



SOMPTING ABBOTTS PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Education to future-proof the magic of childhood

HISTORY OF SOMPTING ABBOTTS



Sompting Abbots Preparatory School is a West Sussex private school that has educated children since the era of George V. The school owes its existence to two families: the Rutherfords and the Sinclairs.

The school at Sompting Abbots was founded three years after the 1914-1918 Great War by the Rutherford family. It was a thriving boys' boarding school from 1921 until 1939 and the outbreak of WW1. The surrender of France in 1940 forced the school's temporary closure. The pupils were evacuated to Wales and the British Army requisitioned the house and grounds.

In 1946, the Sinclair family resurrected Sompting Abbots Preparatory School as a Sussex independent school. They purchased Sompting Abbots House from the Sompting Estate in 1976. The late Mr Nigel Sinclair, recalled the state of Sompting

Abbotts after the army had left: "It was a depressing sight. All the playing fields and lawns were an unrecognisable overgrown jungle of grass and bushes," he wrote. "The house had nearly all its windows broken." Undaunted, the Sinclairs developed a flourishing school.

Over the years, there have been many changes. The school became co-educational in 1998. It ceased to take boarders in 2008. The school has had six headmasters John Hammond, George Rutherford, Nigel Sinclair, Richard Johnson and Timothy Sinclair. The current head is Stuart Douch.

Today, Sompting Abbots is a successful day school for girls and boys aged 2 – 13. It has been run by the Sinclair family for three generations. Patricia Sinclair serves as Principal, her son David Sinclair as Bursar and daughter Ruth Sinclair as Director.



A ROYAL SLEEPOVER

Did you know that the Princess of Wales, Caroline of Brunswick, wife of King George IV, stayed at Sompting Abbots in 1814?

Her visit followed a scandalous stay in Worthing when the Princess and Prince of Wales were unhappily married. There being no suitable stately home at Worthing, she chose Sompting Abbots at which to overnigh.

The Princess disembarked the next day from Lancing for France. She returned in 1821 for her husband's coronation to demand her place as Queen Consort.

A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

The Grade II-listed house in which Sompting Abbots Preparatory School is housed is Neo-Gothic style. It was originally known as Sompting Manor (pictured here circa 1814). It has been the site of one of Sompting's manor houses since Norman times.

Sompting Abbots, and the surrounding estate, have been continuously settled since the Neolithic era. Where children now play in the grounds, Romans once marched. The Chichester-Brighton Roman road runs through the school parkland.

The Sompting Abbots manor was owned in the middle ages by the Abbey of Fecamp in France. After Henry VIII's Dissolution of the monasteries, Sompting Abbots was granted to Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. By 1830, the manor and its 1,500 acres had descended to Reverend P.G. Croft. In the early-18th century, Sompting Abbots would have looked very different to today. Then it was a large manor house with a symmetrical south front of five bays.





RETINUE OF STAFF

H. P. Crofts (d. 1890) was succeeded by his eldest daughter Blanche (d. 1927) who in 1879 had married S. B. Tristram (d. 1919). In 1923 Mrs Tristram released her interest to her son Major Guy Tristram, (grandfather of Mike Tristram, current Managing Trustee of the Sompting Estate), who retained it until his death in 1963.

Do you recognise below the immense entrance doors to the school? They've changed little since 1856. This picture, thought to date from 1913, shows some of the 20+ household staff. They included estate manager, butler, housemaids, head cook, houseboy, coachman, groom, stableboy, groundsman and gamekeeper. Like most manor houses of the time, Sompting Abbots had an extensive staff.

THE ARCHITECT

In 1855, Sompting Abbots' owners, the Croft family, decided to update and transform the building into a residence altogether more spectacular. Henry Croft was influenced by the fashionable Neo-Gothic movement. He commissioned the celebrated architect Phillip Charles Hardwick to create his sumptuous home.

Hardwick was the leading architect of grandiose banking offices, including Drummond's in Trafalgar Square. His best-known work was the Great Hall of Euston railway station. Hardwick's creation for Sompting Abbots was completed in 1856. It featured steep slate roofs, casement lancet windows, stone mullions, spikey spires, octagonal towers, secret spiral staircases and a castellated parapet.

For the children at Sompting Abbots Preparatory School, today, the architectural terms have little significance. For them, their lofty school building simply inspires their imaginations and makes them dream. Of Hogwarts, the Disney Castle and Sleeping Beauty's palace...



