



MGS memories of 11 Mount Sophia

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Founded in 1887, the Methodist Girls' School (MGS) is among the oldest and most established schools in Singapore. Today, 125 years later, it is still regarded as one of Singapore's popular and premier girls' schools. MGS occupied 11 Mount Sophia from 1928 to 1992. As this site is slated for re-development, former students and staff of the school revisited the scene for one last look, to pay tribute to their alma mater in a ceremonial send-off. Barbara Quek, a former MGS student, shares with us the history of the school and memories that left a deep imprint on many who passed through its doors.

It was a sentimental Sunday on 3 June 2012 when MGS and the Alumnae Association jointly held an Open House Day and Remembrance Ceremony to bid a final farewell to their former school site at 11 Mount Sophia.

The occasion was a bittersweet homecoming experience for the hundreds of old girls and their families who congregated in the packed hall at the basement area of the former Ellice Handy Building. Since the relocation of MGS in 1992 to 11 Blackmore Drive, succeeding

occupants of 11 Sophia included churches and other schools before it was leased to Old School (<http://www.oldschool.sg>) in 2007. This unprecedented gathering of the MGS family was prompted by the expiration of the lease for Old School at the end of June 2012. It marked the closing of a chapter in history as the site made way for redevelopment plans under the 2008 Master Plan of the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

Above: The Maypole dance, traditionally performed on Sports Day at 11 Mount Sophia. Courtesy of Methodist Girls' School.



Old desks and chairs of bygone days (1950), a set of which is housed in the Archives Room at Blackmore Drive. Source: MICA Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Memory is a way
of holding onto the
things you love,
the things you are,
the things you never
want to lose.¹

¹ From the television show, *The Wonder Years. Welcome to The Quyte Garden! Celebrating 14 years online 1998-2012*. Retrieved July 23, 2012, from <http://www.quoteagarden.com/memory.html>

² DSA-Sec is an admission exercise to allow participating schools to select some P6 students from other schools for admission to Secondary 1 based on their achievements and talents before the PSLE results are released. Source: Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2012). *Direct School Admission - Secondary (DSA-Sec)*. Retrieved August 10, 2012, from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/admissions/dsa-sec/>

³ Mok, W. Y. (1985). Looking back. *Fellowship: MGS Alumnae Association newsletter*, 6. Call no.: RSING 371.223095957 F

Remembering roots

Originally known as Bukit Seligi or Seligi Hill, Mount Sophia was also called Sophia Hill. Seligi is the nibong palm used locally in flooring and fishing stakes. One might casually assume that Mount Sophia Road was named after the school's founder Sophia Blackmore – much like the naming of Blackmore Drive. However, this affiliation of place to person is mere coincidence as the name "Mount Sophia" was in use prior to Sophia Blackmore's arrival in Singapore. The hill was, in fact, named in honour of Lady Sophia, the second wife of Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore, by Captain William Flint, Raffles' brother-in-law. "Sophia" was also the middle-name of Flint's daughter, Mary Sophia Anne.

The impending loss of the former school site, a significant historical landmark perched on a hilltop overlooking bustling Orchard Road, ignited debate across various social media. Former school sites conserved for heritage and commercial use, such as the former St Joseph Institution (SJI) at Bras Basah Road or Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) at CHIJMES, might have given some hope for a similar fate.

The school's history could be traced back to 1887 when Sophia Blackmore, an Australian missionary, came to Singapore on a personal calling to provide girls with an opportunity for education. MGS had a humble beginning as the Tamil Girls' School at a rent-free shop house at Short Street. The school began with a pioneer batch of nine Indian girls, whose busi-

nessmen fathers wanted them to be brought up as young women of worth to society. Nonya, Chinese and Eurasian girls also enrolled over time. The school relocated to Middle Road while awaiting the completion of a larger building on Short Street. Then, increased student numbers and space constraints necessitated the move to Mount Sophia where it remained until 1992. Overcrowding and new school demands eventually dictated another shift to its current campus at Blackmore Drive.

