

N Olwen Davies – a tribute and our memories.



Miss Davies, when she left, in 1973

APPOINTMENT OF THE NEW HEADMISTRESS

IN THE SPRING of 1965 the Governors of St. Mary's Hall appointed Miss N. Oliver Davies, M.A., as Headmistress from September 1965. Miss Davies is a graduate of Edinburgh University. Her teaching experience has been varied and has included several years at a school in New Zealand where for a time she was acting Headmistress. Before she came to St. Mary's Hall she was at Westnabirt School where she was a House Mistress and also taught Mathematics. She has the very warm and sincere good wishes of all friends of the Hall.

Her arrival, as reported in the school magazine, (complete with error)!



At her last Reunion, in 2013

If we take as our guide that St Mary's Hall admitted roughly 90 girls a year with a 'starting core' of 300, Miss Davies had over 750 names and faces of 'her girls' to 'remember'. And yet we never saw her unable to 'place' a girl or to remember something pertinent to their time at school. One of her (many) talents was that she genuinely made each of us think (then and in later years) that we were her only priority. Given her huge administrative burden, the remodelling and renovation work, which were her physical legacy, and her teaching timetable, this was a truly astonishing achievement.

The theme which runs through the many memories girls have shared is that she was unfailing in her encouragement, her treatment of us as individuals, her conviction that we could become the women we wanted to be, but that she took no nonsense! She spoke to at least one 'year' of parents at the Garden Party after their daughters had taken 'O' levels and asked them to convey to them that all-important as these results appeared then, they would soon be consigned to oblivion, superseded by 'A' levels or further/higher education but above all by LIFE. An unconventional opinion at that time, but as always a true one. She left as her physical legacy buildings renovated and restored so well that they were still in use and fit for purpose in 2009. As her true legacy she left 750 or more individuals, who remember her fondly and will miss her 'presence'. She returned often to see us and always offered us more words of support and encouragement, long after we had left our schooldays behind. We are truly blessed to have had her with us for so long. Some individual memories appear on the following pages.

Former Head-Teacher Sue Meek

She was such a marvellous lady and was so very supportive to me, too, always sending kind words of encouragement after our meetings.

May she rest in peace after a wonderful life. I'm glad she was at home and not in hospital.

Penny Harrison (Titheradge 1969-73)

I was immensely privileged to have Noddy to lean on for so long, when I became Manager of the Old Girls' Association. When I first took on the role, at the 2009 reunion she said some very kind words about my mother, who she remembered very well, and added "I always said you would make good..." followed by a very pregnant pause and "...in the end"!

In everything I have tried to do for SMHA since then I have used her either as a real guide – she was an invaluable sounding-board – or to pause and think "what would Noddy say I should do?". I am sure this will continue.

She feels as close to me today as she was last week/month/year.

One abiding memory from school – I often played the piano for prayers and one evening having failed to look the hymn up in good time I was horrified to see that the music was not what we usually sung. What to do? I lurked in the corridor and as Noddy swished along it, dared to stop her and explain my concern. The boarders and staff were left twiddling their thumbs in the hall while she with enormous patience and kindness took me into a music cell and explained how to find 'other tunes for the words'. When entering the hall she briefly apologised for her tardiness, making no reference to the reason and announced the hymn, shooting me a positively twinkling look out of the corner of her eye.

Angie Risley (Charles 1969-76)

She was a brilliant head mistress, knew us all as individuals and managed to get the best out of us. She allowed us to be who we are, let us have fun as well as work hard. A very special lady who will always be in my heart.

When my mum and dad returned from Malta they gave me the choice to go to St Swithun's which was near our home in Winchester. One of the reasons I turned it down was because of Noddy being at SMH! Irony that she then left for St S.! Another one though was because I wanted to stay with my (now lifelong) friends which I'm so glad I did.

Gilly Fifield (Synge 1958-66)

I have very fond memories of Olwen, who hadn't yet gained the nickname of Noddy when I left SMH at the end of her first year.

I remember well her first day. I was the new deputy head girl & Susan Judd, who was head girl, was not yet back from her home in Kenya.

I was asked to go to the study, & went in some trepidation at what this new head would be like. She immediately made me feel relaxed & we talked over a range of things including about what she needed from me & what I'd like to see happen in the school. She was receptive to all ideas.

Among other things I had hoped for was to have a school play as we'd had nothing but House drama competitions during my time at the school.

Later that year we put on Antigone as a school play. I played Creon - a wonderful experience & great preparation for my time to come in September 1966 at Drama School. This, thanks to her, was the start of a slow building of my confidence, setting me up for my future life.