A TALE OF TWO FAMILIES

- Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School owes its existence today to two families and their descendants. Those families were the Rutherfords and the Sinclairs.
- Two generations of the Rutherfords ran the school from 1921 until the mid 1940s.
- Three generations of the Sinclairs have run the school since 1946 to present-day.



Staff and pupils of Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School, 2017

We're lucky enough today to be able to time-travel into the past through the memoirs of three key figures in the school's history. These writers span decades in time, but with each, there's a common theme: each has played their part in instilling the unique ethos within Sompting Abbotts' special environment as a small family-run school.

So let's begin our journey with Mr George Rutherford, son to Mr A.C. Rutherford, the school's original founder.

It was against the backdrop the Depression of the 1930s, provoked by the 1929 Wall Street Crash, that Mr A.C. Rutherford established his successful boys' boarding school at Sompting Abbotts. He did this with the help of his wife and daughter, and especially his son, George Rutherford. George would be forced to leave the teaching profession with the outbreak of World War 2 but would later re-join the school under the Sinclairs.

Here, in his own words, is George Rutherford's story: "It was in 1921 that Sompting Abbotts School was established. My father moved from Bognor Regis to Sompting Abbotts. The numbers increased to around 40 which became the average number. This may seem to be a very small school, but this was fairly normal of those days.

"Sompting Abbotts was self-contained and isolated, there was not an A27 then. The cellars then contained a dairy, laundry and wine cellar. The grounds were in fine condition. Labour was plentiful and comparatively cheap. There were three men and a horse to look after them. The horse, Kitty, pulled the large mowing machine but her main duty was to pump the water up from the well under the gym up to the tank in the tower, she did this by walking round and round, for several hours every morning causing water to be siphoned up. Later, this was done by a petrol engine which also supplied the electricity.

SOMPTING ABBOTTS,

NEAR WORTHING.

Principal : A. C. RUTHERFORD, B.A.

THE Principal prepares boys between the ages of six and fifteen for Scholarship and Entrance Examinations at the Public Schools and for the Royal Navy.

Sompting Abbotts stands in its own grounds and parklands of twenty-four acres, commanding magnificent views over the English Channel and along the coast line. In the grounds are playing fields for Cricket and Football, with Tennis Lawn, Kitchen and Pleasure Gardens.

The main classrooms and dormitories all face South.

The curriculum is based on the requirements of the Public Schools.

Gymnasium and Boxing Classes are held during the Winter Terms.

There is good Sea Bathing during the Summer months.

Arrangements can be made for pupils whose parents are abroad.

Listing for Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School in *The Schools of England, Wales and Scotland* (1931). This annual directory was much relied upon by parents at the time. It was published by Ed. J Burrow & Company Ltd, Imperial House, 30 Regent St, London, and cost 3/6 (three and half shillings to buy).

The grounds were much the same: there was the rose garden, the herbaceous border below it and the walled garden. The walled garden contained a great number of fruit trees and vegetables. There were peaches, plums, pears, apples, figs and strawberries. There were sufficient vegetables and fruit to supply the whole school.

The playing fields were differently arranged. The field below the house was a park with horses or cattle from the Phillip's farm grazing. Cricket and soccer matches were played on the present soccer pitch. Rugby was played on a pitch above, now known as the Horse Field.

The present gym block used to be the stables. There was the coach house with its huge doors and above it, where the science laboratory now is, was the coachman's lodging. The gym and other room were all bricked floored stables. These my father, with some help from myself when home for my holidays, stripped and eventually we had a gymnasium, classroom, carpenter's shop and model railway.

The house itself has not altered greatly. The present library was my mother's drawing room. There were no classrooms upstairs.

With the family, larger resident staff, boys and three resident maids, all possible rooms were needed. The Lodge was occupied by a married couple; the wife was cook and the husband butler.

The school was very much a family affair, with my mother running the domestic affairs and overseeing the garden. My sister helped in many ways. I joined the school in 1930 after three years at Oxford and three years teaching in other preparatory schools. The outside classrooms were built in 1932.

The school carried on as most preparatory schools: scholarships, Common Entrance, matches, church on Sunday with my father reading the lessons. Even talks of secret tunnels and monkish ghosts!

Then came the war. We stayed on for some time and even received boys from another prep school evacuated from Kent.



