

Student Reminiscences

Follow the students' experiences of Westfield College through the unique perspective of students who attended the College between 1899 and 1964.

Anonymous student, writing in Hermes, Oct 1899

'One does not easily forget the horrors of the first night. Dinner was a hideous meal, its only redeeming feature was its astonishing brevity...'

'It was a relief to escape from the overwhelming superiority of the old students to the Mistress's room, where all the other people were as contemptibly new as myself. By the time we came out I felt I knew all about College, and that I, too, would never be late for prayers.'

'When ten o'clock came I felt very thankful to crawl to bed; partly because I was tired, but chiefly because it was very cold and my fire wouldn't light...'



The Mistress, Constance Maynard, sat at her desk, c.1897

Florence B Hoyte, student 1906-1909

'If we had a male visitor – other than a near relative – to our room we had to give notice, and one of the staff had to come to act as chaperone!...On these occasions we had to have an ENGAGED notice on our door, and sometimes this was very embarrassing!'

'...prayers were read before breakfast in the dining hall...Everyone was expected to attend Prayers, and we signed up as we came in.'

'In each of our rooms was an open fireplace, and coal was supplied, but the supply was limited. Think of the maids, lugging the coal, and clearing out so many grates every day in Winter!...Each morning we were 'called' by a maid, bringing in a jug of hot water. I remember sitting at my desk before breakfast and trying to warm my hands on the light bulb.'



Student's room, c.1910

'We had lectures all morning, of course, and in the afternoon we played games, or went to the shops, and a few people did gardening, under the eye of the Vice-Principal.'

'At the beginning of my time no young lady might go out alone! If we could not find a companion we had to ask permission from one of the staff. But soon this rule was relaxed, and on the first day of the relaxation almost every student could be seen walking down Finchley Road ALONE!'

'We all dressed for dinner, and of course we all wore long skirts the whole time. A list was put up every morning of those who were to sit at High Table that night. A member of staff sat at the head of each of the other tables – with one headed by the Housekeeper. This gave us a chance of getting to know Staff members a little...



Dining Hall, c.1906

Later in the evening another half hour was set aside for tea in our rooms. A tray was left in each of our rooms...We either had it by ourselves, or had parties in each other's rooms, each one walking along with her tray, and the hostess providing cakes.'

Gladys M Hoadley, student 1911-1914

'Perhaps the most terrible day of all was the second day of the October term, when all the old Students were arriving, hurrying into each others' rooms. What a babel of laughing and talking there was! We, solitary units, scarcely knowing each other by name, collected in little bands of twos and threes round someone's fire, and with feigned cheerfulness told anecdotes of school life, or hung pictures energetically, pretending we were not feeling homesick and very much out of things.'

Diana A Vernon, student 1913-1916

'One of the conditions some of us found hard to accept was the rule that we had to be in College by 10pm, which precluded an evening theatre or concert in London, unless you could afford a taxi the whole way back, or climbed in later from the waterworks next door.'

Hilda Green, student 1918-1921

3 Oct 1918

'Everybody spent the rest of the evening running round to see other people's rooms. Half the girls had no thought of unpacking, and those who had begun gave it up in despair. The rooms were a lovely chaos of books, pictures, curtains, clothes, jam, coffee, ginger cakes, boots, old tins, waste-paper baskets, hats, trunks, bath-salts, hockey sticks and goodness only knows what.'

11 Oct 1918

'On Sundays we are allowed half an hour extra in bed, prayers not being until 8:30 am, but as we make our own beds each Sunday, we have plenty to do in the morning before our 9 o'clock breakfast...From 10 to half past we have hymn singing in the common room, where we choose our favourites. Chapel is at eleven...Freshers had to be 'at home' during the afternoon to receive 'callers', i.e. people from other rooms...At five o'clock we went to the College Common Room for 'Function'. Everyone had to be present at Function until 5:30pm...Sunday is the only night we get supper – and what a supper – salad, jelly, trifle and coffee!'

25 Oct 1918

'...in view of the spreading influenza...The College is practically in a state of quarantine, and we are only allowed into town for special lectures, on condition that we practically soak our clothes in eucalyptus and swallow dozens of formalin pills before setting out.'

23 Feb 1919

'...After Glee Club we had dancing until half past ten. I love these dances because they are glorious to take part in and frightfully amusing to watch. The craze now is Fox-Trot and Jazz...I never saw anything in my life as ridiculous as Fox-trots to look at.'

10 Oct 1920

'Being a third year now, my duties are double; for not only are there Freshers to shepherd, but poor unhappy Finals folks to cheer upon their way and nourish with tea and buns....But Oh! Those Freshers! Fifty one of them, all exactly alike to our unaccustomed eyes, and no two appearing before us twice!'

