

The Good Companions – the story of the SMHA

(transcribed from the Jubilee (50th) edition of the Newsletter – December 1948)

The widespread and helpful influence of the SMHA in the affairs of St Mary's Hall, shown most conspicuously during the temporary closing of the School, seemed to justify the choice of this moment in which to give some short account of "How it all began." In this tracing, for my own satisfaction, the history of the Association, I found it so wrapped up with the history of the Newsletter that the Jubilee number of the latter seemed the most fitting place for such an account.

The St Mary's Hall Association is the senior in age, and began life under Miss Birrell (my sister's predecessor as Headmistress or Lady Principal), who felt convinced that many Old Girls, realising the large dependence of the Hall in those days on voluntary support, would gladly contribute a small annual sum in gratitude for all that they owed to their old school. In this she was ably supported by Miss Eflie Elliott, the Founder's daughter, who herself, while already aiding the Hall in so many different ways, became a subscribing member of the new Association.

The first number of the Newsletter, under its original name of "The St Maryan," appeared early in 1897, giving the news of 1896. Its chief aim was to give Hall news to members of the Old Pupils Association, which at this stage consisted solely of members subscribing towards the funds of the Hall. A list of these subscribers appeared regularly in the annual report, but at first the only list to appear in the St Maryan was of members of the Prayer Union, a union fostered by Miss Birrell of members of the Old Pupils Association, who, with some of the Staff and a few outside friends, pledged themselves to pray regularly for those Old Girls and former mistresses who were engaged in missionary work abroad. The first list of members of the Prayer Union appeared in the 1898 St Maryan and the next years number added the names and stations of the mission workers.

Links between Old Girls and the Hall were thus already being forged, and these were strengthened by Miss Birrell's continuing, after her resignation in 1899, to keep in touch with her own former pupils who had left the school, urging them to join both the Old Pupils Association and the Prayer Union. Until her health began to fail she contributed a letter to each number of the St Maryan, addressed to all Old Girls and making the same plea.

Miss Birrell was, in 1899, succeeded as headmistress by my own sister, who early realised that if the Association was to expand and grow, it must be something more than a mere body of subscribers; it is true that all Old Girls were invited to Founders Day celebrations every autumn, but they came then as individuals only. Helpful advice was again given by Miss Eflie Elliott, and in 1900 the first Annual Meeting was called, being held in the Alliance Club, in Curzon Street.

The News Letter (the old title of the St Maryan being definitely dropped) of 1908 gives an account of this meeting, at which the necessity was urged of so re-organising the Association "that it might become a real help both to past and present pupils, as a link to join the old pupils together and as a source of support, both spiritual and practical, to the Hall."

A Committee of six was formed, with Miss Potter as president, and it was agreed that an Annual Meeting should be held in London during the Christmas holidays. The name of the Association was to be altered to "The St Mary's Hall Association", a more inclusive title now that former members of the Staff could be admitted as subscribing members.

This meeting, at which 70 members were present, thus marked the beginning of the S.M.H.A. as we now know it, though its activities and its constitution have steadily developed right up to the present time. Not all these developments can be noted here, but some may be mentioned.

The earliest Committee, for instance, had a President (the Headmistress) and an Hon. Secretary (an Old Girl), but for convenience in administration, the Hon. Treasurer was a member of the School Staff and the News Letter was sent out from the Hall.

Contrast with this the imposing list in the latest News Letter, of 20 members of Committee in addition to the President, two Vice-Presidents (former Headmistresses), and others. It was by Miss Ghey's wish, soon after she became Headmistress, that the editing of the News Letter passed into the hands of an old pupil, and this provided another link between it and the S.M.H. Association.

Both past and present pupils gained by the decision made, not long before the temporary closing of the school during the war, that the Elliott scholars should be ex officio members of the Committee, and so able to bring members closely in touch with contemporary affairs of the Hall. As a reciprocal gesture the list of names and addresses of members of the SMHA first given in the News Letter of 1904, had added to them the occupations pursued by them at the time.

The coming of the war reduced the size of the News Letter to an alarming extent, partly because of the restrictions on paper and printing, but chiefly because the Hall itself was "for the duration" of the war, not functioning as a school. News of Old Girls became its most important item, revealing the great number of those engaged in war work of many kinds.

Though reduced in size, the Newsletter still clung to life – even cheerfully – firm in the faith that the Hall's renewal would not long be delayed. And through all the crippling years of war the St Mary's Hall Association increased in strength, taking up the task of keeping alive the "Idea" of the Hall. It met the Governors' appeal for a guarantee of monetary assistance, raising funds by many ingenious methods. Reward came when the Governors reported to the Association that its efforts had made possible the re-opening of the Hall in 1946.

Recognition of the help given was also shown when, during the war, the Governors resolved that two members of the SMHA should be chosen to serve on the Governing Body of the Hall.

Now that St Mary's Hall is in vigorous life once more, and increasing steadily in numbers and enthusiasm under the leadership of Miss Robinson, this concession will do much to keep the Association in touch with school events. Once more the News Letter will aid the good work by being able to include in its pages a diary of the school year, and once more will be able (after a decent interval) to welcome new "old girls" to its growing list of members of the Hall's own Association.

H.R. Potter