

A Brief History of The Tiffin Girls' School

The Tiffin Schools were founded in 1880 in Kingston. The name comes from brothers Thomas and John Tiffin, who were local brewers. In their wills in the 1630s they left a sum of £150 and hoped to sponsor a poorer boy through one of the local private schools. By the 1870s, their bequest had become the largest in the borough and the decision was taken to amalgamate the various charities under the title the Kingston Schools Endowment. Plans were drawn up for two new schools to be built, one for boys and one for girls, each taking 150 pupils. Work began to build a school in Fairfield and was completed at the end of 1879. The Surrey Comet advertised the opening of the school on 20 January 1880 on the Fairfield site under Tiffin Girls' first headmistress Miss Rhoda Ward Fysh.

Miss Fysh was a firm disciplinarian, greeting the girls in French and practising the whole school rising in their seats and sitting down again by means of a sheet of notepaper which she would raise and lower very slowly. Additionally, Miss Fysh did not like the pupils associating with boys, and did not allow them even to walk to school with their brothers. Miss Fysh left the school in 1887 and was replaced by Miss Elizabeth Bebbington, who was a stark contrast to Miss Fysh. She was a modern head and a forward thinker, wanting the girls to gain more than just academic skills. She set up sewing and tennis clubs, and the school library. This was in December 1890, when the school governors granted £5 for books; the equivalent of two weeks' wages for a working man. Miss Bebbington left the school in 1891 after four years to marry Mr Hoole, a clergyman.

Tiffin Girls' next headmistress was Miss Flavell, who was appointed from 72 applicants and remained in the post for the next 25 years. She balanced progress and tradition, developing a new building, taking the school through WW1 and setting up scholarships for girls to attend university. Not unlike the pupils now, the girls were also highly conscientious. In her 1898 report, Miss Flavell remarked that 'homework has been found in some cases to absorb too much time: we have instances recently that girls will take too long on their work than is necessary.' In 1899, Tiffins' Girls' School moved to its new premises on St James' Road, and the old Fairfield site was given to the boys' Tiffin School. Miss Flavell commented that the site was 'commodious and admirably suited for educational purposes.' This included the ultra-modern science lab, 10 classrooms and a large hall.

In Spring 1903, the Tiffin Old Girls' Club was founded with a constitution and membership rules; at the same time the WSPU or Suffragette organisation was set up, though the authorities feared the Tiffin Old Girls' far more. Interestingly enough, one article in the school magazine, by Agnes Williams, Head Girl in 1906, reflected on the Tiffin Girls' attitude towards women's suffrage. It said, 'in time they will have it... of course they will have votes...and they will sit in parliament too!' Also at this time, in 1910, the school's name was changed slightly from Tiffins' Girls' School to The Tiffin Girls' School, as it was recognised that the double apostrophe was somewhat problematic. A new school magazine was published annually from 1908 until 1913. Its front cover, included Tiffin Girls' first motto *Virtute ad Astra*, meaning 'With courage to the stars.'

When war broke out in 1914, the school was greatly affected. The school magazine was discontinued due to the paper shortage and cost cutting; there were food and fuel shortages; the girls would occasionally see Zeppelins [large hydrogen-filled airships] and the Old Girls' Club fundraised for the war effort. The girls would learn of the horrors of the war from their brothers, fathers and uncles. Tiffin School was more affected as old boys and masters went to fight. In total the Kingston Memorial commemorates 623 men of the borough who were killed fighting in the Great War and there is a separate memorial at Tiffin School for old boys who died.

Miss Flavell resigned in 1917, and the new head, Miss Faith Watson, set out to groom the 'thoroughly modern girl'. She introduced a new school motto '*Sapere Aude*'. She also founded a house system made

up of three houses – St Catherine's, St Ursula's and St Barbara's. In 1931, the longstanding candle lighting ceremony began. 52 candles were lit by 52 girls on a 52 inch cake. Miss Watson campaigned successfully for better facilities for the girls and on 15 September 1937, The Tiffin Girls' School moved to a new two-storey building with a quadrangle on Richmond Road, which is where The Kingston Academy now stands. It could accommodate 4-500 girls and cost a total of £42,000 to build. The school was once again affected when war broke out in 1939. The summer holidays were lengthened so that workmen could build 10 air raid shelters on site. During this time, the girls only came into school to hand in assignments. Normal lessons recommenced as soon as the shelters were complete, with no electricity and regular air raid practice. This included how to put on a gas mask and how to assemble in the nearest shelter. During the Battle of Britain in 1940, many lessons happened in the shelters. Girls would be seen carrying desks from the school to the shelters, and returning them in the evenings so that local residents could sleep in the shelters, showing their Dunkirk spirit (the evacuation also having happened in 1940).

Sadly Miss Watson was forced to resign in 1944 after a long struggle with painful arthritis. She set off almost at once for the dry, hot climate of Arizona and was succeeded by Miss Margaret Schofield. One of her first acts was the Victory Dinner once the war was over. Due to rationing, the meal consisted of 'two slices of spam, a custard tart with orange jelly and ice cream'. 'Indescribable shock' hit the school in 1947 when Miss Schofield died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage. A magnolia tree was erected from a fund in Miss Schofield's memory.