27 Mar 1921

[Fire brigade drill] '...a realistic display with my room as the centre of operations. A beautiful fire was lit on the window-sill, and from time to time hysterical members in dressing gowns were hoisted through the windows and down drain-pipes, keeping the first aid section lively.'



Fire Drill Practise, c.1900

3 Jul 1921

'I feel that I have got College and College things right into myself and that it is all a mockery to say goodbye...Well, I am not going to sentimentalize, because I can't; I wouldn't if I could. I have enjoyed it all, and I am sorry in one way that it is over. But I am thrilled with what is to come, and in my heart of hearts I am ready to go. Besides, there is finals. What a thrill that will be!'

Alice M C Le Meseurier, student 1927-1930

‘Westfield college in the 1920s was still considerably under the influence of the gracious, albeit blue-stockinged, ladies of its earlier days. We lived, as graciously as means permitted, in an atmosphere of scholarship laced with girlish frolic, reminiscent of the pioneering days of women’s struggle for learning.’

‘...In spite of having eaten a substantial dinner at seven, we would make tea or coffee, or even cocoa, toast crumpets and consume cake, in sociable groups or solemn assemblies, entertaining a tutor or a don, or as guests of some senior to whom one paid respect and for whom, regrettably, one sometimes developed the then still-fashionable (and uncomprehended) ‘crush.’

‘Another form of fun was the Guy-Fawkes night rag, when the first year was licensed to ‘guy’ the seniors, or even greatly daring, the staff. One even made apple-pie beds, put fireworks in coal scuttles, sand in sugar basins, or chalk-and-water in milk jugs. Oddly enough it all seemed to be quite fun, but I believe it was put to a stop in the early thirties.’

Ellen E Keens, student 1938-1941

‘I remember a notice on the board which said that in the event of war we were asked to continue our studies and could best serve our country by doing so.’

‘...we were aware of the seriousness of the situation as Hitler advanced over Europe. Then in June 1940...the whole sky became dark as if there were an eclipse. Later, we were to learn that this was caused by smoke drifting across from Dunkirk and the streets

of Oxford became full of some of the wounded and dishevelled service men who had been evacuated.’

Edna Mary Jacobs, student 1939-1942

‘Of course we also had to ask our Principal in those days for permission to invite a man into our rooms for tea. We were told that this was the practice in the Oxford women’s colleges, where the beds had also to be dragged into the corridors...’



Mary Jacobs, outside St Peter’s Hall, Oxford, c.1939

‘This small circle [of girls] had dashing ideas like painting a seam down the back of their legs – stockings being in short supply. One of these was also – dare I breathe the word? ENGAGED... and Mrs. Stocks, after much deliberation, allowed her to wear her engagement ring.’

‘Most of the men students were what we called unkindly ‘Weeds’ – and we spent some time finding out what was wrong with them. During the war of course all fit men were called up... It was only when you went

in a punt...and had to do all the punting yourself that you found out the sort of weed he was.'

'Rationing was of course a trial at the time...there was one dish called 'Kipper biscuit' which speaks for itself-especially unattractive when served with cabbage...'

'...long dresses were not essential at dinner in the body of the hall, but students chosen to sit with staff at High Table (a list was posted every day in the Porter's Lodge) would still have to dress suitably. We waited with bated breath for Gillian's [Gillian Browne Wilkinson] name to appear. She said nothing but 'Well, they want me to appear in something long, do they?' On the evening in question she sailed down the Hall in a long fluffy blue dressing gown...'

'We played too, of course – especially making our own amusements (due mainly to lack of money)... Hilarious memories of...Marlowe's 'Dr Faustus'...For many weeks we saved up our silver paper from rationed chocolate to stick on armour for Helen of Troy (very difficult for the girl to move gracefully in this without shedding bits of cardboard).'

Student, 1949-1952

'When I was up no student had a car, nor can I remember one with a gramophone or record player, and many of us did not have radios...'

Student, 1961-1964

'The sixties were a period of transition in many spheres...My generation has been described as 'The Last of the Red Hot Mamas'...there's no denying we were 'the last' – the last all female undergraduate generation. In October 1964 twenty brave young men became the first male undergraduates.'

'Miss Moore and the other librarians would occasionally emerge, harassed and dusty, from heaps of books, catalogue cards, request slips and other paraphernalia. How they ever knew what was in the Library or what had been removed illicitly was a mystery – but they did, and they were fierce.'



Parker Library, Chapman Wing, 1971

'The Queen...opened the new science building in May 1962 (and...had tea with some of us, asking what she could do about her eldest son's difficulties with maths!)

'Fines were imposed on miscreants. Hardly creditable now, but 11- or 2/6 made quite a hole in ones budget then.'