

Wellington School, Ayr

by Joyce Dunford

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With no more than a fifty yard stretch of separating it from the Firth of Clyde, Wellington School, Ayr, must boast the best sea view of any school in Britain. It is a first class example of one which flourishes after a successful rescue operation by parents 20 ago, when it was threatened with closure. There have recently been considerable rumblings in educational circles in Ayrshire, following the decision to make Ayr schools comprehensive. The Wellington governors think this may well result in many more parents wishing to send their girls to the school. As competition to get in is already very keen this could lead to a chaotic situation. They have plans for increasing facilities at the school, but will resist any enlargement of its numbers, as small classes are central to their educational philosophy.

I visited the school on a day of incessant rain, so all but the sight of a large expanse of sea was denied me. The warmth of the welcome compensated.

The buildings consist of two large turreted houses in the Victorian Gothic style favoured at the turn of the century, one used for classrooms, the other for boarders, plus a smaller house half a mile away for the Primary department. "The two large houses were built in the grand manner as Bank Houses," Mr. John Twaddle, Chairman of the Governors told me. "The bank later failed!"

Of the 400 girl pupils, 110 are boarders and the rest day girls. Wellington have consistently refused any grant aid, yet its fees seemed to me somewhat lower than comparable private schools. I asked Mr Twaddle how this was possible, particularly as parents have never been asked to help with developments schemes.

"It has taken a long time to arrive at this stage, where we have no financial worries and dare also able to embark on extension plans," he said. "Of course we are entirely non-profit making - every penny is ploughed back into improvements. The Parents' Debenture scheme has helped. For each pupil entering, £50 stock must be taken up by parent or guardian. In return, a deduction of £4 a session is made from the pupils' fees—which gives a return of 8 per cent- and the £50 is repaid when the pupil leaves."

Another governor, Mr. W. Kirsopp, C.A., attributed its success to the fact that it had a first class staff plus a board of governors "drawn from a representative section of pretty hard-headed business and professional men, with Lady Fergusson of Kilkerran to take an interest in the feminine side."

Before we embarked on our tour of inspection, Miss Jessie Morris, M.A., Head- mistress, and Mr. James Cummings, M.A. (Hons), Deputy Principal, talked about the history of the school. Founded nearly 120 years ago, in Wellington Square, Ayr, by a Frenchwoman, Mrs. Gross, wife of an Ayr Academy master, twenty "young ladies of quality" were taught French and history, but most of their time was spent in the gentler arts of elocution, pianoforte and embroidery.

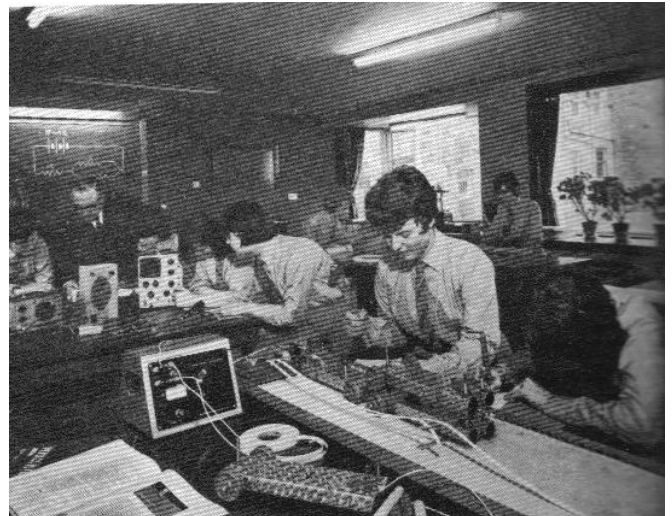
Small though the school was, the lives of those 19th century pupils were interwoven with some interesting historical events. They knitted scarves and mittens for the crew of the Felix, which sailed from Ayr Harbour in search of the explorer, Sir John Franklin. who was returning from an attempt on the North West Passage; they listened to Louis Kossuth, Hungarian patriot, describing the oppressions against his country by the Hapsburgs of Austria: they hung out of their bedroom windows and watched a boatful of burning tar being rushed round the Square the night the news came to celebrate the fall of Sebastopol during the Crimean War, and one of their number from Delhi was able to

recount personal experiences of the Indian Mutiny. Their great heroine at that time was Florence Nightingale -- one of the present school Houses is named after her.

At the beginning of this century, the school was bought by Miss Smith and Miss Cay, who added an adjoining house in Wellington Square and enhanced its academic reputation. Among the pupils of about this time, two have achieved considerable distinction - Dr. Elizabeth Hewat, theologian and historian, for 20 years lecturer and Professor of History at Wilson College, Bombay, and Miss Elizabeth Kyle, author of many books, specialising in historical stories for young people. Dr. Hewat wrote down for me some of her memories of the school 50 years ago: "As I look back on the school I knew from 1900 -1912, I feel it was passing through a stage of transition . . . It was not very far removed from some of the Dames' schools of the 19th century. The Principals, however, were alive to new ideas in education. They introduced a school uniform, and brought in visiting experts from outside, a gymnastic teacher, a master to teach singing, an outstanding elocution teacher, Miss Marjorie Gullane... Even in the Ayr of 50 years ago ideas were entering on the emancipation of women. I remember at lunch one day Miss Smith speaking of the injustices of women like Miss Cay and herself paying rates and taxes and not being allowed the vote, and we heard of a wealthy cultured woman at Prestwick who went to prison rather than pay taxes when she had no vote."

