

High Wych School, St Mary's Trinity Hill, Axminster

Newspaper articles (1977, 1985 & 1986) summarised by Fred Humphrey, April 2019
Appendix written by Graham Davies



At the Open Day, in July 1977, the headmaster, Mr Raymond Birkett, announced the school's success in the Common Entrance examinations and at the Devon and Exeter Music Festival.

Mr Birkett and his wife [Freda] had been in charge for 15 years, always advocating teaching methods based on "The Three R's" which had proved a constant success.

Mr Birkett also told parents about the young Indian girl the school adopted, Margaret, who had now finished her education and was to be married. The new adoption for the school would be a young Tamil speaking Indian girl, Vimala, who had lost her father.

In August 1985 Peter Allen was taking stock at the end of his first year as headmaster of High Wych School. When Mr Birkett retired the Allen and Cummins families decided to purchase the school as a joint educational and business venture, with the husbands and wives becoming the four directors. Mr Allen, previously headmaster of a school in Oxford, took charge of the educational side, while Mr Cummins was responsible for the management of the 25 acre estate.

Peter Allen's educational philosophy is based on discipline and structured learning in a calm, happy atmosphere which generates enjoyment and inspires confidence. The intake for his prep school begins as early as 3 years old (3-13), providing a solid foundation of the basic subjects, French, and scope for the wider curriculum. Children are prepared for the Common Entrance examination. School fees are £390 per term. Nursery department head, Barbara Bridel, who spent 23 years teaching at Lyme Regis Infant School before moving to High Wych, is assisted by Wendy Dixon and Ruth Greenwood.

There is very much a family spirit at the school; a situation strengthened by the headmaster's own children and the 16 weekly boarders. Various projects have already been carried out on the school campus, including the new road, new sports field, the science laboratory and improvements to the boarding facilities.

However, in October 1986 a newspaper is reporting the sale of the school (probably in excess of £250,000) at the direction of the receivers.

Bridport & Lyme Regis News, 15th July 1977 & 24th October 1986
Pullmans Weekly News, 19th February & 27th August 1985

Appendix

High Wych Preparatory School first began in a bungalow at West Hill (Westhill), Lyme Regis. The bungalow (known today as *Crook*) was owned by Miss Dorothy Wheen Silva (1878-1955). Miss Silva came to Lyme Regis in 1915 with her parents, where they bought Coram Tower. Her father, Frederic Silva (1841-1926), born in London and the son of a wealthy merchant, was a starch manufacturer. The family lived at Grove Lodge (Manor of Groves), near the village of High Wych in Hertfordshire, for about ten years before moving to Coram Tower. When her parents died in 1926, Coram Tower was sold and Miss Silva went to live at Westhill where she renamed her bungalow *High Wych*.

We can find no record of a school existing at West Hill, but from people's memories, and drawing conclusions from electoral and newspaper sources, we have confirmed its presence.

- Location of High Wych (known today as Crook) bungalow in Westhill identified, next to a former vicarage.
- Correspondence with family member, *"I've now spoken to my cousin, who says that during the war the school was tiny (six pupils?), and was actually in the bungalow that Dorothy owned on Westhill Road, next to the vicarage. And the bungalow was named 'High Wych'"* The cousin visited High Wych in 1944/45.
- The 1939 England & Wales Register records Dorothy W Silva living at High Wych, West Hill, with her sister and brother-in-law, their children and a cook. Dorothy is described as a school mistress.
- The Electoral register for 1945 records Dorothy W Silva, Ellen Roper and Gertrude M North living at High Wych. This is a very useful record as Mrs Gertrude M North, B.A. Cantab., London Teacher's Diploma, provides the link between the three locations of High Wych School, namely, West Hill, Mona House and St Mary's.
- When it went into receivership in 1986, it was reported that the school had been running for 49 years, apart from a slight break in the war. This fits in well with what we have already learnt giving a date of 1937, or possibly a little sooner, for the launching of High Wych Preparatory School.

In 1946 the school had moved to Mona House, Uplyme with Mrs North as headmistress. A former pupil at Mona House, who attended from 1946 to 1949, remembers that the school was mixed, had about 30+ pupils and catered for the 5-11 year olds. We have another insight in a letter, dated August 1948, written by 17 year old Hilary Phillips, who worked at Mona House looking after seven children who were boarders during term time. She did all their ironing, washing, got their breakfast, tea, supper, bathed them and put them to bed.

By 1950, the school had again moved, this time to the house and grounds of St Mary's, Trinity Hill. Mrs North was headmistress with Miss M O Williams, owner of the property, as principal. It was a boarding and day school catering for girls up to 12 years of age, and boys up to 8 years of age. The spacious stone built country house stood in its own grounds of about 250 acres, mostly wood and moorland. The aim of the school was to provide a thoroughly sound grounding for young children in a happy and friendly atmosphere. Sport was encouraged with a hard tennis court and netball pitch. Riding, dancing and music lessons could be arranged. Miss Williams took full charge of children with parents overseas.



Purchased in 1962, by Mr Ray and Mrs Freda Birkett, they ran the school as proprietor and joint head teachers.