



## Derbyshire Schools

# St. ELPHIN'S

## DARLEY DALE

THE FIRST THING that struck me about St. Elphin's, which I visited last month, was that, for a girls' public school reputed to be one of the oldest in England, it looked surprisingly modern.

Set in beautiful countryside, within two miles of Matlock, it is one of Darley Dale's best known landmarks. The reason for its fresh appearance, I soon found, was that the original buildings had been modernised and added to over the years by new blocks which now accommodate such features as an upper 6th form house, with study bedrooms, a well equipped gymnasium, new science labs and numerous rooms for specialised subjects. The most recent block for teaching art and craft together with mathematics and computer work will be opened later this year.

One soon finds, therefore, a delightful combination of the past and the present, for there can be little doubt that although

St. Elphin's looks back on a history spanning nearly 140 years, it is very much for the 1980s – and, so far as the girls in its care are concerned, the school is doing as much as any other to equip them to earn their living in the changing world of today.

St. Elphin's school, I reflected, was a happy place – or was it that my visit took place on the last day of term, with every pupil conscious of those large trunks packed and ready in the hall, prior to being transported home for the Easter break?

'That certainly helps,' said the headmaster, Mr Peter Pollard with a smile. 'But whenever visitors come, they usually comment on the happy atmosphere of the school.'

Hard work, it seems, *does* have the power to cheer because, apart from the very young children, there is no cosy 9 to 4

routine here but, instead, a strenuous day which continues until 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening. How else could one explain those eight to ten 'O' levels, which most girls sit and the number of 'A' levels they acquire each year?

During a tour of the school, I was told that girls are streamed or put into 'sets', depending upon their ability and for those who need extra help there is the added benefit of almost individual tuition in smaller classes.

The range of subjects is wide. One would expect to find religious education, English language and literature, history, geography, classical studies and so forth at a school like this, but less common are the logic, Latin and, of course, music which are specialities at St. Elphin's.

▽ The headmaster, Mr Peter Pollard



By tradition, Mr Pollard and his family provide the nucleus of the larger family life at the school, for when a child leaves her parents for the first time, there has to be an assurance that the teaching staff will have the willingness and ability to become parent figures in their place. In this new Christian environment, it is mostly found that any difficulties a girl may once have had in her family circle simply disappear.

'Parents also want to be assured that we are academically sound,' said Mr Pollard. 'They want to feel certain that, within a girl's capabilities, she will be academically stretched. For some parents, the 'extras' we provide are important. But no matter if a girl leaves here and goes on to college, as most do, or if she seeks guidance from our careers staff and enters commerce, nursing or occupations like journalism or hotel catering, it is the pastoral consideration which is the most important.'

Worship in the chapel, I saw, is a central feature, and it is this which 'old girls' speak of affectionately when visiting the school years later. Religious instruction is by the Chaplain and other qualified members of staff and girls are prepared for confirmation here. There are annual confirmation services as well as special services throughout the year.

Parents of pupils at St. Elphin's are a general cross-section of society. 'We are not a school where the wealthy tag predominates', said Mr Pollard. Although the original aim at the school's inception in 1844, to provide education for the daughters of clergy, has changed, many such girls are educated there today. Other parents may be in the armed forces –

Geography lesson





△ *St. Elphin's orchestra – a tradition of music*



△ *Hymns in the school chapel*

*A quiet moment in the hall ▽*

perhaps Army chaplains – while others may be working or living abroad.

However, no matter what sphere of life they may come from, they have all decided that they wish their daughters to have the kind of education that St. Elphin's provides. 'I think there is a need for girls-only schools like ours', said Mr Pollard. 'For example, some girls between the ages of 11 and 16 benefit by not having competition between the sexes. In the areas of maths and science, girls often do better in a girls-only school. In school plays they have more scope in the rôles they play and in competitive sport they gain increased confidence when not overshadowed by the most robust abilities of boys.'

At St. Elphin's, plays are performed by girls of all ages in a variety of settings, the productions often stemming from work done in the classroom. For added interest, there are House drama competitions from time to time and last year there was an ambitious school production of *Oliver* to be followed this July by the *Mikado*.

Mr Pollard freely admits to being a traditionalist, 'but not, I hope, oppressively so. Girls like a framework and order but must never feel repressed.' The success of the school he attributes to the devoted service of staff (their willingness

to give their time generously both in and out of the classroom), the smallness of classes which average only 20 pupils and, not least, to a longer than usual working day.

Of the 340 girls at St. Elphin's, some two-thirds are boarders with the remainder coming in daily from distances of up to 15 miles away. Junior boarders from the age of 7 to 11 live in a separate boarding house in which their own staff provide a happy home-like atmosphere, while girls from 11 to 16 live in one of five houses where a house mistress is responsible to the headmaster for the girls in her care. Each house has its own comfortable common room, where the girls may relax.

No article about St. Elphins' would be complete without mention of the music which is such an important part of the life and education of the pupils. All girls in the first three years in the senior school study music in their curriculum. Girls are entered annually for G.C.E. 'O' and 'A' levels in this subject, there is a talented school orchestra, which I had the pleasure of hearing, and, in addition, choirs and string, recorder and woodwind groups.

Individual tuition is available to girls playing the instruments of their choice. There is an annual house music compe-



▽ *With the school computer*



▽ *What's cooking?*



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– continued

tion and music workshop sessions are held regularly, linking with other schools and colleges in the area.

Girls are prepared for all grades of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. There is a large music room and other smaller rooms where pupils may practise or receive tuition. Recitals and concerts are given by visiting musicians and there is an annual school concert.

Although St. Elphin's was founded as far back as 1844, it was not until 1904 that it moved from its original site in Warrington to Darley Dale. A walk around the beautiful school grounds with lawns, tennis courts, a large all-weather games area and playing fields complementing the attractive buildings, I reflected, set the character of this Christian school perfectly.

I learned that the staff are chosen not only for their academic qualifications but for an ability to care for the children while away from their parents. There are scholarships for children of the clergy and the non-clergy, and both receive large entries. Three recent places at Oxford and Cambridge Universities testify to the school's scholarship at the highest level.

With a weekly programme of sporting activities, camping expeditions for the Duke of Edinburgh Award Schemes, trips to the theatre, drives or walks in the countryside – all in addition to a full and varied educational programme – it really does mean that school-days are the happiest of one's life.

Telephone calls home are encouraged at St. Elphin's as these are more immediate and personal than the traditional letter to parents once a week.

Many of the trips are by the school mini-bus which was provided by the Society of Friends of St. Elphin's, a body



△ Art class

*Pictured in the chemistry▷  
lab, Dr David Riley and  
laboratory technician Mrs  
Kathryn Barrett*



which includes governors, parents, staff and friends of the school. Formed in 1952 to help to extend the amenities offered at the school, it has financed many of the building projects at St. Elphin's.

Finally, I was impressed by the continual attention given to the type of career girls would be entering when they left the school. Although at one time a girl might leave public school and simply go home to live with her parents until she married, nowadays the question of choosing a career is uppermost in the minds of teachers and pupils alike.

St. Elphin's is a member of the Independent Schools Careers Organisation and has a comprehensive programme of

careers advice from the the third year onwards. Parental involvement in career choice is encouraged and lectures and visits take place frequently.

I had a feeling as I left that whatever choice of career or further studies the girls pursued, thanks to their time at St. Elphin's, they would fit cheerfully and efficiently into their new surroundings. □

by  
DAVID WHYATT

*Trunks packed and ready for home*

