

John Soper recollections

How entry was gained in the post war years

I spent nearly five years in India with my parents. My father was posted from Portsmouth dockyard to the Naval dockyard in Bombay in 1941. After the war he was posted back to Portsmouth arriving early in 1946.

An interview, with the Headmaster (Mr Jones?) of the Portsmouth Southern Secretary School for Boys in Albert Road, was arranged.

“Have you taken your 11 plus examination?” asked the Headmaster. “No sir” (actually I had never heard of that particular examination). After a short discussion the Headmaster arranged a detailed series of interviews and tests with various teachers over the next two days. During one test I put up a hand to ask a question – “Please sir, what is a florin and a half crown?” Astonished silence. I explained “You see sir I have been working with pie, pice, annars, rupees, for nearly five years”.

I had very little knowledge of English geography and history but was allowed to write about Indian geography as an alternative.

On conclusion of the tests and after an agonising wait whilst my future was discussed I was called into the office. “Soper, we find you a very intelligent young boy” – that’s a relief I thought maybe I will be admitted to the school – “but we assess that you are about 2 years behind in most subjects. We will admit you but we are placing you in the second year”. I was nearly 14 years old at the time!

Corporal punishment

It was routine to see the wooden backed blackboard rubbers hurled at sleeping or talking boys by most teachers. A few members of staff preferred to use the wooden rubbers with a sharp wrap on the knuckles.

However, during one memorable week in the late 1940s, Portsmouth Football Club were at home to a top club in the latter stages of the FA Cup. Unusually, the match was on a Wednesday afternoon. Despite a prior warning from Mr Mills about 75 boys found the temptation too much. At the end of assembly the next day Mr Mills announced “Will all those who were absent from school or sports activities yesterday afternoon go immediately and wait outside my office”. There was a crowd outside the Headmaster’s office. Being an intelligent lad I thought that if we were to be caned the Headmaster would be getting tired at the end of the proceedings. Without much fuss or fighting I positioned myself near the end of the queue. The “tailenders” could tell that Mr Mills was tiring as the number of strokes of the cane reduced progressively. When my turn came Mr Mills said “I have not seen you here before have I?”. “No sir” was my obvious reply. “Do not let me see you again” – no cane!

Combined Cadet Force (CCF)

The teacher in charge was Mr Cummins, the French teacher. He was a Major during WW2. The Force was well supported. Training was comprehensive and aimed at

achieving Certificate A and Certificate B (“Cert A” and “Cert B” for common description). Subjects covered were field craft, map reading, skill-at-arms drill and signals.

There were field days in various locations in SE Hampshire and annual camps with other CCF contingents – both providing good training experiences.

The drill training was enhanced painfully by visits to the Royal Marines Barracks at Eastney. Training culminated in a school contingent entering the Hampshire drill competition. Memory cannot recall the outcome so I presume we did not win that year.

With the benefit of hindsight the school CCF experience certainly made the initial training of National Service much less painful and gave those who had achieved Cert A and B a head start over other recruits.

Famous Old Boys

Following on from the CCF section above, John Stibbon was in the CCF at the same time as me. He was subsequently commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1954 and, on retirement in 1954, was Sir John Stibbon KCB OBE.

To my knowledge, at least 2 other boys from the CCF of my time achieved regular Commissions in full military careers.

The Senate

The Senate system was introduced in the late 1940s to replace the Prefect system. Prefects having been previously selected by the teaching staff it was considered more democratic to have a procedure where the popular vote could have an influence. I believe the teaching staff, however, still retained the power of the veto so that more popular “infamous” boys could be prevented from joining the Senate.

I remember a canvassing period to enable prospective candidates for the Senate an opportunity to address classes and the morning assembly. Then followed the ballot. Senator duties were similar to Prefects but Senators had more of a collective responsibility to discuss concerns and improvements and had more access to the teaching staff to prevent views.

(Ed – see the “Senate” section for more information).

**John Soper
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