

GAIL MORGAN observes the new growth at her old school, Santa Sabina College.

IF, AS Jane Austen maintains with some irony, young ladies are delicate plants, a few questions might be asked about the schoolgirl species propagated in the red clay loam of Santa Sabina College, Strathfield, 20 years ago, and how that plant life has changed and adapted to the hotter and more competitive environment of today.

Santa Sabina in the late '60s was no fertile bed of radicalism. Crucial questions were ones such as how many cream buns will fit on a foolscap folder, will my skin erupt in time for the St Pat's dance, should I let Sandra wax my legs? Or what would happen if I let a tampon get lost inside? Would it then decide to turn septic and all-consuming like a ginger plant left to rot in a dark cupboard to be fed the occasional dose of sugar.

These kinds of issues photosynthesised in the schoolgirl mind of the late 1960s. It was prestigious in our group then to have a boyfriend with a sports car. An Austin Healey Sprite was acceptable, MGs were better and the Alfa Romeo showed a real commitment to excellence. This obsession with cars reflected male priorities more than our own. For Santa Sabina, with its generous school grounds, a feeder school for Sydney's south and west, was a down-to-earth, sensible school that was materialistic in down-to-earth, sensible ways.

The other borrowing from male vanity was the footie. Not Union — we belonged in Sydney's west, after all. Rugby League was followed until Year 11. Some of us used to write to the players if they were in hospital recovering from an injury. It was an innocent age, and we got back some touchingly earnest letters, with compatibly low levels of literacy.

Women's Liberation had not become a politically coherent movement. Men were our Freudian id. We worshipped their freedom with an instinctual love of instinct. They were also, on reflection, complete jerks. If you weren't good-looking and made a spiritual blanchmange, they'd make up a name for you. Once the tag went on, the exhibit was shunned. "Kid Crater", "Fat Girl", "Mandy the Mole" and "Beer-can pasher" (a reference to how a person's saliva foamed during a passionate tongue kiss) were some of the inevitable labels.

The kind of male chauvinism that made women elsewhere in the world turn competitive was so singularly lacking in charm in Strathfield that it made many of the girls into allies and firm friends. Solidarity by default is the best kind. The only thing this solidarity didn't do was make us study. Education in those days had no purpose. You did it to keep your parents happy and be able to write letters to ailing football stars.

Santa Sabina was a good school, but there was not enough outside pressure on women to succeed. At a recent school reunion at the Menzies Holiday Inn, some ex-students expressed their frustration. They were caught unprepared for career, marital breakdown and that desperate quest for knowledge and self-fulfilment which (like valuing one's parents) seems to come far too late in life.

The nuns, too, were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Many chose to go to the deep blue sea, leave the religious life and follow secular pursuits. The Dominicans were, and are, a proud order, fired into cold steel by the Spanish Inquisition, working within a tradition of disciplined and scholarly self-denial. The 1960s reforms to religious codes of conduct, dress and propriety seemed for some to undermine the solidity of the vocation itself. The reformation had to happen. But for us then the impending vacuum was palpable.

The older nuns resolved this pressure by, in some cases, becoming eccentric. One nun used to shoot pigeons if they intruded too often into the school grounds. The same nun would denounce the occasional heretic, threatening to burn her at the stake.

The girls, too, did odd things which from all reports they don't do now. In sewing class back then one class

member used to eat metal dressmaking pins. In retrospect, this gesture seems laden with symbolism (as was the nun shooing away the doves of ecumenism). We were no longer expected to live on a religious bed of nails. Pins would do, especially when they could be eaten — presumably she ate them outside Lent.

Oral gratification was important then, as now. But greater selection at the tuckshop today hasn't diverted many girls from smoking, which seems to be on the increase. In my day it was allowable to gorge yourself at the tuckshop, provided you were prepared to pound hips and thighs against the

newly built science labs to work off the "flab." The very word sounds unscientific. No wonder it has been renamed cellulite. Science was primitive then. Our working model of the atom was as cute as the Peter-Pan collars we wore. Little rosary beads of electrons revolving around a central purpose. It is only now I realise that the "new science" was way behind the time, even then.

