

## I REMEMBER.

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St. Barts 1945-1952**

I remember a school, and the people who lived and worked in it, with enormous affection for I would not have achieved what I have in life if it had not taken me in, understood me, and sent me off to Oxford and beyond.

We came by train, mother and I, early on a sunny afternoon in 1945. We walked up Enborne Road and entered what was to be my home for the next seven years. Mother handed me over to a lady whom I subsequently found out to be the Matron and left. That was that and I found myself alone and was told to go outside and play. I suppose I reckoned that some other boys might be around but it was for me a very, very long time before any turned up. I had never been away from home and here I was aged twelve in very strange surroundings some distance from home in Windsor.

But, boys eventually appeared and I met my fellow travellers in the Common Room of the Boarding House. It was quite a small room but managed to house a snooker table and small lockers for each of us boarders. My fellow travellers all seemed to know each other already and it turned out that a number were from the prep school, which, at that time, was nearby. Oddly enough those became some of my best friends but there were only some ten or so of what was known as Year 1 and we soon realised that there was definite sense in being ‘united’.

Obstacles quickly appeared in the sheer size of other boys who ranged up to the Elysian Heights of the Sixth Forms. Prefects some were and, although reasonably friendly, they certainly let one know where one was in the ‘pecking order’. The Head of House when I started was M.E. Fraser backed up by eight House Monitors. We at the bottom of the ladder quickly learnt that ‘hear all, see all and say nothing’ when in their presence was the order of the day. They ruled over us. I remember sitting in the dining hall at homework and woe betide any one who might take his eyes off work.

So my life at N.G.S., or Saint Bartholomew’s, or Wormestall’s, as a boarder began. I can look back with regret at some missed chances but with a certain sense of pride in opportunities taken. But, above all, I have the deepest and most sincere thanks to all those who saw something in me and who effectively allowed me to succeed, to reach Oxford University and make something of my life. I entered Form 1, which was for those aged eleven and I was actually twelve in the previous June. The combination of my mother’s determination and the recognition by the then Head, Rutherford Harley, that there was something in that quiet boy who sat with the two of them whilst my future was determined saw my entry secured. I had previously failed the Eleven Plus for entry into Maidenhead Grammar School. I entered Form 1A, the top stream, and never left the A Stream.

The Boarding House, of some sixty or so boys, was self-contained. There was the Common Room and bedrooms and not much else. Rooms were pretty bleak (no pictures or posters in those days!). The stairs were solid stone. It was part of the main school buildings and so one could use the library and form rooms during evenings and the weekends. Our dining room was also used by the school for lunches. It was also where all boarding house meetings, homework sessions etc took place. The dormitories were reasonable in size and numbers but the beds were of iron and noisy with worn springs. But then I suppose that bouncing about on such a bed will soon reduce it to shrieks! We started off in the Junior Dorm with, I think, ten of us. One of our first lessons was in bedmaking and those 'hospital corners'! No breakfast until bed were made and passed by Matron. Food was not bad, although I can remember having to take a knife and fork to cut up a peculiar version of a jelly. We also had to wash up after breakfast but lunch was with the whole school and I don't think we were ordered to wash up supper, although all plates and cutlery were collected and removed by us. Certainly we swept the floors and another lesson was learnt in how to sweep a floor correctly. The Matron and her assistant were extremely kind and helpful and I cannot remember a harsh word unless it was merited by untidiness or some such misdemeanour. We also had access to the school grounds, the gym and the open air swimming pool.

Boarding was organised but never overpowering. The town was near Greenham Common, the major American Air Force Base and Americans were seen around the town. We were allowed down into Newbury after school and at weekends. Much more importantly were the 'food' shops. First-class cakes and something completely new, waffles, hot and jammy, from a shop opposite the Cornmarket, and hot pies. Then there was the Bandelog, a very good café, where I especially remember a birthday one Easter of a lad, Burford Brown by name, and, amongst other delicacies, being introduced to Simnel Cake. To begin with, sweets were still rationed and mother used to send me a small box every so on. Later, the School Shop was the major target at morning break and there appeared a new delight the Crunchie Bar. I remember taking a boat out on the local lake with Robin Bonner Morgan and no problems such as are posed today by health and safety rules.

