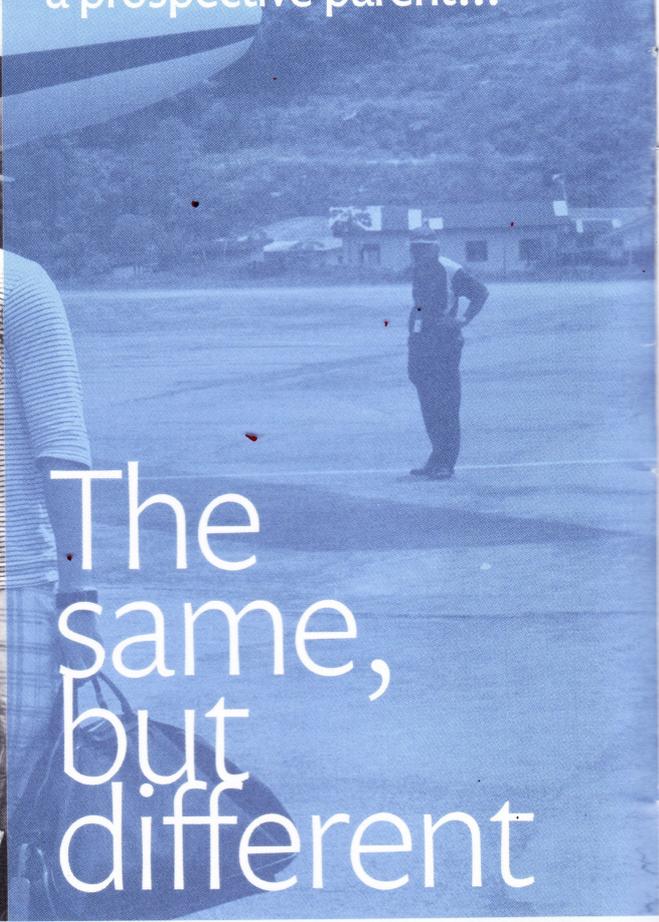




Fiona (Dougal) Hodgkins (Class of 1984) reflects on her experience of returning to Mayfield as a prospective parent...



Fiona with her family



The same, but different

Gabs, Micks, Raphs - the all familiar names, not 'official' anymore but still used - are evidence to the fact that although on the surface things have changed at Mayfield, deep down the heart of the place is the same.

I was recently on a trip to England, from Singapore where I live with my family, taking my middle son to start at boarding school in Kent. Whilst there, I took the opportunity to contact Mayfield to make enquiries for the possibility of my youngest child, a daughter aged 10, to start in Year 7 from September 2010.

I was at Mayfield from 1977 to 1984, and loved every minute of my time there (well, probably not every single minute, but my overriding memories are of being extremely happy). Despite this, I never really thought I would consider it for a child of mine. I loved boarding: the friendships, the midnight feasts, the complicity of sharing your whole world with your friends. But, as I became a mother, the thought of sending my children away to boarding school was unbearable.

I changed my mind three years ago when we left England for Dubai. Our eldest son, then aged 13, chose to stay at school in England as a boarder. It really has been a decision we have not regretted.

Now living in Singapore, we decided our second son was a different story and chose not to send him to boarding school, but a twist of events meant that we changed our minds at the very last minute. Again, early indications are that it has been another great move. So, I am now more amenable to the idea of my youngest boarding which is what took me to Mayfield for an Open Day in September.

I have been back to Mayfield a number of times since leaving - my wedding in 1987; midnight mass in the years before I had children when my parents lived in Crowborough, just a few miles from Mayfield; a couple of summers in the mid 1990s when my cousins rented Aylwins when they visited England from the US (before you wonder why they couldn't rent a normal holiday home, there are 9 of them, children that is, plus parents and a couple of boy/girl friends!); the class of 1984 10 year reunion (I think it was); the Live Crib a couple times (including my middle son being baby Jesus in 1997); and most recently to celebrate my 20th Anniversary with a picnic on the Aylwins grass tennis court on a very windy August day in 2007. But all of these were personal visits and not focused on the school so it was with a different mindset that I drove to Mayfield on that early autumnal Friday morning.

