

THE MYSTERY OF ST BRIDE'S

How did an old house offering a 1920s girls' boarding school experience become an outlet for some of the most creatively enterprising text adventures of the 8-bit era? Welcome to St Bride's...

WORDS BY OWEN WILLIAMS

“Today you've a mystery to solve. Last night you arrived at St Bride's School. The mistresses and girls really believe they are in an old style boarding school. You even wonder if you're not a bit mad to think you're from the Eighties. You want to find out what's going on while you still can... Your adventure starts here...”

So begins *The Secret Of St Bride's*, the inaugural text adventure from the programming hotbed at St Bride's School: a very peculiar institution operating out of a rickety old house in Burtonport, County Donegal. The setup for the game echoed a carefully constructed and maintained aura of mystery around the place itself, advertised in the early Eighties broadsheets as a place where women could go to relive a *St Trinians*-style boarding school childhood they'd never actually experienced. “St Bride's offers a standard classical curriculum,” ran the prospectus, “the cardinal subjects being Mathematics, Elementary

Latin, Grammar and Literature. The day begins with the rising bell at half-past seven... Our girls receive the healthy benefit of lively sea air and fresh open countryside, and in the matter of sunshine, so vital to the health of growing children, we are singularly well-favoured.” The school also boasted facilities such as “a modern gramophone which may sometimes be used by an unsupervised group of girls providing that great care is taken to avoid overwinding”.

“We used, all the time, to see a lady around Burtonport wearing very old-fashioned clothes and a little white bonnet,” recalls Catherine McGlynn of Irish tourism website *Holiday Donegal*. “She drove a very old style black car. I wonder if she was the maid of the house?” She was not. Two such women were actually running the whole show at St Bride's: using pseudonyms, never seen out of Edwardian costume and advocating a return to the values of that era. Among their many side-projects was a campaign to abolish the metric system – motto ‘Don't Give An Inch’ – of which Sir Patrick Moore was a patron. Anachronistically, they published computer games, but this, says Clem Chambers, former head of their occasional publisher CRL (and now a financial pundit and author), was some way from being the weirdest thing about them. “It was certainly a strange setup,” he chuckles, “but these were the days when you could go on holiday to Colditz and play at escaping, and all that wish-fulfilment kind of stuff. That they operated a holiday school and published games was comparatively not odd...”

Trying to investigate St Bride's is both an intriguing and frustrating experience. The people that know the answers remain determinedly secretive, while the people that are willing to talk tend to be fascinated but mystified. Each step along the timeline simply yields further questions. Even the journalists that visited the school during its 8-bit heyday were none the wiser when they left.

The facts, as far as they can be ascertained, start with the house itself, still standing and commonly known in Burtonport as the Atlantis House, after the Atlantis Foundation, who inhabited it before St Bride's. Initially a commune of ‘free thinkers’, it became infamous for its use of primal scream therapy: roaring out one's inner turmoil to attain a purer state of consciousness. Its members were quickly dubbed the ‘Screamers’ by the Burtonport

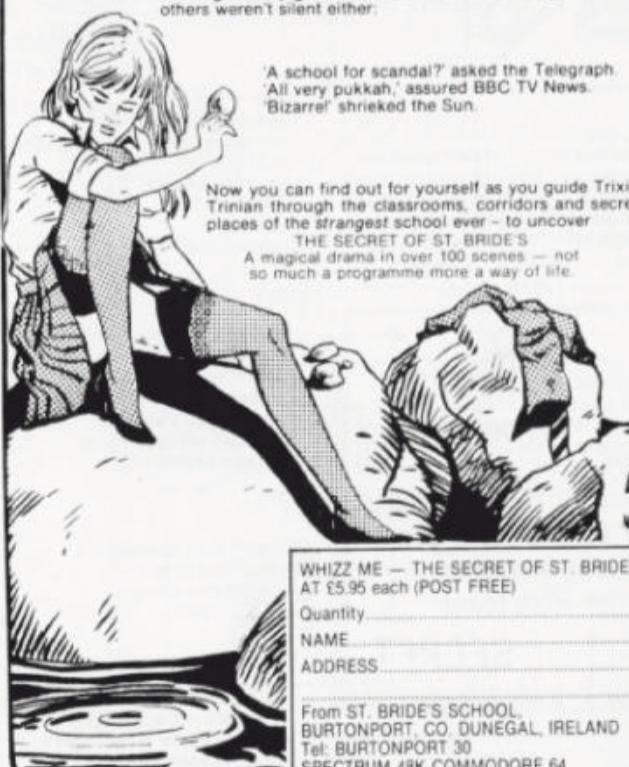


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That's what one paper called St. Bride's - the famous school where grown-up girls are transformed into schoolgirls. The others weren't silent either.

