

## MEMORIES OF THE SOUTHERN GRAMMAR 1946-1951

The Chairman invited Old Secundrians to submit their memories of their days at the Southern Grammar. Unfortunately the passage of years tends to dull the memories of the routine everyday events of the time but certain memories will always remain. Names are the biggest problem, even of those who sat alongside me for several years, and I apologise to them for it.

My first contact with the Southern Grammar came in 1944 when I went to the Wesley Central Hall with my mother for the the protest meeting about the delay in bringing the school back from Brockenhurst to Portsmouth. My big brother Brian was two years older than me and had been evacuated with the school that year. During the school holidays he had taken me to Brockenhurst to view the school and his digs at Milford on Sea. By the time my turn came to join it had returned to Portsmouth.

I reported to the school in Highland Road in September 1946 and found myself in class 1A. We were sat in alphabetical order. There were three Ds, Duckett, Duffet and Dummer, a combination which caused some amusement, even amongst the Staff. Smiling Jack Duffet was the son of a naval officer: he didn't stay the course, being whipped off to Dartmouth to be turned into a captain or an admiral like his dad. Years later I wondered what became of him and tried to look him up in the Navy List but without success. At this distance of time it is difficult to remember other names: John Bond, Paul LeLion, John King, Colin Smith, Brian Loader .....

Morning Assembly took place in the Lower Hall with the classes assembled in rows and the Staff on the stage. The single hymn was sung from Percy Dearmer's hymn book *Songs of Praise*, of which we all had copies. Assembly was led by the headmaster, initially G.B.H. Jones, a remote figure to us First Years. Not long after we joined, however, we were all called to assembly one mid-afternoon where it was announced that Mr Jones had died and we were to quietly disperse. Mr Hore was to take over as Acting Head.

During Mr Hore's headship in 1947 the whole school assembled in the playground for the school photograph. We First Years sat crossed-legged on the ground in the front. Acting head Charlie Hore sat just behind me. Was that little chap really me? Why don't I recognise the others? Soon after, new headmaster H.J. Mills arrived and made his presence felt in no uncertain manner.

Our form master was B.C. Thomas who stayed with us throughout our school life; a decent, reasonable fellow who tried to teach us maths. A notable feature was his hair; as malleable as a porcupine's quills. On one occasion he found it necessary to rebuke one of the class for his untidy mane, only for the lad to remark "Well your hair's not very tidy Sir!" It was the only time I ever saw B.C. explode! As Form master, B.C. made the overall comment on our exam reports. A recurring theme on my reports was "Conscientious but sleepy", "He must wake up", "He always seems to be asleep". Concentration has always been my bugbear, and I would often go off daydreaming and then

struggle to catch up with what had been going on, therefore missing the next bit! In spite of this I still generally seemed to hold my own.

One day, probably during our second year, the school arranged a balloon debate and asked for volunteer speakers. A balloon debate is where several people each take over the role of a famous person and argue their case to the audience not to be thrown out of the balloon. I don't recall who took part or who they represented, except for one; Brian Loader from our class who argued the case for Mao Tse Tung. Now I had never heard of Mao and I doubt if anybody else had – after all he was still a guerrilla leader at the time. I presume Brian must have just read a book about him but it was extremely brave of him to try to sell him to us, particularly since all the other contestants were senior to him. Not surprisingly, we voted to throw him out (just as well since we now know he was a mass-murderer), but as you can see, I was obviously impressed since it has remained in my memory for 60 years. I wonder if anybody else remembers.

In an effort to broaden our education we had Manual Instruction lessons for which we had to walk to Reginald Road School. Half the period was spent with "Farmer" White on woodwork and half with Alfie Trout on metalwork. In spite of my father being a carpenter and joiner who had bought me a carpenter's set when I was only 5 years old I experienced great difficulty with woodwork. We had to plane a length of wood so that all sides were flat and parallel but for some reason they just wouldn't turn out like that. I was almost in tears. Metalwork was a different story however and our shed door at home boasted a lifting latch from my hands for many years.

For P.T. we went to the Co-op Social Club's gym at Devonshire Square which had been built on the site of the bridge which used to go over the Southsea Railway (The railway had also formerly passed next to the school where the Odeon was later built – but I digress). One memory remains of coming out of the gym and seeing the poster for the film *Oliver Twist*, which means it would have been 1948.

