

The Old Huish's Grammar School

Having successfully passed my "scholarship" as the exam, entitling one to a Grammar School education, was known at that time, I started my time there in September 1939. The school was situated on a piece of land that was bordered on one side by the lane that ran through from East Street to Mansfield Road and then its border ran along the back of the gardens in Mansfield Road and down to Silver Street where it had a small frontage directly opposite the Silver Chapel. There a pair of wooden double doors allowed vehicular access. The border then ran back along the back of the almshouses in East St. to form the site. The borders were marked by fairly high red brick walls that had two other access points. The first was about 20 yards up the lane from East Street where it opened into a small area that led to a set of brick steps that took one up onto the lower playground. On the left as one entered the small area there was a small storage area that led to a set of wooden steps [about 10 feet high] and at the top of these steps was the School Office. This Office is at the time of writing still standing and can be seen from the Sainsbury's car park if one looks to the left from the lower entrance to the Store. It was here that I and about a 100 other new boys reported on that first September morning. The main school building ran along two sides of the lower playground and a very narrow walkway went past the end of the building into the upper playground. The upper playground had, on its far wall, several other buildings. Firstly the woodwork shop then the Gymnasium and then two large wooden huts. These huts, which were relics of the first world war when they had housed Australian troops who were stationed in Taunton, were the home of two forms and the Junior School. At the side of the Woodwork Room, on the left, was another passageway that gave access to the toilets and on to the Silver Street playground where there was a modern building which housed the Music Room and a cloakroom.

The main building was L shaped and housed in order starting from the bottom of the lower playground the chemistry lab and opposite, on two floors, above the art room and below the sixth form room that was known as the "dungeon". Next to the Chem. lab was the physics room and opposite, up three steps was the Science room. Next was the great Hall where assembly was held every morning. It was possible to divide the hall into three classrooms. The building then turned at right angles and there were two classrooms and the a small lobby and over it was the Staffroom. Having successfully passed my "scholarship" as the exam, entitling one to a Grammar School education, was known at that time, I started my time there in September 1939. We gathered in the playground whilst older pupils caught up with news from friends they had not seen for six weeks. Eventually we were called to assembly. We were kept in order and quiet

by prefects who seemed to have considerable power to maintain peace and quiet. We then sang a hymn together and a re-assembly song. Then the Headmaster, Mr Arnold Goodliffe, spoke to us. He was the first schoolteacher that I had seen in gown and mortar board hat. He welcomed the new pupils to the School and told us how privileged we were. He welcomed the others back and reminded them of the need for another term of hard study and good results. He then told us that he would not be retiring as had been thought because the incoming Head, Lt- Col Peel Corbin and was now serving in the armed forces and so for the foreseeable future he would remain in charge. After a few more announcements, including news of what the war might bring, Assembly closed and new boys were directed to the school office where we were registered and told which Form we were going to be in. I was allocated to Form 2B and would be domiciled in the lower of the two wooden huts in the top playground. We then collected our books when we filed through a line of piles of books as senior boys giving each new boy a book as he passed along. To me the number of books seemed enormous. We had a text book, 2, 3 or more for some, for each subject and an exercise book for each subject where lessons were written up and homework completed. We also had something entirely new to me—A Scribbler. This was a large thick book of writing paper in which we had to rapidly make notes during lessons that we would later transfer into our exercise books. The exercise books were red and on the front, as well as a place to enter one's name and form, it bore the imposing title "Huish's Grammar School" with the Huish Coat of Arms and the motto *Spe Certa Quid Melius*.

We also discovered where the homes of classmates were. They came from a wide area. We had one from Burnham on Sea by train every day. One from Thorney out on the Somerset levels. Several from Langport. One from Bathealton. Two from Wiveliscombe and one from Burlescombe.

In our Form Room in the Huts our Form Master, Mr Hodgson the Gym Master, allocated desks to us and then, most amazingly to us newcomers to this way of life, he explained that we would find hasps, which a previous occupier of the desk had attached, on each desk and that we should obtain a padlock that would lock our desks whilst we were away from them. I found myself sitting next to a boy who had previously been in the Junior School and he was already wise to this and had his lock ready and rapidly fastened it. Mr Hodgson read out our Time-Table of lessons and we made our first entry in our Scribbler as we copied it laboriously. Our speed of getting things on paper would dramatically improve in the next few days as we tried to keep up with all the things we had to write. We also communally invented a sort of shorthand to help improve things still further. From the time table we found out that most of day would be spent

making our way to the various specialised classrooms whilst others made their way to ours for Geography.

