

## To the End of the Millennium 1984 - 2000

When Mrs Joan Miller's book, 'The York Place Varndean Story', was published, Mrs Margaret Smithers had been Head Teacher for 7 years, overseeing the move to a co-educational school. When she retired, two years later, she left behind a flourishing establishment of approximately 750 students - just over half the present size. Expansion, along with fears of overcrowding and frequent building programmes, would be one of the themes running through the next 25 years, just as it had been for much of the previous century!

Her successor, Mrs Pam Bowmaker, came to Varndean in April 1986 from a Deputy Headship at a 12 form entry 11-18 co-ed comprehensive school in Hailsham. She had the distinction of being the first female Head to be appointed to a mixed comprehensive secondary in East Sussex, inheriting a school which had only been fully co-educational since 1983 (boys having finally worked their way up the year groups from 1979 onwards) . She recalls that Easter was early that year and so she arrived to snow!

She played a key role in both local and national developments. The transition from control by East Sussex to that of the new Brighton and Hove Unitary Authority saw her chairing the Head Teachers' steering committee to facilitate the change. She was the first chief moderator (for Geography) for one of the new GCSE boards (AEB) and developed many of the materials used to assess students in this subject. She also ran workshops nationwide to train teachers on how to support and assess students in the new exam.

One early change was the end to the short-lived Primary/Middle School system and the introduction of Primary and Secondary schools. For Varndean, this meant a double entry in September 1985 of both Year 2 and Year 1. Incidentally, the year group numbers changed from Years 1 - 5 to Years 7 - 11 when the National Curriculum came along.

During her Headship, Varndean gained Technology College status in 1998. She commented at the time that, "The opportunities this will open up for us are very exciting". In the same year, the school also became part of The East Brighton Action Zone (EAZ). Both of these had a major impact which continued after the millennium. We will look at both of these in more detail later.

Mrs Bowmaker's interest in Geography included leading treks to the Andes and, later, the Himalayas. This created much interest in school and led to some memorable Assemblies!

### **Expansion & buildings**

In 1991, The Local Education Authority (then East Sussex) proposed 30 extra Year 7 places at Varndean. This was partly because of a shortage of secondary places in Brighton and partly because Varndean was regularly over subscribed. Such growth could only happen in comfort if the school expanded. The result was the building of the Balfour block for Art, Design Technology and P.E., a new Music suite and the refurbishment of some existing rooms.

The LEA, knowing that the results of a 'baby boom' were about to hit the secondary stage, had planned to build a new High School on the same campus as Brighton & Hove Sixth Form College. When these plans fell through, existing local schools had to be expanded even further. In

Varndean's case, this led to a succession of projects - indeed it seemed rare at that time for the school not to include a building site. By the turn of the millennium, a further extension block, known as Friar, was being added to accommodate English and Humanities (History having operated in mobile classrooms, affectionately referred to as 'the huts', for several years). Other works created an enlarged gym, a dance studio, a drama studio, refurbished languages rooms and more maths classrooms. Furthermore, 95% of the buildings now had disabled access. However, since numbers had now risen to just over 1000, construction hadn't finished.

### **LMS & building**

School buildings are not only about new projects. The existing structure has to be maintained and refurbished. From 1991 onwards, Local Management of Schools (LMS) gave Governing bodies control of their own budget. That first year, Varndean was allocated £1,082,001 (based on pupil numbers and floor area). This sounds fine until one realises that 82% went on staff salaries, reflecting the fact that Varndean had an experienced and, therefore, more expensive staff. The residue had to cover every other demand. Buildings had to be cared for, with routine maintenance, cleaning and, sadly, repairs for vandalism. Books and equipment had to be paid for. Furthermore, the introduction of The National Curriculum increased costs further as departments prepared for these changes. Other national moves also bit into the budget. These ranged from the need to introduce better security measures after the Dunblane Massacre to a 1% cut in the school budget in 1995 because of Government limits on Council spending - sadly, not for the last time. Fortunately, the fear that the new Brighton & Hove Unitary Authority, taking over in 1997, might not honour East Sussex's pledge about new buildings proved unfounded.