I can't remember what year I joined the Combined Cadet Force. As far as I remember, at that time there was only an army branch of the CCF, but I may be wrong. Major Cummins, our French Master, was the senior officer and under him was Captain Ingram: I can't remember other officers. We were provided with uniforms but had to buy our own boots. Dad still had his old army boots and although they were a size too small for me I reckoned I could manage with them for a couple of hours a week. We drilled in the playground after school and became reasonably proficient at it. In the hall we learned to strip and clean a .303 Lee Enfield rifle and a Bren gun. We had a session of target practice with .22 rifles at a range I can't remember, probably Eastney.

In the summer we went to Warminster for a week under canvas. The camp was under the surveillance of The Lancashire Fusiliers who also did the cooking. We were given palliases to fill with straw to sleep on. One day we all got diarrhoea and vomiting but survived. I obtained permission to have a look around town but didn't wear a beret so got told off when I returned. We did a

route march across the downs with rifles on shoulders. That was when I found out that I didn't have any flesh on my shoulder bones. One night the officers had a camp fire in a field and we cadets had to crawl up in the darkness as close as possible without being seen. I was so cautious that by the time I got to the fire everybody else had gone back to camp. By the end of the week Dad's boots had taken their toll and I lost the nail on my big toe. I decided to get some proper size boots. One memory in particular remains of the week at camp – waking up to the magical sound of Reveille in the morning air.

On another occasion we had an exercise on Butser Hill. As I was then a corporal I was allocated a Bren gun and two cadets. Everybody else had rifles and some blank rounds to enjoy. They couldn't afford blanks for an automatic Bren of course, so they had got a bunch of cracker inserts, trimmed them to different lengths, tied one end of the bunch to the muzzle and the other end to a piece of string. It was a one-shot device – you pulled the string and it went pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, and it was all over. We took turns at carrying the Bren – at least that was the theory. But a Bren is heavy and the hill was steep, so the two cadets said “Sod this for a lark” and left it for me to carry. Now in the regular army that would mean a court martial, but what can you do about mutiny in the CCF?

It must have been when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> year, around 1949, that an inter-house one act play competition was arranged. Pupils in the school were divided up into four houses, blue, green, yellow - and brown! Why brown of all colours? Why not red? Anyhow, when I started with the school I had elected to join brown house, probably because my brother Brian was in it. Brown house's entry for the competition was a play about Columbus, produced and led by Blackler, if my memory serves me right. My brother was in it and that is probably why I got enlisted as a non-speaking member of the ship's crew. The mast was a cardboard tube from a roll of carpet, held up by a member of the crew. The stage curtains had always interested me because they were made from hessian dyed red; proper material probably not being available in those post-war years. Of course, the light shone through them and it wasn't too difficult to make out what was going on. As you know, Columbus' crew grew restless after the long period at sea and we extras had been briefed to murmur our discontent. Afterwards the adjudicators commented on the all too obvious chorus of “Rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb”. I don't think we won!

Headmaster Harry Mills had always been unhappy about the Portsmouth accent. One day he decided to try to do something about it. He brought back former master Gus Gardener to teach us how to speak properly. Mr Gardner had been with the Portsmouth Players. I fear he didn't have a lot of success with us. One of the things he tried to get us to do was to pronounce “again” as “agen”. I felt that couldn't be right. Shakespeare obviously agreed with me, otherwise he would have had his witches say, “When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in ren?”

Another thing the Head railed against was Saturday morning cinema clubs. Gaumont British had one at The Plaza which cost 6d. You turned up to view a

main film, cartoon and serial, not knowing what the film was beforehand. That was what the Head didn't like: he said that we should be selective in our choices of viewing, and he was right of course. But it didn't do any harm really (if you could stomach having to sing the GB Club song) and it bears no comparison with the nightly viewing of run-of-the-mill programmes on TV these days.

I seem to recall that the Headmaster took a certain pupil to task one day at assembly for running a nice little sideline in repairing and refurbishing bikes. He said that his time should be spent studying, not running a business. I don't know what happened to the boy in question but I wonder if he turned out to be like Alan Sugar, using his initiative and early experience to become a far wealthier man than the rest of us.

1950 was the year that it was decided to stage Macbeth. One of the first signs to those who were not involved was the appearance of scenery in the hall. Art master Mr Jefferies and team were busy cutting up and painting hardboard and producing large sections of castle battlements.

