



GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

Lady Leslie (May) Smith-Cumming (1860-1938)

Founding Fellow

Recognised for her very personal role in the founding of Gordonstoun, as a lifelong friend and supporter of Kurt Hahn and benefactor of the finances that established the school

May Smith-Cumming was born in 1860, before later inheriting the Logie estate on the River Findhorn and marrying Captain Sir Mansfield Smith-Cumming, the first head of MI6. She became a significant part of Kurt Hahn's life early on, after he and their only child Alistair became best friends at Oxford. Hahn stayed with the family in Moray to recuperate from surgery, and had come to know them well, when Alistair was killed in a car accident at the start of the First World War.

After Mansfield's subsequent death in 1923, May renewed her friendship with Hahn, visiting him at Salem for long periods of time before helping him escape Germany in 1933. During the years that followed, she took Hahn under her wing as a surrogate son, becoming a life-long friend.

May was with Hahn at the Doune, Rothiemurchus and when the school opened at Gordonstoun, she rented a flat in Gordonstoun House. Here she became the school's first "hostess", used her car for pupil transport and helped financially to keep things running.

May died and was buried at the Michael Kirk in 1938 with the whole school taking part in the service. Her legacy lives on within Gordonstoun today at Cumming House and is represented in the names of the first school cutters: the Mansfield and the May.

Author and former staff member Mary Byatt remembers her in the memoir 'Gordonstoun - Pioneers and Pioneering 1934-1940'.

May was one of the principle radiating fibres of the web from which Gordonstoun grew.

In her anguish at losing both her son and husband, she treated Hahn as a substitute son and played a pivotal role in his life and the establishment of Gordonstoun.

A quiet and birdlike figure, she was gentle, calm and kind...

...and was undoubtedly a major confidant and support to Kurt Hahn in those early years of the school. She had steely morals and strong ideals but she was generous and kind to the young.

May Cumming was a generous supporter of the school.

In 1936 she made a loan of £2000 to British Salem Schools, under deed of covenant. She died at Gordonstoun in 1938 and was laid to rest at the Michael Kirk. The boys acted as bearers in the beautiful and impressive procession which led from the house, across the lawn and up the long walk through the woods.