From the 1960s through to the 1990s, before the implementation of the Direct School Admission (DSA)², most MGS girls enjoyed a full 10-year stint at Mount Sophia from primary school through to secondary school. Set up as a mission school, the Christian education continues to be the hallmark of MGS. An old girl from the last batch of Senior Cambridge girls to graduate in 1941 before the Japanese Occupation remembered how she had carefully glued a "yellowed with age...cyclostyled paper"³ printed with the old pre-war school song to the last page of her old chapel book, *The Abingdon song book*. The red-covered *Hymnal for youth* (1941) was synonymous with worship service at Mount Sophia from the 1960s to the 1980s. This was replaced by a new Y-generation hymn book when the former went out of print.

Tucked away from the hustle and bustle of city streets, a tranquil hilltop haven which once overlooked Eu Tong Sen's majestic Eu Villa and the treetops of the Istana, MGS Mount Sophia was a "lovely collection of quaint old buildings, ranging from bricked bungalows and

colonial structures with high ceilings, sweeping staircases and long verandahs to 1950s style classrooms with French doors covered in green glass, and bare cement floors”.⁴

Taking its pride of place at Mount Sophia is Olson Building, the oldest in the cluster, the “only one grand dame” that is “to be retained and integrated with new developments in the future”.⁵ Named after one of the school’s former principals, Mary Olson, this “old girl”, constructed in 1928, has been earmarked for conservation. Responding to queries on why the 84-year old Olson Building was so special, URA spokesman explained that it was “selected because of conservation merits such as a high-pitched tiled roof, elegant geometric masonry corbels (stone brackets), moulded concrete lattices and concrete louvred vents – all visually interesting and suited to a tropical climate”.⁶

The story of MGS at Mount Sophia is incomplete without some tribute to Nind Home, a boarding house for girls built by the Methodist Mission, and where Sophia Blackmore had worked and stayed. In a memorable speech at the dedication service for the opening of the Ellice Handy Building, the late Mrs Ellice Handy⁷ shared that the top of Mount Sophia first belonged to Nind Home, “a happy family of nearly 100 girls, sometimes more, and we came from all races...Those were happy days when there was little pressure and plenty of leisure”.⁸ Nind Home became a part of MGS but was demolished after the war in 1947 when the structure was deemed unsafe. Built in its place was the Sophia Blackmore Memorial Hall.

With the completion of the Kenyon Building named after another principal, Carrie Kenyon, in 1933, MGS started a two-session school. Before its demolition in the late 1970s, this eight-classroom block at the foot of Mount Sophia leading down to Adis Road claimed its fair share of ghost stories – especially those of haunted toilets. The sturdy monkey bars, swings and see-saws were dearly

“I remember being told that at 12 midnight one would hear ‘noise’. Never one to believe such myths and tall stories, I would stay behind in school for campfires overnight and other events past midnight without giving it much thought. One night, I actually heard feet shuffling and desks being moved! Later I was told that the low brick wall in front of the main entrance where the MGS signage stood was the site of a grave. That really kept me on my guard each time we had Girl Guide camps! This story about ghosts and burial grounds at Mount Sophia was not without some history. The Japanese took over Nind Home and made it their Headquarters during the Occupation years. During that time, MGS was used to house prisoners and it was possible that those who died were buried nearby. This might account for the strange going-on at midnight!”

MRS ANNA THAM [1951]



Constructed in 1928, Olson Building is the only building out of the six to be conserved. Courtesy of Methodist Girls’ School.

missed when it was subsequently pulled down to make way for a new multi-storey primary school complex. More memories include picking bright red saga seeds in the playfield behind this old Kenyon block.

The Japanese Occupation from 1942–1945 brought schooling to a halt. MGS was renamed Mount Sophia Girls’ School and recorded its lowest attendance of 15 students and a teaching staff of 7 in 1944.

A new horizon awaited post-war MGS in 1945 when the school was reinstated and Mrs Handy became the principal, a position she helmed from 1946 to 1957 during her 51 years of service. The appointment was a historic milestone as she was the first MGS student as well as the first Asian and Singaporean principal of the school. Hers was a tall order to see through the rebuilding of the school after bombs had destroyed some buildings. The sprawling site was scarred by war, dotted with fox holes and

⁴ MGS Alumnae Association. (2012, June 3). MGS remembers its historical campus on 11 Mt Sophia [press release].

