

"OAKFIELD"

Early Days

The school began with twelve pupils in the 1880s, at Horwich Bank, Whaley Bridge, under Mrs. Procter, where it was highly thought of as a Wesleyan school. In 1885, Mrs. Procter brought her school of 24 pupils known as "Earnseat" to Arnside, where it gained a very good reputation as a Methodist school, Mr. Procter took a singing class on Saturday mornings and prayers after tea but took no other part in school activities.

Mrs. Procter is remembered as charming in every way; she was never stern or cross and yet she set a very high standard.

In 1890, the school moved over to Oakfield. The 2 Mistresses at this time were both daughters of Wesleyan ministers. One of the pupils of these days was Constance Holme (author of "The Lonely Plough" etc.), a weekly boarder who lived at Milnthorpe.

The Bamford Family took over the school of 18-20 girls in 1895. Rev. J. M. Bamford and his wife owned the school but took no active part in the running of it, this was left to their 3 daughters, Miss Bamford, Miss Katie, and Miss Millie. Mr. Bamford trimmed the oil lamps, and Mrs. Bamford presided over the domestic work. Miss Bamford taught music, Miss Katie was the head of the academic side of the school, and Miss Millie was "the daughter at home". Each gave her own individual contribution, but even so there was a strong family atmosphere surrounding Oakfield. The Bamfords gave to the school fine ideals devotedly carried out in a quiet, religious atmosphere, a great stimulus to good-living.

In 1901, the school was housed in Oakfield, and Oakmount; and Haslemere was soon added, as the number of girls reached the 50 mark. In 1903, four or five extra staff were employed as the upkeep of the school involved more than simply class-teaching. There were activities such as swimming (at Kendal Baths) bicycling, picnics; and domestic duties including attending to the various ailments of the girls.

One of the secrets of the success of Oakfield school lay in the gifts each of the 3 Miss Bamfords possessed of inspiring loyalty, self-sacrificing service and indeed affection in the members of their staff. But then the 2 elder Miss Bamfords married 2 brothers. In August 1904, Miss Bamford married Dr. Fred Gamble, a professor of Zoology at Manchester University, and Miss Katie married the Rev. Herbert Gamble, a Congregational Minister. After their marriage, Mrs. Fred went to live in Manchester and later in Birmingham, but Mr. and Mrs. Herbert stayed on at the school. Mr. Herbert was known as the "Head of the scholastic side" but by 1916, it was clear that Mr. Gamble preferred the pulpit or lecture room to the schoolroom, and he longed to get back to full-time churchwork, so he and his wife moved to Surbiton; and Oakfield lost the second Bamford sister. Only Miss Millie was left to shoulder the burden of a now flourishing private school and she had, until then, been occupied almost entirely with the care of her parents and the domestic side of school life. Miss Margaret Eacott replaced Mrs. Gamble and the school won the admiration and respect of all under this dual control of excellent teachers.

In 1912, the girls were housed at Oakfield, Oakmount, Haslemere, and

Langholm; and a few girls were at a Miss Cook's house. New Oakfield was being built and was opened shortly after. Heathcliffe was bought in 1914, and the girls moved in after an outbreak of scarlet fever at Oakfield. The weekday uniform at this time consisted of navy coats and navy straw boaters. These were given up as impractical and blue serge caps followed. For Sundays it was white coats and hats in summer, saxe-blue coats and black velour hats trimmed with saxe ribbon for winter. Black cashmere stockings and black laced shoes were always worn.

The fees in 1912 were £21 7s. 4d. and £23 2s. 0d. in 1918 (plus a war charge of £2 2s. 0d.), The extras included such items as pocket money, 5/6d. to 7/- per term; pew rent, 2/6d.; collection, 5/-; shoe-repairs, 9d.; hockey excursions, 6/3d.; music, £2 2s. 0d.

The First World War made little difference to the routine of the school though there had to be food rations which included a term without potatoes and a term without tea at breakfast. All hockey matches had to be played at Kendal to save excessive travelling, and also the knitting of scarves, socks, helmets, etc., became a compulsory hobby, while there were Sunday collections for the National Relief Fund, the French Red Cross, and the War Emergency Fund.