Tea party at Sompting Abbotts. Photo shows Mr George Rutherford, Sompting Abbotts headmaster, sitting on the left. Undated photo from the 1930s. Courtesy: Lancing & Sompting Pastfinders

Under instructions from the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions), we prepared our cellars for a retreat during air raids. We filled all cracks with sodden newspaper to keep out gas in case gas bombs were dropped.

On the surrender of France, we decided to evacuate. We set out for Wales in two furniture vans, a coach and two cars for Cabalva, a large house on the River Wye, just over the Welsh border.

I later joined the RAF and was posted to India. Shortly after arrival, I received the sad news that my father had died from a heart attack. He was 72. My mother and sister with the rest of the boys joined up with a school in Malvern. This was the end of the first Sompting Abbotts School.

It was after the war, when I was teaching at Northcliffe House School in Bognor Regis, that Mrs Millie Sinclair offered me the post of Headmaster at Sompting Abbotts. This, I happily accepted and was delighted once again to be back in the house and grounds which I had enjoyed for so much of my life."

Enter the Sinclairs, the family behind the revival of Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School. They relaunched the school in 1946 in post-WWII Britain.

These were difficult times. The country had been bankrupted and there was high unemployment. Families had been torn apart and rationing was to continue until 1954. Many positive changes were afoot, however, including the introduction of the welfare state and the National Health Service (1948), and division of the previous rigid class structure.

These are the memories, put to paper in 1974, of the late Nigel Sinclair:

"Sompting Abbotts School, (the second), was born in about 1946. It was started in a small way by my parents in a house called Southdown Lodge in Offington Lane, Worthing. This was a large house with a big lawn, gardens and a paddock. That main house was later to be divided into two separate houses by developers and a house was built on the paddock.



This picture shows the male staff at Sompting Abbotts in 1913. No details of those pictured remain but there's a good possibility that one of the men pictured here was the faithful old gardener Mr Kennard about whom Mr Sinclair writes.

For the first few terms of the new Sompting Abbotts School, we had an acting Headmaster called Nicholson, who was eventually to become Second Master when Mr Hammond was ready to take over as permanent Head. Both masters had been teaching at my elder brother's public school, which was St John's School, Leatherhead. My mother asked them to come to Worthing.

The school at Southdown Lodge grew rapidly. It soon became apparent that new premises were needed, particularly as we had quite a few boarders. Courtlands House in Goring and Castle Goring were two possibilities. Courtlands was eventually offered to us with an extra field on the opposite side of the road for a playing field.

The price for the entire site was around £20,000. In retrospect, it's a pity that negotiations fell through due to a lack of capital. At that time Sompting Abbotts was still partly occupied by the British [and Canadian] Army. Then, it was in such a state of dilapidation that we, at first, thought it not worth entering into negotiations. But it was a magnificent house.

I well remember our first visit to the school which was a depressing sight. All the playing fields and lawns were an unrecognisable overgrown jungle of grass and bushes. The house had nearly all its windows broken or shuttered, the basement was pitch dark and mud was a foot deep throughout. Various trenches had been dug in the grounds and tanks had been parked on the tennis lawn. In an effort to help, the army had painted most of the interior with a bright green paint, traces of which can still be seen in various places. There was no electric light and no running water except for a single tap in what is now the Staff Room.

The only part of the estate in any order was the walled garden which had been looked after by a Mr Kennard who started as a gardener at Sompting Abbotts before the Great War, in which conflict he had lost an eye. Naturally he knew a great deal of the history of the house. It was he who had been the instigator of many searches by the military for a tunnel which was supposed to run from the house to the church. He swore that he had been present when it was found and sealed off in the early century.



Sompting Abbotts House, pictured in 1951

Mr Kennard managed to arouse the enthusiasm of my brothers and cousins and we dug a hole to about six feet deep in the place he indicated. We were excited to find a brick built arch, only to be disappointed to find that the tunnel was about two feet in diameter!

Our youngest cousin was dispatched along the tunnel on the end of a rope but was not too keen to go very far as he was obliged to crawl out backwards. We eventually lost interest in the affair. I'm now fairly certain that the tunnel was part of a drainage system probably dated from Tudor times and that this was the origin of all the rumours about tunnels and smugglers and so on!