⁵ Teo, E. (2011, October 23). Old school tenants fear end is near; tenants of arts hub concerned by short extension of lease. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved August 24, 2011, from Factiva database.

⁶ Spykerman, K., & Wee, C. F. (2012, June 17). Why Olson is special. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved August 24, 2011, from Factiva database.

⁷ Mrs Handy also authored the ‘bible cookbook’ *My Favorite Recipes* to raise money for the school. The first original edition was published in 1952. It has been revised and reprinted 10 times. The recipes reflected Singapore’s multi-racial composition.

⁸ Mrs Handy remembers. (1985). *Fellowship: MGS Alumnae Association newsletter*; 3. Call no.: RSING 371.223095957F



The "100 steps" from Mount Sophia to Handy Road.
Courtesy of Methodist Girls' School.

lined with slit trenches. Under her dedicated guidance, the Mary Nind Wing was built and housed secondary classes in 1952, followed on a year later by the Sophia Blackmore Memorial Hall. The building program was completed in 1955 with the Louise McKee Wing⁹, tuck shop extension and caretakers' quarters. Mrs Handy had lasting memories of this journeying because "MGS is very dear to me, especially this hilltop on which MGS has finally established itself after many moves in her lifetime", when "MGS was all in one place now on Mount Sophia".¹⁰

The old buildings and serene setting of those schoolgirl days occupy a special place in the hearts and minds of those who were educated there. The old prewar buildings possessed much character, as Vivien Goh recalled in an interview. A music teacher by training and profession, she studied at MGS from the mid-1950s to the 1960s. She remembered that

"The girls in my class were studious and well-behaved. We would sit there quietly, hearing loud chatter and shrieks of laughter coming from the classes down the corridor. Even so, lessons were not the main thing. MGS was mainly about friends and the ups and downs of friendship. Friendships forged through the many years we spent growing up together. Friendships founded on common experiences – sliding in our bloomers down the smooth concrete slope by Olson building... Ah Eng, the school peon, setting out bottles of Magnolia milk in pails of icy cold water every recess...quenching our thirst at the tuck-shop with the lurid yellow 5 cent drink (which contained the occasional pineapple chunk)... the whole class brushing our teeth by the drain...struggling to stay awake at chapel... bounding down the 100 steps... the fond jokes we shared about teachers and the hilarious antics by the cheekier girls in our cohort – the many shared experiences remembered and recounted over the years. MGS is about friends and the memories we share."

MS YEOH CHEE YAN [1976]

classes for the Primary 1-3 levels were held at the Kenyon building at the foot of the hill, moving up to the Olson Building for the Primary 4-5 levels and finally elevating to higher ground classrooms for Primary 6 and secondary levels at the Louise-McKee Building. Ms Sim Ee Min, a horticulturalist who studied there in the 1970s, observed that the buildings were located in a seemingly hierarchial way as to represent a progression through different academic levels. Ms Goh also remembered lessons in eurhythmics, and how MGS had nurtured her love for music, singing as well as instruments like the piano and violin. To this day, music is central to the MGS culture and the life of the school.

The memories of former school girls recall rich images of unforgettable experiences – especially the slippery concrete slope by the Olson Building, "polished smooth"¹¹ by innumerable girls who slid – and also ran – down this unique slide in their bloomers and skirts, sometimes without shoes. It was a favorite pastime at every recess that elicited squeals of laughter and occasional screams in front of the staff room. Every true-bred MGS girl who passed through the gates of MGS at Mount Sophia also

⁹ Louise McKee was an American girl who was taken ill with smallpox while on a world tour and died in Singapore in 1925. She was 23 and her father Mr H. N. McKee donated US\$5,000 to the Methodist Girls' School for a memorial. Lau, E. (2004). *The story behind MGS' Louise McKee Wing*. Retrieved August 24, 2012, from <http://www.methodistmessage.com/may2004/mckee.html>

¹⁰ Lim, L. U. W., et al. (1987). *Memories, gems and sentiments: 100 years of Methodist Girls' School* (p. 70). Singapore: Methodist Girls' School. Call no.: RSING 373.5957 MEM

¹¹ Lim, (1987), p. 87.



