

The Ladies' College 1939-1945

**Extracts from an
account by then
principal, Miss E.M.
Ellershaw**

"Term began in September 1939 with much increased numbers, the highest for any term since the College was opened. Many parents who had relations in Guernsey had sent their children to **the Island as a safe place**; others who had been on holiday here when war was declared had decided it was wiser to leave children here even if they themselves had to return to England; and for the days of the "phoney war" it almost seemed they were right."

"With the Summer term of 1940 the picture changed. The fall of Holland and Belgium, followed by Dunkirk, spread **anxiety** through the Channel Islands, but the word **evacuation** was not generally used until the sound of the guns in France was already heard across the sea.

Some of the girls had left Guernsey privately but the knowledge that the school would go as a unit was only made public on 19 June 1940. On that morning the heads of Guernsey schools were called to a meeting at the Education Office and told the policy of the States, that the schools should go out as bodies to England, each school in the charge of its own staff. Boats were coming and schools must **be ready to leave within twenty-four hours**. Parents who were unable or unwilling to leave could thus send their children to the mainland in the care of the school."

"From that moment **normal life was suspended.** The news was announced to the school and each girl went home with a letter to her parents asking them to state whether or not their daughter was to join the school party. In addition, she took the necessary items of clothing to be packed, as a suitcase apiece, to be carried by its owner, was all that could be taken."

"The following morning, Thursday June 20th, the College assembled. We knew the first school party had left in the middle of the night, but the day wore on and the summons did not come. Somehow Mrs Blackmore, the matron, provided lunch and tea but it was not until almost 9pm that the staff and a hundred girls went in **bright moonlight** to the harbour where the cargo boat Batavier IV, was coming in. With Elizabeth College and the two Intermediate schools, we embarked and **set out for England.**"

"The voyage was **long and uncomfortable**. The boat was crowded, with the younger children above and the seniors mainly in the hold. However, rolling ourselves in the rugs which had figured in the kit list, we curled up on the extremely dirty floor and even gained a modicum of sleep.

Daylight came and at last Weymouth was sighted; but a short distance off-shore the boat was halted and swayed backwards and forwards in a very unsettling motion. At length, a pilot boat led it through the protecting mine-field, and College disembarked to face the first of many health examinations. This one proved simple and, tagged with labels proclaiming **freedom from infection**, the girls passed on to a cinema where a meal was provided. From there buses took the schools to a station, and with Elizabeth College and the Boys' Intermediate School, we scrambled aboard a train for an **'unknown destination'**.

The College was transferred by train to Oldham in Lancashire where they stayed at the Baptist Sunday School premises:

"After breakfast on June 21st College settled into its new quarters, the large dormitory above with an equally large dining room below, as well as several smaller rooms. A time-table soon evolved with a squad of girls helping with meals, while another squad, directed by one of the staff, saw to the tidying of the rooms. At first, time was taken up by medical inspections, but after that expeditions were taken by the staff to places of interest or even to the moors surrounding the town, while very soon a certain number of lessons were introduced to give backbone to the day. These were something of an ordeal for both staff and girls as of course there were no books at all. On the second night an **air raid warning** woke us, and in coats over night things we went to shelters but luckily no bombs fell.

Meanwhile offers of help came from the **kind people** of Oldham."

This included making arrangements for those girls already entered for examinations to sit their papers; those who did scored remarkably well under the circumstances.

"As the days went by, several girls left us, fetched by parents or relatives in England, but numbers were still high and the future had to be considered.

Wonderfully kind as the people of Oldham were, they had not expected school children to be sent to them as their own school accommodation was limited, and now that Guernsey was occupied by the Germans it was obvious the stay would be long. Various plans were mooted and it was eventually determined that the two Colleges should move into Derbyshire to the village of Great Hucklow."

After the remainder of the summer in Derbyshire, the College's final wartime move took place in September 1940 with the move to Howell's School, Denbigh, Wales:

"On arriving in Denbigh a health inspection again took place and College could not show a clean bill of health as there was **quarantine** for German measles, a complaint which showed itself during the weeks in Hucklow.

Howell's School... delighted everyone by its fine buildings and large playing field and, best of all, its swimming pool. The latter proved a disappointment as, for all the five years of the war, the pool was drained lest it should prove a landmark for **German planes**.

Three large formrooms were given us, together with three music cubicles to act as staff rooms; space was allocated in the cloakroom while for morning assembly College used the lecture theatre at the same time that Howell's School was meeting in the Great Hall just opposite."

"At first a problem was created by the **quarantine**, but we were allowed to use our classrooms as long as the girls did not mix with Howell's girls in the passages and elsewhere. Hence for nearly six weeks we peered anxiously out of our doors before emerging and then dashed into the open air. Still, it was remarkable that we did keep our germs to ourselves, and also that we never again suffered from an epidemic during the war years."