I have always loved the sight of the school approaching from the Tunbridge Wells direction and it was with exultation that I swung in through the lower gates by the astro and tennis courts. As I made my way towards the chapel, I was aware of a number of one way signs indicating that I was going the wrong way, and as I tentatively approached the tight turn under the archway, I was lucky not to meet any exiting traffic. By the time I had safely emerged outside the Chapel, I had realised that the correct way of entering the school grounds now is from the High Street. Embarrassed, I apologised to the member of staff organising parking saying that I was an old girl and hadn't realised. 'Yes, old girls always act as if they still own the place' I was told, though in a very nice way!



•Fiona with classmates Fiona (Mackenzie) Menken, Lisa (Dowling) Marple, Emma (Sharkey) Vangelatos and Claudia Timpson and most of their children in 2004

We were greeted in the Courtyard, which I think I only ventured into as a pupil on privileged occasions as a Sixth Former to show prospective parents round, though I had subsequently been invited there for sherry on a couple of occasions after midnight mass. We were then given a talk in Micks common room (Micks no longer being a boarding house) by the Headmistress, Heads of School and girls in the Lower School and here I started to realise how little things have changed in the ethos of the school. The beliefs of Cornelia Connelly were mentioned on numerous occasions by staff and pupils and it heartened me that in the 21st Century the teachings of a 19th Century nun could still be shown to be so relevant to girls of today. In fact, I was most impressed by the overall message I came away with, that even in the current economic climate, Mayfield did not need to sell itself by contorting its ideals to suit the popular mainstream, but rather, it clearly lays out what it stands for and has enough takers for this. One of the most important things it does stand for is as a strongly Catholic school, and whilst in my day most of the girls did come from Catholic families, now the school attracts as many non-Catholics. Why does it have such a wide appeal? I think, that apart from being well resourced, it is what it offers to encourage each individual to achieve her all round best, as Cornelia Connelly believed. It is no coincidence that Mayfield, although not highly selective, achieves academic results to rival those of local selective schools by offering a more personalised educational programme.

Of bricks and mortar there are changes other than Rhaps and Micks no longer being boarding houses: St Joseph's House is now the Lower School boarding house; there is a magnificent building enclosing the pool (if that had been there in my day, I would not have had to make so many excuses as to why I could not swim in the freezing water) and a most impressive music block. But there are places around the school that still look surprisingly the same – the 'new' gym (which must now be over 20 years old) where many an old girl will remember sitting exams; the Gabs cubicles (which are soon to go to be replaced by a new purpose-built Middle School boarding house); the old classrooms along the corridor by the entrance hall; the long wooden hallway leading to the dining hall and the locker room – all refreshingly familiar. And even though Aylwins House is no more, the dorms in the new Lower School boarding house still retain the old names 'St Anne's (my first dorm ever), St Joaquin, St Peter and St Paul and so on.

I think staff were a bit aghast when I said things had not changed that much, but I mean that in a most positive way – of course there have been changes, but both the ethos and the fabric of the place were just so refreshingly familiar and yet still so relevant in the 21st Century. This image of familiarity was only heightened as I was shown around the school and passed a blonde haired lady carrying a pile of books with a very recognizable gait – a History teacher from my days! She had left and subsequently returned to Mayfield – it seems that even the staff can't resist the lure of the place. But female teachers who want to work at Mayfield beware; there has been a big influx of male staff so fewer female positions! But are more males a bad thing? I think not: the only handful I can remember from my days were viewed a bit as 'different' and when a young English teacher arrived, the whole school understandably developed a crush on him! The more there are today, the more they are part and parcel of the place.

