

# Boarding school – happiest days of your life?

*“If she can maintain this interest throughout her school life she should amply repay you with some exceptionally good work at her boarding school”*

– L. Nattan, class teacher, Victoria Avenue Junior School, Blackley, Manchester - July 1967.

*“It’s a waste of time talking to you as you will just end up on the scrap heap”*

– P. M. Robinson, headmistress, St Elphin’s School, spring 1973.

So what happened in those six years at boarding school? The girl they were writing about – *Liz Donlan (nee Bailey)* – tells all 40 years later.

I WAS 11 when I went to St Elphin’s School in Darley Dale. My older sister went there from 1948 to 1957 and my brothers had been to a boarding school in Southport. My parents owned a shop-cum-post office and worked there seven days a week, so felt it best to send us all to boarding school.

The younger of my two brothers was against me going to boarding school as he didn’t think I would fit in. I think this was partly because I had a hare lip and cleft palate and he didn’t want me to get teased. As



■ Gresford House, St Elphin’s, 1968: Liz Bailey, then 12, is first from the left on the front row.

it happens, I was teased more about my Manchester accent!

I arrived at St Elphin’s in September 1967 as a very confident 11-year-old with no concerns about leaving home. My parents drove me to the school and I wasn’t in the least bit upset when they left – even though several other girls were in tears at their parents leaving them.

The school was split into six senior houses (Gresford, Kennedy, Pigot, Powys, Selwyn and Wilson – all named after a former headmistress or governor) plus the junior school (Margaret Flood – also named after a former headmistress). I was to be in Gresford House as my sister

had also been in that one. I was taken to a large dormitory, known as Fox. The first three years of senior school were in this dormitory and then girls moved to Orchards, a two-storey building, which consisted of small cubicles on either side of a corridor. The Orchards building is still in situ and is now known as Thornton Mews and houses four luxury cottages.

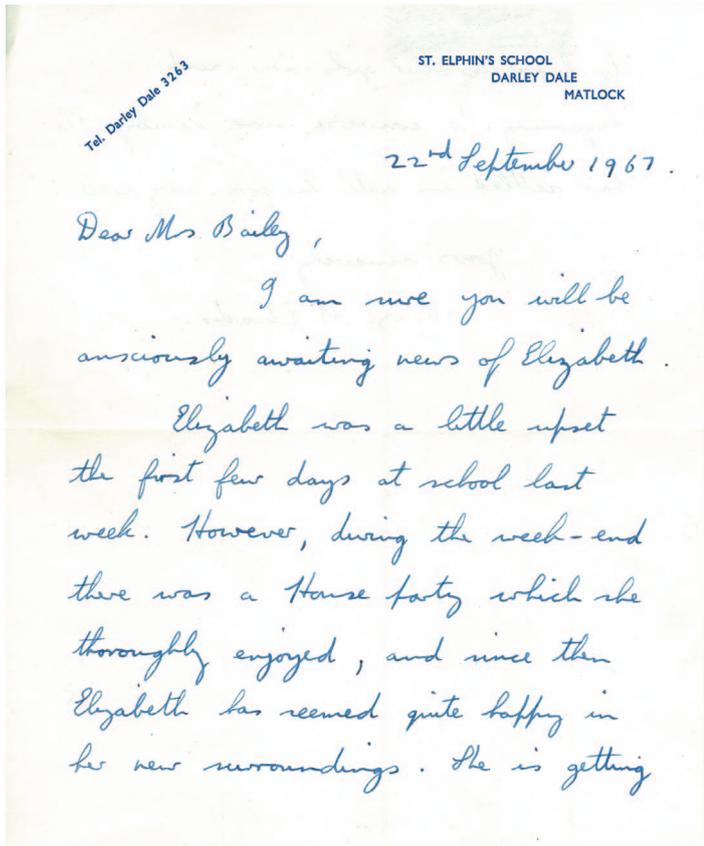
Fox dormitory was reminiscent of a hospital ward – beds down both sides, each with a bedside cabinet, with not much room between each bed. The beds were also ‘hospital type’ and the bedding made with ‘hospital corners’. There were individual lockers where we could store our own provisions.