Sixty-three College girls had come to Denbigh, aged from six to eighteen. At Easter 1941, with the numbers stable at about 60, there were four staff. Teaching the range of subjects to such a range of ages was challenging, but helped by the Howell's headmistress opening up their classes in art, science, games and gymnastics. College girls also started to wear the Howell's blue tunic.

Retired principal, Miss Alice Mellish, joined the College in 1941, teaching Latin and other subjects and supporting the girls and staff with her "common sense" and "sense of humour".

"Throughout the war years **work** for School Certificate was continued while those girls who took Higher Certificate often joined Howell's classes. A high standard of passes was maintained.

In **recreation** as in work Howell's School made us welcome. In our first term there, several girls were incorporated into their Christmas tableaux and College was always invited to plays, concerts and lectures. In this way we were enabled to see Medea with Sybil Thorndyke [one of the most famous actresses of the day].

More than one girl learned to spin and weave wool, some of which they had themselves helped to gather from the strands left on the thorn bushes on the hills round Denbigh."

"College itself had its own **celebrations**. From the first year a special party was held on June 20th, the anniversary of the departure from Guernsey. In 1941 this took the form of a picnic in the gardens of Castle House where the four houses (for these were kept up during the war years) produced entertainments for each other. Those who were there probably still remember Peggy Bird's appearance as Hitler!

In the summer a day was generally spent at the sea at Rhyl, and great was the excitement at bathing once more."

"Although the girls were in **billets** there were many **problems**. At times the billet added to these problems for it is not in human nature for any child to shake down happily in any household. On the whole however a solution was found and the hostesses were most generous. Clothing was another difficulty. Some girls had relatives who could help but many were entirely dependent on College. It was a great relief that the girls had been made to travel in winter **uniforms**. At least these were the sturdy tunics and strong silk blouses of pre-war days. These gave yeoman service, passing from one owner to another until they finally dropped to pieces to be replaced by the **shoddy tunics of wartime**. Summer uniform presented fewer difficulties as bales of the green check gingham were acquired and made into frocks locally. It was at this time too that College took to berets in place of the velours and panamas of peace time. Plain green blazers were obtained, but many keen workers embroidered the College badge on their own blazer pockets. Since we were sharing the buildings of another school it was felt that a standard of uniform must be kept up."

"The **years passed** and even the youngest children who had been evacuated from Guernsey were senior members of the middle school. Our only means of communication with the island was of course **Red Cross letter**, and it was a great day when a batch arrived. Once, special photographs of the school were taken and sent to Guernsey via a prisoner of war, so that parents should at least see how their children were looking. In 1944 there was still no sign of our return home."

"Then in 1945 came the turn of the tide. The **Channel Islands were liberated** and excitement grew. At last it was heard that the College party was to return on August 3rd. Term ended and everyone packed, a very different packing from five years back. Now it needed an extra railway container to take the cases of school books and the extra luggage amassed in Denbigh. Those girls who had parents in England joined them, but an excited party of thirty-one girls finally set off...on our way to London."

"That night was spent in a rest centre near Waterloo Station but the crossing was not to be made till the following night, so parties set off after breakfast next morning to see something of London. The day went quickly and before the end we were joined by seven Old Girls and also a number of unaccompanied Guernsey children who were to travel with the College. It was a party of fifty-five that finally embarked on the small vessel *Hantonia* for the final stage of the journey. Not many people slept much that night and the journey seemed long, but when daylight came we saw the reason. *Hantonia*, instead of taking the usual route, had circled the island and was sailing along the South coast of Guernsey round by St Martin's Point and so into the harbour where a crowd of parents was waiting on the jetty... So after five years **College came home.**

It came home united and very conscious of its entity as a school. Our lines had fallen in pleasant places and we had made many friends.... Now it was ready to face the task of starting again in its old home. That it was so ready and so able was due to the hard work and devotion of the staff for these years, and the courage and good sense which the girls had shown throughout."

"There was an unbelievable moment when the bus bringing us from the White Rock turned the corner to Cordier Hill, and we saw the College hung with flags to greet us, and the still more incredible moment when I stepped into my study and saw it to all intents exactly as I had left it that summer evening in 1940. The wonder grew and deepened as I explored the College. Some things had disappeared, of course, and very much was worn and battered but so much remained! And all these marvels were the work of our Bursar, Miss Lainé."

Miss Lainé kept a detailed diary during the Occupation, a copy of which is still kept in College.

From an evacuee:

Miss Ellershaw paid tribute to all who contributed to make a success out of a disaster- with one exception. We who shared the experience of the long evacuation want to pay our tribute to her. In all those five long years we leaned upon her; she shouldered the ultimate responsibility. Her administration, her courage, her steadfastness, her humanity and her care for one and all, made her the Headmistress we trusted and respected, who brought College back in good heart to our own island once more.