

School names building after island war hero

SHE was a hero of the Second World War and one of the last surviving female Spitfire pilots.

Mary Ellis was also an energetic presence on the Isle of Wight, managing Sandown Airport and becoming Europe's first female air commandant. She died, aged 101, last year.

So it seemed appropriate that children at St Blasius C of E Academy in Shanklin chose to name their brand new building after this high-profile local personality. And some of Mary's family and friends were there for the opening ceremony.

Bishop Christopher cut the ribbon to officially open the new classrooms with Mary's niece Rosemarie Martin, and some of the oldest and youngest pupils at the school. It was part of an opening ceremony that included 1940s songs, a reflection on Mary Ellis's life, and prayers for those who will use the building.

Parents, staff and children were asked to vote for one of four notable Isle of Wight women their new building could be named after. They chose Mary Ellis, and completed projects in which they researched more about her life.

Pupils Adam Farley, aged 11, and Rosie Jeffery, 10, recounted her story to the whole school and invited guests, telling them how Mary had flown 1,000 different planes of 76 different types during



Bishop Christopher opens the Mary Ellis Building at St Blasius C of E Academy; (left) Mary Ellis, who flew Spitfires in the war

the war. They pledged on behalf of the school to keep her memory alive.

Pupils Lucy Shirley and Leah Murphie sang solos, while Milly Orchard,

Gracie Kelly and Summer Baxman led the closing prayers.

Cllr Clare Mosdell, who was Mary's goddaughter, said: "She learnt to fly when women didn't even drive cars. She flew lots of different kinds of planes and her contribution to the war effort was huge. Mary made me feel that I could do anything I wanted, and that's true of all of us here too."

And Mary's niece Rosemarie said afterwards: "It was very touching. Mary loved children and would have made every effort to be here. She would be amazed that anyone would name a building after her.

"She was still flying Spitfires on her 100th birthday. And two weeks before she died, she went the premiere of a film she was in, called Spitfire. She left the island early, went to the RAF celebration, and wined and dined until 12:30am. She was an amazing woman and loved every minute of life."

The two new classrooms now house pupils from Years 3 and 4, and will replace temporary classrooms that had been on site for years. They were funded by the government's Department for Education after an application by the Portsmouth and Winchester Diocesan Academies Trust (PWDAT) to the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF).

St Blasius is one of three academies within our diocese run by the Portsmouth and Winchester Diocesan Academies Trust. The trust's interim chief executive Fiona Perkins - who is also a former principal at the academy - spoke to children at the official opening too.