Soon after the war, the number in the school rose to 97, but in the 1930's they fell again to 45.

Miss Birnie Rhind

In 1935, Miss Bamford and Miss Eacott retired and handed over 45 pupils to Miss Noel Birnie Rhind, whose father was a sculptor. It was a comparatively small community but it grew steadily until the 100 mark was reached in 1945. In 1936, there was a change from the old navy blue to tweeds, and when Miss Bamford left Arnside, work was begun on a science laboratory and chapel. These extensions were finished in 1937. The war came and soon the school grew until senior girls and members of the staff were living out. In 1942, Oakfield achieved the Board of Education recognition with a staff of 15. In 1944, from a school of 80 pupils, 5 open scholarships were won, a record which Miss Birnie Rhind described as "our greatest triumph". Oakfield Old Girls distinguished themselves during the war. Joan Mortimer was the first and one of the few women to be awarded the Military Medal while serving with the W.A.A.F. Sybil Walton was seen in the film "The Gentle Sex".

The Move to Underley Hall

But the Arnside property was no longer suitable for growing numbers and common rooms were too small, and so in 1944, Miss Birnie Rhind decided to move the school, and began looking for a building large enough to house 100 pupils and teaching and domestic staffs; and capable of being converted. This was not easy but she finally decided to buy Underley Hall. The building was large and adaptable, and so a legal advisor, Mr. Greenwood, was hired to carry out the negotiations. Thus, in September 1945 Underley Hall became "Oakfield".

Here is Miss Birnie Rhind's description of moving in: "*It was a great task to equip and modernise it. 5 miles of old electric wiring were taken out*

and many miles more put in. Some 20 baths were put in and many improvements were made. I also decided that I must try to achieve my last aim - to make Oakfield a Public School, with the headmistress a member of the Headmistresses' conference". This she achieved at Underley.

Curriculum

Of primary importance to reaching this aim was the taking up of the public school curriculum, and earning a reputation for success in public examinations. Biology, English Language, English Literature, History, Geography, French, Mathematics, Music, were studied up to School Certificate Level, with the additional subjects of Latin, German, Domestic Science, Greek, Physics, Art, Scripture, and Needlework. English, Botany, Zoology, Chemistry, Latin, French, German and Mathematics were studied up to Higher School Certificate Level.

As music played an important part in education at Oakfield the pupils sat the Royal School of Music Examinations for piano, cello, violin, and viola. High grades were attained especially in piano and violin and various scholarships and prizes were won. Good grades were also achieved in the Royal Drawing Society Examinations. It was certainly a very rigorous academic life at Oakfield, and a high standard was achieved, rewarded by great examination success.

Activities

There were also many out-of-class activities. Music played a very large part in the life of the girls. They had a gramophone society and a recorder society within the school, and there was a large school orchestra and a choir, and concerts were a popular feature of internal activities. Outings to concerts at other Wesmorland schools were arranged and many musicians visited Oakfield to give recitals.

As regards sport, the major games were Lacrosse, Tennis, Netball, Rounders, Swimming, and Gymnastics. Lacrosse was played at inter-school level, and "Oakfield" even took part in the Northern Schools' Lacrosse Tournament held at Liverpool. Visits to Kendal Baths stimulated an interest in swimming, and some got Life Saving, and Instructors' Certificates.

Outings, picnics, and educational visits were a common feature and trips to the Lake District, Fountains Abbey, and Haworth etc. were arranged by the staff. Drama visits to theatres and various school productions were organised by the "Oakfield Dramatic Society", who also put on a Nativity Play each year. There were also "Wild Flower" and "Photographic Societies".

The girls organised collections amongst themselves for all the major public charities such as "Childrens Homes", "Lifeboat Society", "R.S.P.C.A.", "Cancer Research", and they once ran a Bazaar stall in Kirkby Lonsdale for the "National Schools' Appeal".

The Church Society

In 1949, Oakfield became officially recognised as a public school. Having achieved her aim Miss Birnie Rhind retired and handed "Oakfield" over to the National Church League designating her vice-headmistress, Miss Randle as her successor.

