

Former St Helena Girls' High School, Sheffield Road, Chesterfield (now the University of Derby, Chesterfield Campus).

Some Notes on its History

The first secondary school for girls in Chesterfield was a private school run from a house called East Bank, almost opposite the St Helena building on Sheffield Road. Faced with the need to provide places under the 1902 Education Act, the county council bought up the private school and got it temporarily recognised as a public secondary school on condition that they built a new school as soon as possible. This they did on a very ambitious scale. G.H. Widdows (1886-1946) was one of the outstanding school architects of his day and this was his first major project for the county council, opened in 1911 by the Duchess of Devonshire, at a cost of £24,000, it was recognised at the time as a very fine building and this remains the view today. The site was difficult, but Widdows made good use of its steep slope.



Under the 1944 Education Act, Chesterfield Borough Council was given day-to-day control of county secondary schools in the borough (as well as complete control of primary schools as an excepted district). The borough council avoided the use of the terms 'grammar school' and 'high school' and so renamed the boys' school Chesterfield School and the girls' school St Helena. The latter name is derived from St Helen's chapel, a medieval chapel which stood near the school and was the home of the grammar school from its foundation in 1598 until about 1714, when the chapel was demolished and a new school house built (the existing former Chesterfield School buildings (now Chesterfield College West Studios) are on a slightly different site and date from 1846 and later).

By retaining two single-sex academic secondary schools in Chesterfield (there was also a smaller, third mixed school), the borough was able to offer 25 per cent of the age group places in such schools. This was far more than most local education authorities, which opted for mixed grammar schools. The two schools on Sheffield Road had about 1500 places between them in the 1950s and later; there were no mixed grammar schools of that size outside big cities. Both had very high academic standing, thanks to two outstanding headteachers. At St Helena this was Miss Brenda Clarke, who most of the former pupils attending the unveiling of the plaque will remember as their headteacher.

From the early 1960s efforts were made to destroy a system of secondary education in Chesterfield which was recognised nationally as outstanding. These efforts were eventually successful in 1991, when all the existing schools were closed and new ones opened in the same building. The nominal successor to St Helena and Chesterfield School is Brookfield School, which occupies the buildings to which the boys' school moved from Sheffield Road in 1967. An anodyne view would be that Brookfield has had a 'mixed history' since 1991.

On closure of the school the county council used it for the area education offices. In 2016 the building reopened as the University of Derby's Chesterfield campus, specialising in nursing and health education. Now the property of the university, the Grade II listed building was carefully restored and adapted, in a partnership with Frank Shaw Associates and Henry Boot Construction.



Our civic society chairman Philip Riden comments;

St Helena and Chesterfield School were important as major agents of social mobility for their pupils. They did not have catchment areas as such – they took pupils from all the dozen or so borough primary schools and a similar number of schools in the adjoining county area. This gave them an entry that was predominantly upper working class and lower middle class, with a few children from wealthier or very poor families. Both schools enabled their pupils to proceed to higher education and to successful professional careers in a way that is no longer possible in Chesterfield (unless you happen to be Catholic) or most other towns. I would say this was the most important feature of the modern history of St Helena.

A shortened and edited version of GH Widdows' obituary in the Derby Daily Telegraph - Monday 11 February 1946



GEORGE HENRY WIDDOWS, was architect to Derbyshire County Council for 26 years. He died at his home, 21 Parklane, Allestree, Derby on 11 February 1946. He had retired in 1936.

A native of Norwich, he came to Derby in 1898 as architectural assistant to the Borough Surveyor, and in 1904 was appointed Buildings Surveyor to the County Council. At the end of the year he was made architect to Derbyshire Education Committee and, with a reputation as a designer of modern schools, particularly secondary schools and open-air primary schools, he became a pioneer in the work of school planning.

Between 1904 and his retirement in 1936, Mr. Widdows was responsible for the erection of 60 new elementary schools in the county, and for the architectural work on 17 secondary schools the majority of them were new buildings—and extensive additions were made to others.

Mr Widdows also helped to bring up-to-date several of the county's institutions. After additions to the County Mental Hospital, Mickleover, the reception department was one of the foremost in the country, and many authorities visited the hospital to study Mr Widdows's design.

In 1910 Mr Widdows became county architect and also helped to bring up-to-date several of the county's hospitals and institutions. Just before the First World War he began pioneer experiments on under floor heating in open-air schools, and although delayed by the war, it was widely recognised as an important step forward in school design.