The fact that there are very few nuns around is a sadly noticeable change but simply a sign of the times. Those of us from the heydays of Sister Jean and TJ know the impact they had on our lives. Sister Jean became Headmistress in my second year, having been Deputy to Sister Anne Murphy before that, and I became particularly close to both her and TJ in the Sixth Form in my capacity first as Head of the Lower Sixth and then as Head Girl. When I first started at Mayfield, nuns were Head of each of the boarding houses and others were involved in the school in different capacities, most notably Sister Nesta as Bursar and Sister Prisca as Sacristan, but I have to say that the lay staff who have been entrusted the next generations of Mayfield girls are doing a great job in maintaining Cornelia Connelly's ideals.

So, I left the Open Day at Mayfield feeling that I would be delighted for my daughter to go to my old school. Would I expect her experiences to be the same as mine, I don't think so (can you imagine that we had bathing timetables in Aylwins for 2 bath and 3 shower slots at set times each week!) but I do think we could identify with many of the same places and definitely with the ethos of the place.

But will my daughter be going to Mayfield in September? Probably not, and here is my one greatest sadness – from days when the school was more than two thirds boarders, there are now very few full time boarders, currently with less than 20 in the Lower School. This is a sign of the times rather than any reflection on the school, but means that whilst we remain overseas expatriates, Mayfield is not the right school for my daughter, which is a great pity. It is extraordinary how things go full circle though – my parents moved to Singapore in 1975 and I did the last 2 years of my Primary education at the Tanglin Trust School here. We moved to Singapore in 2007 and not only did I get a job teaching at my old Primary school, but my daughter is doing her final 2 years of Primary Education there too – wouldn't it be neat if she could go on to Mayfield from here too?!

The Headmistress writes:

It was a pleasure to meet Fiona when she came back to Mayfield. It is important for us to hear your opinions and responses to Mayfield today.

For a period at the end of 1990s and into the first half of 2000s boarding was in a general decline. Mayfield had always relied upon its excellent reputation to attract boarders – a reputation spread by word-of-mouth – and perhaps with hindsight we could have been more active in fighting that decline. As we look forward, the governors and the school are committed to re-establishing Mayfield as one of the foremost Catholic boarding schools. We are confident in the quality of our pastoral care and the commitment of our boarding staff, which after all, must be the priority for parents sending their daughters away to school. Cornelia Connelly's philosophy of education directs our endeavours. Not only is the academic curriculum challenging and stimulating, but we have an extensive range of extra-curricular activities during the week and at weekends. Girls are involved in activities within their houses and with girls from the rest of the school. In fact, our most recent ISI and Ofsted inspections rated our pastoral care and activities as 'outstanding', acknowledging the importance of the Catholic ethos in our- and the girls' - achievements.

As part of the whole school development, of course our accommodation needs to be further upgraded, and new facilities introduced; not for their own sake, but to further improve the education and environment for our girls. [Also, it must be said, our new boarding house will mean that, outside term-time, facilities can be hired out for public benefit and increased income generated for the school!] Clearly we need to build up our numbers of boarders. In the Middle School we have a good number and Sixth Form boarding is increasingly popular, not least as it provides an excellent preparation for university. However, in the Lower School there are not as many boarders as I could like and we are actively looking to recruit more. Daughters and granddaughters of Old Cornelians are, without doubt, our priority. It goes without saying that if all those OCs who expressed interest for their daughters enrolled, we would be bursting at the seams; if you don't we won't and a self-fulfilling prophecy results. I know how much our boarders enjoy and benefit from their time here, so my challenge to you is to come and re-join our community, as a visitor or even as a parent. Share your experiences as a Mayfield girl with others so that they recognise and appreciate what a Holy Child education at Mayfield offers. Help us ensure that the traditions and opportunities you enjoyed and from which you benefited; an education which helps prepare young women to respond the needs of the age, continues to be available to future generations in the same way that it was to you.