

PORTSMOUTH SOUTHERN GRAMMAR SCHOOL AT HIGHLAND ROAD

A MEMOIR BY DAVID BROWN

("D.R." to most, "Brun" to a few, "Doc" uniquely to Bill Pashley)

Early in September 1945 between five hundred and six hundred boys and a full complement of schoolmasters arrived at Highland Road school which became the home of the Portsmouth Southern Grammar School for Boys for many years to come. They didn't have full use of the premises – a part was retained for the Infants and Junior sections of the original school. It's not clear where the older pupils from that school were accommodated, if indeed there had been any. My brother, a pupil there until the Summer of 1945, assures me that it had catered for all ages up to 14 so presumably they were scattered among other schools in the area such as at Francis Avenue.

Most of the boys had already been pupils at the Southern Grammar School for a year or more but not in Portsmouth. The greater part of the establishment had been evacuated to the New Forest area around Brockenhurst in 1939 (it seems that the Bishop Wordsworth School in Salisbury was also a destination but details of who went there are lacking) and returned in time for the first full term following the end of World War Two. Although having no firm information I suspect that a few boys did not, in fact, return but stayed in the New Forest; some may well have had nowhere and nobody to return to. Fathers had been killed on active duty, mothers had died during the Blitz on Portsmouth, houses had been bombed out of existence.

Other boys came from three sources. Some had started with Grammar Schools in other parts of the country for a variety of reasons during the war years. I, for example, was living in Gosport when I passed the 11-plus examination (or "the scholarship" as it was commonly called in those days) and so joined Gosport County School which was evacuated to Eastleigh. During the war my parents moved to Portsmouth so it made sense for me to transfer to a Portsmouth school in 1945. (Actually, Gosport County School came back from evacuation at the end of 1944 so I had two terms crossing Portsmouth harbour to attend school daily.) A second source was boys who, often for the lack of opportunity to try, had not passed the 11-plus but were assessed by their headmasters and the education authorities as likely to benefit from a grammar school education. They tended to arrive as 13-year olds and would be placed in classes with 11-year olds so as not to put them at too great a disadvantage academically. Some were older still and in my class of 13-year olds we gained two boys aged 15. The third source was the new intake.

At that time the school's annual intake was about one hundred pupils who were divided into three forms labelled A, B and C. My impression is that the top 33 or so from the 11-plus examination started in form A, the next 33 in B and the remainder in C. Then, at the end of each academic year, a sort of promotion and relegation might take place when the bottom few in form A would be compared/contrasted with the top few in form B (with a similar review between form B and form C) and boys moved from one form to the other if that were deemed in their best interests. I don't know who took the decisions but presume that the Headmaster and form masters must have been involved. That initial type of allocation changed during my five years at the school with the intake rising to 120 or so spread across four forms and what seemed to be a random distribution during the first year which was used for assessment leading to streaming by perceived ability in the second year. Another impression, which may be wrong, is that all of us managed to crowd into the hall (gymnasium?) for morning assembly; my only clear recollection of that space is that there was a small, low stage at one end which was occupied by masters during assembly and used for the "house plays" (of which more later). There must have been a piano as well, though, because Colin Peters used to play; his touch was such that, eighteen months after I left school and three thousand miles away in Egypt, I heard a piano being played in the camp NAAFI and knew at once that he was the pianist.

Whatever our ages, none of us had a school uniform in 1945 – not a blazer, not a tie nor a cap, not even a standard pair of trousers. Times were hard and even if you had money it couldn't on its own buy you a new set of clothes. There were few in the shops and what was on display was rationed; if you didn't have the right number of clothing coupons you went without. When clothes rationing was introduced in 1941 we had 66 coupons each per annum and a blazer required 8, so Mum would probably have given priority to a pair of trousers (6), a shirt (4) and a pair of shoes (3). However, rationing continued until 1949 with the allocation of coupons being reduced first to 48 and then again in 1945 to 36 – with no change in the number required for each item. We seemed to manage adequately without a dress code and I recall wearing a pair of my father's Royal Marine trousers from which the red stripe down the side had been removed.

On the academic side, we were prepared to take the School Certificate examination at the age of 15 or 16 and the Higher School Certificate examination at age 17 and/or 18 for those (comparatively few) who stayed on into the 6th Form. To gain the School Certificate it was necessary to gain at least a pass in five subjects; English Language, Mathematics and Latin were mandatory and the other two had to include a modern foreign language and a science subject. It was all examinations, too – no course work back then.

