

The time capsule reveals a bottle of Swan ink, some wool and ribbon, together with exercise books and a pencil stub.

THE GIRLS OF ST ELPHIN'S

Time Capsule Reveals School's History

“Well! What have we here?” It’s amazing how little pieces of history keep emerging from the busy construction project at the site of St Elphin’s School at Darley Dale. Alison Davies reports on the discovery of a time capsule dated 1933 and of memories of high jinks for the girls of St Elphin’s.

AT RAVEN AUDLEY COURT’S St Elphin’s Park Retirement Village, new and refurbished cottages and apartments are being built in the grounds of the former Victorian hydro and school. The existing main house, which was the main building of St Elphin’s School, is being carefully refurbished and will become the centrepiece building at the development. The accommodation will consist of the Audley Club, which will provide the facilities and services of a country house hotel, and seven luxury apartments. Refurbishment of the school is revealing glimpses of the site’s glorious past.

The main house at St Elphin’s was originally called ‘The Grove’ and was built in the 1880s by William James Roberts. Roberts was a Darley Dale man, born in the village and baptised in St Helen’s Church, Darley Dale on May 28, 1806. In spite of his humble origins in Darley Dale, he became a brewer in Manchester and, by 1851, he owned the Crown Brewery in Hulme. By 1861 he had many men working for him at the brewery and on his farm near West Didsbury. However, Roberts did not forget his Darley Dale roots. He donated money to St Helen’s Church to pay for a fence around the famous ancient yew tree in the

Continued on page 12 ►

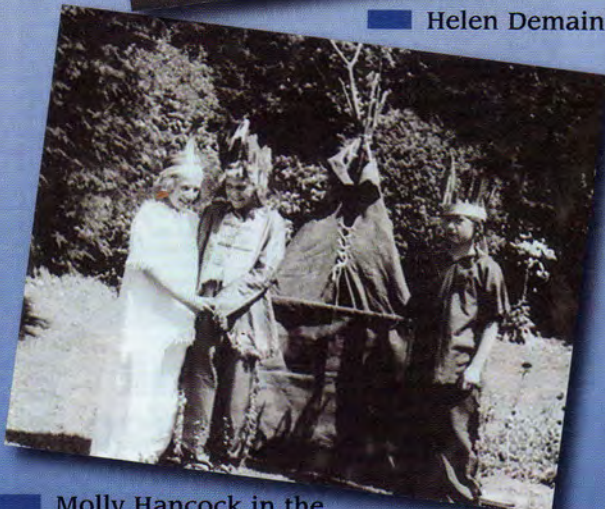
► Continued from page 10



Helen Demaine and friends, 1946



Helen Demaine, 1944



Molly Hancock in the Hiawatha play, 1945

churchyard. He also financed the restoration of the church and the enlargement of the graveyard. Roberts purchased 'The Grove' in Darley Dale, which he had demolished and a new house built in its place. Sadly, he died before he could live in the new property.

Darley Dale Hydropathic Institute

In 1889, 'The Grove' was sold to William Atkins. He redeveloped it and added new features such as the Turkish and Russian Baths and the plunge pool. It was opened to the public as the Darley Dale Hydropathic Institute in 1891. Many of the original beautiful features in the main house at St Elphin's Park remain today. They include a character staircase made of oak and pitch pine, a wooden fireplace in the main reception hall and the reception desk for the Hydro. In addition there were many interesting architectural features including the lovely lantern dome above one of the corridors, the Victorian tiled fireplaces, the bath houses and the tiled floors.

The Hydropathic Institute soon became a magnificent playground for Victorian ladies and gentlemen to enjoy whilst 'taking the waters'. Luckily, some of the original features are still intact and are included in the restoration and refurbishment of St Elphin's House. However, by the turn of the century the popularity of the Hydro began to fade. In 1904 the buildings were taken over by St Elphin's School and it is from the days as a school that the latest treasure has been discovered.

Secrets in the ceiling

The redevelopment and refurbishment of the site is being carried out by Baggaley Construction. During initial works on the main house a member of their team, David Boden, was removing part of the ceiling in the cellar when out tumbled some dusty old exercise books and a rusty tin. The book revealed that in 1933 two pupils attending St Elphin's School, Miss Annette Harris and Miss Mabel Hand, together with their friends Misses Hare, Fitch, Adams and Owen had hidden a few items in a tin under the floor boards of a classroom.

"I don't suppose the young ladies had very much that they could afford to hide away in 1933," said Kevin Taylor, project team leader for Baggaley Construction, "so finding a book, a bottle of ink and some blue tissue doesn't sound very exciting these days but to them it was probably quite daring to hide these things away."

The book revealed that it and the tin had been discovered and hidden again three times in 1943, 1946 and 1947. From these notes, it was possible to trace two of the young ladies who wrote their names in the book as having found and then hidden the treasure again: Miss Helen Demaine, of Cheadle Hulme, (now Mrs Wallen of Pwllheli) and Miss Molly Hancock, of Bamford (now Mrs McColgan of Camberley). They are now both in their 70s and have very fond memories of their time at the school. "I remember when we had to do something to raise money towards National Savings", said Helen, "I had to demonstrate skipping to music on the old tennis court below the terrace. I can also remember having fire practice. From our top dormitory at the front of the building, we had to tie sheets together and climb out of the window and slide to the ground. We thought this was great! No Health and Safety in those days."

Days of fun and adventure

"I remember climbing out of the dormitory window and going off to play in the woods with friends. We had great fun in those days" remembers Molly. "In the summer of 1945 I was 'Hiawatha' in a play in

the grounds. We had Red Indian tepees and wonderful costumes. Being contacted about something like this is fascinating and I can recall some of the girls whose names are in the book as if it were yesterday".

The 'Hidden Treasure' is available for anyone to view at the Marketing Suite at St Elphin's Park. The Audley staff are pleased to show visitors around and to explain the plans for the redevelopment of the fascinating historical site. Audley have invited Helen and Molly to visit the development and other former pupils are encouraged to get in touch and share their memories of their time at St Elphin's School. Audley have received some fascinating letters that speak fondly about time spent at the school. There must be many stories to tell and old acquaintances are being renewed as pupils and staff make contact with each other to reminisce over happy times. ■

Editor's Note. Former pupils and staff of St Elphin's School are invited to write to Alison Davies, Community Relations Manager, The Marketing Suite, St Elphin's Park, Darley Dale, Matlock. DE4 2RH. Further information about St Elphin's Park is available from the Sales & Marketing Suite, tel. 01629 733337 or at www.audleylife.co.uk. Additional information about William Roberts was taken from a paper written and researched by F. P. Atkinson of Darley Dale.



Postcard of St Elphins School



David Boden and Alan Furniss, finders of the time capsule

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