My brother Richard, three years younger, followed me, having passed his Eleven Plus. He and I had different personalities and interests. He enjoyed his years and gathered numerous friends with whom he still communicates. His memories will be different to mine but equally varied and interesting.

Onwards and upwards I, and my fellows, progressed through the school. For some reason Rutherford Harley thought I should follow the Classics and so I never entered a science class or laboratory even. I soon gave up Greek but by then it was too late. I actually felt a certain inferiority to my fellows who came back from a science lesson talking about magnesium flares and large tin cans being squashed as the air was removed from them. It all seemed great fun and not quite the same as taking part in the Chorus in a Greek play.

Apart from what were then the fairly new and up to date science block and the gym, the general state of classrooms would by modern standards be described as poor. They were

small, crammed with the old iron desks with a lid and an ink well, and, apart from the odd book shelf, not much else as there was hardly enough room to get around. The art and music rooms were better and more spacious. The masters' common room was at the top of the stairs around to the left and the school office was directly ahead. Our school prefects' common room was up rickety stairs by the side of the office and 'out of bounds' to everybody, including staff. No posh chairs or any thing like there is today but it was ours and I think we did have a kettle and some basic cups etc. It was a small space and it was difficult to accommodate all of us at once.

Being useful both at rugby and cricket I spent much time in practise and playing for teams. Looking back, this detracted from the Arts and I did not really develop much detailed knowledge of art or music but there was much around and visits to the local Cornmarket to see Merrie England, and King Lear, or to Stratford to numerous Shakespeare plays, or Gilbert and Sullivan's Ruddigore, or the local cinema to see Lawrence Olivier in King Henry V, built up a basis for the future. There were two cinemas in the town at that time. One was of good quality, the other rather smaller and a bit dowdy. We were not supposed to enter but it is amazing what one can get away with! We also had professional musicians coming into school. Two I recall like yesterday. One was Evelyn Barbirolli, the wife of the great conductor, Sir John. She played the oboe and even the most 'barbaric' of us realised we were in the presence of quality. Another was the Finzi Quartet and I recall Maggs, sitting with some of us up in the gallery, squatting on his haunches mimicking them by pretending to play a snake charmer's pipe, such was his dislike of the music. Some staff played at morning assembly. Maggs, himself, played the piano. A small orchestra included Seaborne, who once managed to break a string on his double bass. Above all was the head of music, Keene, a superb pianist and who conducted the local town choir and orchestra. He was a real enthusiast but died not long after I started.

Talking about assemblies reminds me that a prefect always read the lesson of the day from the Bible. It was, to say the least, very nerve-racking on the first occasion. We did not chose our lesson and my first one was a long, difficult passage from Deuteronomy and I remember Pud Abel having a sympathetic word afterwards. He sat just by the lectern and quite clearly saw me quaking!

By my final year I was Head of Boarding, Head of Davis House, a School Prefect, The Under Officer of the Cadet Corps, and, having had a relaxed first year in the Sixth (no exams in those days!), had to work very hard both for Advanced Level and Oxford Examinations which entailed Latin unseen translation. I say Oxford because my one visit to Cambridge for interview was a failure. My geography master, Seaborne, had recommended me to his old College, Queens, but the interview lasted just a few minutes and I knew, as one does, that they were not interested in a 'grammar school' boy. The other lads, who were up there for interview, were from a clutch of 'first division' independent schools and as we walked round the City they seemed to be from a different world as they talked about their schools.

So, where are the boarding lads of my time? I've never been one for reunions but the mind's eye sees Bonner Morgan, Preston, Shambrook, Cadell, Wilder, Burford Brown, Spindler amongst others and Abbott, Fishleigh, Slater etc of the day lads. All achieved high levels of attainment in their particular fields thanks to St. Barts. Of all of them Wilder became a real friend. Complete opposites, we worked well together. Those who remember his Hamlet or his Lord Chancellor in Gilbert and Sullivan's Iolanthe, and his musicality will know just how good he was. Not surprisingly, he became Chairman of The Durham University Debating Society. If you read this Neville you will remember one Spring Term long and boring days isolated in the sanatorium as we recovered from mumps.