A school for scandal? asked the Telegraph. All very pukka, assured BBC TV News. 'Bizarre!' shrieked the Sun.

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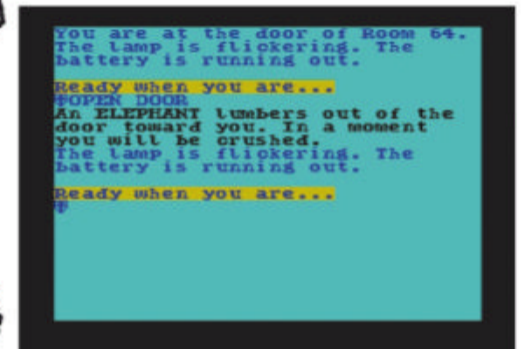
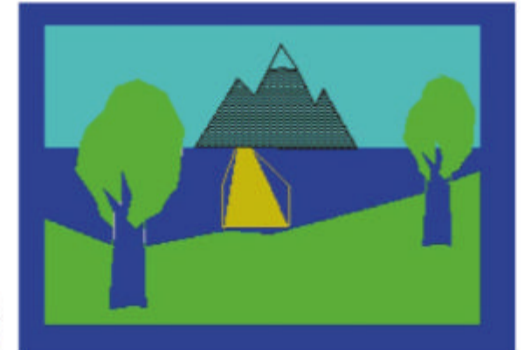
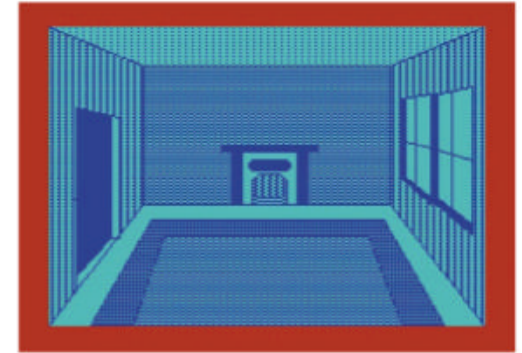
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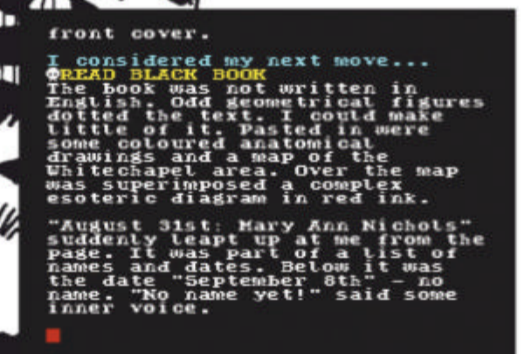
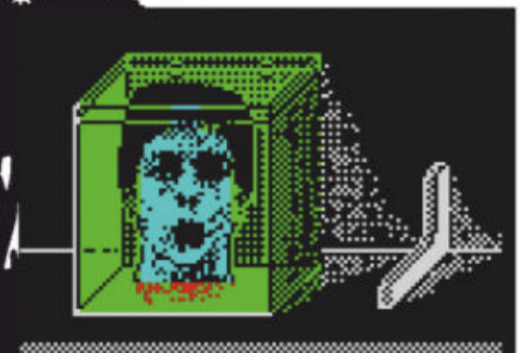
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From ST. BRIDE'S SCHOOL, BURTONPORT, CO. DUNEGAL, IRELAND
Tel: BURTONPORT 30
SPECTRUM 48K COMMODORE 64

» A mail order advert for *The Secret Of St Bride's*.



» [ZX Spectrum] An elephant proved to be the nemesis of the St Bride's schoolgirls.



» [ZX Spectrum] Jack The Ripper was a violent departure from the typical whimsy found in the St Bride's games.



» [ZX Spectrum] *The Snow Queen* was set to be part of a sprawling series of interactive books based on popular fiction, however further instalments failed to materialise.



I am in a little bedroom, It is my grandmother's. There is her wardrobe, and her washstand over there. A door is in the East wall. And I can see: - my grandmother sleeping peacefully in her bed

What shall I do now?
 *KISS GRANDMOTHER
 Oh yes. I could never have left without that.

Very well, I have done that.



