



A NEW BEGINNING FOR ST ELPHIN'S

The building in Darley Dale that was known affectionately as St Elphin's School has quite a tale to tell. As it begins another phase in its long history, *Alison Davies* looks back to the early nineteenth century and the changing fortunes that befell the house and its owners.

THE FIRST HOUSE BUILT on the site was called Grove House. It was a substantial villa, built around 1820 for John Alsop, a rich lead merchant from Lea Wood. It was three storeys high and had a wrought iron veranda that looked south west across the dale. The house was built of local Ashover gritstone and there was also a service wing to the North East. Both Alsop's son and grandson greatly expanded the house, adding new wings and extensive pleasure grounds in the surrounding parkland.

In 1848 John Alsop emigrated to Australia and the house was acquired by the Reverend William Bathurst, who occupied the building until 1863. On inheriting an estate from his brother, he sold the house to Mr Robert Pringle. The building changed hands yet again in 1884 and the new owner, William Roberts, decided to build a new house and demolished the old one. The replacement was a substantial Victorian Gothic edifice of three storeys and an attic, with a splendid entrance hall. It was completed in 1887 at a cost of £35,000 but unfortunately William Roberts died before he could occupy it.

In 1889 the house was sold at auction for just £11,250 to William Atkins, formerly of Rockside Hydro in Matlock. Atkins lavished great expense on the interiors and facilities and in 1891 he opened the house as the 'Darley Dale Hydropathic Institute'. As a hydro hotel it catered for the Victorian passion for spas and hydrotherapy, offering a range of services that included vapour treatments, plunge pools, a Turkish Bath and a Russian Bath, all fed from the 'Sharder Spring' water supply on the estate. The hotel also boasted tennis, billiards, fishing, a fully licensed bar and its own golf links and had the luxury of an ice-house. Guests came from nationwide and were met by carriage from Darley Railway Station. However, after the turn of the century the spa began to fail and the owners looked for a buyer.

The story now moves to Warrington in Cheshire and to the Reverend Horace Powys from St Elphin's Parish Church in Warrington. In January 1844, Powys set up a boarding school which he called 'The Clergy Daughters' School', using some funds dating back to 1698 that were set aside for the care of clergy orphans and widows in Warrington. The school was adjacent to St Elphin's

Church but drew pupils from the Greater Manchester area. It was supported financially by the Archdeaconry of Chester and incorporated a pupil teachers' centre where the orphans and pupils could train to be teachers themselves. The school began with three orphans and five student mistresses. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the area had become industrialised and conditions were cramped and far from ideal. There was an outbreak of Scarlet Fever in Warrington and so the Headmistress, Miss Catherine Kennedy (Headmistress 1896 to 1910) and the Governors looked for alternative accommodation. It was decided to purchase the Darley Dale Hydro and the girls were taken on a day visit to the site.

Early in 1904 the school moved to Darley Dale. The teacher training college stayed in Warrington but was destroyed by fire in the early 1920s. It became St Katherine's Teacher Training College in Liverpool, which is now part of Liverpool John Moores University. The school took with it the name 'St Elphin's' as a reminder of its origins in Warrington. No one is quite sure who St Elphin was, but Dr James Kendrick, researching in the nineteenth century, concluded that he was a nephew of the seventh century King Oswald, a young priest warrior who was killed in battle in Mercia and buried on the mound where St Elphin's church still stands.

The school flourished in its new and beautiful dales surroundings, with a steady stream of pupils winning scholarships and places at Oxford and Cambridge. The school expanded to take girls not only from the Archdeaconry of Cheshire but from other Anglican dioceses. Lay pupils were admitted as boarders after the move to Darley Dale and from 1933 weekly boarders and day pupils were welcomed. Daughters of missionaries came from India and Africa and remained at school all year round.

Richmal Crompton

The School's most famous old girl is Richmal Crompton Lamburn. Born in Bury, Lancashire, on November 15, 1890, 'Ray', as she was affectionately known, was the second child of Edward Lamburn, a clergyman schoolmaster, and his wife Clara. Ray started at St Elphin's School in 1901 at age eleven and moved with the school to Darley Dale. Much of her early writing contains incidents from St Elphin's: hockey matches, William as a model in an art lesson



Richmal Crompton, a St Elphin's pupil and the author of *Just William* stories and others. Pictured in her youth in 1903

and school drama. After a scholarship to Royal Holloway College she returned to St Elphin's in 1914 to teach Classics and then moved to Bromley High School.

'William' came to life in a story called *Rice Mould* which was published in the *Home Magazine*. In 1922, *Just William* was published. In the summer of 1923 Richmal Lamburn suffered an attack of polio which left her without the use of her left leg. She gave up her teaching career to become a fulltime writer. Her novel *Anne Morrison* reflects her school days at St Elphin's, in the beautiful Dales she loved. She continued to write *Just William*



Artist's impression of the redeveloped main house with health and wellbeing centre

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■ St Elphin's girls in 1940

stories up to her death in 1969. The Maple tree planted by 'Ray' is still at St Elphin's today, along with the lovely trees on 'The Hump', planted by her fellow pupils.

St Elphin's school continued to thrive throughout the twentieth century. The two daughters of the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire attended the school and many of the new teaching and accommodation blocks were named after governors and supporters of the school, including Burgis, Thornton, Hopkins, Devonshire and Robinson; the academic and sporting houses were also named from the school's past – Kennedy, Pigot, Powys, Wilson, Gresford, Selwyn, and Fletcher are all names that will bring memories flooding back to old girls and staff alike.

Sadly, during 2003-4 the school faced financial problems. It tried, unsuccessfully, to alleviate these by seeking planning permission to build housing on part of its land, and the school was forced into liquidation. It was purchased by new owners in July 2004 but was closed very suddenly in March 2005.

In June 2005 the 44 acre site was purchased by Raven Audley Court plc, specialists in building fine retirement villages. Planning permission was given in November 2006 to redevelop the site. Only the 17 acres that were occupied by the school buildings and accommodation blocks will be used for the transformation from school to retirement village. Permission has been granted for 127 apartments and cottages, including the redevelopment of the former chapel and one of the dormitories. The main building, that once saw the Victorian gentry take the waters, will once again be a health and 'well-being' centre with a swimming pool, fitness suite and treatment rooms. There will also be a library, coffee lounge, bar and bistro restaurant. The refurbishment will restore the old

Grove House to its former Victorian splendour and the grounds will be reinstated, landscaped and maintained as they were at the height of the Hydro's popularity.

Looking back over almost two centuries, one wonders what the next 100 years holds for St Elphin's Park, as it will be known. One hopes for a future of interest and opportunity in a changing world for all those who make their homes there, held fast to its roots in the beautiful Derbyshire Dales. ■

Editor's Note: *Alison Davies is the Community Relations Manager, Raven Audley Court plc. This article was written with the assistance of Judy Crook and Ann Hodgson who were both teachers at St Elphin's School.*



■ The Grove House, completed in 1887