

QUEEN BERTHA'S SCHOOL STORY

by Bunty Hunt

Additional material from Jennie Burgess, Birchington Heritage Trust Archivist

The following is the outline of the Story of Queen Bertha's School. I have written a little of what I know. I would like to enlarge on it with contributions from other girls. Please send me any anecdotes or relevant news items so I can produce something more complete.

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Miss Hunt and Miss Harris met because they both taught at the same school. They became very good friends. Before starting at QBS, Miss Hunt went back to Argentina to see her parents. It would appear from the number of letters I have, that they wrote to each other nearly every day. There were particularly long letters from Miss Harris saying how much she was missing Miss Hunt.

The partnership deeds for Queen Bertha's School were drawn up on 29th March, 1929, between Catherine Margaret Hunt and Gertrude Agnes Esmé Randall-Harris.

The premises purchased in Birchington-on-Sea were called "Fernleigh"¹. The property was renamed Queen Bertha's School (in 1929). The purchase was made out of the partnership moneys. The initial capital sum was two thousand, five hundred pounds, proved as follows:-

Miss Hunt - £1,800: Miss Harris - £700. Miss Harris was entitled at any time during the continuance of the partnership to bring in additional capital, till her share equalled that of Miss Hunt, but neither was entitled to contribute more than the other without their consent.

The rest of the deed covered all other aspects of the partnership, such as payment to each partner and clauses to cover any likelihood of disagreement, or breaking up of the partnership.

I have tried to find out a little bit about the early years of the school, as I did not arrive at the school until 1945. Pam Gifford went as a day girl in 1931. She boarded a year later. She left in 1939, when the school was evacuated to Wales and helped with the move there. I don't know when the 'other' house

¹ "Fernleigh" was right hand of two large properties on the outskirts of Birchington. The one nearer to the village was called "Rose Bank" and was owned by Lord Forester in 1916. "Fernleigh" was built for Alderman Robert Grant, JP, a wealthy businessman. He lived there with his wife until her death in 1908. The following year he donated the Fountain in Birchington Square in her memory. It was opened on June 2nd 1909, with much pomp and ceremony. He moved away about nine years later and the building remained unlisted until 1924, when William Brice was listed as resident there. Sydney George West, MA, had bought "Rose Bank" next door, renaming it "Birchington House School", a preparatory school for boys.

(Birchington House / Rose Bank) was acquired - quite early on, I think.² I understand that Muriel Bray, who was a prize tennis player, was forever in trouble for sneaking through the hedge to see the boys!

Celia Green (Pemberton) went to QBS in 1934. She has a group photo from her time. There were 47 girls, 3 small boys and 7 teachers (including H. & H.). The masters from Chatham House were already part of the establishment; I think they began with the start of the school³.



School group - c. 1939

The Chapel was dedicated on 10th July 1935 by the Bishop of Dover. The Chapel gifts were dedicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury 29th July 1939. (The decision to set aside a room for the Chapel in 1935 was probably made shortly after acquiring "Birchington House" next door, which would have doubled the available space).

The school was very active in those early years. There were numerous clubs and societies, such as - The League of Nations Union, The Socrates Club, the various 'House' competitions, i.e. drama, music, sport etc, Sunday School, the Chapel, pets, tennis, Guides and many more activities.

[In 1939, Pam Gifford says that she and the young matron - who didn't even have a provisional driving licence - share the driving to Wales for the evacuation expedition. Pam says the matron was "a natural" driver! She continued in her letter, "We went the whole way to Haverfordwest in the day." The school was due to stay at Tregeyb Mansion at Ffairfach, but initially went

² By 1929, when Queen Bertha's opened, Mr C. A. Seymour Sewell MA (Cantab) was principal of Birchington School, but sometime between 1934 and 1935 it closed down. From then onwards, it is not mentioned as a separate unit, giving the clue that this was possible the date when Miss Hunt and Miss Harris bought the additional premises.

³ Among the masters from Chatham House Boys' Grammar School were, Mr Bateman (Biology), Mr Lane (Maths), Mr Nash Williams (Classics) ? ----- (History). Mr Shepherd from Hereson also helped out (Art)

to Picton Castle (the Phillips' other place). This was because Tregeyb was not immediately ready. They ran out of oil on the journey down to Wales - Pam blamed herself for this She then recalled spending her first night at Picton with her head under the bedclothes all night to 'avoid the bats' - what a night, after such a long, tiring journey!]

My mother, brother Jim and I arrived in the UK from Argentina on the 2nd September 1939, the day before war was declared. Jim and I were posted straight down to Birchington. We were on the beach at Minnis Bay when the siren sounded. I was told to pick up my shoes and run, though I had no idea what it was all about. We ended up in somebody's garden. I thought it was the Shipton's (Shiphams? - who lived at "The Minnies" on the corner of Sea View Road and Grenham Bay Avenue), but it may have been the Randall-Harris' - ("Anglesey" at the sea-end of Hereward Avenue). I also remember that Jim had a monumental nose bleed!!

