

# **Mrs Margaret Barker (nee Devereux)**

## **Memories of St Paul's School 1916 - 1919**

Margaret Barker (born Margaret Devereux) and her brother, Charlie, were both pupils at St Paul's School. The Devereux family had moved from London to Dorking in 1916 to escape the air raids that had begun to descend on the capital in the latter stages of the First World War.

Margaret was married twice and had no children. She became very involved in the local Girl Guide movement, and to many in Dorking she was known throughout her life as 'Brown Owl Barker'. She lived in Hampstead Road, Orchard Road and then Flint Hill.

Margaret died on 29 November 2001 and is fondly remembered still by many in Dorking.

Margaret wrote these recollections in 1979 when she visited the school to speak to some of the children.

“When the school was built it could only have had a very small playground as the Glory Woods stretched right down to the school boundary.

It could not have had much in the way of sanitation, as water had to be collected in buckets from the pump in the High Street.

St Paul's School in those days was very much in the country with the woods behind and open fields all around, with little traffic on the gravel road apart from the occasional horse and cart, and very few houses. The church was there, also the General Hospital, known then as the Infirmary and the Workhouse<sup>1</sup>. There was only one house between the school and Cotmandene and a few at the Horsham Road end.

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<sup>1</sup> By the time Margaret was writing these memories in the 1970s, the Infirmary and Workhouse buildings she mentions had become the Dorking General Hospital. Now, in 2011, only one of these buildings still stands: the original entrance block to the Workhouse is now the Asquith Day Nursery. You can still use the steps, gate and path from Horsham Road that led to this entrance block.

Each child was given a picture postcard on a Monday morning. This card was marked with two stars for each day's attendance, given in at the end of the week and a certificate given at the end of the term. Terms were longer and holidays fewer then.

When I first went to St Paul's School in 1916, the surroundings had changed very little. The rooms were separated by glass-topped screens, which were pushed back for prayers in the morning. Girls and infants entered by the left-hand gate, boys by the right. School hours were from 9am-12pm and 2-4pm and there were no school dinners. The school bell rang at 5 minutes to 9, we lined up in our respective lower playgrounds and marched in to piano music when the whistle blew.

By this time most of the trees between the school and what is now the Glory Woods entrance had been cut down and we had a farm and a large field (now your playing field) between us and the woods. This field was very private and out of bounds as it was the playing field belonging to a very high-class school for young ladies. There was also another farm halfway down Chequers Yard and as part of our war effort we used to collect acorns for the pigs.

We now had a very large, very sandy playground, divided by an iron fence. Each half had a little hillock at the school end, on which stood three pine trees. On wet days we were only allowed to play in the lower playground.

Had we been standing at the school gate, we would have looked straight across to the High Street. High Meadow and the Vicarage were the nearest buildings on our left and the Institute, then the Boys' High School, was over the field on our right.

On Ascension Days we could see the Fair quite plainly and when the snow was on the ground, our boys and the High School boys had many a snowball fight until Mr Rivett, their Headmaster, would rush out in his cap and gown, brandishing his cane and would chase them all away.

By far the most important event in our school year was the Empire Day Celebration on May 24<sup>th</sup>. I have talked to many people about this and no-one can remember this occasion falling on a wet day. We practised for a whole week beforehand. The girls lined up behind the school banner, a blue silk one with gold letters, having one pole and two long cards. It was every girl's ambition to carry the banner. We marched as far as the Vicarage garden, then wheeled round and marched up to the girls' playground, where the boys, who had been marching in the opposite direction, joined us. On the day itself, every girl wore her best dress, white if possible, a red, white and blue hair ribbon and of course, a red, white and blue buttonhole. The boys sported a wide red, white and blue ribbon fixed across a white shirt from shoulder to waist, and a

buttonhole. It was always a very hot day. We expected someone to faint and they always did!

The Headmaster, the Vicar and the school managers sat opposite us, and the Union Jack waved overhead. The piano had been wheeled outside and we sang patriotic songs such as “What is the meaning of Empire Day?” and “Flag of Britain, proudly waving.” Someone made a very long speech about his or her adventures in some part of the British Empire, everyone joined in the National Anthem and the Vicar announced that he had persuaded the Headmaster to give us the rest of the day off. We then gave three cheers for everybody and everything and all went home.

I wonder how you spend your holidays? We had no television, no radio and very little pocket money. Most of our free time was spent out of doors on the Nower or in the Glory Woods. We walked for miles. We had to. There were very few buses. We usually went about in groups. There were some very large old holly trees in the Glory Woods, which made splendid houses for the girls and camps for the boys.

During the First World War the Devils Den was full of German prisoners who were employed cutting down trees, while soldiers stood round with loaded rifles. There were many more on the Deepdene Estate opposite the Cemetery.

Once, when we were in the Glory Woods just above Glory Farm, we saw a fox dash out of the wood, across the field and onto Chart Lane, followed soon after by the Hunt, the men were in hunting pink, ladies in black and wearing silk hats, and the hounds making a terrible din. It was a most impressive sight, but we were glad the fox got away. Imagine anyone trying to hunt across the bypass today!

What is now the General Hospital<sup>2</sup> used to be much smaller and was divided into two parts, the Infirmary for the sick, and the Workhouse for the poor. People did not get all the help from the State that we do today, and those who were unfortunate enough to have no home, no work, no money and no friends were sent to the Workhouse.

It was also possible for tramps, homeless people tramping from one town to another, to spend a night there. Just by the Workhouse railings in South Terrace, there was a large, hollow oak tree. If the tramps had any money at all they had to pay a few coppers for their bed; if not, their lodging was free. So they would wrap up their pennies, hide them in the tree and collect them in the morning. All the school children knew that this happened, but not one of them ever touched it.”

MB 1979

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<sup>2</sup> Downsview Gardens now lies where the Dorking General Hospital stood at the time Mrs Barker wrote these memories.