We also learnt of the power wielded by the prefects which ranged from a wiggling [telling- off] to lines and even corporal punishment when they were allowed to administer up to six on the posterior with a gym shoe which the unfortunate victim was obliged to supply. We all wore the school uniform that was dark trousers and jacket, knee length socks in the school colours of black with two red rings just below the knee. We also had to wear, when not on school property, a school cap that was black and carried the Coat of Arms and Motto. Prefects were easily identified as their cap bore a long bright red tassel.

We also learnt that the Masters, who also wore gowns and mortar boards, had all been given nicknames. The ones that I remember are the Deputy Head, Mr C H Rutt was Ginger although what hair he had was long since turned to grey. Physics master Mr Pleass was obviously "Bobby". We had two French masters, one Mr Trevett was I believe part French and dressed in a French style wearing a long black cloak and a Homburg hat. All he needed was a smoking bomb to become the archetypal revolutionary He was affectionately known as "Froggy" The other, a Mr Snook, was known as "Erfie". The reason for this became apparent when in one lesson he brought the small attaché case that he kept his books in and placed it so that we could all see the three initials stencilled onto the front. They were E.R.F. Our English Master was "Basher" Hunt and Cheeser Hayes took Science. Mr Eele who taught English and was also an excellent wicketkeeper, was because of his height of 4 feet 10 inches, known to all as Titchy. Mr Dickenson who taught Geography was, because of his Newcastle accent known as "Won" to rhyme with "Ron".. This had to do with his saying "a One" instead of One. Only he would pronounce it "Hev you got a Won".

There was of course the evacuation of children from the cities in anticipation of bombing attacks and they also had to be accommodated. There were so many in that extra new classrooms were needed. The first was in what had been the Scout-Hut which was at the back of the bottom of the Main building and a new form "2D were housed There. Then the third form expanded into another class and they were housed in the Woodwork Room. Woodwork was suspended due to lack of timber, in any case, for the duration. Another new Classroom was started across the road in Silver Street, upstairs in the Chapel.

We were given a close up of exactly what "six of the best" meant when one morning as we having a lesson, the Head came into the classroom. He stood silently and watched and observed for a short while and, then at a suitable point, he spoke. He told us that he had a most difficult task to do but something that had to be done as the welfare of our fighting men scattered

all over the Globe to defend us deserved every effort being made on their behalf. There was however one of our classmates who had not been doing this. He had been putting his selfishness before his father's peace of mind. This boy had so upset his Mother that she had written to tell the father just how difficult their son was proving to be and the father had written to the Head to ask him to rectify the situation. He then called "Bo" Richards, a lad from Burlescombe, to the front and read to the Class the letter he had received from the father who was serving with the Royal Navy in Hong Kong. From underneath his gown, he then drew out a bunch of canes that were about 5 feet long and laid them on the desk beside him. He had Richards [known as "Bo"] to hold out his left hand and he gave him six strokes of the cane. The force was such that pieces of cane flew off the end as the cane struck the hand and after two or three he was obliged to select another. The procedure was then repeated on the other hand and with a warning to Bo that there would be worse to come if his father found any reason to write again in a similar way. Bo Richards sat down and the Head left. Richards was given permission to go to the toilets, which gave him the opportunity to shed a few tears, and we all sat there absolutely dumbstruck. I don't think the lesson ever got restarted and we were left to do some copying up of notes already taken.

The Head was not alone when it came to dishing out some corrective punishment. Several masters had their own individual ways of getting retribution for lack of effort or misbehaviour. Bobby Pleass used an instrument from his Physics Lab. It was a half metre rule that was seen only in a Lab in those days. He used a method of giving the required number of strokes on either hand or foot that inflicted some mental torture in advance. Having got the candidate out to the front of the Class, he would delay the actual procedure until he had described just how painful it was going to be and also accompanying his little speech with cracks of the half meter rule on various surfaces where it made a resounding thwack. By the time he was ready to start the victim was shaking with anticipation of what was coming. Cheeser Hayes, the science master had a different technique. He slapped the face but before he did so he posed the recipient of the slap into the exact position. He did this by tilting and moving the head until it lined up exactly with the swing of his arm and then when he had his arm raised, and was all prepared to administer, he would pause and say "Not quite right you have moved slightly and then the posturing would start all over again. So that as well as the slapped face at least 5 minutes mental torture accompanied it. Basher Hunt the English master used a gym shoe on the posterior and his nickname tells just how effective he was with it. In fact so good that rarely did anyone step out of line in one of his classes. The worst of all, however was Capt. "Mitty" Mitford. He beat boys as one would in a rough house fight. He used his fists. He would grab the offender