The Premises Committee worked hard to cut costs by budgeting for work which would reduce long-term costs, such as replacing rotten windows with pvc, installing energy efficient gas boilers (so good they had to be turned down!) and saving water. Extra money was injected in a variety of ways. Letting the building for after school and weekend activities helped. Grants from the Parents' Association funded a minibuss and better stage equipment. Local business links were pursued, with TSB sponsoring the renovation of the library for example. The Varndean School Development Trust, a joint venture between the Governors and the Parents' Association, pledged £3000 a year for various projects - in 1993, this was 'TI for IT' meaning Technology Initiative for Information Technology to improve and add to the hardware and software of the IT department.

One thing the Governing Body was not prepared to do was to obey East Sussex's order for the cleaning staff to be dismissed and then re-employed under new, worse conditions. The Governors appealed to the Secretary of State...and won!

### **Structure of the day**

What experiences were students having within this framework of change and expansion? School began, as it had for some time, at 8.45 and ended at 3.10. Lessons were timetabled on a two week rota of 5 one hour lessons. There were two registrations, one at the start of the day and the other originally at the start of the afternoon, but later moved to the end. Lunch time was 40 minutes, just as now, but did not start until 1.20.

### **Subjects**

To write about each individual subject would take too much space. Suffice it to say that the traditional subject teachers worked hard, as they continue to do, to update their curriculum - partly from necessity, with the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1998, but also from a desire to introduce innovative teaching ideas. For example, we all know that History used to 'end' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not any more! Students began to study topics up to the end of the twentieth century such as the World Wars. Religious Studies developed from a basically Christian syllabus to one embracing multi-culturalism and social ethics. Many topics were introduced which crossed curriculum lines, such as work on the environment, relevant to many subjects including Science and Geography.

However, certain subjects were themselves innovations. The most obvious has to be the introduction of Information Technology (I.T.) or Computer Studies, as it would have originally been called. The earliest mentions come in the 1960s, when Sixth Form maths groups went to conferences about computer applications. By 1975, a Computer Club existed in school allowing third, fourth (now Years 9 & 10) and lower sixth formers to attend programming workshops during lunch on one IBM Machine. Computer Studies was soon introduced as an Upper School option, with a dedicated Computer room comprising 5 Commodore Pets and two BBC Computers! The hope, in 1983, was that "there would soon be an opportunity for Lower school pupils to attend Computer club."

A new computer room, in the Scola Block, was opened in 1989. It was refurbished 6 years later, with the help of Sphere Drake, after whom the room was named. Other updates came courtesy of the Varndean School Development Trust and the Parents' Association. Video conferencing facilities were also added, allowing an exciting link, on one occasion, to the Sarasota Marine Laboratory in Florida to see pictures from a camera within the tank housing killer whales!

Varndean's expertise in this area, led to the school applying for and receiving Technology College status in September 1998. Thus we became the first school in East Sussex to gain this accolade. The bid was led by Andy Schofield, then one of the deputy heads. £100,000 of sponsorship had to be raised! There will be more on this achievement in the second chapter.

Design Technology also made leaps forward. When Varndean was a Girls' school, only needlework and cookery were taught. The arrival of the boys ensured change as rooms for woodwork, metal work and technical drawing were required. However, the fledgling department aimed to expand into plastics, electronics, graphics and other media to produce a multi-media approach, which would allow a more academic approach than the traditional craft subjects had had. This was facilitated when the Balfour extension opened in 1993 with a dedicated technology floor. Needless to say, facilities were open to boys and girls.

Other new subjects, some of which do just predate 1984, were Business Studies (with a newly refurbished Alliance & Leicester room from 1995, including computers), Citizenship and P.S.E. (Personal and Social Education) courses.

The change from a selective to a non-selective school had many impacts which were still working their way through after 1984. One specific area was the need to address the requirements of students who found study and, sometimes (although this had existed in the grammar school as well), behaviour, difficult. In 1991, a new whole school approach to recognise and

meet all children's needs was introduced with a senior teacher appointed to oversee Learning Support and Special Needs Education.

## **Exams**

Examinations also had to be rethought. Staff had already got to grips with the Certificate of Secondary Education (C.S.E.), designed for students for whom G.C.E. was not felt suitable. This two tier system had its drawbacks, especially by separating students according to ability, causing resentment from some students and parents. The introduction of G.C.S.E. (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in 1986 solved this problem. Governors' Reports showed Varndean students consistently gaining above national average results. Indeed, on one occasion, it was named in Parliament as one of the most improved schools in England. Obviously, some years were better than others and results partly depended on comparison data used as test results from Years 6 and 9 became more widely used. The school strove constantly to raise achievement, including targeting the performance of boys, introducing a personal tutor scheme for all Year 11s, holding Easter Revision sessions and a parents' evening and, by 1999, a computer revision guide.

