

Memories of Faringdon County Grammar School for Girls Lilias Cooper(nee Dewhurst)

This school was formerly known as the Elms and even after becoming a county grammar school for day pupils some townsfolk still referred to it as the Elms. The Headmistress from 1943 till 1956 was Anstace Moore, who, during her career was a J.P. at the Juvenile Court. She was awarded the O.B.E. in 1953. After her retirement she went to West Barton, Thorverton in Devon and she died in 1983. Her obituary was in the Wiltshire Gazette 2/10/83.

The Headmistress that followed Miss Moore was A. J. Towns (Joan), who was at Faringdon from 1957 till 1976, and guided it from an all girls grammar school to part of the comprehensive co-ed school. After retirement to Leiston, Suffolk, she enjoyed many overseas travels and her hobby, bird watching. At the time of writing this she continues to enjoy a more restricted retirement amongst her family.

I began my school days at Faringdon Grammar School for Girls in 1954 and, I hope, in the following notes and memories, to show what life was like for me and my sister and friends during our school years. I had the experience of being there during the last years of Miss Moore and the arrival of Miss Towns. My sister arrived in 1957.

We were brought up at Harwell, the Atomic Research Establishment, and attended Chilton County Primary School, where we passed our 11 plus exams. In 1954 everyone living at Harwell had to travel somewhere to secondary school and there was a choice between schools in Abingdon, Didcot and Faringdon, and our parents, John and Margaret Dewhurst, chose Faringdon when their eldest daughter Lillias (me) passed the 11 plus.

One of the reasons given for choosing the school the furthest away from our home was that there was one girl, some years older, who already got picked up by the school bus, who could look out for me. The other reason was the school's reputation of being led by a good headmistress and staff, and girls at the school were happy.

When it came to my sister Rosemary's turn to pass the 11 plus, I was the one to look out for her on the bus and, as well as the continued good reputation and happiness of the girls, it was hoped outgrown school uniform from me could be passed down.

Two other girls living at Harwell started with me in 1954, Valerie Nichols and Marjorie Farrimond, and we had to go to Faringdon for an interview with Miss Moore and a session with the school tailor so that we would have the hat and blazer before term started and the grey pinafore and checked blue and white shirt. We also needed the gym outfit known as 'greys' and a pair of white plimsolls for indoor sports and black plimsolls for outdoor sports. I remember the tailor had set up shop in Miss Moore's office, which was to the right of the main house, originally the Elms. Miss Moore was in her secretary's office to the left of the main door.

We were shown around the school too, but my lasting memory is of the two people, Miss Moore and the tailor, and the fact the hat was rather large but, as it had to last all the time at school that was the maxim of everything bought in those days 'allow for growth.'

Transport to the school was by buses chartered from Tappins Coaches based in Didcot and the cream and brown coaches took girls to the school from villages and towns in Berkshire and the borders of Wiltshire. From our direction there were three buses, one started in Didcot, one in Abingdon and one at Harwell. The Harwell bus took the A34 to Rowestock corner and then went towards Wantage, picking up at the turn offs to East Hendred and Ardington. After Wantage it picked up at Challow, then Stanford in the Vale on the A417, reaching Faringdon in time for the start of the school day. The Didcot bus picked up at the Hanneys, Steventon, Denchworth and Grove and I think the Abingdon bus took in Marcham, Charney Bassett, Buckland and Littleworth. The journey took about an hour each way.

On each bus the bus prefect, usually the first one to get on, or the most senior of those who got on first, had to ensure everyone was on the bus going home that had got on that day. Hats had to be worn at all times and no food was to be eaten on the buses. There was no restriction on writing or singing, so homework was often done to the sound of harmonies being worked on in the back row. We all got very good at writing in a moving vehicle. On the last day of each term buses left the school, with 'hats off' and cheering from the girls, in convoy through the town towards the Folly, waving to local residents, and we were allowed to eat sweets on the bus!

Buses came from the Swindon direction too and in 1954 there were no parents in cars picking up, so, at turning out time the road in front of the school was full of coaches, and no doubt this made a big impression on traffic in Faringdon during term time.

In September 1954, when the bus delivered us to the school entrance, the three girls from Harwell found we were all in different classes because that year's intake was so large they had made three classes. I was in a classroom in the old house with Miss Morton as the form teacher and that year she had three unusual names to remember – Lillias Dewhurst, Dallas Clarke and Annas Dixon.

Every pupil was put into a group known as a house, and you remained a member of that house for your school life. The Dewhurst girls were in Grenville and the house colour was yellow. Roper House was green and Sydney House was blue and the fourth house was red – it was another admiral's name but I can't remember it.

Admiral Clifton Brown, a local landowner, was chairman of the governors in those days and had been there from when the school was the Elms, so probably he had something to do with the choice of naval names for the houses. He retired from the school governors when there was a change of headmistress and Lord Faringdon, owner of Buscot Park, took his place as chairman.

Each day began with an assembly in the main hall and every one had to put on their white indoor plimsolls to go into the hall to protect the floor. There were cloakrooms adjacent to the hall where outdoor shoes could be left and where the Jewish and Catholic girls met if their parents objected to them attending assembly.

After assembly pupils followed their timetables. Each class had a form room where some books could be kept, but because space was tight, you could only return to the form room at break or lunch time to collect a forgotten book, so you worked out what you needed for the day and carried it round with you.

One of the first year's form room was the sports pavilion under Miss Pain, which was some distance from the main school, so time was built into the timetables to allow girls to get there and back without dawdling.

