

Chapter 2 School

I have not much recollection of infant school in Tring although there is one forceful memory. It is of the gas mask we had to carry at all times. Hung round your neck in a cardboard container it was a quite ghoulish item. Made of black rubber with huge glass eyepieces and a cylindrical filter it gave a boy a most sinister appearance when worn. Another recollection is that I was not very quick to learn.

Air raid shelter trenches were dug in the chalk playing fields near Miswell Lane and we had great fun taking cover in these and hurling chunks of chalk at one another. The piece de resistance was the high slide, as a make do observation post, but this was nearly the end of John Coldwell who fell all the way from the top, a distance of some fifteen feet. I was there as it happened and he looked mortally wounded but luckily was fully recovered in a month or so.

I did not appreciate the financial effort that my father spent in sending me to Berkhamsted Public School as a dayboy: I was paired with some boy called Mosevitch whose father was apparently some world renowned concert pianist not that that meant much to me.

School was an absolute pain. Whoever said your school years were the best years of your life was crackers. Living on the western side of Tring, the distance to the railway station on the eastern side was two miles and the theory was that the station bus would meet the Berkhamsted train. The steam train was very often late so the bus would go and I had a very good knowledge of every tree, house, and paving stone between station and home. You could always determine those travelling to school by train by the ash smuts on white shirts. One glimmer of light on the train journey was Muriel. Being the only schoolgirl on the train she was most careful to distribute her favours fairly.

Northchurch tunnel lasted for one minute and twelve seconds and once every week it was my turn for a grope with Muriel whilst lying in the string luggage rack. Roger Ayres, one of the regular school commuters, was the son of the proprietor of New Mill General Stores: one morning in 1946 he turned up for the train with a magnificent surprise – a tub of ice cream made with his father’s new machine for each of us. We had forgotten that ice cream even existed.

Rugby and cricket were the main sports and I did not excel at either although I did win the competition to throw the cricket ball furthest. One thing I did quite well was to shoot and I represented the school at Bisley. My best results were at the 500 yards distance (perhaps this was because of my nefarious practice, aged 12, with a bren machine gun).

Misdemeanours were soon sorted out in the Prefects’ hut – drop your trousers and several hearty whacks to your rear with a slipper.

School orders were so ridiculous that you were put on a charge if caught speaking to any female who was not your mother or your sister. Eventually I took to cycling to school. The trick here was to catch up with the bus on the return home as the vehicle slowed for Pendley Beeches fuelled by the gas trailer it was towing. A pull up Pendley Beeches would speed us for the downhill run into town. Gaucin the French master was a mean and spindly man. I was no good at the language and he took a dislike to me. Any lack of attention was rewarded with a hit to the back of the hand with a ruler: edge-on. Mr. Waters, the Geography master was a lovely man at the other end of the spectrum and, of course, his nickname was “Puddles”. As for Religious education the Chaplain, Slick Redfern, was a pushover whom we treated abominably. Non-stop banging of desk lids, paper aeroplanes and, of course, books resting on top of a half open door. The jewel of all the subjects was of course

science and especially Chemistry where there was fissible material and we could make things bubble, smell and explode. Aged 12 we were given just one brief talk in the science block on sex education: I remember the master at the blackboard chalking up his idea of what went where. Some years were to pass before I was able to put his instruction into effect.

Much admired was the young blonde wife of the Housemaster and I think she knew and enjoyed the lust she inspired in her husband's flock.

I think one of the best lessons I learned at school was to do with a boy called Glazier. He was a bully and much feared. On one of the occasions when he had a go at me, I got mad and decided to risk everything and have a go back. By good fortune, I got a punch into his solar plexus and he never bothered me again - a fundamental plexus.

The highlight of my education had to be to do with the French examination for Matriculation Exemption. French was hard and I was dreading the paper. However, on reading the test my heart soared. Having attached to it a mark of 20% for the examination, was an instruction to translate a poem from French to English and I knew it by heart. Good old mean, nasty, horrible Gaucin.

Aged around ten we would visit the Rex cinema at Tring. There would be amazing films featuring Buck Rogers and others. Especially vividly do I remember the scenes of flying machines belching smoke from their bellies; never for an instant did I consider that such things could come to pass in just a few years.

Whilst still at school several of us went to Ballroom dancing lessons with a teacher at Tring, aged about forty I suppose. She could not emphasise too much how important it was to

have good posture. This could be achieved by dancing
stomach to stomach. When putting this to effect I knew
where the boys' minds were going, but never knew what
were her thoughts!