Miss Birnie Rhind retired to Crowborough, Sussex. On leaving "Oakfield"

she was presented with a cheque of £100 as a token of appreciation. She gratefully accepted the gift and said it would go towards the erection of a greenhouse in which she would grow the best tomatoes. By 1951 she had established a small scale market garden selling vegetables and flowers and also eggs. She also did a great deal of driving for the hospital service. Her hobby was show-dogs, and her Sealyhams won championship shows all over the country. However, she will always be remembered as the Headmistress of Oakfield, a strict disciplinarian but a fine example to her staff and pupils.

Miss Ethel Randle had none of Miss Birnie Rhind's financial responsibility, as the Church Society actually owned the Hall, and so she was able to devote all her time and energies to simply running the school.

In 1951, much work was done on the inside of Underley. Music rooms, bathrooms, lavatories and dormitories were distempered and painted. The heating system was extended to heat all the music rooms, art-room, and staff flats. Externally, the kitchen gardens and "private gardens" were added to the property already owned by the Church Society.

As far as the girls were concerned, the retirement of Miss Birnie Rhind did not bring any changes. In 1950, the Second Kirkby Lonsdale Guide Company was formed at Oakfield. Great use was made of the surrounding countryside for short camps, and in 1952, Lady Baden Powell came to Kirkby Lonsdale and met the Oakfield Guides. The "Oakfield Folk Dance Club" was added to the other societies in 1951.

Here is a description of a winter evening at Oakfield, written by a fourth form pupil in 1951: *"Our work for the day ends at 7.15 p.m. Usually, if not always, it has been a day of hard work and we are glad when this time come. It is dark by then, but the comforting electric-light enables us to carry on indoors as if it were daylight."*

"When preparation is finished we go down to the sitting room... we can always find something to keep us occupied. The most popular pastimes are knitting, sewing, reading or rug-making. Some people though, are not so quiet and prefer dancing, so the gramophone and records are brought out and we have a gay evening. Then we have prayers followed by supper. It is nice to have hot cocoa or soup on these cold winter nights followed by a bath and bed."

The Jubilee Hall

As the school increased in numbers and the staff had to be increased to 16 in 1955 (including Miss McEwan who is now the piano tutor at St. Michael's) Miss Randle decided that an Assembly Hall was now necessary. An architect was employed to draw up plans. A drawing of the proposed hall shows it to be an eastward extension from the N.E. corner of the Hall, where the old conservatory stood. The estimated cost was £6,000, and as the Church Society was not going to build it, money raising schemes were launched. At first the work was to start in June 1956, but by 1957, they had only raised £2,700. By 1958, they were still far short of the total cost, and so ideas of converting existing buildings rather than putting up a new building were put forward.

Move to Reading

Then in 1959, Miss Randle decided to amalgamate “Oakfield” with a school near Reading. In the 1958 School Magazine she wrote: *“You will know of our removal to Wokingham in September; it offers opportunities which do not exist in Kirkby Lonsdale. It is only 30 miles from London and yet stands in 30 acres and so is as secluded as “Oakfield”. The first year we shall be somewhat tightly packed although 2 new classrooms and a new laboratory will be ready in September. The existing classrooms and laboratory are going to become dormitories. We hope to begin building the proposed “Oakfield Hall” in September, and by putting dormitories over it to free rooms in the house. We shall have too an attractive swimming pool, which was an addition to the school only last year. The proximity to London will make visits to art galleries, theatres, concerts, etc. a possibility, and I hope too that we shall have many visits from old girls. I am sure that you will realise that the welding of “Oakfield” and “Luckley” into “Oakfield-Luckley” is no light task and will call for much good will from both schools. Miss Drake, founder of Luckley died in May, she lived just long enough to complete the handing over of the school to the Church Society”.*

Miss Randle accepted the post of headmistress and most of the Underley “Oakfield” girls went with her, but because of the strongly Christian atmosphere and high standard of teaching, by the time they left the girls were “particularly pleasant and well mannered”, as one outsider who knew them well put it. The “Oakfield” motto “palma non sine pulvere” had been carried out. The efforts (“pulves”) of the Bamfords, Miss Birnie Rhind, and Miss Randle had certainly resulted in prizes (“palma”) during their stay at Underley.

Underley was now put up for sale by the Church Society, and St. Michael’s College were the next buyers.