

“School”

St Elphin's started for me Summer Term 1939. The war was about to begin and everyone was getting worried. My dear father had served in the army during W.W.I., fought on the Somme, was shot through the thigh by a sniper and, still, he insisted he was fit to face it all again. He tried to get accepted the first day of the war, only to be turned away, which made him quite offended.

I started school in September as a mild, very shy schoolgirl of 11 years old. It was a huge step in my young life after living in a very isolated home quite near Darley Dale. I had an older sister at school already so was well tutored by her.

The first day was exciting. We were out of bed by the bell and pull the beds out of the cubicles into the corridor - between the two rows of cubicles. We were marched off for breakfast to a special junior table in the dining room in senior school. The junior wing was a very up-to-date part of the school, probably only built after a few years previously. I slept in Willis dormitory to begin with and Fox later. Willis had green curtains and Fox had blue.

My first little friend was a girl called Mandy Mitchell. I don't think she was there for long but she took me under her wing and taught me how to play 7's on the verandah adjoining the 3 junior class rooms.

My great love of animals became non-existent to begin with and I missed the cats, tame mice and my love of cows! Miss Robinson was the Chief-in-charge and I was terrified of her! She had lived in Palestine and I think we all imagined the sun had a peculiar affect on her!

The first day of lessons in 3B was quite fun but I dreaded anything to do with maths, which I was hopeless at, and which has remained with me for life!

One had to behave properly and order marks were dished out to people that disobeyed orders. My bed was in a wooden cubicle in Willis dorm and really very

comfortable – apart from a hole in the wood between my bed and the next one. I awoke to see two beady eyes looking at me through the hole and I was terrified! It seemed that it was the thing to do - to bore your way through the wooden partition and spy on your neighbour!

Prayers and chapel were in abundance and seemed to over shadow everything else that we had to do. We had a wide assortment of visiting priests all through my first term; some of them were very kind people and the seniors in upper school were ready to fight for permission to take them for walks on Sunday morning. I have an old photograph of one priest that my sister knew when she was at school. The said priest was a brother of a film actor who was seen in a lot of films at that time. It caused great excitement throughout the school!

I gradually settled into school life and was now sleeping in Fox – the blue dorm. One night was very frightening. We were all expecting to be moved over to senior school to be in the old wine cellars which were being used as air-raid shelters. I remember sitting on my bed – geared up to the hilt in siren-suit, gloves, scarf etc., plus my gas mask at the ready. At last a 6th form girl called Lucy Tyson came to fetch us and we had to hold hands and run across Orchards Bridge to the old air raid shelters. We lay down on lilos with boiling hot water pipes just above our heads (Health & Safety was, of course, unheard of at that time)!! Sheffield took the blast of the air raid and all the boarders from Sheffield were so frightened because they knew what was happening. It was all too sad to use it as a story. The phone wires were all down and no one knew if their parents were alive or not. It was terrible.

I had made another friend called Erica Hancock who started school the same day as me. We used to walk on “the hump” at one side of the junior wing. I always thought this was the waste heap from the time the junior wing was made. There was a nice lawn outside the class rooms called the Green with an air raid shelter on one side – which was usually standing in water inside and a very horrible dark place, like a cave. I don’t know that it was ever used.

I spent quite a lot of time in the school san during my 3 years at school. I passed out one night in chapel, after playing rounders. I was told it was a “strained heart” but soon got going again and was able to spend the rest of my life doing strenuous farm-work. I also got mumps – which wasn’t very pleasant and stayed in the san for a few weeks. The san was a lovely place and I think it must have been missed by everyone in later years when it was pulled down.

I loved having wonderful friends at school whom I have kept up with for years and years. I was in Kennedy House (blue girdle) and was terribly supportive of all the competitions and even the ballroom dancing to Victor Sylvester’s music which took place in the Old Rec. which had tin sheets on the roof, but it was a friendly place with a stage for plays etc.

I really wanted to work with farming and thought it was time I did more for the war effort. I left school at 14 having not taken any exams, which horrified my mother! I bought an old cow, 2 calves, had hens and a pig etc. I earned myself a bit of cash and was really doing what I loved.

I am now 84 and still love cows etc. I have lost my dear husband who I worshipped for 54 years. He had been in the R.A.F. in Burma but came back to the family farm after he was de-mobbed.

I married Jim in 1957 after working on another farm for 15 years. I was hardened off and could cope with hardships etc. Living on high ground both at home and above Ashover when I married I could put up with a lot. I was never used to electricity until 1958 and nor did we have any mains water in the area. There’s still no mains water but I am now used to a very reliable bore-hole!

I didn’t mention food at school – we all thrived on meager meals and I believe we all had an abundance of energy. The only thing I couldn’t face was fish on Fridays. I don’t think many girls ate their lunch on Friday. The cutlery etc. always smelt of fish for 2 days after this and strange whiffs would come through the door in Lower 4th classroom where I was at the time – awful!

It is strange to think that the Old Elphinians is coming to an end after so long. I will always remember the dear friends that I had during 1939 – 1942 - some of which are still around and are lovely people. Alas, we are all “up the tree” now but keep plodding on! The old school building must look very different now but I will always remember the long corridor, the music square, the rec. etc., and my mouth organ that was confiscated late into the night in Dorm 3 on the 1st landing. I wonder what happened to it along with my lacrosse stick that vanished! I hope someone was able to play Lacrosse! – it was a tough game!

With happy memories.

Avice E. Lee

Kennedy House 1939 - 1942