Somehow or other I found myself cast as an English soldier with one line of dialogue. I presume I must have volunteered since nobody would have sought me out. My brother had the major part of MacDuff. The dress rehearsal was at St Peter's Hall on the evening before. It started all right but soon ran into a major problem - the battlements were too big to manoeuvre. The rehearsal dragged on and on, eventually being abandoned. So there never was a complete dress rehearsal before the public performance, but there had been time for me to deliver my one line, and it was enough to make an impression on the headmaster! I don't know how he found out who I was (he had never taken our class) but he nabbed my brother Brian and said, "Your brother's got a terrible Portsmouth accent". I hadn't thought it was that bad! Overnight the big pieces of battlements were cut down into smaller units and the public performance the following night was a great success.

I have a personal tailpiece to the performance. Many years later my brother attended an Old Secundrians reunion (regrettably I have never been able to) and introduced himself to Old Harry again. "Ah yes", said the former Head, "You had that terrible Portsmouth accent in Macbeth". "No Sir", said Brian, "that was my brother". Obviously I had made a great impression on the Head, if only for the wrong reasons, but who was he to insist that the English soldier in Macbeth hadn't come from Portsmouth?

We had two school trips during my stay. The first took in Eastleigh Works and Winchester College, and the other was to Eton and Reading. Eastleigh works was a great delight to me, having always been a railway enthusiast, although I was surprised to find that I enjoyed the carriage works more than the loco works. The one memory that has remained of Winchester College was of the Refectory with the long tables laid out with original square wooden platters. In early days the pupils would have their main course served on one side of their platter and then the pudding served on the other. It's funny how memory is so selective.

The visit to Eton College was to see how the other lot did it. Afterwards we were split into two groups, one for Huntley & Palmer's biscuit factory and the other for The Pulsometer Pumps works. For some odd reason I chose the latter and regretted it. I was convinced the other chaps had free biscuits

I can recall one Speech Day, held at South Parade Pier Pavilion. I can't remember any of the speeches, of course, but I can recall that we had had to learn a couple of patriotic songs for it (I vow to thee my country?). Wasn't Viscount Montgomery, Monty, the guest of honour, or am I dreaming?

John King was also a member of our class. During my time with him there was no inkling of the fame that was to come. He won an Open Leverhulme Exhibition in 1952 which took him to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. By 1962 John was a D.J. with the British Forces Broadcasting Service in Nairobi where his son Simon was born. Back in the U.K. he became a reporter for the BBC's Points West news programme in Bristol. Eventually he became Head of General Programmes and started making award-winning natural history programmes. John and young son Simon appeared in a series of TV programmes, "Man and Boy," during 1976 and 1978 with Simon looking very much like his dad. John pioneered shows such as "Going for a Song" which evolved as the Antiques Roadshow and was commissioned to make a film for "The World About Us" series. Young son Simon went on to become the exceedingly famous and award-winning wildlife TV programme maker. John died in 1999. I find it strange that although I instantly recognised John when he first appeared on television (his son Simon looks just like him) I found it quite difficult at first to pick him out from the row of first years sitting crossed-legged in the front row of the 1947 school photograph.

Harry Steed took us for Music and Religious Instruction. I wonder who it was that first came up with his nickname, "Caboss". Always pleasant and with the suggestion of a smile on his face, Harry knew how to treat boys and what interested them. Thus the jokes about the origin of Isaiah's name (one eye's higher than the other) and the explanation of the words "the buck verteth" in the 13<sup>th</sup> century lyric "Sumer is icumen in" (he explained that the buck made a noise like a raspberry tart). I have to thank him for introducing me to many of the popular classical pieces. Nowadays music is all around us but it was not so in the 1940s with just the Home Service and Light Programme on radio (sorry, wireless). He had a rapport with the class and I have seen him stand in front of a boy in the front row, holding him by the ears whilst talking to the class, and thereby obviously causing him some discomfort, but not causing any offence to the lad.

Doc King took us for Geography. Over the years his assessment of my performance varied from A to B-. I must have learnt things but looking back, I don't *recall* doing so, save one thing: namely, that one of the industries of Norfolk was making wire netting.

Jack Thomas was our History master. I have no criticism of his teaching but there was little to bring to life the dry facts of kings and battles in those days. The only illustrations were the few in the text book and, unlike today, there were no dramatisations to bring the characters to life. I did enough to earn As on several occasions but it wasn't until we reached the 19<sup>th</sup> century that I felt I could relate to the people involved, then I found it fascinating.

"Dizzy" Winter took us for Physics. He had first joined the staff in 1910 having previously been a pupil at the school. When he took us he was in his last terms and looking frail. I expect he was glad to retire after having us to teach.