Varndean soon developed a reputation for being a truly inclusive school. Apart from the mentoring scheme already mentioned, a 'listening service' was also introduced to counsel students finding life hard for a variety of reasons. As a result of all these initiatives, Varndean became hugely oversubscribed

## **Reports and Parents' Meetings**

Education is a partnership between students, parents and teachers. Sometimes the parents can feel a little left out, so communication is vital and can always be improved upon.

The traditional school report was a single side of A4, with grades, exam marks and a brief comment for each subject plus an overview from the Form Teacher and, often, the Head too. Increasingly, it was felt that the limited information given to students and parents on progress (or lack of) and, crucially, on how to improve further, would be best described as 'could do better'. Varndean has therefore been at the forefront of developing more meaningful reports, a process which continues.

In the mid-90s, The Varndean News informed parents that,

"All pupils will receive a profile at the end of each school year which will, on the whole, be a positive document, setting out attainment in schoolwork, together with an assessment of personal achievement and personal qualities. Discussion and negotiation between pupils and staff will take place at various stages during the year. The final profile will contain information from previous years.

In addition, we have introduced a subject based formative profile which offers extra information to parents and gives pupils a chance to comment on their progress".

Parents were also invited to an annual evening where they could speak with their child's teachers. To help those with older children, a Careers Officer was usually present.

Parents had expressed concern that there were not enough opportunities to raise day-to-day concerns over academic, social and behavioural issues without making formal appointments. In response, a weekly 'drop-in'

surgery after school was introduced in 1996. Sadly, lack of take-up led to its demise. The introduction of the Homework Diary, with spaces for weekly signatures from parents and the form teacher provided another avenue, if not always used to the extent hoped for.

The Governors were very involved in this area. 5 Parent Governors (6 by the end of the decade) helped this along. They developed a policy document, 'Liaison with Parents and Conciliation Procedures' (a "not-very-catchy" title as they commented) for those rare times when a dispute does arise.

They also considered the best ways to consult parents of students whose behaviour was causing concern and therefore were in danger of exclusion.

## **Inspections**

If there is one thing that strikes fear into most teachers, it is an Inspection! Before 1993, the LEA Advisory Service carried out inspections. Varndean was examined in 1989 with a follow up in 1992 which congratulated the Head and Staff "on their outstanding achievements". The Governors bemoaned the fact that the report was confidential and could not therefore be shared with parents. How times have changed!

In 1993, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) was formed. Varndean learnt it was to be one of the first schools visited. The original format meant several months of preparation, with mounds of paperwork and an increasingly black cloud hanging over everyone! The Inspectors finally arrived for a week in November. Their report highlighted the "very high standard of education" provided. They also pinpointed six "Issues for Action" - Financial decisions to be made in accordance with the School Development Plan; improved staff participation in decisions; the introduction of staff appraisal; a more consistent approach to discipline; improving KS4 results and complying with the law on both RE in Year 11 and the required daily act of worship. Great strides forward were made, through an action plan, on all points except the final one. This remained a complex problem, as it was in many schools, especially the act of worship element.

Varndean's experience was used to help other schools, both locally and nationally, about to undergo the Ofsted 'experience' for the first time.

Re-inspection took place in late 1997. 14 Inspectors came to look at standards; quality of education; financial efficiency; spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, as well as how the school had progressed since the previous visit. The report commented that, "the Headteacher is highly regarded in the area".

Again, six areas for further progress were identified - curriculum reassessment; more consistency in teaching and learning; better assessment; improving underachievement; review of management structures and improving staff attendance. Well, no where's perfect! The fact remains that Varndean was rated as a "good school that could become an excellent one". It was named in the Chief Inspector's annual Report as one of the best 66 secondary schools in the country and the only one in either Brighton and Hove or East Sussex!

## **Student Participation**

Varndean has always felt it vital for students to have a say in how their school is run. This has taken many forms over the years. At the start of the 1980s, Upper and Lower School Forums, with one representative per form, met to consider issues. By the end of the decade, a whole School Council had evolved. This was seen as "an extremely important body" whose

representatives from all years advised the Head and the Governing Body. Indeed the Head (or her representative) and a Governor were nearly always present. Changes were made as a result of these meetings, for example on uniform. The Council also sent two representatives to the Surrenden Student Council, which looked at issues concerning all 5 educational establishments on the campus.