New changes resulting from the Butler Education Act of 1944 were overseen by the Miss Schofield's replacement, Miss Orford. The Act introduced free education for all, categorising the school as a grammar school with admission through selection. O-Level and A-Level qualifications were also introduced. British National events continued to affect The Tiffin Girls' School. A train was hired to take the whole school to the 1951 Festival of Britain Exhibition on the South Bank, where the girls saw the latest technological advances of the New Elizabethan Era. A two day holiday was also celebrated due to Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. Each girl was given a commemorative spoon, while Surrey County Council gave £10 to each school to commemorate the occasion in some way. Miss Orford decided on a Bible to stand on the oak lectern which stood in the assembly hall. At this time, the 'Tiffin blue' school uniform was first introduced. Girls were required to wear blue blazers and jumpers, grey skirts and blue and white blouses, not that dissimilar to today.

Miss Orford retired at Easter in 1964, and Miss Brenda Weedon took over, directing the school through much political change. The Tiffin Girls' School was one of the few schools to survive the massive drive by the Labour education policy towards more comprehensive education in the 1960s and 1970s. In January 1980, The Tiffin Girls' School celebrated its 100th birthday, and a Grand Reunion took place on Saturday 19 January, where over 2,000 cups of tea were made for the Tiffinialia exhibition. The school seized the opportunity to show and sell a variety of souvenirs, including spoons and a centenary LP record of the girls' voices.

1980 also saw the departure of Miss Weedon after 16 years; she was much loved by both staff and students. The beginning of the 1980s was uneasy for Tiffin Girls'. Miss Elizabeth Davies, the successor to Miss Weedon, was forced to retire due to ill-health, and Dr Hillary Nicolle, her deputy, was appointed as headmistress in 1982. At 37, she was the youngest headmistress this century and certainly the first to have children of her own. A period of rapid modernisation began. Under Dr Nicolle, The Tiffin Girls' School outgrew its premises for the third time. 30% of classes were being taught in temporary huts, so when the former Rivermead School building became available, plans began for the school to move 'next door'. The staff and girls appreciated the extra space including a dining hall and large assembly hall. The Sixth Form was now even allowed to sit on chairs during assembly.

In the summer of 1988, Dr Nicolle moved on and Mrs Sandra Buchanan took her position as Headmistress in January 1989. High on her list of priorities was the enhancement of the self-confidence and self-esteem of the girls. In her report of 1993 Mrs Buchanan declared “Tiffin girls are very special. Not because of their academic ability but because of other qualities that are far more endearing. They are considerate, unassuming and very supportive of one another. They are conscientious, generous and very good company. In short, they are a pleasure to teach.”

In 1994, Mrs Pauline Cox became the 11th headmistress of The Tiffin Girls’ School, and in her first year the Sunday Times and Daily Mail ranked it the top girls’ school. Mrs Cox also introduced the current house system, named after four previous headmistresses. Mrs Cox undertook many building projects, including in 1999, an all-weather pitch with flood lights, after a huge fundraising effort and a grant from ‘Sport England.’ Additionally in 1998, the ICT suite was launched, which contained computers with Windows 95 and the internet, and was opened by HRH Princess Alexandra. In 2003, an electrical fault caused a huge fire at the school. It took a crew of 60 fire-fighters five hours to put the fire out, leaving damage to 15 classrooms, and the power and heating systems of the teaching block; much school work was destroyed. The school shut early, for the first time since 1945, and while the building was being repaired, lessons took place in the hall and gym, and in temporary huts nicknamed ‘the village’. Being able to cope through this has shown how the school can overcome adversity. The result of the building works was the Holdsworth wing, named after Mrs Holdsworth, who was the chair of Governors at the time.

The school has gone from strength to strength in the 21st century. Modern facilities have been created including the new drama studio and music suite. Ms Ward became the 12th headmistress following Mrs Cox’s retirement in 2010 and reinstated, in some ways, the school’s founding principles of prioritising places to girls who live locally and those who arguably may best benefit from a grammar school education. Successful capital bids enabled new science laboratories and library facilities to be built.

In January 2016, The Tiffin Girls’ School celebrated a new milestone with the appointment of its first male headteacher, Mr Ian Keary, following the departure of Ms Ward in 2015 to become one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Education. During Mr Keary’s headship, the school’s vision was rooted in the three values of *Community*, *Love of Learning* and *Character*, which were reflected in the popular tradition of handing out weekly Headteacher Awards. The school’s intake increased to 180 and included criteria to support social mobility and the expansion from four to six houses. A digital and AI strategy was launched and vital work around Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), ensured the school remained forward-thinking and inclusive. In 2026, Ms Kilburn became the 14th Headteacher, transitioning from her former role as Senior Deputy Headteacher and also an alumni of the school.

Acknowledgements:

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The Tiffin Girls’ School archives

Notable former pupils include:

Elspeth Attwooll, former Lib Dem MP and former MEP for Scotland

Sophie Bray, Olympic gold medal winner at Rio 2016 in women’s hockey

Grace Capel, human rights barrister Garden Court Chambers

Jan Etherington, journalist, broadcaster and award-winning comedy writer

Lisa Faulkner, actress

Katie Halil, former advertiser, current illustrator, blogger, What Katie Drew

Jasmine Hemsley, co-author The Art of Eating Well and Good + Simple lifestyle cook books

Amy Hoggart, comedian, actress, tv presenter
Caroline Knight, obstetrician gold medal winner in Royal College of Obstetricians exams
Anna McNuff, adventurer, traveller, explorer, speaker
Katherine Parkinson, actress
Hannah Reid, former Captain Surrey Storm netball superleague champions, over 100 appearances
Sophy Ridge, presenter and political commentator Sophy Ridge on Sunday
Sacha Romanovitch, CEO of Grant Thornton UK, the first woman to lead a major UK accountancy firm
Zeena Shah, author, entrepreneur, business woman designing printed textiles and home accessories
Lynne Truss, author
Sarah Winckless, Olympic bronze medal winner at Athens in women's double sculls

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