

Jean Douglas Remembers

For over fifty years, from the mid 1940s until 1997, Miss Jean (Virginia) Douglas was on the staff of the Junior School in Dundalk Grammar School, and can recall former pupils ranging in age from their late twenties to their late seventies.

Jean was born and brought up in Oldcastle, Co Meath, the eldest of four (she had two brothers and a sister), where her father taught in the Gilson Endowed School. After leaving secondary school, she successfully applied for a place in teacher training college. However, before she could take up her place, the college closed for a period of two years, so instead she took a kindergarten course in Dublin.

Soon after she had completed the course, a Mr Chambers, a shopkeeper in Oldcastle who was also a cousin of the then Headmaster of Dundalk Grammar School, Rev A A Hanbidge, told Jean's father that a teacher was required for the Junior School. Word was conveyed to Mr Hanbidge of Jean's interest in the position, and he arranged to meet her for an interview in the White Horse Hotel in Drogheda. She took the train from Oldcastle to Drogheda, where she was met at the station by Mr Hanbidge. She was, in her own words, "dressed to kill", complete with a new hat. On the walk to the hotel, the hat blew into the Boyne, never to be seen again. The Headmaster and Jean spoke over a meal, and she was appointed. Mr Hanbidge would be the first of four headmasters she would work with in a career in the school spanning more than half a century.

On her first day at the school, now some seventy years ago, Jean travelled by train from Oldcastle via Drogheda to Dundalk. Nobody met her in Dundalk, so she asked a railway porter for directions to the Grammar School. He directed her to a waiting donkey and cart which would soon be going to the school. She was directed to put her bags on the cart, as were a number of school pupils who had also arrived by rail. She and the pupils then followed the donkey and cart as the caretaker drove it back to the school. At the school Mr Hanbidge met her and brought her into a room (now the headmaster's study) where a woman was sitting darning socks. On the floor beside her was a large basin containing many more socks to be darned. Jean thought that this woman must be the school matron. However, by way of introduction, the Headmaster said "My wife will show you to your room".

Jean's room was one of two partitioned off from a boys' dormitory (the NE corner of what is now the Orchestra Room). The partition which separated the



staff bedrooms from the dormitory, and from each other, was no more than seven feet high, so complete privacy was not guaranteed. A red enamel basin on a stand contained water for washing, with a further supply of water in a yellow jug. Later, when she used the water she found it was red also - a young colleague and practical joker, who later became an archdeacon in the Church of England, had poured red ink into the water. The bedroom beside her was occupied by Miss Brenda McCarthy, who taught Science. As there was no heating of any description, Brenda advised Jean to wear a hat in bed.

For her first class, Jean was shown into a room (now demolished) with twenty-six pupils who had no books, copies or pencils until she arranged to get some for them. A couple of days later the Headmaster put his head around the door and said "Now, miss, you'll have drill in the ball alley". She was totally unprepared for this, but improvised as best she could.

Duty at weekends (there was weekend boarding until 1981) was difficult. On Saturdays there was prep (study) in the morning until an hour before lunch. After lunch senior pupils were allowed down town for two hours and juniors for one hour. Pupils were allowed listen to radio on Saturday evenings (there was no television until many years later). However, the strict sabbatarianism of the day meant that pupils were not allowed listen to the radio on Sundays, nor were they

permitted to play football, hockey or tennis.

On Sunday morning all pupils attended church. The staff member on duty lined up the pupils and examined their uniforms. The pupils then walked to church in twos, the so-called "crocodile", often incurring the mockery of children in the street as they passed. The Roman Catholics left the line at the Friary, the Presbyterians later branched off to their church in Jocelyn Street, and the member of staff accompanied the remainder, the majority of the boarders, to Church of Ireland service in St Nicholas' Church (the Green Church). All returned for lunch. In the afternoon, in Jean's early days in the school, the pupils attended a children's service in the meeting house off Linenhall Street. Back again to the school and, after tea, down town again to the evening service in the Green Church. Teacher and pupils alike were exhausted. Once, on a sunny summer evening, after the final return from church, the Headmaster said "It's a lovely bright evening, miss, bring them for a walk".

Jean also recalled a number of amusing incidents from her days in DGS. Once, in evening prep, Jean became aware of a very unpleasant smell - a stink bomb - but pretended not to notice. Soon a boy came up to her seeking help with his homework. When Jean had helped him, the boy said "Miss, do you not get any smell?" "Unfortunately I have no sense of smell", was Jean's reply. The boy returned to his seat, somewhat deflated.

On another occasion Alan Gray, later a school governor, then a young man who was friendly with a number of the school staff, was visiting the school. Jean was heating some beans in the kitchen, which was off limits for teaching staff, and Alan came in to talk to her. Suddenly they heard Mrs Hanbidge approaching. Jean pushed the pan of beans amongst the other saucepans so that it would not be discovered, while Alan tried to hide. Mrs Hanbidge discovered Alan, who, with eyes to the floor, said he was looking for a lost shilling. "Don't know what's happening here", was Mrs Hanbidge's comment as she left the kitchen.

The cold caused the younger staff to be inventive. During morning prayers a teacher who didn't attend would remove some coal from the headmaster's study to augment the meagre supply in the staffroom. One young man, later a dean in the Church of Ireland, used to bring turf from the shed and hide it on top of a bookcase in the staffroom. One day the Headmaster entered to find the future dean balancing on a chair taking down a sod of turf. "What are you doing, sonny?" "Getting a sod of turf, sir". "Funny place to keep it", the Head replied. "There's a whole shed of it in the yard". The fuel allowance was then increased.

Once, in the early 1970s, an advertisement had been placed for kitchen staff. Soon afterwards, one of



(Miss) Jean Douglas is pictured above (RHS) in November 1954, at a presentation to Rev A A and Mrs Hanbidge. L-R: Rev A Finnamore, Rev A A Hanbidge, Mrs Hanbidge, Miss B McCarthy, Mrs Walsh, Miss J Raeburn, Mrs McClenahan and Miss Jean Douglas.

the existing kitchen staff brought a young woman to Jean, asking her to bring the new arrival to the bedroom shared by three of the kitchen staff, which she duly did. Later, in conversation with her, Jean realised that the young woman had not been employed to work in the kitchen but was, in fact, a new member of the teaching staff. She was Miss Joyce Mullins, better known to us now as Rev Joyce Moore.

Leisure pursuits were very limited, but during her younger days Jean very much enjoyed tennis, and represented Cavan in tournaments organised by the tennis club in Dundalk.

Jean was a contemporary of two other long-serving members of staff, Maureen Magowan (later McClenahan), and Joan Raeburn, and was a frequent visitor to both homes, the Magowans at 4 The Crescent and the Raeburns at 24 Castle Road. While the meals and warmth were very welcome in the early days of post-war food and fuel shortages, Jean formed enduring friendships with both Maureen and Joan, continuing to visit their homes regularly until her retirement, and subsequently keeping in touch with both women until their deaths in 2000 and 2009. Jean and Maureen shared an interest in drama, attending any plays they could, and enjoying in particular the Maytime Festival week of drama which ran from the 1960s onwards. Jean and Maureen were also regular cinemagoers, but did not like Joan to know as they felt she would disapprove!

Counting amongst her past pupils a member of the school's teaching staff, Ms Ruth Eveson, who is one of her most recent former pupils, the Headmaster, Mr Cyril Drury, and more than half of the school's Board of Governors, Jean can feel she has done plenty to ensure the school is in good hands for the future!

Trevor Patterson, March 2015.