

Margaret McConchie (née Sproat)

The following notes were based on our discussions with Margaret when she was in her late 90s



Margaret Sproat aged c.21



Margaret McConchie aged 100

Margaret Sproat was born at Lennox Plunton in 1919, and grew up there. She travelled to Borgue Primary School by Shetland pony and trap and later cycled daily to Kirkcudbright Academy. She and two of her sisters trained at the Glasgow & West of Scotland College of Domestic Science, known as the “Dough School”.

Her first job was as a cook at Dumfries Infirmary but she was delighted to be accepted for employment at Cally House School in 1939. This was close enough to cycle home to visit her parents and later, her boyfriend. She took over as cook from Mrs Cowie of Cally Gardens.

Margaret was in charge of cooking for up to 200 pupils and about 30 staff who required 3 meals a day, 7 days a week during term time and holidays. She lived in Cally House and had a cosy room, because it was above the boiler room. Working days were long, starting at 7am and she remembers being rather annoyed when some of the teaching staff complained about noise from the kitchen at that early hour. She had an assistant cook, Isabel Martin and a scullery maid Jean Shaw (from Usher Gardens in Gatehouse). Other staff that Margaret remembers fondly include Phemie MacDougall, Jano Scott and Dorothy Bunting.

The food was prepared in the Cally kitchens, which were quite dark, being partly underground. The wooden kitchen cupboards were old and occasionally rats would nest behind them and male members of staff were called on to dispose of them.

Meals for the pupils were taken by lift up to the dining room before being placed on tables for serving. Staff ate in their sitting room - the room between the Bow Lounge and the present-day Conservatory. Margaret was allowed to join the teaching staff for dinner.

Much of the food was sourced locally. The milk came from Cally Mains Farm and the meat from Cochrane's the local butcher in Gatehouse. Margaret Stobo, a music teacher, organised pupils to help grow vegetables at Cally Gardens. In the autumn, brambling was a popular activity. One year she remembers making 1000 lbs of bramble jam and 13lbs of bramble jelly and being exhausted by the process. The pupils' food rations were pooled and as a result they managed to collect enough sugar rations to make all this jam.

During the summer holidays the Cally School did not close, but sometimes pupils would return to Glasgow when the air raid danger was considered to be sufficiently low. Sometimes parents would come from Glasgow to see their children. As a result the teachers had to organize lots of activities to occupy the children. Margaret once played in a staff v. pupils hockey match and she remembers Saturday evening dances in the Bow Lounge. (The old ballroom above the bow lounge was one of the pupil's dormitories)

The staff and pupils had to be prepared for gas attacks and air raids. In preparation Margaret bought her first ever pair of trousers and a warm jumper, in case she had to quickly make herself decent in the middle of the night. One night the air raid siren went off and everyone sheltered in the tunnel behind the kitchens. The planes flew over and nothing happened but it is thought that they were heading up to Glasgow with their bombs.

Margaret left Cally House School in May 1942 and in June she married her boyfriend John McConchie from Mossyard Farm.

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