» *The Snow Queen* is one of the lesser known titles from St Bride's.

locals, and subsequently relocated offshore to the island of Inishfree to escape increasing press intrusion. Legend had it, with the right weather conditions, you could stand on the Burtonport harbour and hear banshee-like wailing coming across the water.

This was in the Seventies, and in the early Eighties, the vacant house was taken over by an all-female community inspired by a 'sapphically inclined' student club founded at Oxford's Lady Margaret Hall. Its founding members had gradually created a complex philosophy and fantasy world called 'Aristasia', which posited two female 'sexes' – dominant brunettes and submissive blondes – and encouraged retreat from the modern world. They referred to the swinging Sixties, deemed to be the beginning of civilisation's end, as 'The Eclipse', while the real world outside Aristasia was designated 'The Pit'.

With the Atlantis Commune departed, the Aristasian women rechristened the house St Bride's (after the fifth-century Irish abbess and miracle-worker). Candida Crewe, who visited for the *Telegraph* magazine, described it as like stepping into a Gothic novel where "a single candle flickered behind a lace curtain, guests were invited into a parlour heated only by a feeble coal fire, and the mistress of the house greeted her guests wearing a long black dress and white lace collar".

This mistress is now best known by the name Marianne Martindale, but she was then calling herself Marianne Scarlett, and has also at various times gone

"I DIDN'T HAVE ANY KNOWLEDGE OF COMPUTERS [...] BUT I FOUND THEY WERE WONDERFUL, THEY WERE MAGICAL"
MARIANNE MARTINDALE



» [ZX Spectrum] *The Secret Of St Bride's* ensured that the institute attracted plenty of media coverage, largely due to the ironic nature of its development.



» [PC] *Second Life* is where the values of St Bride's and Marianne Martindale continued...



» [PC] ...however, these days the virtual space has been effectively abandoned.

by the monikers Miss Partridge, Miss Traill, Mari De Colwyn, Brighe Dachcolwyn and Clare Tyrell. "One's real name is the name one is using at the time," was the explanation given to *Sinclair User's* Bill Scolding.

Bill and *Crash's* John Minson (both of whom spoke to us but remember nothing except being baffled), along with three other cohorts from the Eighties computing press, took the opportunity for a visit to the school when they were called to Ireland for a junket publicising the gimmicky *Surf Champ*: the game that came with a plastic surfboard that fitted over the ZX Spectrum's keyboard. John wrote it up for *Crash* as a kind of Hunter S Thompson road trip: "We were just outside Rosstown on the Atlantic coast when the Guinness began to take hold..."

No amount of Guinness, it seemed, was enough to cushion the culture shock. After a tortuous journey that hadn't looked tricky on the map, he wondered if he hadn't fallen through a time warp, arriving at a place that didn't even have electric lights. Incumbent computer programmers seemed unlikely.

The story given to the hacks was of the arrival at the school of Priscilla Langridge (her real name at the time), who had responded to one of the newspaper advertisements offering idiosyncratic escape from normality for £120 a week, and had bought into the fantasy enough that she'd stayed on. According to the – rather unlikely – Marianne Martindale narrative, Priscilla had for some reason brought a Commodore 64 with her on her Edwardian retreat, and found the school's only plug socket. Marianne was initially sceptical about the computer, Priscilla told John Minson, but "she realised that unlike television, which



» [ZX Spectrum] *Dogboy* is an obscure St Bride's game, released in 1992 alongside *White Feather Cloak* and *Silverwolf*.

she thinks is passive and mind-rotting, computer games call for concentration and commitment”.

“I didn't have any knowledge of computers,” Marianne elaborated to Bill Scolding. “My experience was in thinking backwards. But I found they were wonderful, they were magical. I'm a great fan of racing car games.”

A wheeze enjoyed by the St Bride's girls on their afternoon rambles, in which they “noticed odd things, pretended they were clues, and worked out the connections between them” became the basis of *The Secret Of St Bride's*. Priscilla wrote it using the adventure programming software Quill, beginning on her C64 and later migrating to the Speccy. Already apparently a writer before she came to St Bride's, she told John she had found the economical

two-word inputs of the text adventure format creatively liberating. “People make a fetish of excess sophistication,” she mused.

Ultimately, St Bride's was responsible for eight completed games, but the release history is chequered, and a handful written in the Eighties seem not to have surfaced until the early Nineties when they were picked up by re-release houses GI Games and Zenobi. *The Secret Of St Bride's* introduced both the school and heroine Trixie Trinian, and was a mail-order affair from the school itself: advertised with lascivious images of a stockinged, high-heeled, *St Trinian's*-type schoolgirl.

