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## Roedean School to take over St Mary's Hall Brighton

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One of England's oldest private schools for girls has become the latest victim of the credit crunch. St Mary's Hall in Brighton, founded in 1836 to educate the daughters of clergymen, is to be taken over by the exclusive school Roedean.

The takeover represents a coup for Roedean, which is acquiring St Mary's Hall (SMH) for nothing and which stands to see a significant increase in pupil numbers as a result.

Roedean, once regarded as an elite finishing school for the daughters of the upper classes, is heavily dominated by overseas pupils - one third of its roll comes from abroad - and has been seeking to expand its local intake for years.

Situated on top of a hill outside Brighton in a huge Victorian pile that could easily accommodate twice its existing number of 300 pupils, it is, like many other independent schools, keen to seek economies of scale in the economic downturn.

Frances King, headmistress of Roedean, said she would welcome any girls currently at the SMH Senior School, where annual boarding fees are £20,800, who could afford to transfer to her school, where fees are £24,400.

Ms King is guaranteeing places and financial support for 11 SMH pupils who are on full or significant bursaries. A further 25 places have been guaranteed for SMH pupils who are in the middle of their GCSEs and for a further 11 pupils who are on full or significant bursaries.

Pupils from SMH, which takes girls from a broad ability range, will not be required to take the entrance exam for Roedean, which is more academically selective.

For SMH the deal marks the end of a long struggle. In a statement yesterday it said that "economic circumstances" had left it with no choice but to close and end 173 years of independence.

Susan Meek, headmistress of SMH Senior, said the merger represented a good opportunity for her pupils "to attend a top girls' school without having to be assessed" to get in.

She said that SMH had seen a gradual decline in pupil numbers. “We have noticed that our international students aren’t coming in the numbers that they used to. This academic year we have seen a decline in our year seven numbers,” she said.

Education experts say that many more small schools may face a similar fate as they struggle to cope with parents who cannot pay their fees and a reluctance by banks to lend money.

Recent research from the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC), representing the top end of the market, found that applications for the country’s best-known private schools have increased in defiance of the economic downturn.

But but one in ten HMC heads said they were unsure whether their schools could withstand the recession.

Schools with fewer than 400 to 500 pupils are thought to be particularly vulnerable as are those, like SMH and Roedean, that are located in a highly competitive local market. Brighton is positively saturated with private schools, including the highly successful co-educational Brighton College.

After the previous recession in Britain of the early 1990s, independent schools experienced a steep dive in pupil numbers, losing 11,500 children in the following five years.

Under the terms of the Roedean/SMH deal, Roedean will take on ownership of the buildings and land at the SMH Senior School.

Before the downturn, the site may have offered lucrative development potential. But Ms King said that in the current climate, Roedean would keep the building empty for the time being.

Roedean will also take on the Junior School at St Mary’s Hall, which takes boys as well as girls. The Junior School will remain unchanged on its current site in East Brighton, under its existing head Huw May, but will be called Roedean at St Mary’s Hall. Parents were told of the move yesterday.