Higher School Certificate required at least three passes, either in "The Arts" (English, French, Latin, History were the major subjects for our pupils) or in "Science" (where Pure Maths, Applied Maths, Physics and Chemistry held sway). There were some exceptions – Geography attracted a few candidates and one chap took up Biology which required him to attend classes at the Southern Grammar School for Girls thereby attracting many an envious glance from his form mates. Something tells me that the boys studying Chemistry had to learn some German and at some point we on the Arts side were roped in for a few lessons. The "Arts" side of the Sixth Form was known as "Modern", the first year having the abbreviation 6M1, the second 6M2 and the third 6M3. The corresponding Science forms were 6S1, 6S2, 6S3. I have a suspicion that my form in 1950 was the last to sit for the Higher School Certificate before the introduction of GCE's or something similar (GCSE?).

What was achieved academically? My records don't help at all but one salient fact is that in 1950 there were about thirteen Universities in Great Britain so, especially when compared with today, very few people actually got to one. Consider this: in September 1945 there were about one hundred boys in my year; fewer than thirty of them made it into the Sixth Form in September 1947 and of those a mere handful remained for the year starting September 1949 at the age of seventeen. Things get blurred at this remove but as I recall it only two of us (me to Southampton, Tony Blackler to London) went on to University; on the other hand I think that more than we two won Portsmouth Major Scholarships which paid the tuition and accommodation fees as well as giving something towards other living expenses. Some entered the Armed Forces (at least two of my form became RAF officers) or the Executive class of the Civil Service. A substantial number of those who didn't stay on beyond School Certificate joined the Royal Navy as engineering artificers or took advanced apprenticeships in the Dockyard.

Sport had a part to play in our development and one afternoon a week was set aside for it. Initially we played wherever a pitch was available for football or cricket, often at Baffins (in all honesty I don't remember it being anywhere else but perhaps Southsea Common and/or Bransbury Park were venues). Eventually, though, the school gained its own sports field on the Eastern Road near the then operational Portsmouth Airport. The football First XI was allocated its own pitch and there were several others plus a real pavilion with showers. Luxury indeed.

The main game in winter was, of course, football and we all aspired to emulate Bryan Daysh who won a cap with England schoolboys. Derek Edwards would almost certainly have done so but had the misfortune to be competing for a place with another Edwards, namely Duncan, later of Manchester United and England fame. Yet another Edwards was Brian, who signed for Portsmouth Football Club and made one First Division appearance against Liverpool. John Lennon also signed for the club and appeared in the reserve team. The school teams were supervised by Mr R R Davies and later by Mr Tooze. For a while, perhaps just one season, the assembled school on Monday morning was given an eye-witness report of the First XI's match on the previous Saturday. Our budding reporter was Cecil Jacques.

The school Rugby team was started in 1948, not surprisingly perhaps by a chap with a Welsh background – Neville Gwyn Long. He found plenty of support among those who were physically competent but not blessed with the sorts of skills needed for soccer and managed to arrange games against a few local sides, the first being versus the Northern Grammar School. My memory, which could be faulty, says we won 9 – 0 but has lost track of where it actually took place; for some reason Eastney Barracks sports fields keeps springing to mind. Our own playing field had no Rugby pitch or goalposts at that time so it presumably wasn't there. Through a series of unfortunate events – shades of Lemony Snicket - I ended up as captain of the XV that day in my first (and indeed only) rugby match. I proudly boast to my children that under my captaincy the school team was never defeated and never had a point scored against them; the singularity of my appearance is not stressed.

Athletics wasn't entirely neglected but didn't figure largely in the scheme of things. There was an annual school sports day, held in 1946 on Baffins field which became the site for the new school some years later (in 1954?). At least one other was held on the cinder track in the Royal Navy's stadium at Pitt Street but where the remaining three during my stay at the school took place has completely slipped my mind. So have details of the inter-schools events in which we competed against the Northern Grammar School and the Portsmouth Grammar School (I don't think St. John's College took part). There were annual cross-country races held on Portsdown Hill or thereabouts; memory suggests that each year's intake had its own race with another race for all Sixth Form pupils.