Aerial view of a historical school site at 11 Mount Sophia. Courtesy of Methodist Girls' School.

remembers the well-trodden “Hundred Steps” behind Cathay Building. This famed flight of steep steps with no known origins was an integral feature of the school grounds. Exactly one hundred steps, they brought back happy days of “bouncing down the steps to, perhaps, a film show [at Cathay Cinema]...part and parcel of life in MGS”, even though “few passers-by know about this picturesque footpath”.¹² It was the convenient ‘backdoor’ to Handy Road and even truancy at times. When asked what were the most abiding memories of her schooldays in MGS, Kelvyna Chan from the class of 1972, now principal of Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC), was quick to highlight the 100 steps leading up to Mount Sophia, because that “was my daily challenge. If I can overcome the 100 steps every morning at 7am, I can overcome anything”.¹³

Linda Lim, class of 1966, recalled physical education lessons that included practising English folk dances to recorded music and the maypole dance. She wrote a vivid account of her school days in MGS with her group of friends called the Nuttes. Excerpts from her memoirs were published in Fellowship 2010 newsletter, “Vignettes of an MGS life”, in which she shared anecdotes of primary school, recess, sports day, school plays, the kacang puteh man and toilets suspected of being haunted by the Orang Minyak, or “oily man”.

Relics remembered

Gone are the days of school life at Mount Sophia but relics of the past are vivid reminders of this precious heritage. Some of the artefacts housed within the MGS Archives Room at Blackmore Drive include a pair of old wooden speakers that were part of the public address system hanging from the front

of each classroom, the dignified school bell, an archaic desk and chair, the metal printing block on which the school song was engraved, as well as an old hefty office safe. Handicraft works and other memorabilia have been preserved and safe-kept by Mrs Anna Tham, MGS’s longest serving principal of 17 years. Though retired, she still returns to the school to tend to these treasures as well as contribute her time to mentor the girls in various CCAs.

“Old School”

Spanning approximately 140,000 sq ft, the 11 Mount Sophia site was acquired in 1996 for the development of the North-East MRT Line. This leasehold state property was creatively used by Old School which retained the original façade of the six low-rise buildings and their accompanying stairways and walkways. The Old School tenants included artist Chua Ek Kay, fashion boutique Comme des Garçons, a Paris-based Japanese label, whose owner Mr Theseus Chan had coined the much-loved place name “Old School”. It was a natural meeting venue for MGS reunions and get-togethers. Old School was given an initial two-year lease which was extended yearly to 2011, and finally to June 2012, when the area was re-zoned for residential use.

“Save Old School”

The “Save Old School” (SOS) campaign (<http://www.facebook.com/saveoldschool>) was launched by MGS alumnae Carol Tham and Lim Li-Hsien in 2011 to lobby the government to conserve the Mount Sophia campus. The Facebook site garnered 5,406 likes on Founders Day 2012. This petition to the community called for the preservation of the existing structures with its slogan “Saving old spaces and places

“The MGS motto is ‘To Master To Grow To Serve’. When I was in primary school I asked a teacher, ‘don’t we have to grow first before we can master and serve?’. As a little girl I couldn’t imagine mastering anything without first growing up. I remember receiving a glare and being told to shush. So I responded rather defiantly ‘the school just made it this way to fit into the letters MGS!’. I received the appropriate punishment of that time - the Scotch Tape Over the Mouth. Like a Scarlet Letter, quite a few of us were ‘marked’ with a scotch tape over the mouth for various misdeeds, but most of us viewed it as a small badge of honour, and we would mostly be giggling in the corner and mumbling to fellow miscreants, exchanging opinions about whose mouth was more taped.”

MRS ELAINE NG [1981]

¹² Koh, K., & Lim, S. T. (1987, July 15). Down the steps of time. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved August 24, 2012, from Factiva database.

¹³ Toh, J. (2011). Common bonds. *Fellowship: MGS Alumnae Association newsletter*, 6. Call no.: RSING 371.223095957F Also available from <http://mgs.sch.edu.sg/section/101>



MGS girls enjoying a folk dance. Courtesy of Methodist Girls' School.