by the arms and clothing and throw them across the room and then haul them up for some more. He was extremely lucky that he did not injure someone seriously. History master, Mr Wickenden, the history master, and one or two others seemed to be able to manage without resort to violence. It was not all punishment though. These were all excellent teachers and they took a great deal of time to make sure that we all understood what we had been told. We started French lessons which were entirely new. Algebra and Geometry were also new ground. Art was taught by Mr Desa who was a very likeable and friendly master. All Art was taught in the Art Room and our work could be left there until required again. It was the only thing that we did not have to carry around the School. Mr Wickenden who was, for those times, a very competent photographer used to take us over to Taunton Museum where he had the use of a slide projector and would show us some of wonderful pictures he had of Exmoor and more especially historic buildings in Somerset.

The winter of 1939-40 was a very cold one with very low temperatures and the Caretaker used to throw several buckets of water down in the lower playground and we then had a ready made slide some 30 yards long that kept everyone amused for some weeks. On particularly cold days Playtime would be extended in order to give everyone the chance to warm up with some exercise. There was some very primitive form of central heating in the main building but heating in the outlying classrooms was by the standard school heating appliance of the time the Tortoise Stove. A tortoise stove was a cylindrical stove with two openings. One at the top where it was filled and one at the bottom where the ashes were removed. They were fuelled with coke and were filled and lit in the morning and then had to last all day. The setting of the bottom entry that also controlled the air supply was critical. Open too much and the stove was burnt out by lunch time. Too little meant that the stove struggled to stay alight. So it was a very fine balancing act that kept us, not warm but lukewarm. It was, of course forbidden to interfere with the fire. It was lit and set by the Caretaker and it usually managed to see the day out.

The School, for sporting purposes, was divided into four Houses, Tone, Brendon, Blackdown and Quantock and I was allocated to Quantock House and during that first winter I was picked in the House 6-a-side football team. There was in each team a pupil from each year level and the whole school trekked down to the sports field, which was at Rose Meadows on Hamilton Road, to see the Games. We played in the first semi final and won and then amazingly we won the Final. I had the silver medal that I won for a long while but unfortunately it was stolen. I had more sporting success when, in the spring, the Cross Country races were held There were three classes Senior, Middle School and Junior. I entered with relish. Running was something that came very easy to me. I had grown up with a

bunch of boys who had the free run of the vast Tone Vale Hospital Estate and games of chasing featured strongly on our list of activities. We thought nothing of running several miles in an evening. The race started at the back of Vivary Park and went by way of Haines Hill and through Sherford and Ash Meadows to the finish at the rear of the Park where the Taunton Deane Cricket Club Pavillion is now.

The race started well and we were all soon making our way up Haines Hill when a G.W.R. delivery lorry passed us and hanging on the back were a group of lads taking a breather. We had a laugh and on we went and by the time we got down to Ash Meadows I found myself in second place, headed only by the Lower School champion. I wasn't exactly sure of the route so I just kept him close at hand and ran in runner-up in my first sporting achievement at Huish's. A few days later at Assembly the Head announced that he had become aware that cheating had taken place in the Cross Country race. I was called to the front and asked if I had won my second place by riding on a lorry for part of the race. I denied that I had but said that I had seen some racers on the lorry. There was no proof of who they were and the upshot was that the race was to be re-run. The next time of course it was a different game. I now knew the course and had no need to follow any one so I just ran away from the whole field and finished so far in front that as I finished there was not another runner in sight. The Lower School Champ was a poor third and there could be no question of riding lorries this time.

As the war dragged on we had special assemblies where the Head would tell us of Old Boys who had lost their lives in action or perhaps had been made Prisoners of War. One in particular that I remember concerned someone that most of us had known. He was Trevor Pratt and he also had a younger brother Dickie at the school. Their parents ran a dairy in Silver Street just a little way along from the School entrance. He had been in the sixth form and a prefect when we had started at Huish's and had gone direct from school into the R.A.F. to train as a pilot and here he was just two years on dead. There were others as well as time went by.