The Secret Of St Bride's sees the player (as Trixie) waking one morning in 1985 (in “a holiday centre in Ireland where you experience old-fashioned storybook schoolgirl life”) to discover that all evidence points to the year actually being 1927. Initial escapades include donning a gown to get past some stern mistresses; and of course, judiciously using a mouse to frighten



» [ZX Spectrum] The attention to detail in regards to characters was unsurpassed for its time.

“IT WAS CERTAINLY A STRANGE SETUP BUT THESE WERE THE DAYS WHEN YOU COULD GO ON HOLIDAY TO COLDITZ AND PLAY AT ESCAPING”
CLEM CHAMBERS

off a charging elephant. Outside the school you encounter both village life (the local ‘peeler’ will arrest you at the drop of a gymslip) and some fantasy creatures, before you head for town, marry a maharaja and track down the mysterious authoress Ms Merlin who

has the power to send you back to your own time. There's also an epilogue with a magic amulet, should you choose to indulge.

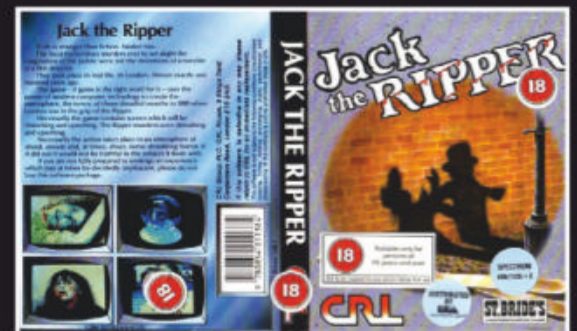
It is, obviously, all a jolly silly lark, but it sows the seeds of most of the subsequent St Bride's adventures: humour, fantasy and a strong emphasis on wilfully independent female characters: although Marianne Martindale and Priscilla Langridge always insisted at the time that they weren't writing games just for girls. Trixie reappeared in *The Very Big Cave Adventure* (spoofing Will Crowther and Don Woods'