Talking to some Year 10 students from the old school, I formed certain, and no doubt erroneous, conclusions about the way things have changed. Academically, things have come a long way. The girls are given career goals and

plenty of maths and science. But socially, the delicate plants are still growing in the same old window-box. Boys are a major topic of conversation. The GPS boyfriend is depressingly desirable. He wears the same Levis he wore in the '60s, a touch less faded. His shirt is conservatively striped, revealing a Hanes T-shirt underneath. The main difference is in the footwear. This is sociologically consistent with prolonged recession. Sturdy Doc Martens have replaced fraying canvas sneakers with rainbows painted on them. The ultimate male has long hair with two earrings in the one ear. This premium person is the

very opposite of a cosmic loser. "Loser" is current jargon for the hard-working nerd, destined to remain a dag.

"All right," I say. "So you've got maths that adds up and science with due gravity; you must feel great. Not only that, you can study Australian politics and journalism and any number of boutique subjects." They say, "We've got careers to choose from. But you had '60s music and a revolution." There it was. Each generation has some grenade to explode in the face of the next.

I had to reprogram — "What about multiculturalism?" In my day you had to hide your background. They say the

Gail Morgan ... not enough pressure.

Picture by STEVEN SIEWERT

Italian girls go for Italians with the right clothes, you know, like linen suits. It was then made clear that the Italians, like other nationality groups, had enough numerical strength to form discriminating and demanding sub-cultures. No-one was trying to hide any more.

"Society tells us we've got to have a career," one girl adds, "but most of us would like to marry someone rich." Her laugh creates respectable ambivalence. With the increase of Christian ethics in the school, and the decline of religious orthodoxy, she knows this is not the right answer. In my day, I say, provided the rich husband went to Mass, there were no ethical problems whatsoever.

Her honesty on the rich husband issue made me believe in other rule-of-thumb statistics: 50 per cent of girls smoke (or experiment with smoking) and most of the girls in Year 12 remain virgins. Santa Sabina has always been a school with strict codes of sexual conduct, but it surprised me nonetheless. Did AIDS come just in time to save them from the dreaded undertow of sexual promiscuity? Or is it simply that chastity is the rock on which Strathfield society is built?

I asked the most depressing question on my list: "Who gets in to the prestige group, then?" The honest one obviously doesn't want to answer this one, not being in the "prestige" group herself. Her tone becomes matter of fact as she spits out, "Pretty girls, with the right boyfriends, who wear Country Road clothes. It's yuk." I sympathise with her sense of helplessness.

"No-one really likes them," she says, "but they're not losers. Sometimes one of them will deign to come up to me and say, 'How are you, OK?' and I'm supposed to be grateful. It's off, really off. Other girls do interesting things like have radical ideas and go on binges. One girl just reads Jane Austen all the time."

My eyes must have lit up. I knew there was a reason for leading off the article with Jane Austen. Besides, in Year 10, apart from being an airhead, I'd read *Pride and Prejudice* at least four times. Thank God for the throwback. When I asked her how many girls enjoyed reading she found it difficult to estimate. But books seemed to score higher than computers, maths and science in the "things to be tolerated" department.

With the big issues out of the way, we settled down to comparing school uniforms and facilities at the tuckshop. "It's a shame you don't have Buttercup Lane any more," I say. "It was a great place for smoking, miles away from the nuns, and covered in golden buttery flowers. The fence palings used to be rotten there, and we'd hitch up our skirts and speak to the local boys. It was kind of Islamic the way we used to flirt with them through the fence." They look at me as though I'm mad. It is only when you're older that you can see parallels, and you're not put off by old fashioned names like "Buttercup Lane".

There's no use explaining things. How can you put the slower pace of life then into words now? It's like analysing the freshness of the air or the quality of blue in the sky. You can never be sure you got it right.

Mulching previous plant comparisons for a minute, let's get onto a recession motif. Footwear. If it is broadly possible to summarise schools this way, Santa Sabina in the late '60s was like a pair of sturdy flaties. Have these flaties become career stilettos in the '90s? I'm not sure. Let's compromise on sturdy stilettos. Thing haven't changed all that much, or so it seems.

The most noticeable difference is academic. In our day "new maths" and "new science" created a Utopian regime, a climate of promise, that paved the way for the computer revolution in the late '70s, when everyone rushed to buy the new and unstreamlined technology they couldn't afford. What are we left with now? Stainless steel sinks and monster mainframes.

In many ways we were the first flowering of post-war reconstruction. One big irrigation scheme. All dammed up with nowhere to go — trickling out into teaching, nursing, and secretarial studies. Nowadays, English and maths are not put into simplistic opposition. Nor are careers and femininity. Pigeon-holing has made way for dove-tailing. That's how it seems anyway, as I shake off my flaties, take up a book in the sunroom and photosynthesise.



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