

RESCUE MISSION: Twenty years ago Ursuline Prep was on the verge of closing

Inspiration and hard work pay off for thriving school

Matt Cannon

matt.cannon@gazettenews.co.uk

TWENTY years ago a Brentwood mum helped fill the once abandoned corridors and rickety staircases of a Warley mansion with the sound of children learning.

Pauline Wilson was among other Ursuline Preparatory parents, then based on the grounds of Brentwood Ursuline off Queens Road, when they were told their children's school was to close.

Former Ursuline pupil Mrs Wilson quickly joined the fight for the cause – but with little success. The trustees disbanded, leaving her alone.

Handed just three months to replace the group, she got to work recruiting parents and friends she thought could make a real difference.

After a few strategic coffees, the group began to look for a new permanent home for the facility, while Brentwood Ursuline continued to provide space for the school.

Eventually they found the abandoned Grade II listed Old Great Ropers, in Great Ropers Lane, owned by property consultant and one-time Tory bean-counter, Sir Malcolm Chaplin.

"I think the others used to

dread me phoning on a Saturday or Sunday night," said Mrs Wilson, recalling the other trustees.

"I'd say 'I've found this building fancy having a look'?"

"My goodness, we looked at some awful places – we were getting desperate.

"There was a windmill, a place over Tilbury way, somewhere the other side of A13 and a big barn in Coxtie Green Road, which is still there today.

"This place was derelict. Sir Malcom owned it and he was very cautious when we came around but as soon as we walked through the door we could just see the children in it – it was lovely."

Difficult

With a location agreed thanks to the help of Sir Malcolm, finding a head teacher to make the vision a reality was proving difficult.

As the head teacher of a large secondary school in Essex, Mrs Wilson made the decision to take on the project herself.

She says she realised the role was right for her after an admittedly embarrassing incident in which she accosted a "young man" for smoking on school property.

"I'm your new geography teach-



RESCUED FROM DERELICTION: Old Great Ropers became school

er," he rebuked. "I stopped and thought what am I doing? I didn't know the children – you couldn't – I didn't know the parents and I don't know the staff, even though I interviewed them.

"I've never regretted the move I made.

"I love the school – I'm an Ursuline girl myself. I knew that if we didn't have a head teacher we didn't have a school."

Despite admitting the school could probably expand, Mrs Wilson insists the 20 children per class enriches the educational experience of pupils.

"Everybody knows you and

they know the family and if there's an issue where a child is behaving a certain way you understand if it's out of character or if it's being naughty," she said.

"The other week one boy spoke to a teacher in a not very respectful manner, which was unusual, but we knew his nan had just died.

"It's also good to remember the younger pupils. They look at the top classes and they do what they do. The older ones look after the younger ones a little too."

It might be housed in an 18th century building, but the school

has stayed on the cutting edge of technology.

Students use iPads and interactive whiteboards to create computer programmes and develop applications for phones and tablets.

ICT co-ordinator Christine Ryan joined Mrs Wilson in praising the young students for the quality of their work, from apps to ambitious animations.

"The children make these apps in school and we digest them by looking at how the application works and asking how can we improve that and then they go and improve the app from there," she said.

Enjoy

"It's been a real eye-opener for all of us. They enjoy it.

"The thinking behind it is not only to get them designing but to think logically 'without this, this can't happen'."

The school has experienced a low turnover of staff and trustees during the last two decades, which Mrs Wilson puts down to the atmosphere, and the inclusiveness of staff – "everyone has a role to play," she says.

How times have changed.

■ Check out the pupils' apps at ursulineprepwarley.co.uk