VIDEO NASTIES

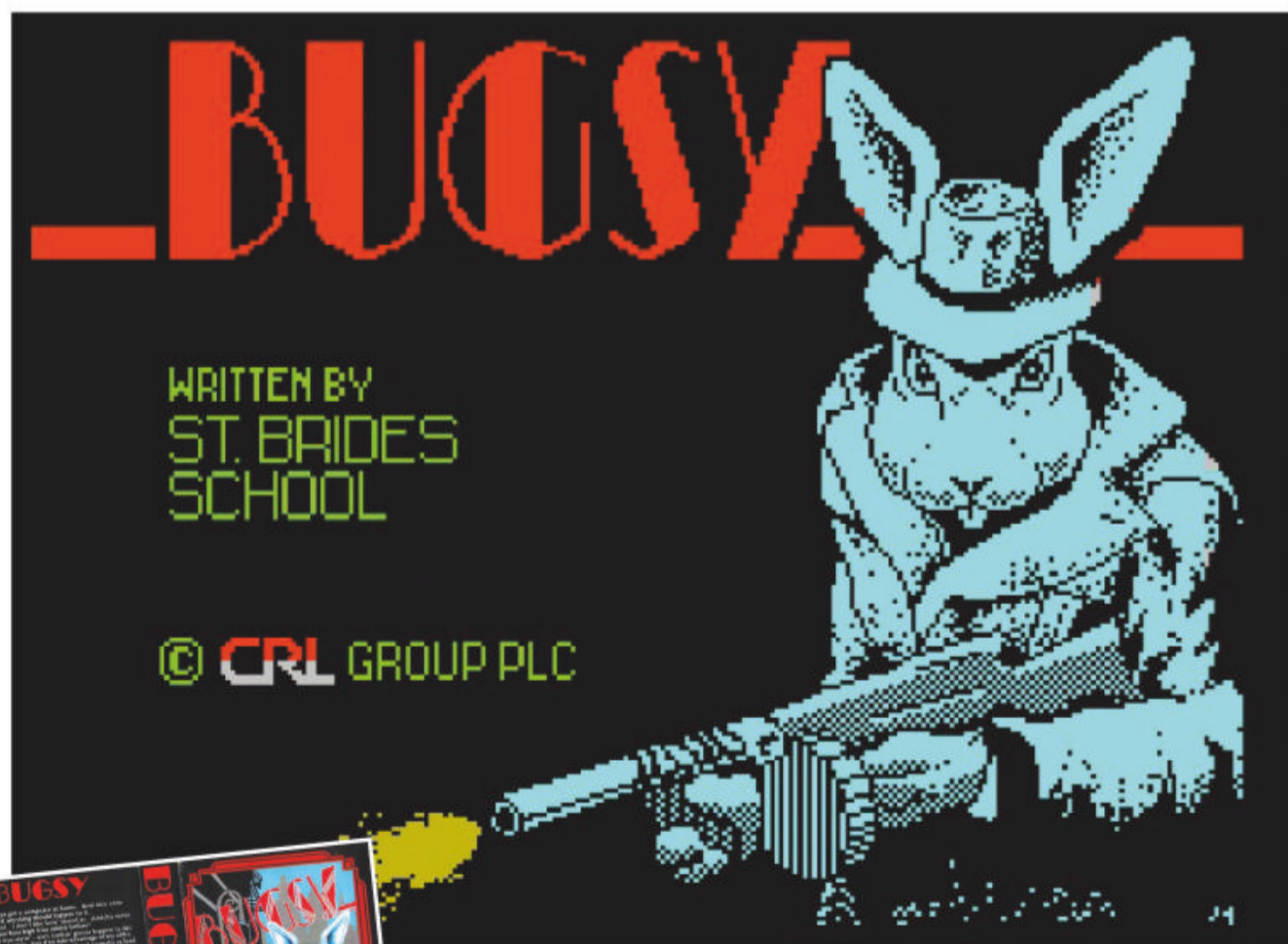
DON'T FEED THE TROLL

■ *Jack The Ripper* was, notoriously, the first computer game ever to be granted an 18 certificate by the BBFC. It seems incredible now that gruesome text and 8-bit stills could have caused controversy, but *Jack The Ripper* was the *GTA* of its day. CRL's Clem Chambers insisted with a straight face that certification for ‘adult’ games was a moral responsibility. Now, he admits cheerfully, “I was trolling!”

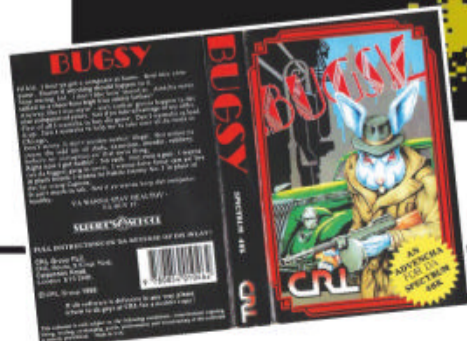
“I saw a copy of *The Sun* that had a story about the ‘Video Nasties’ controversy,” he laughs, “and I thought, ‘Aha! Nobody's ever put a film certificate on a game! If I do it first I'll get loads of coverage!’” It worked, but also backfired. “It sold out on day one but then the middlemen refused to restock it,” he laments. “Our distributor was upset about it being a success and didn't want it to sell. It was basically strangled in distribution.”



» *Jack The Ripper* earning an 18 rating is about as ludicrous as certificating library books.



» [ZX Spectrum] A talking 1920s rabbit called Buggy Maroon. It's not exactly subtle, but it's deservedly one of the most memorable text adventures from St Bride's.



THE HORROR, THE HORROR

THE GHOULISH CLASSICS THAT PAVED THE WAY FOR A RIPPER

■ *Jack The Ripper* from *St Bride's* formed part of a series of horror text adventures published by CRL. "It was their idea; they came to us with it," recalls CRL head honcho Clem Chambers. "They said, 'We're Victorians, we'd like to do it!' So we said, 'Yeah, course you can!'"

They were, however, entering territory that had previously been inhabited by a sole occupant. Rod Pike had written literary Gothic horror games for CRL based on *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Wolfman* (he also composed *Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde* for short-lived publisher The Essential Myth). An industrial engineer by profession, he did his adventure programming in the evenings. "I don't like humorous games," he told *C&VG's* Keith Campbell. "I prefer to be scared to death in the comfort of my living room. My aim is to scare the pants off the player."

His personal text adventure ethos was that every location should have a definite purpose. Some of his puzzles could be infuriatingly obscure, however: a locked door in the opening portion of *Frankenstein*, for example, can only be opened by your father, who only arrives if you sit in an armchair and wait for him.

