

West Hartlepool Grammar School.

The local Grammar School, called West Hartlepool Secondary School in those pre-Comprehensive days, was a fine establishment with about 16 masters and 300 pupils, with a proud record of University scholarships and other achievements. Until 1938 it shared premises in Lauder Street (next to the Town Hall) with the Technical College evening classes; under this Box-&-Cox arrangement our gear had to be kept under lock and key, and our desks were heavily carved by 20-odd years of double-entry graffiti.

The Headmaster Ralph Todd was of local extraction but well endowed with wisdom and wit. Assembly announcements after Prayers were dispensed briefly with equal parts of instruction and dry humour and we held him in high regard. In the Fifth form he taught us English himself for 'Matric' year (O-level) and for the first time in my life I understood what a noun clause was: he wrote on the blackboard 'This is what I wanted' and 'This is a pudding' and he put a ring round 'a pudding' and another round 'what I wanted' – noun, noun clause; as easy as that. When we were studying 'Julius Caesar' and it came to Caesar's last words "Et tu Brute" I asked like an idiot "Please sir, why did he say it in French" and Mr.Todd's economical return was "Well did he?" No pompous showdown, no punishment, just a passing but devastating aside. A similar aside Mr.Todd dropped when a lad had a cat under his desk for some reason, and Todd's English lesson went something like this: - "Now the Central Stores has a fine dome on it, so what do they do? They put DRINK LUTONA COCOA up in lights; put that cat out, we don't want a cat in here". And the only one to put it out was the one who might have brought it in.

There were other outstanding teachers at the Grammar School – Dowland in Physics, Boardman in French, Leason in Maths, Foster in Latin. There were of course others who bored us into the ground and some who couldn't even keep order; some who caned (usually on the backside) and others who didn't need to.

One thing stands out: it's the teacher that counts, not the subject. For the

first two years at Grammar School we had an unpleasant Maths master, an Oxbridge sadist beside himself with superiority, followed by a bore who couldn't keep order either, and only in the Matric. Form did we get Mr. Leason who made Maths look easy and was a great guy too. He didn't come to us until after Christmas 1936, yet in July 1937 I matriculated with a Distinction in Maths after three years of algebraic incompetence, so that I plumped for the Science Sixth although I had a bent for the Arts.

But the most memorable was Fred Hill the music Master because he was the complete teacher, not only good at music but good at teaching: he taught English, Maths, Shorthand, Bookkeeping and anything else the Head asked of him, let alone extra-mural activities like chess and snooker. He loved his job, he loved the school, he loved us and we loved him. As for his music it was magic, sparkling with invention and fun. He didn't attempt to teach musical rudiments to the unmusical but kept everyone happy with a kaleidoscope of variety – hymns, partsongs, one-man G & S shows like 'The Mikado' (I've never heard a Pooh-bah as good since, even in D'Oyly Carte performances), gramophone records long before 'Musical Appreciation' had been thought of, classical arias and campfire songs taught by example and by rote without copies, all with scintillating piano accompaniments. I still recall his first appearance before us in 1933, when he fixed us with magnetic eyes as he walked towards the piano and struck up a hymn for us to sing ('Glorious things of Thee are spoken' it was), ignoring the piano and looking over it straight at us.

Fred also ran a School Camp in Borrowdale, on a shoestring - £4.10s (£4.50) for a fortnight. By 1938 we could make it, as Dad had found a job and I as a 6th-former was given a Maintenance Grant, helping to support this 6ft specimen of overgrown adolescence. (Mind you, according to the chemist's weighing machine with a table of heights and weights I should have been 4ft. 6ins.)

Fred's idyllic campsite was two fields upstream of Stonethwaite, where the beck supplied fresh water for all our needs. The first job was to dig the latrines and erect tents over them; toilet roll outside indicated vacancy.

But Lake District weather is notoriously changeable and in 1938 it was too wet to set up camp; so we slept in Todhunter's barn for the week-end, high up on the hay, sharing our smells with the cattle; but they didn't seem to mind, even when we started to sing to the accompaniment of two guitars and two tin-whistles, the best orchestra we could muster. As the rain sluiced down we found that the most practical wear for walking the pebbled path to Rosthwaite was sou'wester, cycle cape, bathing costume and gym shoes. The

sou'wester I had to borrow, but I did have a bathing costume, given to me back home by Mr.Garthwaite after the elbows had been darned.

But the weather brightened by the Monday, and before long it was too hot to walk far, so one day we slept in the sun and set off for Great Gable at midnight, with one torch between us. It was certainly not too hot and at dawn we shivered on Gable. My recollection is that of seeing the rising sun reflected in Wastwater, but a Borrowdale expert Arthur Ray assures me it must have been an illusion as morning mist resembles a lake and we were facing the wrong direction anyway. Whatever, it was a never-to-be-forgotten experience.

The end of 1938 marked the end of our shared school at Lauder Street, and I was one of those helping the move to new buildings augmenting the stately home of Brinkburn, built by a Victorian timber importer in spacious grounds on the edge of the town; and here we were treated to brand new furniture and equipment undreamed of, like two pianos, one of them a concert grand. The removal went without a hitch and the school retained its old traditions and staff – mainly for the good, though we could have done without one or two of them. But that's life – you take the rough with the smooth.

It was no fault of the building that my academic career took a turn for the worse, but it certainly didn't fulfil its earlier promise. I had been expected to match my sister by winning my way to University and I did Matriculate with distinctions and scored creditably in 'Higher', but failed the Scholarship paper in my best subject Maths. I virtually wasted a year trying again and wondered what to do instead if I failed once more. I had been planning to be an architect, but I was steered towards a Civil Service exam in Post Office Engineering, which fell through when Mr.Chamberlain told us "No such undertaking has been received and consequently we are at war with Germany". I took no more advice but decided to apply for a job. With my good record in Chemistry ICI seemed a likely place. I had no enthusiasm for the chemical industry but there was one handy at Billingham – none of this modern ideology that your ambitions should be fulfilled. Nobody really fancies work; I wanted to be a cinema organist but that wasn't reckoned to be a proper job and there was no known route to it from Education – any more than other coveted jobs like acting or footballing.

Of course it was not the aim of Grammar Schools to route their pupils into pleasant occupations, or indeed into any occupations other than further academy. It was R.S.Reed, Principal of the Technical College in Lauder Street, who took sufficient interest in me to see I was keener on practical work and suggested Post Office Engineering. Meanwhile he got me a Saturday half-crown job tutoring one of his pupils in Applied Maths, and a

half-crown was solid silver in those days (almost literally). So I was indebted to Mr. Reed for his interest in me and I even attended his Technical College for Engineering while marking time at Brinkburn. He could see I was no chemist and he was not an ICI fan, but when war broke out there seemed to be nothing else for it.

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