

Staging a great reunion – at the school she hated!

A former St Elphin's pupil who hated her time at school so much that she twice tried to run away has just organised its biggest-ever reunion! Liz Donlan explains how and why she was happy to return to Darley Dale nearly 40 years on.

Below: Seven years after the school closed, former pupils and staff staged a traditional "school photo" outside St Elphin's House at their reunion. Picture by Ron Duggins.

LIZ DONLAN (nee Bailey) is happy to admit that she was "a bit of a rebel" during her six years at St Elphin's from the late Sixties. She remembers, in 1970, being moved to the same landing where the then headmistress, the late Miss Maud Robinson, had her bedroom and study. "She wanted to keep an eye on me as I suppose I was a bit rebellious back then!" said Liz. "I only kept in touch with one pupil (Rosemary Allen) when I left in 1973 but lost contact with her a few years later. I had no desire to get in touch with anyone as I hated my time there – I even tried to run away twice! However, it was through Facebook that I was 'tracked down' a couple of years ago."

There had, by 2010, been several reunions of former pupils – involving up to



Preparing the name badges for the biggest-ever reunion of former St Elphin's School pupils.

about 60 women – since the school's closure in 2005. One of the former pupils running a Facebook site about the school was Gill Haywood (nee Prescott) – and she and Liz, who runs a small website company, set up www.stelphins.co.uk, which went live on Christmas Eve in 2010. Liz and Gill's spells at St Elphin's had overlapped by three years but they didn't recall each other

– a fact which has not stopped them becoming firm friends.

And last year Liz, who now lives in Cheshire, also met up with a former pupil she did remember – Anne Marie Reeve (nee Robinson), who lives in Mansfield. They met up in Darley Dale with their former PE teacher, Miss Davy, and then visited St Elphin's – at a time when restoration work



on the main school building was well underway. Audley's community relations manager, Alison Davies, agreed that the historic building – dating back to 1820 – could be used for a reunion after the work was completed this autumn.

It was also agreed at the 2011 annual general meeting of the Old Elphinians, held in Sheringham, Norfolk, that the objectives of the society – to raise funds for school projects – was clearly no longer applicable and that a motion to wind up the society should be put to the 2012 AGM. As the provisional plans for the 2012 reunion were already in place then, it was agreed that the two events be held together.

Once it was announced that both the reunion and the AGM were going to be held at the

newly-restored building – which was officially reopened by Lord Edward Manners and renamed Audley St Elphin's House in September – the number of ex-pupils expressing an interest shot up to the point that Audley said they would not be able to cope. As a result, the reunion was scheduled for October 6 with the Old Elphinians meeting a week later.

And on Saturday, October 6, a total of 100 ex-pupils and

“...a total of 100 ex-pupils and 13 former members of staff returned to St Elphin's House...”

13 former members of staff returned to St Elphin's House – one making the journey from Australia and two from the Bahamas.

They were given a tour of the newly-restored building, which had been a private house and a health spa before becoming St Elphin's School's new home in 1904. The building



A scene from a St Elphin's production of Oliver in 1982.



Flashback to the 1982 Speech Day at St Elphin's, with the school's first and only headmaster, Peter Pollard, handing out prizes. Mr Pollard, who had been head of another girls' boarding school in Malvern, Worcestershire, was at the Darley Dale school from 1979 until 1994.



Feature



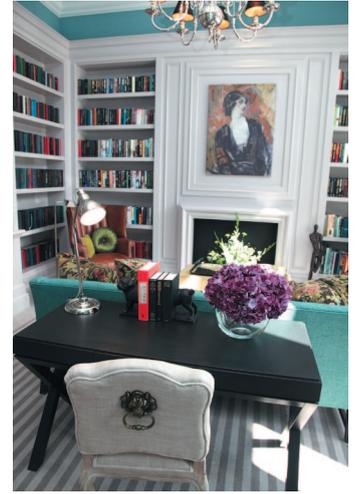
A group of former pupils watch as the Invicta Stone is unveiled at St Elphin's House.

now houses the retirement village's health club, pool, bar and restaurant as well as eight luxury apartments.

They also enjoyed a 'school lunch', courtesy of Audley's catering team, including some traditional classics such as jam roly-poly and custard and the same afternoon teas that pupils enjoyed for decades there – jam sandwiches, iced buns and Battenburg cake.

And to bring back memories of the school tuck shop, bags of sweets were given out to all the former pupils - with the sweets even corresponding to the decade each person was at the school!

Image Printing of Matlock printed free of charge a commemorative programme of the event, and Reflections magazine was happy to help the organisers recreate the traditional school



"The building now houses the retirement village's health club, pool, bar and restaurant as well as eight luxury apartments."

photograph outside the front of St Elphin's House.

The top prize in a raffle - a two-night stay with bed, breakfast & evening meal for two in the Chatsworth Guest Room in St Elphin's House, donated by Audley – was won

by Kemi Gbaja, who was at St Elphin's School from 1977-79.

And the 'old girl' now living in Australia, Jenny Winkless (nee Gray), who was at St Elphin's from 1971-75, led the singing of the old school song to end the festivities. ■

Special stone really is "undefeated"!

IN April 2005, the owners of the school sold anything that was removable from the building – inside or outside. One of the items was the Invicta Stone (Invicta means "undefeated") that had originally been on the top of one of the turrets above the main front door. In the 1960s, the turret was demolished for safety reasons and the Invicta Stone had been put in one of the school's rose gardens.



The arrow marks the traditional home of the Invicta Stone on one of the turrets at St Elphin's House.



Marianne Jackson unveils the Invicta Stone at St Elphin's House during the school reunion.

In 2011, former pupil Marianne Jackson (nee Stewart) managed to track down the Invicta Stone which had been purchased by Lassco, a salvage company based in Oxfordshire, at the auction of the school contents. Lassco told Marianne they were willing to sell it for less than they paid at the auction, if it was returned to the school. Audley then offered to purchase the stone from Lassco if the Old Elphinians would fund a suitable plaque to be installed with it.

The stone returned to Derbyshire late last year and was cleaned up and reinstalled in its rightful home. Marianne unveiled the stone at last month's reunion, and the plaque is now being made. ■