Keith's interviews seems to have been Rod's only published one, and he remains elusive. "People have looked for him and haven't found him," Clem



confirms. So who was he? "Good question," Clem continues. "He was a nice guy who liked to write. I felt that he was a bit like a UK Stephen King: he was very softly spoken and pleasant, but you could imagine he might write horror."

Wolfman was Rod Pike's final game, leaving the way clear for *St Bride's* to stride into Ripperdom. "I think he wanted to write novels," Clem muses. "I'm sure his books would have been really good but I don't think he was ever published. He was writing in a void, effectively, with us as his bridge to his audience, and he was very happy for any affirmation. He would've loved this retro revival."



► Rod Pike's last game was the incredibly evocative *Wolfman*, a fitting swan song.



► [ZX Spectrum] They might seem antiquated, but Rod's horror titles were truly chilling.



► Miss Martindale welcoming girls to *St Bride's*. Not pictured: Commodore 64.

original text epic *Colossal Cave Adventure*), this time as your guide and narrator. She was, it turned out fond of terrible puns (the bull that believes your outrageous lie is a 'gully bull'; when you blow it up it's 'a bomb in a bull') and of commenting on the proceedings themselves. "The description of this room is very misleading," she apologises at one point. "I'd complain if I were you."

Also wilfully independent – to the extent that she sometimes takes control of the game away from the player – is Gerda, heroine of *The Snow Queen*: based on the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale and intended as the first in a series of 'interactive books'. And there was another modern-day schoolgirl – Petra Stone – at the centre of *Silverwolf*, in which the player can switch between four female characters. An accompanying comic was proposed and designed, but seems never to have been published, and may have contributed to *Silverwolf's* late appearance. Another game tying into a proposed *St Bride's* comic, the superheroine adventure *Wondergirl*, never materialised at all.

What did appear on game shop shelves, thanks to the efficiency of CRL, was *Bugsy*: the strange tale of a gangster rabbit rising through the Chicago mob via protection rackets and booze-running until he's big enough to take down Al Capone. Like *Trixie*, *Bugsy* is grudgingly respectful if you do well at the game, but basically has little patience with "keyboard bashers". "If you ain't figured dat dis street leads east/west by now, I ain't gonna tell ya," he growls.

And infamously, there was *Jack The Ripper*: a gruesome literary horror game, the solution to which involved wielding the pure and wonderful female soul essence of one of Jack's victims to end his reign of gore-charged terror. Interestingly, solving the mystery of the Ripper's identity is irrelevant, and after the first two thirds spent around the streets and houses of Victorian London, the final, utterly bizarre stretch has you wrestling with baffling Masonic puzzles in a subterranean underworld.