Various Canadian units were billeted in the house during the war. Even now we're often visited by men who were here in those days. Several Canadians have told me that they had a resident kangaroo here for some time. They found it wandering on the Downs and it was thought to have belonged to an Australian regiment, although they could not be traced. Eventually it drank some engine oil and unfortunately died, to be buried in the grounds with some ceremony.

We decided that Sompting Abbotts would suit our needs and we, as a family, moved in in about 1947 whilst the school was still based in Worthing. Life was very primitive for a time with no services except the single water tap and we had to rely on paraffin for lighting and cooking. Building materials were very hard to obtain then so it was a slow process to restore the house and grounds into some sort of order. Gradually, however, things improved and it became apparent that running two establishments was not sensible and eventually we were able to move the whole school to Sompting Abbotts.

Over the next few years, the premises were gradually improved. Admissions increased and the school grew steadily. After a time Mr Hammond left to become Headmaster of a school in the West Indies. My mother was fortunate enough, however, to be able to persuade George Rutherford to rejoin the school as Headmaster.

After Mr Rutherford came back to the school things went well for many years and the school prospered. About 11 years ago, however, numbers diminished and the financial position became bleak. My mother



Children playing cricket in the grounds: a scene that will have changed little for almost a century.

was tired and not well and it became obvious that something had to be done if the school was to survive. At the time I was commissioning power station boilers in Leeds and was due to go from there to the firm's head office in Peterborough.

After some thought, and in spite of some well meant family advice, my wife and I decided to join the school and came down from Leeds at the beginning of 1964. Times were hard at first with few boys and no money but fortunately things improved and the school again grew and prospered. My father had faded away in 1962 after a long illness and my mother died in 1966. It was a sad time for me. I still sometimes expect to see them when I go into their old sitting room when the school is empty. At the present time, the school is full to capacity and we have a first class staff who, I think, all share our feelings about Sompting Abbotts.

Since moving down to Sompting Abbotts, we have become more and more involved in the school, and more and more influenced by its atmosphere. This atmosphere was engendered by my parents and fostered by Mr Rutherford and the staff. It is not easy to describe clearly, it is there and is a

combination of many things, and there's no doubt that the boys themselves are responsible to a large extent. Given the freedom which was so hardly won in the 1940s, it's our intention to continue as we are for many years to come. If I can continue for as long as George Rutherford I will be thankful, but have some doubts about my abilities in this direction!

Special mention should be made of Mr. Bell, Captain King and Mrs. Moultrie, who have been with us for more years than they may care to remember! Finally, I would record our awareness of the Croft family who built Sompting Abbotts and their direct descendants, the Tristrams, who are our benign and friendly landlords."

The Continuation of The Sinclairs

Sadly, Nigel Sinclair passed away in 1995. The Sinclair family, however, was determined to continue the school which he had built up over many years. Here is the next episode of the story, in the words of the current Principal, Patricia Sinclair:

"My husband, Nigel became ill in 1984 and my son David joined the school on the



Headmaster Stuart Douch with 2018 scholarship winners and awardees to Lancing, Brighton and Winchester Colleges

administrative side, becoming Bursar. Richard Johnson, who had been a master at the school for many years, stepped in to support my husband and was a tremendous pillar of strength, becoming Headmaster in 1993 and retiring in 2005. After his retirement, he became a regular visitor to the school, sharing his wisdom and quietly offering advice.

When Richard Johnson retired, my son Timothy, who had been at Sompting Abbotts teaching History and deputising for the Headmaster, took over the role. It was a great shock to us all when he died suddenly in his late forties in October 2012. We have always had a very loyal, good staff. I can't speak too highly of the solidarity they showed in particularly difficult circumstances. It will never be forgotten.

From the tremendous response after Timothy's death, one theme was constant: the ethos of the school. After much thought David and I offered Stuart Douch, an old boy of Sompting Abbotts and Lancing College, the Headship. Stuart had been Head of English at the school since Richard

Johnson's retirement, he knew the school well and understood what it stood for, having been a boy here. We felt we made a good choice.

As I write now, although we have suffered much going through a world recession, we feel confident, that with a fair wind, the school will prosper, as there is such a buoyant feeling with the parents and staff. We remain determined that the school will continue to be independent.

At Sompting Abbotts Preparatory School, all our dedicated staff and the senior team have every intention of continuing to do what we do best: to provide children with an outstanding traditional, yet progressive, education at our special family school."



**SOMPTING ABBOTTS
PREPARATORY SCHOOL**