

Discipline

In the six years I attended WHGS there were few if any breaches of discipline. We did what we were told without question, we paid attention in class, we did our homework on time, we did not question our marks and we never complained to our parents. Of course there were a few exceptions but by far the majority of us toed the line and were well aware of the serious consequences of any misdemeanour.

At that time most grammar schools were unisex. In boys' schools the model behaviour described above was largely the result of corporal punishment meted out at times with Dickensian ferocity which would certainly have met with approval by Wackford Squeers. This was after all considered the norm in those days. By the time we entered grammar school we were all too familiar with extreme forms of punishment and had been well and truly knocked into shape by the excesses of sadists like 'bruiser' Addis of Elwick Road Junior Boys.

Frequent caning ensured a level of discipline that would astonish today's teaching profession. Apart from the physical discomfort there did not appear to be any serious lasting effects other than encouraging docility and discouraging dissension of any sort. We became adept at hiding our feelings and our contempt for the teaching staff. Someone once said that the British make good actors because during their formative years they learn how to present a false impression to the adult world of a docile eager individual while managing to hide the seething rebellion that burned inside. The following three examples illustrate the sometimes hilarious situations that such rigid discipline produced.

I remember vividly the beginning of the school year in 1941 when Form 2A waited with apprehension the arrival of EN Houlton the English Literature master. He strode into the room with a firm stride and after a cursory 'Good Morning' and a few introductory remarks proceeded to hand out our new exercise books. They were stiff backed and of a better quality than we were used to. Each subject had its own distinctive colour and I think in this case the colour was green. There was a label on the front and much to our astonishment Houlton gave us a detailed description as to how we were to fill out the label. He spoke quietly and deliberately and made it very clear that he wanted us to reproduce exactly what he was about to write on the board. When he finished the blackboard example he gave us a few minutes to fill out our labels. Despite his quiet demeanour we were conscious of what seemed to be a sense of suppressed rage. Sitting there in our unfamiliar red blazers and striped ties we were after all a little awestruck at achieving grammar school status and rather intimidated by our surroundings it was after all a new building and far better equipped than any other school we had attended. We were also perplexed as to why Houlton was taking so much time telling us how to fill out a label as though we were five year olds. Obviously he attached a great deal of importance to this seemingly trivial exercise. Opposite the word 'Name' on the first line of the label he wrote 'Name'. Underneath that he put English Literature, Form 2A and September 5 1941 on Lines 2, 3 and 4. All this seemed fairly straightforward except for Line 1 where there was some

ambiguity. One or two boys looked anxiously round the class trying to decide what to do. At first sight it seemed obvious. But on the other hand he had been quite explicit. 'Fill out the label exactly as I have it on the board.' Was this some kind of trap, a rite of passage perhaps with painful consequences for those who got it wrong? After some agonising I bravely wrote my own name despite having serious doubts as to whether this would be acceptable. After a few minutes Houlton walked round the class to see what we had written and I can still remember his cry of exasperation when he discovered that half the class had written 'Name' on the first line.

Fast forward a couple of years to an incident that produced an even bigger reaction from the great man. By this time we had learned that Houlton's legendary temper was not exaggerated. It could explode with a minimum amount of provocation so it paid to recognise the preliminary warning signs and know when to keep quiet. The event in question occurred during a 4A history examination which was supervised by Houlton. In his usual fashion he outlined very carefully and deliberately the examination ground rules. It was all rather straightforward since by now we were quite familiar with examination etiquette. He ended his remarks by saying that he could see no reason for there to be any questions. Almost immediately NW put up his hand. With a sharp intake of breath a dramatic change took place in Houlton's demeanour. In measured tones he slowly repeated his last sentence. 'But sir' came the response and we all held our breath while Houlton (no doubt with a superhuman effort not to raise his voice) made it clear that the matter was closed and we were to get on with the examination.

An hour passed while we struggled with the questions. As usual many of us wished we had paid more attention in class and been more diligent with our homework. Eventually Houlton stopped what he was doing to stroll round the class and see how we were getting on. After a few moments of silent approval he stopped in horror in front of NW's desk. "What on earth are you trying to do" he cried in a strangled voice. What he saw needs some explanation. In those days everything had to be written in pen and ink. Pencils and fountain pens were forbidden (this was before the advent of ball points which would also have not been allowed). NW's problem was that he had forgotten his pen. One can only guess at the misery he must have endured. He could not just sit there staring into space but what could he do? In sheer desperation he decided to try using the pin which he kept in his lapel as a makeshift pen. He found that he could in fact do something with it and managed to cover a sheet of foolscap with an unholy mess of hieroglyphics punctuated by large blots, the only problem being that it was totally unreadable.

For once Houlton was at a loss for words or more likely speechless with rage. But as with the 'Name game' described above he really did not have a leg to stand on I cannot remember what happened next but I presume NW managed to get a pen eventually. He certainly deserved a medal for his perseverance and ingenuity.

The final example is somewhat different. It illustrates the kind of disciplinary power that a member of the teaching staff was able to exert when faced with a serious and potentially dangerous situation.

The incident occurred in the winter of 1942/43. It was the end of the school day and there was enough snow around to enable us to start throwing snowballs. What started as a friendly confrontation in the junior playground suddenly became a more serious matter when a bunch of seniors invaded our playground. Although small in numbers the seniors' fire power was greater than ours. They also resorted to all kinds of dirty tricks such as catching hapless juniors and rubbing their faces in the snow or stuffing snow down their necks. It was no contest and in no time we were in full retreat pursued triumphantly by the remorseless seniors. We headed for the driveway leading to the school gates and hopefully freedom from persecution. The driveway was quite long with a bend at the far end. Suddenly round the bend Mr. Boardman our French teacher appeared with his bicycle.

It must have been a terrifying sight. A hundred boys heading straight for him in what was rapidly becoming a panic stricken stampede. He had two options. Abandon all pretence of the dignity his exalted position represented and sprint for the school entrance or stand his ground and show this rabble who was boss. In the split second he had available to make a decision he chose the second option. With a mighty roar that would have startled a passing lion, he bellowed "Stop" followed by "Get back". As if by a miracle we all stopped. The pursued/pursuer distinction disappeared and rather sheepishly we made our way back to the junior playground.

Many of the senior boys were in the school Army Cadet Force and with their help 'Lieutenant' Boardman quickly had us lined up in column of threes with military precision. Noticing two school prefects trying to do their best to look inconspicuous he barked at them to stand out and come to the front. In those days prefects bridged the gap between the remoteness of the teaching staff and the rest of us. They had a certain authority and took a delight in admonishing their inferiors with commands such as 'take your hands out of your pockets.' Boardman told them in no uncertain terms what he thought of their conduct this afternoon and what a disgraceful example they were to the junior boys. A dressing down like this was of course music to our ears. Quite suddenly it was all over and we were free to make our way to our respective homes and as far as I can remember there were no repercussions. No doubt we all felt a sense of relief and of course satisfaction that the prefects had been humiliated. I am also quite certain that none of us gave a thought to what Boardman had been able to achieve and the remarkable way he had managed to take control of the situation.

We will never know what went through Boardman's mind as he turned the corner of the driveway. Was he supremely confident that he could turn back this hurtling mob or was he acting out of sheer terror? This time I think he is the one who deserved a medal.