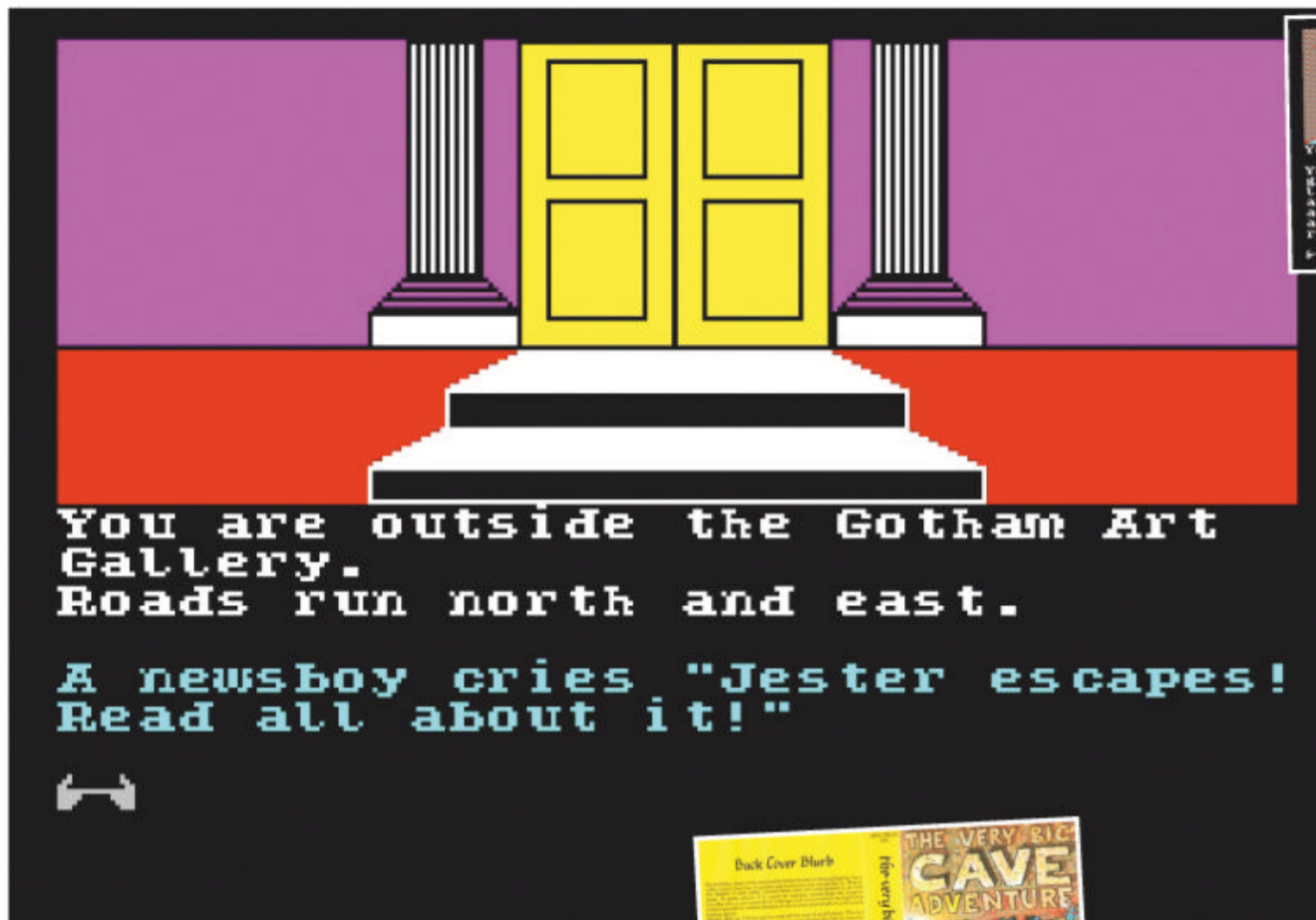
SILVERWOLF

PART ONE: THE QUEST FOR THE SWORD

BY

ST. BRIDE'S

► [ZX Spectrum] *St Bride's* noticeably progressed as a developer, with its later titles exhibiting more vibrant visuals.



a stranger to show up: "I said, 'Oh... you don't look very much like your pictures.' And this woman smiled and said, 'There are many Miss Martindales'... So we then weren't sure who

exactly had been writing for us."

Aristasia gradually became a sprawling online community and eventually factionalised and broke apart; its 'intellectual descendents' metamorphosed once again into something called The Daughters Of Shining Harmony, while Miss Martindale married the film director John Guillermin and reinvented herself as a spiritual relationship counsellor in Topanga, California. An Aristasian embassy was once established in *Second Life*, promising "groups of girls to be found chatting at all hours of night and day". Until relatively recently, virtual archaeologists could still visit the site, long-neglected and eerily quiet.

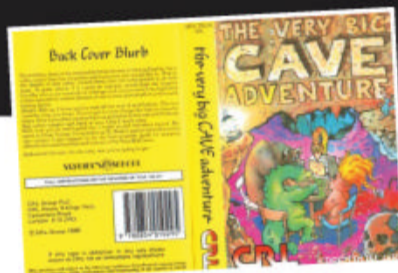
The Burtonport St Bride's house too now stands empty, still vaguely known locally (among those who know it at all) as the home of The Screammers and the strange women that came after them. Tracing the fate of its former inhabitants may lead in unexpected directions, but its principal legacy, though modest, perhaps remains those eight simple games from the Eighties. Easily available at the click of an emulator, they allow a glimpse into a female-centric world where fantasies could be indulged: whether they be of schoolgirl shenanigans, fairytale quests or Gothic sleuthing. Three and a half decades on, while the games industry is now seemingly waking up to incorporating female protagonists in a meaningful way, it's worth remembering that St Bride's was there first, creating worlds where Trixie Trinian and Petra Stone could take decisive charge. It's just a shame that, among all the peripheral weirdness, hardly anyone noticed. *

"I THINK THEY REALISED THE GAMES WERE A BRILLIANT IDEA TO PUBLICISE THEIR SCHOOL"
CLEM CHAMBERS

"They were great games," remembers Clem Chambers. "They were anachronistic to their supposed ethos, but I think, basically, St Bride's were in business: they were doing it on a commercial basis, however un-commercial they may have looked! In those days, once you got past a certain level of complexity, you didn't need incredibly specialised skills to write computer games. I think they realised the games were a brilliant idea to publicise their school, and obviously they were right: they got buckets of press."

