

Mary Finch, a true Croydon High Heroine

How many times in your school days did you walk past this memorial plaque in honour of Mary Finch? Initially located in the Wellesley Road school building and now pride of place in the corridor leading to the drama studio in our present building.

So, who was Mary Finch?



In January 1911, aged 9, Mary Finch joined Croydon High School at Wellesley Road. She had previously attended Downs Court Preparatory School. Her two younger sisters, Margaret and Grace, also attended Croydon High School. By 1913, the Finch family lived at 'Skerryvore' on Oakwood Avenue in Purley.

Mary was an extremely gifted student – academic, athletic, and accomplished at drama and music. She was Head Girl from 1919 to 1920 and passed her first medical exams whilst still a pupil in the Sixth Form. She served as captain of the netball and lacrosse teams and secretary of the cricket club. And she passed the Royal Academy and Royal College of Music exams for violin.

After Croydon High School, Mary attended the London School of Medicine for Women at the Royal Free Hospital and had completed two years of study.

Why is there a memorial to her?



In early August 1922, Mary and her family went on holiday to Gorran near St. Austell in Cornwall. They were joined by their friends, the Wood family, from Norbury.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, 30th August, the Wood family, together with the Finch siblings, went to Porthluney beach for a swim. It was here that Mary, her younger sisters Margaret and Grace, her brother Jack and 15-year-old Stuart Wood found themselves in difficulty due to the strong current.

Despite Mr Wood's repeated attempts, he was unable to assist them. Mary, who was not a particularly strong swimmer, first

brought her sister Grace to the shore and then returned to attempt to rescue Stuart. Whilst the others managed to reach the shore, Mary and Stuart were swept away by the strong current.

The following evening the body of Mary was found by a local carpenter at a place named 'Blue Corner', close to where she had disappeared. Stuart's body was recovered the next day.

At the inquest, the coroner stated, 'the conduct of Miss Finch was very plucky, she gave her life for the boy and but for her, one of the little girls also would have drowned, she could not have done more.'

Mary was buried on September 5 at Bandon Hill Cemetery on Plough Lane, Wallington, following a service at the Friends Meeting House on Downs Court Road. On her coffin was white heather collected by her father from the Cornish moors. The villagers of Gorran sent wildflowers. On her tombstone are carved ivy leaves, the symbol of Croydon High School.

A public memorial to Mary Finch

In the following year, funds were raised by friends and colleagues for a public memorial to honour the heroic efforts of Mary Finch. If you look closely at the junction of Downs Court and Selcroft Roads in Purley, you will find a wooden memorial seat on a red brick platform in front of a yew hedge. The plaque reads

"In Radiant Memory of MARY FINCH of Purley. She gave her life in attempting to save a friend from drowning August 30th 1922 Aged 20 years."

To mark the 100th anniversary of Mary Finch's courageous efforts, we will be placing a commemorative wreath at this memorial seat on August 30th.

A memorial prize was set up in honour of Mary Finch, declaring that she lived in the spirit in which she died. The prize was awarded to a girl in the Sixth Form for public spirit and service to the school. The first girl to receive this prize was Doris Goodsell in 1924. Our very own Mary Knight (Hermes) 1963, former secretary of the Old Croydonians, received the award in 1961. We believe that this prize was last awarded in the late 1990s. Perhaps now may be an appropriate time to reinstate this award on the 100th anniversary of Mary's death.

(Sources - *Mary Finch Heroine of Purley* by Alan Hardcastle and *Croydon Guardian* 28 June 1990)

