

Norah H. Vincent (nee) Leach
1929 – 1935

In September 1929 I entered P.H.S. with feelings of excitement and a little trepidation; I suppose it is usual to have some doubts about whether one is capable of competing on a higher level. It was originally a private school under the headship of Miss M.P. Potter from 1910. She, and a Miss Dallas Edwards, a needlework mistress, lived in a cottage in the school grounds.

Our uniform consisted of a navy pleated skirt, white blouse, tie, blazer, felt hat and black stockings and shoes. The badge showed a beehive and owl, (indicating that we were to be as busy as bees and wise as owls), as well as the school crest, and the words in Latin meaning "we strive - not for school but for life".

I believe Miss Potter was well liked by her pupils and kept in touch with them in their later years but I sometimes wonder if she had the same feelings for the scholarship girls who were gradually filling the school. She was rather fussy and old fashioned in her ways and one incident stands out which concerned me. It was her custom to stand at the door of the school after a holiday and before we were allowed to enter we had to produce a signed paper to say that we hadn't been in touch with any infectious disease or at least that we were now clear. My paper stated that I had had mumps and according to my mother, who was a Red Cross Nurse, I was now free from infection. I wasn't allowed in and went home quite distressed. So my mother and I went to a medical centre and the doctor simply took her word and signed the form. So without any more ado, but with great vexation on our part, I was admitted.

A new era began in 1931 with the appointment of Miss V. Turner BA London in September, who was an excellent head mistress, firm but fair and very approachable. By this time my class was entering into our third year, in fact middle school. Looking back to September 1929, it was the start of our first year and also that of our form mistress Iris Hartland, who taught us French and was also a musician. Her classes were always friendly and interesting. We were asked to bring a small mirror so that we could see that we were shaping our mouths correctly to make the various vowel sounds. She gave us all French names as near as possible to our own Christian name. At a later date she arranged for each of us to have a French correspondent. Mine was from Lille and we each wrote in the language of the other but added a few words in our own. Gradually her French writing grew more and the English less until it eventually stopped altogether.

It was a pity, though, because it was a good way of learning a language and exchanging photos and view cards. I often wish I had looked after her correspondence but alas! It has disappeared somewhere along the way. Miss Hartland's advice to us career-wise was to keep music as a hobby because one needs to really excel or be very lucky to get anywhere in the musical world.

Other teachers I liked were Miss Davies from Wales and Miss Saville, to mention just two. The latter was a good teacher of English, language and literature, quite strict but fair and interesting. Miss Davies used a knowledge of psychology

to try and instill some scientific principles into our behaviour. Once, on a Monday morning she asked each pupil in turn, if we could say what percentage of the previous day's sermon we had remembered (assuming that we had all been to church). She also remarked that if we knew what effect our behaviour had on our associates we would be astounded. In fact she was full of bright ideas. She wrote a big T on the top corner of the blackboard and would point to it as a reminder to keep our tongues still.

There was one teacher, though Scottish and pleasant enough, quite obviously had favourites, especially curly-headed girls. One day she told me I would never pass a botany exam, and when I attained a credit in that subject and told her of my success, she merely said "What, with those awful drawings" and walked away, grinning like a Cheshire cat - not very encouraging.

At school and in the street, especially when in uniform we were expected to behave in a refined ladylike manner, walking no more than two together, no hilarity and certainly not eating out of doors. Rules were strict and if seen behaving badly we would be in trouble. The punishment for minor offences like forgetting to bring materials, books etc, or talking in class could be an order mark and three in a week would mean detention. A more serious breach of discipline would incur a conduct mark and anyone unruly or unfortunate enough to earn three of these in a year could be expelled though I didn't hear of that happening. They were quite happy days really.

The grounds were grassed with a few trees and circled by a path which was very pleasant for a stroll around at lunch time break. There were tennis courts and we also played netball and rounders in the games session. In the winter we had to walk to sites further afield to play hockey. Now the school buildings have been extended and so there is less garden space; also the former Blind Institution has been taken over for school purposes. This reminds me of the time when a daughter of the managers of this organization was a classmate of mine and in the holidays we sometimes climbed over the wall into the school grounds for a game of tennis.

At the lunch break we visited the kitchen for a cup of hot milk before venturing out of doors and some girls who travelled to school by train were given a midday meal in Miss Potter's cottage. I don't know what happened later. I always went home for lunch as I believe was usual for most of the girls who lived a short distance away.

