headmistress the school has a total staff of twenty-six with four visiting staff. There is a Bursar's House in the grounds and next year a house is to be provided for the permanent Chaplain. Tuition Fees are £144 and these are applicable to day girls from the locality. Most of the girls, however, are boarders and pay in addition a boarding fee of £195. Kindergarten fees are 20 guineas a term.

Substantial reductions are available to daughters of clergy and particularly to those from the dioceses of Manchester, Chester, Liverpool and Blackburn. In these days of ever increasing costs, especially in regard to building, equipment and salaries, I felt there must be an ever-mounting temptation to encourage the full-fee paying pupil at the expense of the clergy daughters, but this was categorically denied by Canon Longbottom, who is also the Chairman of the school's Finance Committee. 'What we are doing', he said, 'is so well worth while. If you want the clergy to give their lives in the service of God we surely owe it to them to do whatever we can to help them. It is to this we are pledged by our foundation'. And so, I am sure, it will remain.