Our Chemistry teacher Mr Shackleton teacher was also an Old Boy. The thing you noticed about Shacks was his accent. "That was N.B.G." he would say, "and the B stands for Bloomin!" Once when he was dictating, a lad in the back row made a writing error and muttered a crude word under his breath. The whole back row burst out laughing. "Not so much noise at the back", said Shacks. At the end of the period everybody had to hand in their books. The next day when the books were returned one of the other boys found that Shacks had written in red ink "Come and see me". Also ringed in red ink was the word *Shit* which he had subconsciously written. Chemistry was probably one of the more interesting subjects because you did things in the lab, and once when we were learning the processes of producing coal gas we had a trip to the gas works at Hilsea.

Latin was my locus horribilis and Latin master Sid Parnell despaired of me. As we worked our way through Caesar's Gaelic Wars and Virgil's Aeneid his comments were predictable. "His work is poor. He does not show much ability". It was obviously my fault, but at least I was consistent - only once did I rise above B-. The plus point for me was that, unlike the other boys, I was never asked to decline words in class ("You boy, decline *ingens*"), and therefore never had to write them out a hundred times when the answer was wrong. An irony is that fifty years later, because of my increasing interest in English etymology I bought a brand new Latin Dictionary. What would Sid say to that, I wonder.

Saxon Walker joined in 1950 as Senior English Master in succession to Dr Lobb who had moved on to Southampton University. Doc Lobb had never taken us for English although for some reason he filled in our reports each exam instead of our actual English lecturer (Mr Ingram?). We had studied Julius Caesar in our First or Second Years but it never grabbed our imagination. When we did it again in the Fifth Year under Saxon Walker it was a different story. I suppose we had been too young for it first time, or it may have been Mr Walker's enthusiasm. I'm sorry to say that we were not behaving particularly well one day and there was a lot of talking going on. Twice he asked us to shut up, but instead of asking us a third time he just shut his book, said that if we weren't interested in learning he wasn't staying, and walked out. That worked like magic: there was complete silence as we all felt rather ashamed of ourselves.

While I was at the school Mr Njaa from Illinois spent a year there as an exchange teacher. He never took our class but it was amusing to hear of the time a boy made a reference to niggers. "We don't use that term nowadays", Mr Njaa gently corrected the boy. We say "negroes". How times have changed since!

My stay at the Southern Grammar ended before it should have done. It had always been accepted in my family that I would go into the Dockyard and endeavour to become a draughtsman like a member of my family before me. It was considered to be an achievement to do so. There had been numerous precedents to this course at the school as I was to find out, and others would follow. I had never expressed a desire to aim for any other occupation, the truth being that I had tended to let the stream take me where it willed. There was no talk or enlightenment at the school about careers.

I took the Dockyard entrance exam during my first term in the Fifth Form in late 1950 as a trial and was surprised to come top. There didn't seem any point in staying any longer so I told the Head I was leaving. He was not at all happy, told me I would regret it and said that I was not supposed to leave until I was 16, but he didn't stop me. So on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1951 I started as an apprentice at the Dockyard (quite a shock) and became a part-time student at the Royal Dockyard School. I found that the headmaster was W.G. Burrell, former pupil of the Southern Sec. from 1900-1902, who was in his last year before retirement. I had barely completed my first year there when I went down with T.B. which kept me away from my tools and books for 14 months. When I went back, the R.D.S. had been renamed Portsmouth Dockyard Technical College and there was a new headmaster, (renamed Principal), John Goss, who had been a Southern Sec. boy 1919-1923. I also found myself amongst other Southern Grammar boys who had followed me, including Brian Andrew who sadly died in 1998. A striking difference to the Southern Grammar was that the staff always addressed us as Mr -, or later used our first names.

A move into the drawing office led to a one-way ticket to the Admiralty/M.O.D. in Bath, where I have remained. I have been lucky to have been involved in some great projects including Polaris, Type 22 Frigates, Type 42 Destroyers, the Navy's first electronic machinery control system and finally Trident. It was during this last project that a desk arrived in our office from store for a new member. In the drawer was a copy of an old book, *Portsmouth Southern Grammar School for Boys*. "Anybody want this old book?" asked the new member. Lucky me! Also on this project I made the acquaintance of contracts officer Ken Priddy, who had been a lofty Fifth Former in the back row of the 1947 photo when I was a snotty nosed First Year in the front row. Ken had a copy made of the photo which he very generously gave to me. He died in 2009. I retired as a Senior Professional and Technology Officer in 1993.

Michael Dummer