Another innovation of wartime was the fact that boys were needed to help on farms and in any way possible with food production, Homework limited the time that was available for these activities so at lunch time, once we had eaten our sandwiches washed down with a small [third of a pint] bottle of milk, a classroom complete with supervision was made available so that a start could be made on the daily quota of homework. Later in the war another innovation was the "British Restaurant" This was a place where very ordinary food was made available at very cheap prices and the School started having lunches there. The restaurant we used was in East Reach where the Vauxhall Garage is now. It consisted of two very long Nissen Huts. One where the food was prepared and the other the dining area. We

used to gather in the Silver Street Playground and make our way down in a long crocodile but for some reason we were allowed to make our own way back.

I was always fairly good at cricket and soccer and after a couple of seasons I made my way gradually into the School 1st XI at cricket and then the following winter I was selected for the 1st team at soccer. The match was an away fixture at Dr Morgans at Bridgwater and I was , as they say in football now, over the moon. Winning was something that was expected as Huish's was renowned for the quality of their cricket and football but we were hopeless at rugby and lost by considerable margins. We had a Gym. Master called Williams who was very keen to improve things and he used to run coaching sessions after school at Rose Meadows but it never really caught on. We once had a cricket coaching session down at the County Ground when the famous Somerset bowler Jack White came along to talk to us and, although he was then an old man he gave a demonstration of his ability, He was a slow spin bowler who gave the ball a lot of flight and he placed a coin on the wicket at somewhere on the off stump and proceeded to land the ball on the coin three times in an over, The School also used the County Ground for home cricket fixtures and also for the annual sports day.

Arnold Goodliffe passed away and Mr C.H. [ginger] Rutt became headmaster. And at about this time we the first ever lady teachers, apart from Miss Sharp at the Junior school, were seen. One of the first was a Miss Macdonald. She was a young and very attractive lady and of course this led to all sorts of jokes and innuendo. She was followed in short time by several more including Mrs Rutt and life soon settled down as though they had always been there.

We had excitement too, one of our schoolmates became famous overnight when his house in Westleigh Rd. took a direct hit from a German bomb. Another caused a furore when, after getting into trouble, decided to run away and was missing for several days before being caught by the Police in Windsor. The School had an Air Training Corps unit that was commanded by English master, Mr Hunt and an Army Cadet unit that was commanded by Mr [Capt,] Williams and Mr [Lieut.] Tipper. It was extremely popular and had about 120 members, I joined and went off to Summer Camp with them at Yoxter Camp up on the Mendips. The Camping Club was also still going and I went for a week-end stay in a tent beside the River Barle at Dulverton, We cycled there and back carrying all our gear with us.

We had a school report that was sent by post to our parents at the end of each school year and form lists showing where everyone finished the year as regards exam marks were included in the School Magazine. The report also included an entry that indicated how many detentions had been

incurred during the year and on one occasion when I had been given more than usual I worked out how I could avoid my parents getting to know and the trouble that would follow. When a master gave someone a detention, he sent them to the staff room to collect the detention book . The detention and reason was entered and the book then returned, The master in charge of detention then had a list of those who should be there and he then signed them off. I asked for permission to go to the toilet but instead went to the staffroom, which was empty, collected the book and then took it with me to the toilets where it was flushed away. Funny enough there was nothing said about the missing book but the reports did not have any details of detentions in them.

Obviously the war played a big part in our daily Lives. We got used to the sight, of to us, strange people. Some Cypriot troops were stationed at Norton Fitzwarren and came into Taunton. There were Polish and Czech airman up at Blagdon Hill and of course from 1942 on there were thousands of American troops in the town. We swapped wartime souvenirs Bomb shrapnel and pieces of crashed aircraft were the most sought after. I even managed to get someone to do a 100 lines punishment for me for a piece of a Wellington bomber that crashed on the Quantocks.

In spite of all this our education continued and eventually it came to end in the summer of 1944. We all sat the Oxford School Certificate. This took place over about 10 days at the Methodist Church in Upper High Street and were then ready to get work and face the world. As I have have watched the education standards slowly decline I now realise just how lucky we were what the Richard Huish,s Grammar School achieved in spite of all the distractions of war to normal life.

Eric Saffin.