I haven't mentioned the "house" system whereby each boy was assigned to one of four houses – Blue, Brown, Green or Yellow. The four competed against one another, mainly but not exclusively in the sporting field. The inter-house football matches (from which the school's First and Second XI players were generally omitted) were keenly but not over-skilfully contested and details of the cricket matches (which were even less skilfully contested) were faithfully recorded in a score book. Have any been preserved? An example of the lack of skill: Thomas was fielding as a somewhat short mid-off and gave a cry of anguish as the ball, bowled by A W C Blackler, hit him in the back of the neck. Each house had a house master and I suspect that each also had a house captain but details are lacking.

I remember little about the school's cricket teams other than that the master in charge was Mr Chatterton who taught Chemistry, that Les Jones and Geoff Elderfield were a pair of demon bowlers, Bill Bagley could spin the ball and Don Sanders was an agile slip fielder. Being keen on cricket (still am) but pretty useless at most aspects of it (still am) I became scorer to the Second XI and played once (against Price's, Fareham) when someone failed to turn up. The score book will show that I hit a six; it won't show that it consisted of a two plus four overthrows.

Each individual could accumulate sports points which counted towards qualification for a medal, gold, silver or bronze. Details of the system are lost in the mists of time but presumably points were awarded for representing the school in some activity or for performance at the school sports day or for playing in a house team. The only thing I recall for certain is the time trial for 100 yards – if you managed the distance in 13 seconds you gained some points – which was organised at least once by Mr S G Davies, one of the Maths masters. My efforts in the years 1945 – 47 gained me a certificate saying that I could claim a silver medal "after the war". The war had, of course, ended before I started to accumulate those points but no matter – I never received a medal and don't know of anyone who did.

There were some extra-mural activities. The Sixth Formers were allowed to mingle (under strictly supervised conditions, of course) with their opposite numbers from the girls Southern Grammar at the Athenaeum. There would be a talk by one or more pupils, or some form of debate/discussion. Just once during my Sixth Form days we held a social to which the same girls were invited – possibly the only occasion on which a conga line weaved its way across the playground. Does anyone know whether it was a unique event? We were all taken once to the Odeon cinema on the corner of Festing Road to see the film "Scott of the Antarctic" and in later years (I remember just the one occasion) there was a school trip; the main trip on that occasion was to London to see a production of Noel Coward's "Present Laughter". Looking back I wonder whether that was a suitable play for 17-year olds. However, Fillingham and I didn't see it because we volunteered to stay behind and perform all the Senatorial duties for the day. We went on our own later on, visiting the House of Commons and then a revue starring Bonar Colleano. I think we got the better deal. One thing not clear to me is how I was talked into watching a production by the girls of Portsmouth High School of "Viceroy Sarah" which was so boring that only the title remains with me.

During some Summer holidays harvest camps were organised by several masters, one of whom was Mr Hitchins who taught French. I know he was involved because on one occasion I accompanied him to the camp in his car and he gave me my first driving lesson; it was along the lines of "Should I fall unconscious while driving, steer the car as best you can, kick my feet away from all pedals and press your own foot on that one there". The camp during my years was always at a farm in East Chinnock, a Somerset village half-way between Yeovil and Crewkerne, and the general rule was that you caught a particular train from Portsmouth or Fratton station. Your bicycle was placed in the guard's van and you rode it from Yeovil station to the farm. We were accommodated in tents and our meals were cooked by the masters' wives. The masters found work for us, contracting with a local farmer for instance to pull the flax from a field or two for an agreed price. They also, presumably, kept the books and shared the profits amongst us in due course.

They tried hard to push some culture into us and one method was the school play. There were at least four during my five years at the school: "The Tempest" came first, probably in 1946, followed in successive years by "Henry V", "The Merchant of Venice" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream". If you look very carefully at the cast photograph for "Henry V" you may see me as the only 15th century maid to own a 20th century wrist watch. The plays were performed in the Hall of the Training College at Milton, just across the road from the "White House" pub, the terminus for the number 5/6 trolley bus. After my time someone grew more ambitious and my little brother appeared in a production of "The Pirates of Penzance" in 1955 or 1956. All these were full scale productions under the control of the teaching staff. At a lower level, though, came the house plays.

Producing them was the boys' own work, so to speak. Once a year each house selected a one-act play, nominated a director and a cast and presented the outcome on the small stage in the school hall. They were in competition, with a judge to assess all aspects of the production and decide on a winner. Few memories of these remain and the only play that genuinely comes to mind is "The Monkey's Paw" from the story by W W Jacobs although there is a half-glimpse too of something from Saki. What is certain is that the judge in at least one year was Mrs Aileen Mills, wife of the then current headmaster and a professional actress. Her theatrical career is not known to me beyond the role of Dot Luscombe that she played in the BBC Radio serial "The Luscombes".

