

Back to Skule

Charlotte Reather takes fellow old girls from Cheltenham Ladies' College on a trip down memory lane



Above Mary Archer and her peers at Cheltenham Ladies' College in the 1950s. Right Lady Archer today



SINCE Cheltenham Ladies' College (CLC) first opened its doors in 1854, legions of Greenflies (named for the fetching sage-green uniforms) have gone forth into the world, not as braying Sloanes, but individuals who seek to make a difference professionally and in society. That was the vision of Miss Dorothea Beale, the principal from 1858 to 1906, a suffragist, educational reformer and founder of St Hilda's College, Oxford, whose foresight remains woven into the fabric of the school that has equipped so many women with the confidence and skills to don the robes of success.

As an old girl still sewing my own patchwork dressing gown, I am only just beginning to appreciate the gifts CLC gave me 15 years ago, notably confidence, a solid academic foundation and the determination to never give up (especially cigarettes, a habit I started in the loos of my sixth-form house, Beale).

Dr Mary Archer, Lady Archer of Weston-super-Mare, scientist and chairman of the Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, was a self-confessed goody-goody when she attended from 1956 to 1961. She says: 'I owe CLC an enormous amount. It gave me a thumping

good education and great resilience. I've always been able to cope and face up to difficult situations. CLC was very disciplinarian, which suited the post-Second World War era, but, sensibly, it moved with the times and today has a much more relaxed approach. There is closer contact between girls and parents.

'It's moved with the times, and today has a much more relaxed approach. School is a less separate experience'

Right Cheryl Gillan MP, Secretary of State for Wales. Far right Cheryl with her classmates



We used to be packed off on the train and didn't see our parents until exeat; now, there are daily emails and phonecalls home. School is a much less separate experience.'

There were several remarkable teachers during Lady Archer's time, including the poet U. A. Fanthorpe, who taught English. Lady Archer says: 'I particularly remember an elderly chemistry teacher, Miss Margaret Keay. She had a great enthusiasm for her subject and a lovely Irish accent. One day, one of the lab drawers was left open at shin level.

She walked into it and must have been in a lot of pain, because there was a large gash in her leg, but she calmly took the lesson and, at the end, went to patch it up. I really admired her for that. Years later, I read the first volume of Margaret Thatcher's autobiography, and was thrilled to discover that Miss Keay taught the Prime Minister at Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School.'

Sadly, the Iron Lady pipped the Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP, Secretary of State for Wales, to the post by becoming the first female British Prime Minister. 'My history teacher, Miss Hembury, predicted I would be the first! I was the first MP from CLC, however. Now, there are four of us: Sally Keeble and Fiona Mactaggart on the Labour benches and Amber Rudd and me on the Tory side.'

Mrs Gillan attended CLC in the 1960s. 'I've been back to "Coll" a few times to speak to the girls. It's really come on since my day. There have been huge physical changes—the main entrance building is in front of the gardens and there's a new performing-arts centre.'

One feature that sticks in every former pupil's mind is the 310ft black-and-white

Cheltenham Ladies' College; Julian Andrews/Rea Features; David Rose/Rea Features; Matthew Davidson



Nicola Horlick was known as the Bolter for constantly running away from school

Marble Corridor. 'I was always told off for running down it,' says Mrs Gillan. 'And for talking after lights out. I'd have to run round the whole of Field [vast playing fields] before school. If any book brought from home was deemed inappropriate, it was confiscated, as was coloured underwear. I was very jealous of my peer who had her pink knickers taken from her—I thought she was very racy.'

Mrs Gillan continues: 'CLC was, and still is, a very international school, with a huge mix of races and religions. I didn't know what prejudice was until I left. I learned to relate to people no matter who they were. CLC instilled a social conscience in me. There was the St Hilda's East project [CLC's permanent charity], a community centre in east London, which college supported, and we did voluntary work at local nursing homes.'

I'm suddenly reminded of Ben, who I used to visit at the Leonard Cheshire Home. He was paraplegic and had a motorised chair, so we could get to the pub and back before anyone noticed we were missing. We'd down our drinks before weaving our way back.



The 310ft Marble Corridor, where the temptation to run often proves irresistible



'I didn't know what prejudice was until I left. I learned to relate to people no matter who they were'

One old girl would have used this as an opportunity to escape. Nicola Horlick, dubbed 'Superwoman' for balancing a banking career with bringing up six children, loathed CLC: 'I was there for two years in 1973, from the age of 12,' she says. 'My house was far away, so we had

to walk miles every day. Girls can be so horrid. At weekends, we were incarcerated in our houses with nothing to do, which made the bitchiness even worse. It was a good school, with good teachers, but a good education isn't just what you learn in lessons.'

Miss Horlick complained to her parents. 'Everyone ignored me, so I ran away.' She was eventually apprehended by the police about to board a train to Liverpool. Years later, she discovered her CLC sobriquet was 'the Bolter'.

'I've been back a few times to talk to the girls. It's a changed a great deal since my era,' she adds. 'All the houses are closer to the school for a start.' And I'm pleased to report other great changes since my stretch at the 'Nam. Newly appointed principal Eve Jardine-Young tells me that green knickers and luminous see-through leotards are no longer on the uniform list and sixth formers can wear trousers. Now, that *is* progress. 🐦



Far left The author and friends sharing an exuberant moment.
Left The author today