I remember, too, staying at Picton Castle, but I didn't understand why everyone was running around or why we were put into a dark, uncomfortable van and deposited at a castle in the middle of Wales.

Our stay at Tregeyb is all a bit blurred. The house was very dark. We went for long walks and I got lost and was very frightened, as it was nearly dark when I was found. Jim and I only stayed till Christmas. Miss Hunt gave me a beautiful party frock - white organdie with pretty flowers - but I never ever wore it again; I was allowed to open the box sometimes and look at it!!. We went back to Argentina, and there were no parties at the Estancia.

I know nothing about the war years in Wales as I did not go to school properly till September 1945. The school came back to Birchington then. There was still quite a muddle when the term started. The RAF, who had requisitioned the place during the war, left a trail of chaos behind them.

There was still a School Parliament in 1945. Can anyone remember when it ceased to exist? It was certainly before I left in 1950.

1945 was a bulge year - there were many, many more girls than before the war and a number of day girls. It all felt very strange. I was told off for not wearing socks and the senior girls teased me about the mouthful of gold bands I had on my teeth. I had a monumental fight with Jane Smith - and ever since we have been - and still are - the best of friends. I was 13 and had only spent two years of my life at school - in fact, three different schools - so I was behind in most subjects, but especially in maths. For the first couple of terms I couldn't understand why people said Latin was difficult ... for me it was just Spanish with a few different endings!!! But it caught up with me in the end and I was allowed to drop it.

I always said that in Miss Harris's "book", there existed only three types of humans - Classicists (people), failed Classicists (nearly people) and the others - who didn't exist!!

We were allowed pets; I had two mice, Colita and Castano. They eventually escaped into what was to become the staff cottage. I often wondered whether the staff were plagued by mice. Pat Frankland had two male chinchillas, who stopped playing on the lawn one day and produced babies!

It was difficult being the headmistress's niece - so much was expected of me - but I did manage to keep tins of condensed milk in the rabbit hutch and was party to the hidden delicacies we kept under the floorboard in Daffodil dormitory.

Does anyone remember the demise of Cook? She was a witch! But Miss Hunt protected her, for cooks, even 'witch' ones, were hard to come by in 1845. We got into terrible trouble if we upset Cook.

It all came to a head one Speech Day. No one could find Cook. Nothing was organised for breakfast and, even worse, nothing for the special tea for the parents. Miss Hunt was beside herself with worry. Eventually, after hours of searching, a groan was heard coming from the cellar - and one very drunk Cook was brought to the surface. It subsequently came out that she had been selling our food on the 'black market' and giving us short measure, to finance her drinking habits. That was the last we saw or heard of Cook!

One day at supper, Miss Harris was lecturing us on some misdemeanour. While pretending to be very attentive, we had one eye on a caterpillar that was crawling up her lettuce leaf onto her fork. We none of us uttered a sound. Just as she opened her mouth to receive the fork load, the caterpillar wriggled. We then had to register great surprise and dispose of the uninvited 'guest'.

One of the joys of the summer term was sleeping on the veranda with Miss Hunt.

The highlight of my years at QBS was Miss Compton, the plays and the Kent Festivals - "Hiawatha", "As You Like It", "1066 & All That" and "Alice". I longed to go on the stage as a career, but with Martita⁴ being my aunt, I think it was felt that one actress in the family was enough.

Who remembers the glass-fronted bookcase in the hall with H. & H's nicely bound classics in the locked cupboard? When I was helping to pack up the school (when it closed in 1959) Miss Hunt said, "Please remove your grandfather's pornography from behind the classics in the hall." All those years at QB and I had no idea what interesting things were in that cupboard!!

What did any of us gain from our years at QBS? For myself I learnt self-discipline, an ability to grit my teeth and cope with situations that many of my

⁴ Martita Hunt - 1900-1969 - British actress, was most famous for her role as Miss Havisham in Dickens' "Great Expectations". She was born in Buenos Aires to British parents, Alfred & Marta Hunt (nee Burnett). She spent the first 10 years of her life in Argentina, before returning to England with her parents to attend Queenwood boarding-school, Eastbourne, and then train as an actress under Dame Genevieve Ward and Lady Benson. She first appeared on stage in 1923 at the Kingsway in "The Machine Wreckers" by Ernst Toller.

contemporaries can't face: survival - and above all, to think of others first, especially in the ordinary everyday things, like leaving a light on and not taking all the hot water - just putting the other person first. What harm did my years at QB do to me? My confidence was drained from me. For years, I lacked self confidence. Though I did have the courage to walk out when I couldn't take any more - at the expense of my education - as I never took my 'Highers' exams.

QUEEN BERTHA'S SCHOOL for GIRLS

Principals

MISS ESMÉ RANDALL-HARRIS, B.A.,
DIP. PEDAG. UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
MISS CATHARINE M. HUNT, L.R.A.M.
Assisted by a Fully Qualified Staff



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