Her husband, Mr H J Mills, was one of three to hold the post of headmaster during the years 1945-1950. The first was Mr G B H Jones who lived in Exeter Road, Southsea and, according to an old school report of mine, was a Master of Arts (Cantab) and a Barrister-at-Law who had been awarded the Military Cross. In those days a headmaster could still afford to spend time in the classroom and he took my form through the Acts of the Apostles in Religious Instruction. Sadly, he died in office sometime in 1946 or 1947 – certainly after 25 October 1946 on which day he signed my first school prize from the Southern Grammar.

The next, who acted as a caretaker pending appointment of the next permanent incumbent, was Mr C Hore – presumably the most senior teacher on the staff at the time. He held the reins until the arrival in the Autumn term 1947 of Mr H J Mills (who signed my next school prize on 28 November 1947). Mr Mills was still there when I left and his wife Aileen was still alive in September 2004 at the age of 93.

He had strong views on how his school should be organised and they included handing some power to the pupils. That led to the formation of The Senate which was intended to be an exercise in democracy. The headmaster retained the right to appoint the Head Boy and a Deputy but styled them Consul and Pro-Consul. Another 23 pupils, who had to be in the Sixth or Fifth Forms, were to be elected by all those from the Third Form upwards and given the title of Senator. In effect, these 25 were the school prefects under a different name and presumably the first batch included all those who were already prefects at the time of change-over. Elections were certainly held at the start of the 1948/49 school year (I was a successful candidate) and I think that they were the first. It may have been at this time that a Senator was first distinguished by the braid sewn round the edges of his blazer (yes, we had made some progress towards a school uniform by then).

The Senators were mainly in their second or third year in the Sixth Form with a few in their first year while John Lennon was the only exception that I recall, being elected while he was still in the Fifth. We (the Senators) realised that some of our classmates did not have the charisma which would support their election and sought a means of overcoming that problem. The solution was simple: we gave ourselves three votes while everybody else had just the one and agreed among ourselves which candidates were to receive the extra votes. It didn't guarantee success but we always managed to achieve the "right" result. So much for democracy.....

My recollection is that the Senate had four official positions of which Consul, Vice-Consul and Secretary (my post) were three but what on earth could the fourth have been? All nineteen forms below the Sixth were allocated a Senator whose main duty was to usher his form to the relevant room at the start of the morning and afternoon sessions and maintain some degree of order pending the arrival of the form master to take the register. A minor misdemeanour was likely to see the offender punished with a few lines while something more serious could lead to detention.

One specialised task was "late duty" which involved one Senator standing by the school gate (there was just the one gate) to take the names of all those who arrived after the appointed time. I frequently undertook the task quite willingly because, if you were lucky, you could avoid at least a substantial part of morning assembly. Living at the junction of Highland Road and Exeter Road meant that I was closer to school than almost everyone else (though not Elwyn Gunter and Maurice Kleinadt in Henley Road nor Bryan Daysh in Albert Road).

Recollection of Speech Days is similarly hazy. We had them and presumably I attended them but only fragments come to mind. At one, boys from the Sixth Form (Modern) presented a scene in French from Molière's "Le medecin malgré lui" and my opening speech was "Ola! Ola! Ola! Fie! Qu'est ceci? Quelle infamie! Peste soit le coquin de battre ainsi sa femme." Some things just won't go away... One year at least (perhaps all these things happened in the same one) we went to South Parade Pier. On one occasion the prizes were presented by the novelist Denis Wheatley who may or may not have been an Old Secundrian.

Some things are perhaps best left uninvestigated. Who electrified the handle on the Senate Room door? Why did they seemingly hang Sizer? What really happened to the school bell on Wednesday, 15th February 1950 when Portsmouth FC lost 3-1 to Manchester United in a FA Cup replay? There were probably equivalent events during your own time at the school.

Let me finish by paying tribute to the teaching staff (all male in those days) who were dedicated not just to pushing facts into our heads but also to helping us become rounded human beings. My particular thanks go to Doctor Lobb for making literature so interesting (though even he couldn't make me appreciate Robert Browning's poetry), to Mr Jones the headmaster who relieved me of the pressure of keeping up with boys a year older than I, and to Mr "Sid" Parnell who made me realise (alas, far too late) that hard work can transform "all right" into "very good".