After school activities included a music session with a visiting teacher called Tommy Martin who was a bit of a character. We all enjoyed this light-hearted time of folk singing. Later on a school choir was formed and also a school orchestra. We had regular visits from Mr Walter Weekes who gave us an illustrated talk on the next performance of the Plymouth Orchestral Society to take place in the Guildhall. He first acquainted us with the different instruments which compose an orchestra and then the descriptions of the actual pieces to be played; in this way, a number of girls were encouraged to attend these concerts each year.

The Literary and Debating Society was usually well attended and showed dedication and the development of lively minds. Subjects proposed and opposed were as follows:

1. That the social and political ideals of modern youth are impractical since they are subversive of established order'.
2. That the tendency of modern life is towards the destruction of character'.
3. That trams in Plymouth should be abolished in favor of buses'.
4. That careless pedestrians should be liable to penalties'.
5. That no cinema should remain open on Sundays'.
6. That the time has come for Tariff reform'.
7. That the youth of today lacks the spirit of adventure'.

An inter schools debate held at Devonport Secondary School:

8. That punishment under the present system of English law is detrimental to the offender, and consequently to the community'.
The motion was carried by 64 votes to 56.

Conferences Francaises with slides were held periodically at different schools to help oral communication of the language but I found the written word much easier to learn. Never-the-less the views of France encouraged our interest.

A junior branch of the League of Nations was started in 1933 and meetings were held regularly at school. It was hoped that girls would learn enough about the League to go out into the world to help bring about 'the brother-hood of man' and the reign of the Prince of Peace.

There was a thriving Girl Guide Company, 45th Plymouth, with five patrols at full strength. Many proficiency badges were obtained and camping at various sites enjoyed.

Sometimes a play was enacted or as in 1934 a school concert entertained a large audience of parents and friends with solos, recitations, both the junior and senior choirs and the newly formed orchestra including a duet on home-made bamboo pipes. The great sum of £11-13s-5d was collected toward the cost of a new piano. On one occasion each class was given the opportunity to provide an item of their own choosing. Some bright young sparks decided to appear in pyjamas and make up a band with assorted instruments. I don't remember much about the so-called musical delight they contributed but I do know that there was quite a shindi because they dared to appear in nightwear.

A most important but rather solemn occasion was Speech Day when the whole school assembled, dressed in white. January 1932 was the first one since Miss Turner's appointment and we were favoured by a visit from Viscountess Astor, who distributed the prizes. There was a short programme of entertainment by the school and of course speeches. Viscountess Astor spoke of her fight for women, to

develop their own individualities and try always to think of others rather than themselves.

The most popular of our activities was the school bazaar held annually in support of two hospital cots. Preparations started and fundraising began weeks before the day. We were certainly as busy as bees, making gifts and collecting bric-a-brac, planning games, sideshows, anything to make it the best day yet. It usually started about 11 am and continued till 7pm and was the highlight of the school year raising more than £ 100 for charity.

Swimming galas and life-saving competitions, as well as inter-school hockey matches all helped to give useful exercise; as did regular physical training sessions in a well equipped gym and also country dancing. On a wet day, after having our milk drinks we could come into the main hall and dance, but partnering each other was a bit of a turn off. So one day when we had an evening dance. We asked if we could invite the Plymouth College boys to join us but that was flatly refused.

Looking back through my 1934 magazine I was amazed to read that we had a lecture by none other than Mr Walter De La Mare on 'Character in Fiction'. It was reported that the talk was delightful, containing much quiet humour and poetic prose. His final remark was that inevitably the novelist displays his own character in his works.

There was just one school trip during my stay at PHS and that was in June 1934 when we were taken by train to London. We were then escorted by buses on a grand tour. We passed through Oxford Street, then saw the Horse Guards resplendent in their red and black uniforms on well-groomed horses. We followed the River Thames to Tower Bridge, passed Somerset House, London Bridge, and had a walk about around the Tower of London. We saw the Beefeaters and sentries wearing their bearskins and eventually reached St. Paul's Cathedral and admired the splendid architecture of Sir Christopher Wren. The highlight of the day was tea at the home of that famous politician and pioneer Lady Astor at St James' Square. Afterwards we were taken to the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey and finally on the buses and then train, first to Bridgewater where we had a meal before completing our journey to Plymouth. It was certainly a day to remember, so many wonderful things to see, all in one day.