

Ruth Isabel Janet Diana Streatfeild Gervis (1894-1988)

Illustrator, painter and sculptor.

Born 13 August 1894 at Frant, Sussex, daughter of the Rt. Rev. William Champion Streatfeild and Janet Mary (née Venn).

Married Henry Shorland Gervis in 1928.

Art mistress at Sherborne School, September 1941-July 1953.

Art mistress at Lord Digby's School, 1953-1964.

Died 26 October 1988.



Sherborne, both Town and School, has lost by the death of Ruth Gervis on October 26th at the age of ninety-four, one of the community's most attractive personalities of the two middle quarters of the present century – and beyond. She lived in Sherborne for sixty years and only left it, on a brave decision prompted by the unselfish wish not to be a burden to anyone, ten days before she died.

Ruth Streatfield came to the town in 1928 as the bride of Shorland Gervis, who had joined the science staff of the School seven years earlier, and their serenely happy marriage lasted until his death in 1968. She taught Art at the School from 1941 to 1953. The Art room in those days being immediately above the science laboratories meant that she was teaching near to her husband (always known as Shor), and during the morning breaks she was the only woman among a group of distinguished masters hosted by James Andrews, head of the department, having tea or coffee brewed on a Bunsen burner. 'Outsiders' were occasionally invited and recall vividly the stories of the boys and occurrences in her own department with which Ruth enlivened those select sessions. In 1953 she went to Lord Digby's School with a programme lighter but no less vigorously carried through and continued there until her retirement, if such it can be called, in 1964. Thereafter she devoted herself, when not working in her delightful garden, keeping in touch with her family, painting pictures or taking adventurous trips abroad, to forwarding the interests of the very successful Sherborne Art Club, of which she was a founder member, and to regular morning hours at the Sherborne Museum, where in an upper room she presided over a band of fellow enthusiasts only a little younger than herself which became known as the Geriatric Play-Group. 'Play' indeed! They worked extremely hard and the results may be seen in the excellent dioramas and similar displays which no give



Henry Shorland 'Shor' Gervis (1898-1968).
Assistant Master (Natural Science), Sherborne School
1921-1964.

visitors so much pleasure, interest and instruction. By a happy coincidence the Art Club, of which she was President for twenty years, celebrated its Golden Jubilee in the summer of her ninetieth birthday.

She herself was a gifted artist in various media: pen-and-ink, water colour and oils, with a particular gift for drawing figures; this aspect of her talent was well demonstrated in the illustrations for her sister, Noël Streatfeild's celebrated story, *Ballet Shoes*; and in her old age she took to making pottery figures in which acute characterisations and lively attitudes were graced by delicate and harmonious colours.

But it was as a teacher that she excelled. She used to say that if a child could be taught to write she saw no reason why it couldn't learn to draw; and if she may sometimes have been obliged to admit to herself that a pupil's work was bad she never discouraged him by saying so. Faults would be pointed out and corrected, but there was always both for her and for him, the promise, the expectation, that the next attempt would be more successful. New ideas, which sprang again and again from her fertile mind, were on constant offer for exploration or experiment. She was an enthusiast; she loved life in all its liveliness and her innate wisdom based on an undemonstrative faith in the good in people and things enabled all who came to her for help or advice to see more clearly what the good was. She was a great talker, the sentences scurrying in eddies and runnels, like a mountain stream, stopping, then darting on again in a 'sudden sally'; the very tones of her voice were, somehow, pebbly. Not that she ever failed to be an interested listener.



Mrs Gervis teaching in the Westcott Art School at Sherborne School in 1950.

One characteristic episode must not be forgotten. When King George VI and Queen Elizabeth came down for the School's Quatercentenary in 1950, a brief visit by the Queen to the Art School was provided for; but when Her Majesty and Ruth got together, all such mundane considerations as schedules and timetables were forgotten in their shared interests and enthusiasms, so that the rest of the programme was put out by at least twenty minutes.

Everyone who had the good fortune to know Ruth – her children and grandchildren, friends, neighbours, pupils, even the most casual acquaintance – will remember her with admiration and with a smile that is a reflection of the one she was so ready to give to them.

Oliver Deverell Holt (School House 1923-1928)
The Shirburnian, Lent 1989.

A Tribute to Ruth Gervis on her leaving Sherborne School in 1953, *The Shirburnian*, Summer 1953:

It was a somewhat bold move on the part of Canon Wallace, as he was then, to appoint a lady as the sole art teacher in a big public boys' school, but it can be doubted whether even his habitual optimism could have foreseen what a magnificently successful move he had made. From the moment that Mrs Gervis came, just twelve years ago, art in the School began to go forward. Her enthusiasm was infectious and all those who came under her influence seem to have caught something of it. A visit to one of the periodical exhibitions at the Art School would soon make it clear to anyone how versatile was the scope of her teaching and how she encouraged the natural ability – often unsuspected – that lies in so many boys to find its own way to the making of really original pictures. Spontaneity was the keynote of it all from the fresh and attractive, if slightly tentative, drawings of the lower school to the more finished and mature works of senior boys; but always it was evident that Mrs Gervis was there with advice and helpful criticism, developing her pupils' own style and never trying to force them into any kind of mould. It was obvious too that even those without much talent did at least enjoy their work and begin to discover what fun it is to try to express oneself in form and colour.

But making oil and water colour pictures was not all that was taught in the Art School. Many excellent models and statuettes were produced. The quality of the posters that adorned the Cloisters from time to time were a tribute to her teaching, and many School societies owed a debt to her help and advice.

All this was not achieved without sacrifice. Mrs Gervis spent long hours at the School and gave up much of her own work as an illustrator. Besides this, the task of managing exhibition is an exacting one – far more so than many people realise. So those who knew her best are perhaps not surprised that the time has come when she feels that she must have the respite which she well deserves.

She can rest assured that for many she has made their time at Sherborne a happier and more satisfying episode. Now she is succeeded by one of her own old pupils, who need have no doubt that he is taking over very much of a going concern. To him we wish great success. But we are all sad at Mrs Gervis's going, for the boys will miss a wise and gifted teacher and the staff a valued colleague. However, she will not be far away; so, while wishing her all happiness in her new part-time work at Lord Digby's School, we can say "Thank you", but we need not say "Goodbye". After all she has left a hostage with us.



Watercolour of Corfe Castle by Ruth Gervis, n.d. Sherborne School Collections.