As head of Elliott I had an interesting experience with Noddy, whose flat was at that time in a part of Elliott. One winter Sunday evening when many girls were dancing in the basement, a man was discovered outside the window when someone opened the curtains! The police were called & Noddy & I spent an hour or more driving around Kempton looking for the man!

She had a wonderful ability to understand girls' points of view, to make them feel their views mattered, to have a laugh without losing her authority. Noddy totally transformed my life at SMH, & my memories of it.

She remained interested & engaged with me until very recently due to failing health. We kept in touch by letter & in a visit to her home some years ago she was just the same. She loved her 'girls' & was always interested in any news of them.
She was a wonderful head & a remarkable lady.

Nicky Jenkins (Blackwood 1972-75)

"Noddy" meant a great deal to me. Her wise counsel at a critical time in my school career was the saving of me!

She was a wonderful Head Teacher who knew all her pupils as individuals.

Sue Scott-Gatty (Hayllar 1969-76)

I have such very fond memories of Miss Davies.

She valued spirit and individuality and was truly inspirational in that she gave you permission to be who you could be.

I remember her kindness to me and my dorm members [including Sandie Newman and Angie Charles] when the ceiling collapsed onto my bed in the dorm at St Hilary. She understood and acknowledged our shock and trauma whilst gently encouraging us to 'keep calm and carry on'. She was one of the very few teachers / staff members at SMH whom I felt recognised and valued us as individuals. Ironically, my parents chose SMH above St Swithun's as they reminded them of the headmistress at the time my eldest sister was there, then she left us to go to St Swithun's!

God rest her dear soul.

Judith Scott (Savery 1970-76)

I remember Noddy with great affection. She was so practical and no nonsense. I felt a special bond with her given that I was sent to her office on my first day of school after getting lost trying to find the physics lab in a building I had never before even visited. She seemed as stunned as I was for the reason she found me standing dutifully outside her door and I remember having a lovely conversation with her. The first of many as it transpired! I felt quite bereft when she left.

Johanna Vicat-Brown (Vicat 1969-76)

I often think one of the truest tests of what someone has meant to me is how I feel when I look at a photograph of them - I look at this photo of Noddy (top left) and feel enormous warmth towards a marvellous lady who I have often thought of throughout my life and whose face still makes me smile when I think of her.

RIP dear lady and thank you for your kindness and wisdom.

Juliet Rose (O'Hea 1961-67)

Always sad when another bit of your past disappears. May she rest in peace.

Fenella Rouse (1960-68)

Miss Davies believed in me when I was teenager at SMH. I left in 1968. She gave me whatever confidence I had and I have owed her a debt ever since. I remember her as a remarkable, insightful and kind person who gave generously of her time. She was modern and forward looking. As others will remember, she used to say: "We're not educating girls, we are educating [the] women of forty [they will become]."

Diana Markham (1969-73)

Noddy was a remarkable woman and many of us owe her a debt of gratitude.

Hilary Briegel-Jones (Briegel 1966-69)

I have very fond memories of Miss Davies as my headmistress. She had a great sense of justice coupled with a wicked sense of humour. I am comforted to read she died peacefully at home.

Annie Blake (Golding 1961-69)

I remember dear 'Noddy' well. I am glad she had a peaceful passing.
My sympathy and condolences to her family at this difficult time.

Trish Ffrench (Williams 1970-75)

Noddy was my first Headmistress and she also taught me Maths. I remember when my parents went to a parents evening she said that 'her Maths is excellent - I just wish she could draw her margins straight'! I'm so glad she died peacefully in her own home.
Praying for her family at this difficult time.

Anna Waring (Tinner 1967-77)

That's sad news indeed. For even though 'Noddy' put the fear of God into me and I spent many scared minutes standing outside her office looking at those traffic lights signs to change colour in order to be "blown up" by her she was the best headmistress, who got respect and ultimately the best out of her girls. Indeed the end of an era.

Debs Treyer-Evans (Silver, 1970-75)

She was a remarkable woman.

She was the reason my parents sent me to SMH. They were so disappointed when she left for St Swithun's just two years after my arrival.

In the short time she was there, she exerted a huge influence on me. Not just as a firm, kind and talented Maths teacher but also as a wise Headmistress.

The only time I was called to her study was when a group of us had pulled our regulation berets right down to our eyes on the bus to school. We thought we looked hilarious. Someone phoned the school to report our unseemly behaviour and we were summonsed to Noddy's study. She ordered us to fetch our berets and then to show her how we'd been wearing them on the bus. She watched us in silence. We felt very foolish as we stood there. She said nothing and then we were dismissed. Such a clever way of dealing with it. When I became a teacher many years later, I wondered whether she herself had secretly found the whole incident quite amusing.

