

ZELA CAMERON (NEE) CONSTABLE
1941 – 1948

Prior to the 1944 Education Act, Plymouth High School was a fee-paying school. Full fees were 24 guineas a year (£25.20). In addition to the private pupils, each year the School accepted the 20 girls who had obtained the highest marks in the Plymouth Education Authority's Scholarship Exam (11 Plus). Parents of these girls paid reduced fees on a sliding scale based on income, some paying no fees at all. My parents paid 12 guineas a year for me (£12.60) until fees were abolished in 1945.

During the war the Plymouth grammar schools were evacuated and the buildings of Devonport High School and Stoke Damerel High School were taken over by government departments. Girls and staff from all three Schools who did not wish to be evacuated were gathered together in the Plymouth High School building and the "Plymouth Emergency High School" was formed.

From Montpelier School I joined Plymouth High School at the Emergency High in September 1941. I lived in Peverell, and walked with friends to and from School every day. If it rained my mother gave me the one penny fare (about ½p) to catch the bus or tram. Hardly any families owned a car in those days. The ones who did were not able to use them during the war because petrol was unobtainable for private use.

During 1941/42 lessons were sometimes interrupted when the air-raid warning sounded and we had to line up and walk quickly and quietly to the cold, damp, concrete air-raid shelter in the grounds, where we sat on slatted wooden benches till the "all clear" siren sounded.

By the end of my second year at Plymouth High School the St. Lawrence Road building was full to overflowing as more and more girls opted out of evacuation. In September 1943 about 100 girls, including myself, who lived on reasonably convenient bus routes, were transferred to an annexe situated in a building at the far end of Durnford Street, where we stayed for two years, visiting the main School on two afternoons a week for music, science and cookery lessons.

At first most of us, particularly the Plymouth High School girls, were resentful at being moved from St. Lawrence Road, but soon found there were advantages in being exiled as we had more fun, and were given much greater freedom and privileges.

We organised our own Drama Festivals and were allowed to spend summer lunchtimes basking in the sun at Devil's Point, where on one occasion we discovered a treasure trove of oil-covered grapefruit washed up on the shore. These we took back to School and were allowed to spend the afternoon cleaning them up in hot soapy water, then we each took one or two home to have as a treat. We hadn't seen such exotic fruit since before the War!

Because of a shortage of teachers at Durnford Street we had a Royal Marine P.T. Instructor on loan from Stonehouse Barracks to take our gym lessons. Imagine it

– a man!! We also had a married French mistress. This was quite a novelty, as all other staff were unmarried women, mostly middle-aged and elderly.

With the War safely over, in September 1945 everything returned to normal. Our friends from the other two Schools went back to their own buildings and St. Lawrence Road became home exclusively to Plymouth High once again. New friendships were made as girls returned from evacuation at Newquay and the outpost at Durnford Street. By this time I was in Form 5A (Year 11).

We were all expected to work hard to achieve really good results in our School Certificate exams (now G.C.S.E.) at the end of the year, but it wasn't all work and no play.

There was great competition to obtain a place at the Friday evening dancing class held in the Plymouth High School gym, with sixth formers from Plymouth College. Romance blossomed – but woe betide any girl having her boyfriend waiting for her outside School at 4 o'clock!

A “Post-War Society” was formed for Sixth Formers of Plymouth High School, Plymouth College, Kelly College and Tavistock and Plympton Grammar Schools. We met socially at each others' Schools to discuss subjects of interest to us and to get to know each other. As these meetings were held in school time, they were very popular.

Out of School hours we went to see the latest films and listened to comedy shows, plays and pop music on the radio. We went to classical music concerts at the Central Hall and to see amateur dramatic societies performing Shakespeare and modern plays at the little Globe Theatre in the Royal Marine Barracks.

From 1945 work began on the re-building of the City Centre which had been destroyed by bombs during the War. By 1947 the new main road, Royal Parade, had been partly built and King George VI and Queen Elizabeth came to officially open it. I was one of a privileged group of Plymouth High School and other sixth formers who were given reserved places close to the King and Queen to watch the ceremony. We were told that we had been given pride of place because we were “the future citizens of Plymouth.”

Like all teenage girls we loved make-up and clothes and enjoyed trying out the latest hair styles. How we would love to have had the choice of clothes that girls have today! In our day, styles were plain and simple until Christian Dior brought in the “New Look” in 1947/48, which of course none of us could afford to buy.

Regarding hair styles, one hated School rule was that if a girl's hair came even ½ inch over the collar of her School blouse, it had to be tied back. If it wasn't, she was given a piece of string and made to tie it back with that, whether she liked it or not.

I spent two years in the Sixth Form (1946-48) taking subjects for Higher School Certificate (now 'A' levels). I wanted to teach and obtained a place at training

college in London. After qualifying I returned to Plymouth and taught English at Burleigh Secondary Modern until leaving to get married in 1954.

Throughout my 7 years at Plymouth High School our Headmistress was Miss Violet Turner, whom I liked and admired tremendously. She was tall, stately and dignified with a pleasant and ready smile. She was exceedingly proud of the School and interested in all the girls. However, she would not tolerate bad behaviour and there was serious trouble if any girl was caught breaking School rules. I suppose it would be true to say that she possessed “an iron hand in a velvet glove.”

I feel I owe a great deal to Miss Turner, the excellent teaching staff, and all my friends, for making my schooldays at Plymouth High School such happy ones.