

THEY'RE YOUR STORIES

At 101 years old, Beryl Newman has experienced plenty of change in her life. From war and rationing to the shortening of netball uniforms, there have been plenty of things for the Cantabrian to reflect on.

However, there is one change Beryl never thought she'd live to experience in her life. On May 1, 2019, Christchurch's Avonside Girls' High left its earthquake-damaged site in the city's red zone to relocate to a new purpose-built school 10 minutes away in North New Brighton.

As the longest-surviving old girl of the public school, Beryl was devastated to see her alma mater leave the original site.

"The Avonside site was very attractive," Beryl fondly recalls. "I used to love going up through the gates – you just felt you were entering into another world. It was just special, the school by the river."

On March 2 this year, the school's Old Girls' Association held a farewell for the site on which the eastern suburbs school had sat for exactly 100 years. As with most Old Girls' events, Beryl was there.

"It was a bit sad, really," laments Beryl, who attended the school from 1931 to 1935. "It meant a great deal to me being there. Not everybody went to secondary school and it was a struggle for my parents to get me there."

It was only eight years earlier that Beryl had attended another farewell for the school.

Following the devastating 2011 earthquake, some of the college's buildings suffered extensive damage, forcing the students and faculty to continue off-site at Burnside High School for the remainder of the year.

Affected most was the stately Main Block, a two-storey brick building containing the library, office, science labs and classrooms. Beryl recalls the first time she saw it



Beryl (far right) lunching with the girls. Top: The prefect (back row, centre) in 1935.



The country girl's parents were proud of her achievements. "In my day, not everyone went to secondary school."



"I was so impressed by the building. I'd never been in such a big building before; it was just marvellous! I went to Avonside not knowing anybody. The first day there, I went to the cloak-room and I immediately felt at home."

But the demolition of the building and subsequent shift from the original site, shared with brother school Shirley Boys' High School, clearly saddens the centenarian, who worries that Avonside will lose a part of its identity after such a rich history.

The all-girls school opened in 1919 as an eastern branch of Christchurch Girls' High School. However, in 1927, the school broke away and became a completely separate entity.

"We had great difficulty trying to impress on people that we weren't Christchurch Girls' High School – we were Avonside!" laughs Beryl. "It's retained its identity as a good high school and I think the girls are quite proud of being Avonsiders."

During her time at the school, Beryl was incredibly sporty, enjoying netball and

athletics, but also excelling academically, making her a natural choice for a prefect.

Beryl confesses that even after eight decades, some still remember just how seriously she took her role.

"In a recent meeting, one of the older old girls came up to me and said, 'I remember you, you were a prefect. You used to be at the gate catching us for coming in late,'" she giggles. "They got detention if they were late and that was what she remembered me by."

Her passion for her school years was something that clearly had an impact on Beryl, who went on to study at the Christchurch Teachers' College and became a primary school teacher.

However, as she recounts tales of her teenage school years, Beryl stops often, emphasising how it was her parents that made it all possible.

Born in 1918, Beryl was one of six children who grew up in a farming family in the suburb of Marshland.

Although most children attended primary school in

those days, Beryl explained that going on to higher education wasn't that common.

"I was a country girl and my father was a farmer, and in my day, not everyone went on to secondary school," she explains. "It wasn't the accepted thing at all, but my family insisted, even though we weren't very well off."

However, Beryl is still thankful her parents, Allan and Winifred, gave her the opportunity to go to high school, despite the daily 8km commute on her bicycle, rain or shine.

"I was thrilled to be there," says Beryl enthusiastically. "I can still feel that pride of going into school."

"To be part of a big establishment like that and the teachers just thrilled me because I hadn't had anything to do with people with such knowledge before. To find a teacher that had travelled overseas, that was something!"

Beryl smiles and adds, "My mother was very proud – so was my father – but Mother especially made quite a thing about being very pleased that I'd had this education."

Fleur Mealing



THE OLDEST OLD GIRL

*Beryl's in a
class of her own*

AVONSIDE'S A SPECIAL PLACE
TO THE CENTENARIAN