

## Peter Higgins memories of the Southern Grammar

I was fortunate to have joined the school a year after it relocated to the new premises at Baffins. My first impression was that it was huge compared with my comparatively small primary school (Milton) and, as a keen sportsman, that it had playing fields!

As a new boy I was overawed by all of these much older pupils and teachers with flowing gowns – and we had to transfer classrooms between lessons rather than staying put in one place as I had been used to; and in this enormous building how would I ever find my way around and not get lost? Mr Westfold, a biology teacher and a kindly man, was our form master and I need not have worried because he settled us in and everyone seemed to be helpful. Furthermore, the initiation processes that I had been told about (heads down toilets etc) never came to fruition – not for me anyway, although as a tall boy for my age perhaps that helped me to escape; either way, I have no recollection of it happening to others either.

My first assembly was an eye opener when H J Mills, the headmaster, came sweeping into the hall his cloak billowing behind him (I'd never seen one of those before), his dark hair swept across his forehead in its usual style and with a look of foreboding about him – here was a man not to be trifled with. It was only many years later that I learnt from his daughter, Diana, that he was affectionately known as the “Dark Satanic Mills”. In practice, although scary looking (he had a remarkable resemblance to the actor Robert Beattie) I always found him to be a kindly man albeit not one not to be crossed.

Certainly, it was a very different establishment from my primary school (excellent as that was). Here we were suddenly introduced to modern languages, sciences, woodwork or metalwork and a host of new subjects that we had never experienced before – and, at the end of the day, there was homework to be done (book covering at the start of each new year but real homework after that). Punishments including detentions, lines and worse were also new to us. But we soon got into the swing of things.

In retrospect my footballing, cricketing and basketball abilities were a boon to me since I quickly became established in the various school teams and created good new friends – many of whom have remained as such for all of my life.

My means of getting to the school was by way of a couple of miles cycle ride from Milton to the school including a stretch of the Eastern Road (not sure I would fancy that these days). I recall that most mornings a home built sports car would come roaring past me – and I later learnt that this was driven by Craig Barlow a history teacher at the school.

I never fancied the idea of wearing a school cap (though I was proud of it and the rest of my new uniform) and I soon learnt that if I put it on about 200 yards from the school entrance I could avoid detention for not wearing it (except when the pesky Senators ventured out to catch boys doing just that!).

I recall the bottles of milk at morning break – lovely when it was cold in the summer but not so nice when left in the sun during the summer; I sometimes wonder if it was left there deliberately when the caretaker was having a bad day!

I recall morning assemblies and Chris Butchers playing the War Memorial organ extremely well.

Many boys stayed for school lunches. Eight boys were allocated to each table with a head of table and two helpers (all more senior boys) on either side of him. These boys were responsible for dishing out meals to all eight on the table – and it was important to get a table where you got a fair share of what was on offer (although semolina and jam were often not too heavily fought over).

In retrospect most of the staff were good at what they did although there were exceptions. In particular I remember Stan Davies and Roland Chatterton who took it in turns to be Deputy Headmaster; Arthur Hitchins (French) who was a good teacher but of whom I was a bit scared especially when, early on, he gave me lines for saying that “sommous” meant “are you” rather than “êtes vous” (funny how things like that stick isn’t it?). Mr Butterworth (geography teacher); Ian Watson (a good physics teacher and who still attends Old Secundrians dinners [2012] and looks exactly as he did when he was teaching us); Jack Thomas a slightly forbidding history teacher; Dr Traynor (English); Bob Burnett (a very good French teacher and a really nice man); John Hood a good but slightly scary maths teacher; Tom Hobbs also a good maths teacher who would threaten to hang you out of the window by your finger nails; “Bertie” Blake taught us French and had a habit of wobbling his head from side to side as he spoke to you; Commander Watts (maths); Mr Gosling taught us Latin – but we used to play him up quite a bit and so didn’t learn as much as I would have liked; “Buller” Jefferies (art) who, I am sure, everyone will remember for his outrageous stories as to what he was supposed to have done in his life and I can honestly say, never taught me a single thing – although he would probably have wasted his time anyway because I can hardly even draw a straight line with a ruler; Doc King (geography) – how did the school ever retain his services because, apart from showing us film of his holidays and pointing us to a particular page in a text book, he never actually taught us anything apart from how to escape to the car park within 60 seconds at the end of the school day.

Then there was the venerable Brian Naysmith (sport) who joined the school just after I arrived – he was something of a hero to many boys as he was also a part-time professional footballer with Pompey; a good coach who produced some excellent soccer and basketball teams but another who you didn’t want to cross. I recall getting cut on the head during a games lesson after diving at somebody’s feet who was a bit clumsy and being taken to hospital for stitches. I attended school the next day with my head bound in bandages and Brian instructing me to go onto the 1<sup>st</sup> X1 pitch at lunchtime and practice diving at his feet so that I wouldn’t lose confidence; imagine the reaction when I went home at the end of the day and told my parents.....but he was right to have done it.

I'm afraid that my love for sport did interfere with my academic work although I did get six good grade GCEs. I left the school part of the way through my A level studies; in retrospect that could have been a massive mistake from a career perspective although I got away with it. Mr Mills was strongly against my leaving and when I went to see him on my last day he told me so – finishing up with the request that I should at least stay until the end of the football season (we had a very strong 1<sup>st</sup> X1 and I was their goalkeeper).

An insight, perhaps, as to how some staff viewed you was gained many years later when I attended one of my first Old Secundrians dinners and Bob Burnett (now sadly no longer with us) approached me and said “I remember you. I'll get the name in a minute. 1<sup>st</sup> X1 goalkeeper, opened the bowling for the 1<sup>st</sup> X1 cricket team, 1<sup>st</sup> team basketball”. After a few seconds he said “Higgins, that's the name isn't it?” I replied “Yes, do you remember anything about my French?” The reply came “Bugger all!”

Looking back, the school was good academically – without being outstanding – with many teachers who were highly motivated and committed to what they were doing. They also gave freely of their time for extra curricular activities. Pastoral care was also good when it was needed. Discipline was tight – and that taught boys how they should behave throughout their lives. We all owe a great deal to the staff for what they did for us.