One other lad must be mentioned. He joined the school as a boarder later on, after his mother had died. His father was, I think, a bank manager. Tony Davis was a 'one off'. He was of the highest intellect and an outstanding cricketer. He went to Reading University and then to Cambridge where he achieved First Class Honours in Classics. He opened the batting for Berkshire in the Minor County Championship for many years and could have achieved First Class status. He became Head of Boarding and led us a merry dance. I doubt if this story has ever been told but in the depths of night, at around midnight, a few of us sixth formers used to steal up to the masters' common room, put on their university gowns, go out and run over the playing fields waving and flapping our gowns. We also had a secret cache of cider. On return we placed the gowns carefully back and retired to bed. Wormestall arose several times during that year.

Tony introduced cider into the boarding house. That was completely forbidden but he managed it. Cider in those days was The Drink and I do not think that any of us was ever found the worst for wear. Oddly enough he and I never got on and it was Tony who took every opportunity to remind me that I was only 'average', and after Geoff Abbott and I had opened the innings against the Nautical College Pangbourne and won the match by ten wickets he, as Captain of Cricket, voted against me having my full colours. Confidence is important and I don't think that for the school I ever achieved at cricket what I could have done. Later, at Oxford, playing for St. Peter's, I again opened the batting and in my second year we were undefeated!

But the final memories must belong to the staff, all men, who gave us the confidence and enthusiasm to fulfil our potentials. I remember Old Baines brought out of retirement to take 1A. He introduced me to chess. Pud Abell taught us English and was the man who introduced me to literature and books. I remember in 2A sitting in class on a Friday afternoon just listening to him reading Shakespeare and his voice captured the characters and the language in such a manner that he just went on until the lesson ended, then shut his book, stood up and said he would continue next week! I don't think that staff had to fill out detailed lesson plans in those days and we were the benefit of inspired teaching that went off into such tangents. My favourite subject before St Barts had been geography and Snozzle Seaborne soon realised I was an enthusiast. He it was who saw me through to ultimate success. My greatest delight was entertaining him to tea in my rooms at St. Peter's Hall (now College) during my first year. Bill Slatter, Sutton and Sewter developed my cricket. Maggs supported us all in many ways. He took a couple of us one

Saturday to watch Hampshire play at the County Ground in Southampton. Doug Saint kept my real interest in History alive in the Sixth Form. Ismay educated me into the intricacies of back stage work as I became a senior stage hand. Idris Herbert, the Deputy Head, was a remarkable man. He possessed enormous energy and had a very responsible job but found time each year to duplicate in the office the official magazine of School House (the boarding house). He spent evenings at it, having to put into print our handwriting before turning the handle, and the published version covered several pages. Then there is Captain Edwards to whom I am eternally grateful. It was who led me through the intricacies of translating Latin prose at University Examination level. Finally, the Head, Ballantyne, who succeeded Rutherford Harley. He saw that something in me as others did, and, once Cambridge had rejected me, actually went up to Oxford to make the school known and to let them know that there were some grammar school boys who might be useful. So, I went up to St. Peter's Hall (now College), sat the examinations, including Latin translation, had interviews and succeeded. At one interview I was asked about my batting average. At the other I met Robert Steel (later Professor of Geography at Liverpool, and then Vice Chancellor of Swansea University) and I remember we talked about 'our' subject for some time and he seemed impressed by my reading amongst other things.

Yes, I owe what I have managed to achieve to St. Bartholomews and more importantly to all those who worked in it. I apologise to those whose names I have not mentioned. The old buildings have seen may a success because of the quality of the people, staff and boys, passing through despite the lack of facilities that now are taken for granted. May the new purpose-built school retain some of the history of the old and build on that strong basis. History points both back and forwards and so gives credence for the present. Wormestall should be pleased for after all, it has continued onwards and upwards since he founded his Chantry in 1466.