

I guess everyone who ever knew Nobby Houlton will link him with his carpet. I'm always reminded of him when I see James Cagney and his palm tree in the film 'Mr. Roberts'. Over the years I've encountered a number of 'leaders' who have adopted similar fanatical obsessions as petty demonstrations of their power, something that seems to come over people who finally achieve the 'top job'.

He wasn't just known as Nobby by the way. That was his 'soft' nickname. We always called him 'The Count', as in Dracula.

It was the mid sixties and the revolution was under way. The establishment, *his* establishment, was being challenged from all sides, rocking to the core his safe, ordered world and Nobby wasn't going quietly.

He was a stickler for correct school uniform. When yellow socks were all the rage he would inspect us all as we lined up for assembly, screaming at anyone with yellow socks to get rid of them, and sending people home, not to return until they got a haircut. He also hated to see anyone fidgeting. It is said that we always castigate others for our own shortcomings and he would often pause in mid speech to yell 'Stop scratching boy!', yet one of his own particular traits was to be constantly rubbing his forefinger along the side of his nose or stroking his neck with a kind of puzzled, distasteful sneer on his face.

During speech day rehearsal he made a fatal slip by announcing that we would conclude with 'God save the King...er I mean Queen'. Too late, on the big day it seemed like the entire school emphasised 'God save our gracious *KING*....!'

The School Song (King Henry's song) was another bone of contention for him as the chorus: 'for idleness is chief mistress of vices all', we were wont to hiss heavily on the 'sssess' which naturally drove him crazy. For days he rehearsed us and rehearsed us until we had toned it down to his satisfaction. But again, come the Big Day...

One memorable speech day, Mayor Addison (who spoke in a broad Hartlepool tongue) referred to the School Orchestra as 'the band'. A swell of barely suppressed mirth rippled around the assembly and Houlton, already stony-faced looked like he was about to explode.

I certainly remember his penchant for screaming 'LIAR!' at people. On one occasion when he was conducting some inquisition he went round the entire class asking each boy in turn: Was it you?' 'No Sir*', 'LIAR!'

He left the room screaming: "You're ALL Liars!"

In truth we all knew who the culprit was, but the culture of never snitching was strong and Houlton knew it too.

He once caned a group of us for having pens and money stolen from our blazer pockets during games. All three classes, A, B and C, did games together but there was only accommodation for two classes in the changing rooms which were then locked. Thus the C class had to change in the downstairs cloakroom, wide open to anyone who cared to wander in. The games teacher, a man called Peach was supposed to look after our money and valuables but balked at the volume of assorted (pre decimal) coins and flatly refused. Witnessing this, the thief, knew he had carte blanche to rifle our pockets and reaped a fine haul of cash and pens. Naturally, our mothers were incensed and made us report the thefts next morning. Houlton's response was to cane us all for being victims. With the thief now knowing that no one would be reporting him, he continued unimpeded.

That is until Major Gavin Donaldson arrived.

A dour Scotchman newly qualified as a teacher after leaving the army, he had a son, who unsurprisingly went straight into the 'A' class. Then the son had his pen pinched...

Now the thieving was taken seriously and a prolonged witch hunt ensued, conducted by the righteous Major. His approach was to suspect everybody, interrogate everybody, and punish everybody. Except, of course the thief.

There were a select number of privileged people in Lie school who Could Do No Wrong. They were the creme de la creme who came from Good Families, professional parents often with social connections to Houlton. These chosen elite were held as shining examples to the rest of the riff raff. For them, schooldays would be a jolly breeze, the smooth progression to university enhanced with awards, cups and medals. Their every accomplishment was celebrated and they seemed to belong to a world of open doors and privilege from which the rest of us were largely excluded.

Bullying was rife, but like the thieving, rarely addressed until an offspring of the Great and the Good fell victim. Then there would be yet another witch hunt where far worse bullying would be perpetrated by the teachers.

I was once hauled out of a class by a history teacher called Howe and accused of assaulting a first year. Howe, an angry hissing Yorkshireman, was white with fury, grabbing me by the hair, and dragging me down a flight of stairs heading for the physics lab. I had no idea what was going on but any protest provoked a clout round the head.

Arriving outside the physics lab I was presented to a small bespectacled child who I had never seen before. The child shook his head, declaring that he had never seen me before either. Howe's anger was now at boiling point. He dismissed me, still in that deadly white hot whisper warning me that he never wanted to see me ever again.

It transpired that the real perpetrator was the next, very similar name to mine on the register, and Howe had made a mistake. He was not a man to apologise, and I was too terrified of further reprisals to take it further.

He left shortly after.

Any achievement was usually announced during assembly, with particular emphasis on derring-do on the rugby pitch. Houlton loathed any kind of boisterous or enthusiastic applause, grudgingly allowing about eight seconds of polite, restrained clapping before his annoyance surfaced and silence was demanded.

One Monday morning, early in the Autumn 1963 term, I was again hauled out of class, this time by Owen Smith, the art teacher.

As before, anyone pulled out of class by another teacher meant just one thing, you were in Big Trouble! So to the murmuring and hissing of my fellows, I left the room wondering what I was in for this time.

Happily it was one of the nicest surprises I've ever had.

Unbeknown to me, in the previous term Owen Smith had entered one of my paintings in a national school art competition and I had won first prize in my age group.

This turned out to be a magnificent boxed set of oil paints, easel and canvasses. Also included was a framed print for the school art room. As far as I know, Houlton never acknowledged this and it certainly wasn't announced during assembly.

If someone in the rugby team had scored the winning try over Coatham (we were always playing Coatham) then this was infinitely more significant, - and I wasn't in the 'A' class.

The last time I met Houlton was in 1966, after I had left and gone to art college. I went back to see Owen Smith (he was shortly to retire) and we met Houlton in the corridor. He leaned back, (squinting hard at me, trying to remember who I was - he clearly didn't) scratching his nose and repeating "Eee! I never knew you had it in you!"