Ann Wood (Schooling 1967-72)

I was in awe of Miss Davies when I was at school, she also was an inspiration to us all.
May she rest in peace.

Kathy Howard (1967-76)

The photo you have sent with this sad news is just how I remember her. I saw her was at one SMHA AGM (probably in the late 1990s). As I drove towards Kemp Town I said to my companion how I'd love to see Noddy. We drove up the drive to the upper terrace (this felt special as only the teachers were allowed to do this normally!) and parked alongside another car. I looked towards my left at the car and in it was Noddy! We both got out and exchanged warm greetings. At that meeting I took a group photo of Noddy, Mrs James and Mrs Leslie - a trio of heads! [The photograph is on our Alumnae website]

I remember at school Noddy was amazing, she seemed to know everyone's names. I remember the last day of term when she was leaving the school, she stood by what was known as 'the pupils' entrance' shaking hands with every pupil, saying goodbye to them by name.

Noddy was also a mathematician, and had an interesting book which had mathematical 'wonders' in it, quirky facts and figures from multiplying or dividing etc. 'this and that' number(s) with another to make the original number you first thought of type 'magic'. And she used to occasionally use her black university gown to wipe the black board so its dangly ends became covered in white chalk. Funny what things one remembers from being a child! Of course we all remember her traffic light system for entry to her office!

For me, Noddy was the headmistress of my time at St Mary's even though I also had a number of years with Mrs Leslie. It is certainly thought provoking knowing that Noddy has now departed to that heavenly school in the sky, may she rest in peace.

Mariam Verjee (1960-69)

Miss Davies had a kind heart.

Many years after leaving school I owned a hotel and restaurant business. One afternoon two ladies came in for tea. I walked past and almost fell over -it was Noddy with a friend! I went across to say hello and she looked at me and with no hesitation asked me by name how I was. It was extraordinary that after 20 years she could recall my name!

I pray for the eternal peace of her soul. My condolences to her family

Nadya Peet (Milner 1970-77)

Please pass on my condolences to her family, I remember her fondly as when I was at SMH I was a mere whippersnapper (being 9 at the time that I started) She was a truly formidable person in my eyes - I held her in really high esteem & I was really saddened when she left to go to Winchester.

I can still see her to this day along with the rounded stairs that climbed to her office.

I will light a candle for her.

Maddie Orme (Pickard, 1969-76)

"Noddy" holds a very special place indeed in my heart. We had a few very close moments, after my father died when I was only 14, she was truly amazing. She was so kind, and never talked down to me, never patronised me, only ever treated me in a very adult, unsentimental, calm way about how it must feel. Equally, when I'd been sent to see her once or twice on a bad behaviour issue, again, she would just talk to me as almost an equal and laugh, telling me to basically just get a grip, play along, and just behave how I was officially supposed to..! We shared a sense of humour. She was amazing.

Julia Dunnicliffe (Bagshaw 1969-74)

I will always remember Noddy's living Christian example of our SMH motto, "before honor humility" and have so many memories of the unique friendship which she so personally showed me.

During the years which have followed these memories have been so precious.

Bobby Milton (Rosemary Lyons 1961-67)

I was so sad to hear the news about Olwen.

I remember her approach to life when she came to SMH was like a breath of fresh air, and I thought she was a wonderful & very fair headmistress. It was sad for the school when she moved on to St Swithun's.

My husband & I visited her from time to time, & I always kept in touch with her at Christmas.

I would love to hear if there will be a memorial service for her, and will try and attend if possible.

My condolences to her niece and family -what a wonderful long life!

Georgie Golding (1968-74)

Noddy was an extraordinary woman. She was the first person (apart from my Dad), to really believe in my ability, always reminding me I could achieve and allowing me to push the boundaries, to turn a blind eye to convention and to just be myself, as long as I remained kind to others.

What a wise woman she was, a true feminist and the right person for a, hitherto, rather staid girls school.

Remembered with gratitude. RIP.

Elizabeth Eastham (Ferguson 1969-76)

Noddy was my first Headmistress. At primary school, I had had a headmaster.

For a timid 11 year old, catching the train and then bus to school 'on my own', though surrounded by pupils all going in the same direction, was a huge change. I went to SMH because I wasn't offered a place at Grammar School, despite passing my 11+. My father decided that the local comprehensive wasn't suitable, so, turning to other solutions, landed upon the school in Brighton that my mother had attended, shortly after the war.