“Many retired teachers were met with the cheers and hugs of old students. The obvious camaraderie and smiles of alumna who attended, and the rousing singing of the school song at the end is a great testimony to the strength of school ties, and how MGS at Mount Sophia had made such an impact on the lives of old students. It is sad that things have to move on in this direction, but one hopes that the spirit of Sophia Blackmore and her vision of the Methodist Girls’ School will live on despite the changes and developments that time brings in its wake.”
MS SIM EE WAUN [1984]

in Singapore”. The SOS page is filled with old photographs and anecdotal accounts. Architectural historian Lai Chee Kien of the National University of Singapore and Dr Kevin Tan, Ex-officio (past President) of the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS), noted that the MGS Mount Sophia site is “historically significant as one of the first few educational institutions for girls”.¹⁴ Conservation merits that were highlighted include “historical architectural type, structural integrity and demonstration of workmanship”¹⁵ – all of which the MGS site fulfils. Architectural conservation consultant Ho Weng Hin is part of a research team commissioned by the SHS to write a book on local architectural history that will include the two-storey Sophia Blackmore Memorial Hall, with its iconic clock tower and fair-faced façade. According to him, the 1950s was an important period of Singapore’s history and such buildings commemorate local history and are integral to social memories. He said that the building was significant as it was designed by a post-war pioneer local architect, Mr Seow Eu Jin. The URA has acknowledged Mount Sophia’s heritage, but maintained that it is not always possible to conserve and retain all old buildings and former school sites.

Hall of Fame

All schools laud outstanding students who have done the school proud in various ways, MGS is no exception in this regard.

Among the luminaries in MGS hall of fame are personalities such as the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo, wife of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who graduated from MGS

in 1936, playwright and Professor of Law at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Eleanor Wong, national swimmer Pat Chan and acclaimed Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) violinist Lynette Seah.

Memories live on

At 6pm on 3 June, the school flag was marched in proudly by a colour party led by Mrs Tay Poh Imm, President of the Girls’ Brigade in Singapore and a teacher at the school since the 1970s. Addressing the crowd of more than 500, including one in her 90s and a few in their 80s, MGS Management Board Chairman Mrs Fang Ai Lian gave a short recollection of her school days there. Reverend Dr Tony Chi who presided at the commemorative service recalled his past connection to the school at Mount Sophia as the School Chaplain. In closing, he offered a thanksgiving prayer and said a benediction after a rousing rendition of the school anthem which was particularly meaningful and poignant that day, especially when the chorus of voices came together with:

*Down through the years our memories
will keep a loving place, of friendships
made and pleasures shared, and lessons
learnt apace...*

The school song was first sung in 1949.

Recalling the solemn and somewhat wistful end to the formalities of the day, Barbara Chee, President of the MGS Alumnae Association, reflected, “Tears were shed when the school flag was marched out and a feeling of nostalgia tinged with sadness hung in the air for a few moments”. On a more positive note, she noted that these “special memories of our school days at Mount Sophia...will remain in our hearts forever regardless of what happens to the buildings in the future”.¹⁶

At the reception that followed, former MGS girls met and mingled, recollected and reminisced about the yesteryear as they walked down memory lane to relive some of the best times of their school life there. Armed with cameras, many took parting shots of memorable landmarks. Class photos from the 1940s to 1992 projected in a slide show and a video clip of two alumnae flashed back scenes of the past.

MGS Mount Sophia has left a loving legacy of school life experiences. Braving the tide of changes, MGS will continue to “lift high her banner” in the march of time to live up to its motto ‘to master, to grow, to serve’.

¹⁴ Teo, E. (2011, October 23). Old girls fight to save Old School; online petition calls for URA to conserve former MGS campus. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved August 24, 2012, from Factiva database.

¹⁵ *The Straits Times*, 23 Oct 2011.

¹⁶ Chee, B. (2012, June 30). *Annual Report (July 2011-June 2012)*. Report presented at the 51st Annual General Meeting of the MGS Alumnae Association, Singapore.

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11 Mount Sophia through the years: Nind Home in the 1890s, Sophia Blackmore Memorial Hall and the Old School.

1 & 2: Courtesy of Methodist Girls' School, 3: Courtesy of Old School.

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