The games, as Clem rightly suspects, turn out to have been part of a wider business portfolio that also included handmade costumes and a publishing house, The Wildfire Club, through which the school published lesbian periodicals (*Artemis*, *The Romantic* and others) and books by Marianne Martindale such as *The District Governess* and *The Female Disciplinary Manual*.

Was it an innocuous institution for role-playing eccentrics, or was there something more fetishistic in its make-up? The answer appears to be both. On the one hand, it was a sort of "romantic retreat where 19th century values, politeness and dressmaking were preferred to the tawdry modern world", but in investigating St Bride's and its



» *The Very Big Cave Adventure* proved to be one of the Spectrum's defining text adventure games.

iterations, the word 'discipline' comes up a lot. In the early Nineties, before the school eventually closed, Marianne was convicted of caning a pupil rather more enthusiastically than the recipient would have liked. "Whenever I have a maid, she receives corporal punishment," she told *The Independent's* Rosie Millard in 1995. "I have always beaten my maids."

Following an unspecified disagreement with their landlord, the sisters of St Bride's decamped in 1993 to Oxford (where Clem Chambers once bumped into them, "still fully garbed out in all their crinolines") and then to London: specifically to Whipp's Cross (no, really) near Epping Forest.

Priscilla Langridge disappears from the narrative sometime prior to the London arrival, but the St Bride's 'experiment' continued under Marianne's aegis, reverting to the 'Aristasia' name but still manifesting as a school.

There was again much spanking, witnessed in a 1996 Channel 4 documentary. But Marianne's sidetracking Aristasia into an overemphasis on fetish (whether she admitted that was what it was or not) seems to have annoyed many of her peers until she was effectively 'silenced'. For a time, she was the female columnist for the whimsical gentlemen's periodical *The Chap*, but there's even mystery here. Editor Gustav Temple remembers inviting her to a *Chap* party, only for



» A review of *Jack The Ripper* from *Sinclair User* describes it as another "solid product of the St Bride's hothouse".

COLD COMFORTS

There are, of course, compensations even to an English Winter. Many different ones. Mink, open fires, ermine, muffled wine, fox, hot chestnuts, chinchilla, and even the humble rabbit. Do not take my previous piece amiss, dear reader: I yield to no one in my love and admiration for Nature and her Art. It is merely that, like many artists, she works better in collaboration. One must avoid the terrible mistake of those ghostly modern musical groups who imagine that they can write, play and sing their own music. They are jacks of all trades and painfully evidently masters of none. Popular music is the work of four kinds of artist: composer, lyricist, musician and singer. A few people combine the talents of two of them in one person. Very few (other than the above-mentioned Mr. Noel Coward) of more.

So it is with Nature. She cannot by herself make winter perfect. She requires three other kinds of artist: the designer, the furrier and the lady. The designer looks at nature's wonderful creations in the raw and sees how they can be shaped into something truly exquisite. The furrier executes this design with consummate skill. Yet all three artists are working without the fourth: the lady, who will display the work with elegance, poise and feminine magnificence. Nature, Art and Breeding. The three indispensable ingredients of Perfection.

There is, of course, one further traditional requirement for Art, and that is Patronage. In the case of the Art that interests us at present, we may say that it is precisely for this purpose that the institution of Holy Matrimony was created, though if a Lady prefers to remain unmarried, her Daddy will usually prove generous. Or failing all else, she might even apply to the paternal relation.

These vulgar financial underpinnings of great Art have been rendered rather less troublesome in recent years by an absolutely wonderful body of people known as the Animal Rights Movement. These generous and compassionate souls dedicate enormous amounts of time, often at considerable personal risk, to lowering the

price of furs to a point where they can actually be worn by ladies, and not just by the wives of multinational spivs and corporate cockneys. Often these campaigners are rather scruffy and dismal individuals themselves, which makes their concern for the welfare of those of us who have the means and the looks to dress splendidly even more touching.

It is not my usual practice in this column to wax sentimental, far less to be public-spirited. But this season is sometimes regarded as a time for giving. So if you have a few shillings to spare and were casting about for a worthy cause, do spare a thought for those selfless Animal Rights people.

On the other hand, if you have rather more than a few shillings to spare, I did have my eye on a rather splendid chinchilla stole in a charming little shop in Jermyn Street.



» Miss Martindale wrote a regular column for men's magazine *The Chap* after departing St Bride's, remaining elusive even to the magazine's staff.