There were also wardrobes and drawers for our clothing.

There were four toilets with wash-basins opposite and two baths at the end. Rotas for bath times were displayed and had to be adhered to – although we did occasionally swap with each other. Baths were scheduled twice a week – and there were no showers.

I was introduced to the girl who was to look after me and ensure that I learned the routines and where to go for meals and classes.

By the following morning, several girls were crying as they were homesick but I was still extremely confident. Following breakfast, we went



Part of a letter to Liz Bailey's mum from the house mistress, Miss Edwards, after a bout of homesickness.

to our respective classrooms and had 'form time' – this was when our form mistress would give out any notices. The first lesson then started and BANG – I suddenly became very homesick. I was taken to the matron's rest room and mothered. This happened every day for the first two weeks and at virtually the same time every day. To this day, I have no idea what triggered it at that time.

### The weekday regime

**7.15am** – Rising bell

**7.40am** – Silence bell – we were not allowed to speak once this bell had sounded while we got ready for breakfast. I often used the silence bell as the time to get up – how I managed to get washed and dressed in 10 minutes I don't know!

**7.50am** – Line-up bell – each house lined up along various corridors, in form order; the higher the form, the nearer the front of the queue. The house prefects (sixth formers) would stand opposite to ensure we were all quiet. Gresford House lined up along the bridge which linked the out-buildings to the

main school building but has now been demolished. Each house walked, in single file, down to breakfast – complete with our own napkin and napkin ring and we had to remain in absolute silence.

We had to walk past the headmistress, who would stand in front of the fireplace at the bottom of the stairs and inspect us all as we marched past. (The fireplace remains part of St Elphin's House, which was reopened last September).

**8.00am** – Breakfast was served in a large dining room known as The Stopford Hall. The hall, opened by Princess Margaret in November 1963, has now been demolished. It had long tables and each house had a rota for where everyone was going to sit. Each table of girls took it in turns to line up at the kitchen hatch to get their meals.

The head of the kitchen staff was Miss 'Parky' Parkinson. She used to bawl at us and could probably be heard halfway down the A6 to Matlock! If we misbehaved, we would simply be sent to

the back of the queue. During breakfast, the radio was played as we were 'supposed' to listen to the news!

**8.30am** – Chapel service was held each morning by the school chaplain or headmistress. One of the girls would read the lesson. I was absolutely petrified when it was my turn, but was so chuffed after it was all over as the headmistress and a number of the teachers congratulated me.

**9.00am** – Lessons started. There were three 40-minute lessons until 11am when

we had a coffee break, then a further two lessons.

**1.00pm** – Lunch in the dining room, when again we lined up. Then we had 'House time' when we went to our respective houserooms and the house mistress would give out any notices.

**2.00pm-4.00pm** – Three more 40-minute lessons.

**4.00pm** – Afternoon tea. Thankfully, we didn't have to line up for that. We also had to change into twin sets (matching jumper and cardigan) which was the nearest thing to wearing 'home clothes' rather than the school uniform.

*"One of the girls would read the lesson. I was absolutely petrified when it was my turn"*



St Elphin's School Choir won prizes at the 1976 Buxton Festival and were pictured on the school terrace afterwards. Grey suits were worn on Sundays and special occasions. Picture supplied by Helen Miller (nee Simpson).

## Feature

**4.50pm -6.50pm** – Homework, known as ‘prep’. We were set different subjects each night and, like lessons, each period was 40 minutes. The younger girls finished at 6.10pm while older girls would do a further period until 6.50pm.

**7.00pm** – Supper: same format as breakfast and lunch.

**7.40pm** – Following supper, fifth and sixth formers had another period of ‘prep’.

**8.20pm -9.00pm** – The sixth formers had a final period of ‘prep’.

Once prep was over, we were allowed some free time either in the dormitory or in the house room. Each house room had a television and some had record players – subject to the availability of house funds.

