

Finella Mary Gammell

1901-1987

Finella was the fifth child and second daughter of [Sydney](#) and Alice Gammell. She was born on 16 May 1901 at Drumtochty Castle, Kincardineshire. It is likely she was given her name because the Strath Finella and the Hill of Finella were two prominent features of the Drumtochty landscape. When she was four, the family moved to Countesswells House near Aberdeen, where she was taught by a governess (Miss Key). By this time the family had little money for luxuries but they knew how to entertain themselves and to make the most of what they had, which proved useful for later life. Finella loved acting, collected a large box of stage costumes, and put on plays for family and friends.

At 14 she was sent to Queen Margaret's School, which because of the war had been evacuated from Scarborough to the Atholl Palace Hotel at Pitlochry. She stayed there for four years, and then enrolled for a two-year Domestic Science course at King's College, London. On completing this, she returned to Queen Margaret's, now back in Scarborough, as under-housekeeper and cook. After three years, she went as cook to Badminton House School near Bristol; she got the job partly because she undertook to run the Girl Guides as well.

Finella was a person who could turn her hand to anything. Early on she learnt to drive and in 1920 helped her father take his famous car, SU13, down to the Rolls Royce Museum in Derby. She was an accomplished needlewoman and often made clothes for herself or others. With her upswept hair and regal carriage, she always presented a distinguished figure, neatly dressed even when clothes were scarce.

She did well at Badminton House, where the Headmistress, seeing Finella's talents for working with young people, suggested she move into the classroom, and in 1930 she took a post teaching English at the Frances Holland School in London. In 1937 she was encouraged to apply for headship of North Foreland Lodge School in Broadstairs, Kent, which was losing pupils fast and likely to close. Although the governors thought she was rather young and light-hearted for the job, they appointed her.



Finella in about 1904



Finella in the 1920s

Finella threw herself into lifting the spirits of the 20 or so remaining pupils, teaching English and encouraging activities which were educational, healthy – and fun. Applications rose, but in 1939, as invasion threatened, the 40 pupils had to be evacuated, first to a hotel in Dorset and then to a stately home in Gloucestershire, Lydney Park. After the war, she persuaded the school Governors to buy Buckfield House, a large Victorian mansion near Basingstoke, which became its permanent home (until it closed in 2005).

It therefore became Finella's home as well. She inhabited a small pokey suite of rooms in the centre of the house, from where she could see, hear and sense all that was going on. She rarely left the place, for the school was her life and she organised it like a large family, drawing doubtless on memories of Countesswells. She also drew on other Gammells for practical help; as soon as she was appointed, she asked her brother [Willie](#) to join the Board of Governors to bring in financial expertise, and he helped her find homes for the school, both during the war and after. After retirement she wrote: 'As children we remember nearly strangling each other... and between 1937 and 1967 we had great arguments but our friendship remained unshaken – I could not have done without him.'

Her nephew John Gammell (later to become the headmaster of Repton School) taught for a short period at the school after he was demobilised from the Army. In turn the family supported her; five nieces (Ann Hill, Rosemary Gammell, Janet Gammell, Bridget Ivory, Jane Gammell) and one great-niece (Caroline Stormonth-Darling) became her pupils.

Finella, affectionately known by all as 'The Gam' ran this small school for 30 years in her own inimitable way, sometimes infuriating staff and governors with her unorthodox views. But her pupils loved and admired her, often returning long after they had left to seek her counsel. She had an unquenchably optimistic view of the human spirit and all who came in contact with her, from whatever walk of life, felt valued and respected. She would never ask anyone to do anything that she was not prepared to do herself, from the most menial tasks to leading worship at the daily 'chapel' service. Her strong Christian faith permeated the school; she had a good singing voice and took great trouble to ensure for example, that the girls learnt to sing the psalms according to the modern system of 'pointing'.



Finella in the 1940s



Finella in front of North Foreland School 1963

She taught mainly English, but would lead discussions on many topical themes – including, if requested, on sex and human relations; these were usually delivered in cosy groups drinking cocoa around the fire, so that questions could be asked and answered without embarrassment. Drama remained her passion, and she continued to produce as many plays as she could find time for.

There were few rules, but freedom was based on self-discipline, and individual responsibility was a key theme, combined with compassion and consideration for others. At the end of schooling the girls were expected to be able to cope efficiently and cheerfully with whatever life would bring them. While there was no entrance exam, and the Gam's emphasis was on personal growth and development, academic standards gradually rose so that students began to go on to university.

In 1967 Finella retired and moved to Romsey in Hampshire, where she bought a small house for herself and ex-matron Frances Frankham, who helped her keep house. During the remaining 20 years of her life she threw herself with her usual energy into local activities; she set the 'Open Gate Club' to provide activities for people who had suffered strokes and she offered tutoring to dyslexic youngsters. In addition, she began organising a series of musical events in Romsey Abbey, and she is remembered as the lady who 'brought music to Romsey'.

She died in Romsey Hospital on 5 July 1987. Later an oak door in the north-west corner of the north transept of Romsey Abbey, giving access to the belfry stairs, was dedicated to her memory with the inscription: 'In loving memory of Finella Gammell 1901-1987. She loved and served this place.'



Finella in retirement in the 1970s



The door in Romsey Abbey commemorating Finella's life