Another interesting teaching space was the Hut, which was by the netball courts, and the Barn was by a covered way, which took girls from the main house to the hall.

In 1954 the newest part of the school was the French, Geography and Domestic Science block, now Faringdon Town Library. The original house was where the headmistress' flat was situated with one classroom upstairs, the school nurse's office with the secretary's office and headmistress' office downstairs.

The main Sports changing room and showers were by the assembly hall and other cloakrooms were by the Domestic Science room.

For all health matters a school nurse was on hand and she supervised medicals, the polio immunization programme and the TB vaccination programme.

Every girl had a bottle of milk at morning break and the crates of milk were put close to radiators in winter to keep them from freezing, but most mornings they were to be found in the covered way.

The dining room was not big enough for one sitting, so there were two lunch sittings, but the food was excellent, all home cooked and the staff were very caring towards the new girls who, in some cases, must have gone home for lunch while at primary school.

We were used to staying at school for lunch time and we were also used to the rule that once in school you did not leave till home time, unless it was on a supervised outing. No one was allowed out of Faringdon School except with special permission and I never knew any local town girl who went home for lunch.

When I started at the school swimming lessons, during the summer term, meant a coach trip to Buscot Park to Lord Faringdon's swimming pool on the Lechlade Road. This was no treat as the pool was small and deep and surrounded by classic statues and pillars. The water was cold, dark and slimy and little red worms clung to the swimming costumes if you stopped moving. Non swimmers, like me, clung to the edge in mortal fear of slipping under, but we were told we were lucky to have access to a pool.

A swimming pool fund had been in existence for years and finally, circa 1958, an outdoor pool was built on land beyond the netball courts and before the cricket field. The pavilion was the nearest building for changing in. Although the weather had to be considered every time it was used I learnt to swim in this pool and we never saw red worms, although someone did say in later years that frog spawn was found in it!

As we progressed up the school the uniform changed, pinafores became pleated skirts and in summer we had gingham blue and white dresses, but the gym tunics with matching knickers were used throughout the time at school, only teams playing for the school were allowed shorts and sports shirts.

Every year the school had a Sports Day when parents and siblings attended, and it was mortifying to have to put on the gym outfit for the inter-house games, which were usually gym spectacles involving everyone in the school, when some of us were gaining weight or figures.

Communal showers (mandatory) also took some getting used to for shy girls.

There were two days when the school was on show to the parents, sports day and the prize giving day, which was usually held in October and presided over by the Chairman of the Governors and the headmistress. Someone of importance and inspiration was also asked to present the prizes and give us a talk.

Amongst the variety of prizes given for progress and achievement in scholarly subjects was the posture girdle given to girls who had good posture and poise. I was awarded one of those in the lower sixth form and that made my grandmother very happy. Being an average sports achiever I had given up any idea of earning what my Scottish grandmother called 'the blue stripe' as I assumed the sports mistress chose the recipients, but it was wonderful to take it home to show my Nan and I was really proud to wear it the next year. I was also surprised and proud to be made head girl in my last year at school and the head girl's badge and posture girdle are still two of my special possessions.

At the end of each term we had to pack up all our books into parcels using strong wrapping paper and tape or string, this was the days before plastic bags, so the parcels could often be rather odd shapes, and they were stacked in the cloakrooms in class order. This was to enable school cleaners to give the classrooms a good clean and also for us to transport our parcels the next term to new form rooms. However, the parcels often got moved, dislodged or came adrift during their time in the cloakrooms so first day back could be an anxious time till you found your parcel.

I left school in September 1961 and returned for the prize giving in October 1962. By then the new dining hall had been built on the netball courts and the Hut had disappeared. I had gained seven O levels and two A levels by the time I left and was able to start work at the library at Harwell and do library exams at night school.

My sister, Rosemary, left at age sixteen and took a secretarial course in Abingdon and went from being a P.A. at Esso research to working for the BBC in London after her marriage. After my marriage I lived in Caithness for 15 years and have been in Lancashire for 33 years, but I have been very fortunate to have continued a pen friendship with Miss Towns, and have kept in touch with Marjorie Farrimond from my time at the school.

Lillias Cooper, formerly Dewhurst, Lytham St Annes, May 2012.

This information is provided for Mrs Rosemary Church, Chairman of the Local History Society and responsible for the Local History Room at Faringdon Library, where there is information on the school. If you read this and want to confirm or change some of our memories, please let Mrs Church know.

This task of remembering was triggered by a phone call from Miss Towns and a subsequent call to Mrs Church and an e-mail to Philomena and Rosemary. It's been fun thinking back, I hope that readers, probably old girls of the school, enjoy and remember other things that can be added to these memories.

PS

I went into detail as Miss Towns wanted a comprehensive report so it was more than just memories but a description of life at school and I was grateful for the help I got from Philomena and Rosemary Dewhurst my sister and her best friend Marion Little about the teachers .

We were lucky to get a comprehensive education in a grammar school as in those days we got domestic science and art alongside latin and could combine the lot. I well remember getting my gran to knit the socks and the knickers were the most enormous pair the family had seen not sure what happened to them. Then there was a baby's dress which again I got help with but my daughter wore it when she was born as Mum had saved it. As for the pinny and nippy band for cooking well that was a year of unnecessary sewing as the teacher Miss Lawrence went sick and we got drama for a year - great fun.

Do you remember the careers talks on an individual basis? They kept recommending teaching and I could only think of something exciting like joining the WRENS just to see the reaction.