The move from Wellington Square to Carleton Turrets came in 1923 to provide for a continual growth in numbers, and Miss Carter took over as proprietor and Head- mistress. When in 1948 she decided to retire, its future was in jeopardy. Several parents, including the present chairman of the governors and another governor of that period Mr. J. B. Clark, agreed it must be saved, put up the money to buy it, and later formed it into a private company limited by guarantee. Since then it has continued as an independent school, steadily growing in size and achievement.

Below left, group work at the kindergarten – “small classes are essential to good teaching”; right, sophisticated new science labs, but the hammer still has its place



Above left, the art department – exciting ideas about crafts as well as art; right, the library – studiousness and a superb sea-view



"We can now very definitely be described as a career school," Miss Morris told me. She went to Wellington as Maths Mistress and Deputy Principal in 1951, and succeeded Miss R. O. M. Donnachie, M.A., as Headmistress about six years ago. Last year she had regretfully to give up teaching because of the increase in administrative work. Her depute, Mr. Cummings, Principal teacher in History and Careers Master, went to Wellington nine years ago from Kilmarnock Academy.

"An average of 17 girls out of an upper class of 25 go to universities each year from here," he said, and showed me the list of girls bound for universities and colleges this autumn. He mentioned girls recently at the school who had achieved especial success - Angela Jamieson who won a scholarship in gemmology from Glasgow Art School and was the youngest member of the Royal Society of Arts; Jane Iland, the best cookery student at the Hotel School in her second year at Strathclyde; Margaret Gibb, daughter of the Manager of The Glasgow Herald, in third year medicine at Glasgow University; and a Chinese girl, Loh Wei Leng, who had won a history scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge.

Above, Janet Lamont (head girl), Anne Weir (deputy head girl), Morag Russel (head boarder), Miss J Morris (Headmistress), Mr J. Cummings (Deputy Principal)

Teaching girls from all over the world is rather a special feature at Wellington. Of the boarders, more than half come from outside Scotland. I was amazed at the variety of countries from which they came - Hong Kong, Gambia, Guyana, Borneo, Italy, Kuwait, India, Zambia, Turkey, Kenya, America and Malaysia. Most go home for the long summer vacation, but have shorter holidays with friends or relations in this country, they said. In many cases their fathers are of British nationality working abroad, but some are of the same nationality as the countries where they live.

"We consider small classes essential to good teaching," Miss Morris said, "and in our primary department at Sleaford there is no class of more than 18; in the secondary, 24 is the maximum." Entry into the primary is by interview. One of the secondary staff - Miss Catherine Cosh, M.A. who teaches French and German, is a former pupil - no fewer than six of the eight primary staff are former pupils. Among those six is the head of the department, Miss Eileen Clark, a Scottish hockey internationalist, whose sister Christine, another former pupil, is also in the Scottish team.

Most of the secondary school places are filled by the primary pupils, so there is keen competition for the few additional ones. Scottish O. and H. Levels are taken, plus sixth year studies. "I have never known a girl leave without at least two O. levels."

In a school where day girls and boarders work side by side, discipline can be difficult for the boarders. I asked Miss Morris how she coped. "At weekends we keep them well occupied with badminton, table tennis, record playing, television, country dancing and swimming. The older girls can shop in Ayr on Saturdays and are often invited to the homes of day girls for lunch or tea. Who they meet then is the responsibility of their hostesses, but in no circumstances would we allow them to invite boys to the school. The boarders also have a mid-term holiday and can choose one other weekend."

Below left, the school orchestra discoursing most excellent musicke, conducted by Miss Marshall; right, dough school - a Brides' Course is popular



There are three aspects of the school which I was shown with especial pride - the new science laboratories; the Arts Section run by Mr. John Milne, who has new and exciting ideas about crafts as well as art; and the domestic science block adjacent to Sleaford, which girls go on using just for the fun of it, even when immersed in the higher academic subjects. What is affectionately called a Brides' Course is run for them.

An important part of the extra-curricular activities of the school is the Drama Club, which produces a play every second year - this year an adaptation of Mrs. Gaskell's novel "Wives and Daughters" - for which they take over Ayr's Civic Theatre in mid-June. An operetta by the primary department in which every girl was taking part, was scheduled for May, and they were all making their own costumes as part of the exercise.

With two internationalists connected with the school, it is not surprising that hockey is the number one sport, with swimming a close second.

Four Houses - Churchill, Curie, Montgomery and Nightingale - rival each other academically, on the sports field, and in obtaining the largest number of House Marks and the smallest number of Order Marks (meted out for poor behaviour).

There are many enthusiasts in the Old Girls' Club. Each year they have a dinner dance, attended by sixth formers, who in turn entertain the Old Girls at a supper prepared by senior domestic science pupils. "It's amusing to see how they like trying out sophisticated menus," Miss Morris said, "starting off with things like smoked salmon!" She added that one of the difficulties about school meals was that so many girls wanted to slim, and refused any breakfast except grapefruit!

What of the school's future, at a time extremely difficult for private schools? The Chairman of the governors and Mr. Kirsopp, as well as the Headmistress and her Deputy, were full of ideas for improving facilities at the school. Starting at Easter, and to be completed shortly, three new classroom units are being built at Sleaford, and they showed me a beautiful set of architects' plans for a three storey building at Carleton Turrets to include more classrooms plus a large assembly / gymnasium / concert hall.



Above left, the dining room - for breakfast just grapefruit, but apparently no slimming worries over lunch; right, the common room with Miss Heron - there are 110 boarders