Hot drinks before bed were an optional extra. We could provide our own hot chocolate, Ovaltine or cocoa if we wished.

**8.00pm** – Lights out commenced for the younger

girls and continued every half hour – depending on what year you were in – until 10pm.

### Saturday regime

Saturday mornings consisted of ‘prep’ periods. Some girls had ballet lessons in the gym on Saturday mornings and I finally persuaded my parents to let me have ballet lessons as I wanted to get out of doing ‘prep’!

Saturday afternoons we had free time although we often went on walks with the house mistress or a couple of house prefects. We would go to the shops in Two Dales to purchase sweets and pop or we would go to One Tree Hill, Toothbrush, Ricketty Bridge, Little Egypt – these were well-known areas in the locality.

The older girls were allowed to go into Matlock with a couple of house prefects. Although we could go by bus, we invariably walked in order to save our pocket money.

On Saturday evenings, after supper, the dining hall was changed into a cinema when a professional film would



A 1971 picture of the bridge linked Orchards to the main school building at St Elphin's. Picture by Cheryl Steele (nee Chalk).



A typical boarding school dormitory in the mid-Sixties.

be hired. I recall Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Sophia Loren and Richard Burton in *The Sandpiper*.

### Sunday regime

We had to go to chapel services when we had to wear grey suits, together with our straw boaters. Three houses would go to the morning service at 10.30am and the other three would go to the evening service at 6.00pm.

There was also a letter-writing period when we had to write letters home, followed by an afternoon rest when we had to lie on our beds for an hour and weren't allowed to talk.

Some girls would go horse riding on a Sunday to The Stables close to the school. Naturally I also wanted to go – simply to get out of school – but my parents said “no”.

### 'Lent Efforts'

During the spring term, each house would organise a 'Lent Effort' to raise money for house funds. We would make things to sell such as buns and cakes, knitted items, or simply sell items we no longer wanted. The money was usually used to purchase items for the houseroom such as television, record player, radio and books etc.

### Inter-House Competitions

Each house was very competitive and, in fact, even today the competitive edge is still there when reunions are held! Each year there were inter-house competitions for sports, drama and music. Parents and family were allowed to attend Sports Day each summer and I still recall the picnics we had then.

### 'Visiting Days'

We had two 'visiting days' each term – one either side of half-term – when our parents could take us out for the day. If parents lived too far away you were allowed to go with one of your friends and her parents. We also had two 'tea visits' each term when parents could take us out for a Sunday afternoon.

### End of Term

Marks were given out for both good and bad behaviour throughout the year. At the end of term, the overall marks were added up and the house with the most plus marks for good behaviour would win a cup. There was also a House Courtesy Cup awarded to the girl who had been the best behaved or had received the most plus marks. I remember winning it one year – apparently because I had improved the

most. I couldn't believe it and, obviously, my parents were extremely proud when I arrived home with the cup.

On the last night of term we would have a midnight feast when we would have things such as cold beans and, occasionally, a swig or two of cider!

### And finally.....

It is sad that the school closed down in March 2005. However, there are a number of positives in that Audley Court Ltd, the owners of the retirement village there, have retained the name St Elphin's Park and the main school building, Orchards 'dormitory' and the chapel have all been retained and restored.

*Editor's Note:* In December 2010, Liz launched a website, with the help of Gill Haywood (also an ex-pupil) – [www.stelphins.co.uk](http://www.stelphins.co.uk) – to keep its



A picture of pupil Liz Bailey with her mum during a "tea visit" in 1970.

memories alive and there is also an informal group called The Old Elphinians. For more details, email Liz on [lizbailey@stelphins.co.uk](mailto:lizbailey@stelphins.co.uk) or call 0161 339 4467. I would also like to acknowledge the considerable efforts of Marianne Jackson, a former pupil of St Elphin's School, in the research for last month's article on the history of the school and the building. ■