The Prefect system, reintroduced in 1978, continued throughout this time, allowing Year 11 students to take joint responsibility for running the school. They were lucky enough to have a Common Room, partly furnished by a gift from the Parent Staff association in 1995. At form level, a Form Captain and Vice-Captain were elected at the start of each term to represent their peers.

### **Community Service and Charities**

Varndean maintained its generous reputation, not only with money raised for charities in this country, but also for overseas causes. A typical year (1998) saw money raised for wheelchair basketball, the Poppy Appeal and Children in Need. Disaster appeals were always swiftly responded to. The deadly hurricanes of the same year saw a showing of the England-Romania match to raise funds. Closer to home, the Elderly People's Tea Party, funded and hosted by Year 10, remained a popular event.

The showing of the football match reflected a new departure in overseas links. In Romania, the democratic revolution in the dying days of 1989 opened the country up to Western eyes. Much of what visitors found horrified them, especially the plight of children in the notorious orphanages. Varndean raised money towards the international drive to improve these. More significantly, a link was forged with Scoala Nr 3, at Gura Humorului. An early visit from their Headteacher, Valerin Pop, led to three Varndean staff, led by Mrs Bowmaker, and students visiting Romania. In 1996, six Romanian students and their teacher came to Brighton. Their visit was paid for with donations totalling £2500 raised by the school and local businesses. Mr Pop was surprised that students were encouraged to talk to adults and to hold their own opinions! Varndean students began to write to Romanian students and ways were considered to help the school, which was short of books and resources. The Romanians generously gave the school some books on their country, a flag, two costume dolls and an icon. Later on several Romanian staff visited with their partners and were hosted by Varndean staff.

### **Uniform**

Uniform has always been a key item on the School Council agenda and regulations have to move (within reason!) with the times. In 1994, boys' ties were abolished, along with V-necked jumpers for all. Navy blue sweat shirts were introduced and were very popular. Girls still wore a blue and white striped blouse with a navy skirt, whilst boys wore a white shirt with black trousers. All had to have black shoes. Four years later and all students were now allowed to wear navy blue or white shirts with navy blue, black or charcoal trousers or skirts. Most thought it an improvement, but others felt it was too formal!

The sourcing of uniform also changed at this time. For many years, Varndean students and their parents had made the journey to Horton-Stephens, later Cobleys, in central Brighton. In 1984, this came to an end. The Parents' Association decided to set up a Uniform shop where they

hoped prices would be less than on the high street, whilst still allowing a profit to be made to help fund the association's many projects.

### **Parent Staff Association**

We have already seen that the PSA set up the uniform shop to help parents purchase affordable school clothes. This was but a small part of their contribution. Money was spent on replacing and, later, hiring, minibuses. Individual departments were helped such as in 1993, when they purchased a 'software' licence for Maths, Art materials, PE team strips, audio equipment for Languages and an electronic piano for Music. A particular focus was to improve the Hall facilities - curtaining; sound system and lighting all benefited. To do this, money had to be raised. Many methods were used, including selling refreshments at school events. The Quiz evening, however, was especially famous and enjoyed by teams of parents and staff. The compere was Alex Harrex, an ex-student who became involved as a parent, PSA Secretary, Parent Governor and, later, Finance Officer on the understanding that, 'Mrs Harrex is Right, even when she's Wrong' (not that she was very often!). They also helped organise 'Fun Days' in 1994 & 5. The latter, to celebrate the school's 111<sup>th</sup> Birthday, included the appearance of Cancara, the 'Black Horse' belonging to a certain bank.

This is not to say that everything was as successful as the PSA would have liked. At one point, there was a turnover in membership of 25%, given that the school had only four year groups. This improved when Year 7 was reintroduced to the school. But the overall feeling was that this was a flourishing organisation as the new millennium dawned.

### **The Final Year**

The school was very proud when Pam Bowmaker was awarded the O.B.E. in 1997's New Year's Honours List (issued on 31<sup>st</sup> December), for services to Education in East Sussex. She went to Buckingham Palace in February 1998 for the investiture.

The following year, she decided to move on to a new challenge. This was to oversee the setting up of The Charter School in the London Borough of Southwark as a mixed, non-selective comprehensive school following a campaign by local parents for better state provision in their area. Thus it was that Varndean entered the new millenium, not only with a new Head, but also with the school's first male Head Teacher.