I remember our interview with Miss Davies, she scared the living daylights out of me! Still, I turned up at SMH in the September of 1969 and proceeded to keep a low profile, never excelling at anything in particular, nor attracting attention for being the dunce or even acting up. Thus I was not a frequent member of the queue outside Miss Davies' study on the first floor just opposite the main staircase. However, I recall being asked by a member of staff to take a message to The Headmistress, so I found myself in The Queue. To this day I can remember the Adrenalin coursing through my veins, sheer blind panic - despite not being in trouble, just The Messenger. Of course, when I was actually in front of her, all the panic dissolved as she was courteous and pleasant, thanking me for the message.

When Noddy left, there were many of us very sorry to see her go and let's just say that with hindsight, she is one of the very few teachers who managed to command my enduring adult respect and consequently whom I remember favourably and with affection.

R.I.P. Noddy

And finally, from the three Old Girls who were able to represent SMHA at Miss Davies' funeral on 9th July 2020:

Mary Panter (Noble, 1967-71)

Miss Davies was so good to me and I will never forget her. She was an amazing lady and teacher. I was such a shy little girl and terribly homesick. I always stayed the first night after an exeat with her; she was really really kind! She once asked me to mend her gown which I did carefully with red cotton!!! She wasn't even cross! I am so sad that the current pandemic; family illness and bereavement, prevented me from seeing her for some time.

Susan Mitchell (James 1967-74)

Despite the difficulties she faced as the years went by Noddy was always cheerful and made me very welcome when I was lucky enough to be able to visit her.

I think the speed at which the news has travelled is a reflection of the affection we had for her. Although we probably didn't appreciate it at the time as we knew no different, we were very lucky to have her as our headmistress.

I think I can safely say that all my memories of her at school are happy ones, even if I was in trouble for something, but I also remember the sad day when she told us she would be leaving to go to St Swithun's.

As an adult it was a privilege to spend time with her. I loved listening to her stories and found out many things about my teachers! We had a splendid day out when we drove to Brighton for the unveiling of a Blue Plaque at the school gate. I felt very honoured that 'Miss Davies' was my travelling companion on such an important occasion.

Sian Spencer (Williams 1967-77)

I entered SMH just 2 weeks after my 9th birthday delighted to be at the big school although looking back what my parents were doing sending me there at such a young age I cannot now imagine.

Miss Davies at that time was seen as a very remote terrifying figure tall and imposing definitely not someone you would want to mess around with! Fortunately I was never one of those summoned to her study as I managed, just, to keep myself out of trouble! When I was 12 she had the dubious pleasure of trying to teach me Maths for one year. I have to say the experience was traumatic for both of us.

Unknown to both of us then I am not only probably dyslexic and to a certain degree innumerate but also very hard of hearing. The combination did not make for a happy experience. It was not unnoticed that Miss Davies who usually taught the first year taught the lower sixth year for one year after teaching my year!

During her remaining time she did much to encourage my love of music aided and abetted by Miss Ratner. Both of them talked my mother into letting me have piano lessons in order to increase my chances of gaining a place at Music College. I was the only day girl allowed to practice the piano at school as we did not have enough room in our small flat for one.

My best story regarding Miss Davies probably concerns my French exchange for reasons that will soon become apparent. We had known the family concerned for over ten years and their daughters had exchanged with both my much older sister and myself. They had a third child who was the same age and the parents decided I was more suited to this one. It happened that the visit coincided neatly with the final week of the summer term and my mother and I thought that it would be nice if our guest could experience a taste of an English school (as several of my class mates had already done with their exchange guests). I was therefore detailed to obtain Miss Davies's permission. I duly went into that study and asked very politely if my exchange could come for the last day of term which in those days was the morning only. "Of course Sian; what is the problem?" Positioning myself to make a quick getaway and taking a very deep breath "His name is Jean" was my reply.

For a moment she paused and looked slightly aghast. She sighed deeply saying "it is only for the final morning isn't it? Not the whole week?" "Yes Miss Davies" I replied, shaking. "Oh all right then as I have already given you my permission!" Never, before or since, have I fled out of a room so fast before she could change her mind! As a postscript Jean really enjoyed the day although he did report to my father that he thought we were all a bit mad!

Miss Davies gave me a much valued faith which has been a pillar of strength during my life. She gave me a lifelong love of learning so that even today I am teaching myself art, photography and new computer programs online. She also helped me to acquire a toughness and independence of thought together with a healthy scepticism and questioning of official policy and pronouncements which defy logic. Finally she gave me the belief that as decent human beings we should help those less fortunate than ourselves not pull up the ladder behind us and throw it away. I count myself very lucky to be considered one of her Girls.