



Memories of former pupils and teachers



Douglas Honer
(at the School 1948-1972)

RANDOM REMINISCENCES OF A SELHURST MASTER

I was appointed an assistant master at Selhurst in July 1948. I was interviewed for the post by Mr Wheeler and Mr Barlow. If there was a third member of the panel I do not remember. Mr Wheeler asked all the questions, including the only one that stays in my memory "Have you any children?" "Yes, one son, two months old". "Well you won't have to worry about a school for him yet".

Unfortunately it was the practice in the education system that teachers retiring or moving to another post at the end of the summer term must give notice by the 31st May and as my current headmaster would not release me, I could not transfer to Selhurst until the New Year.

It is difficult at 93 years old to separate all the memories of a career that lasted forty-five years, especially as the Royal Wanstead School, the first school I taught at for six years, like Selhurst has an old pupils* association which publishes a magazine and holds very well-attended reunions.

After Wanstead came the War, evacuation and the call-up of teachers under the age of thirty. Over the age of thirty, teachers were considered to be in a reserved occupation and only those already enlisted in the Territorial Army, like Mr Ackland (Lt Col CFR Ackland TD) were called up. After six years with the Royal Tank Regiment, four of them overseas, I spent two years at Sir George Monoux Grammar School at Walthamstow until my appointment at Selhurst.

Term began in January and on my first day, not wanting to be late and not knowing how long the 654 trolley-bus would take from Wallington where I lived I arrived before anyone else. I went into the staff-room and was soon joined by Mr Kenneth King ("KM" or "Smiler"). He lived opposite the school and always arrived first and would sort out any letters that had come for members of the staff. He welcomed me and surprisingly immediately started making

disparaging remarks about some of the senior staff, especially Mr Barlow. Apparently the deputy headship in the past had gone to the most senior master but when Mr Wheeler became head in 1945 he appointed Barlow as his deputy although he was not the most senior assistant master. And also he despised Barlow's "War Degree", the university degree awarded by London University to ex-servicemen (of World War One) after a shortened university course and consequently not an "honours degree". I wondered what sort of a school I had joined and whatever would be the atmosphere in the staff-room. It was ironic that unknown to K. M. King I had known Mr Barlow for fifteen years, having met on several occasions at the Cadet corps summer camps where Mr Barlow commanded the Selhurst contingent and I was with the company from Wanstead. Perhaps that is how I got the job! I did not enlighten KM and afterwards came to appreciate his many good qualities; his years of care for his invalid sister, his running the scout troop when younger and his printing of Braille books for blind students.

School started with Assembly as it would do every school morning for the next twenty-four years with the staff crowded on the platform. If you wanted to avoid Assembly the way that would not displease Mr Wheeler would be to tell him you had a cold, he would then approve of your absence and commend your concern not to spread the germs to others. It was Mr Wheeler's fear of germs that prompted him to tell any boy in front of him in his study "Stand off the carpet", his desk and chair being on a carpet some feet beyond which was the polished wooden floor nearer than which you must not come.

Assemblies took a new form when Mr Spratt gave a course of musical appreciation after the religious service. Starting with the classics - Bach and Handel, then Mozart and Haydn and so on to Beethoven and the Romantics. It was when he reached the latter that he made the remark "The rot set in with Beethoven", I am not sure that it was original: I suspect that it was first made by Sir Thomas Beecham. The music was played on a radiogram preceded by Mr Spratt's description and explanation of what we were going to hear.

Mr Spratt joined the staff in 1948, having taught English at a grammar school in Derbyshire. His chief musical interest was in choral singing. He received a lot of support from Mr Ackland and the next addition to assembly was training the whole school to sing in four parts. And so at Speech Day and Prize Giving held in the Civic Hall, when usually the School Choir, a select body, would stand and perform, the whole school stood and sang Handel's Hallelujah chorus; The school had become a choral society. However, Music was not limited to classical singing. In 1949, Mr Pritchard directed a production of Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Mikado". The girls' parts were taken by junior boys with treble voices and the leading men's parts by members of the staff, Mr Pritchard, Mr Mills, Mr Holland, Mr Webb, and Mr Hore, and Mrs Hughes the wife of Mr Hughes played Katisha. An orchestra had been got together by Mr Spratt who conducted. It was a great success and played to full houses every night. But Gilbert & Sullivan was not to Mr Spratt's taste. He had written in an article in the Selhurst Jubilee book of "light operas which ministered to a now outmoded taste". In 1954 Mr Pritchard wanted to produce another Gilbert & Sullivan "The Pirates of Penzance" and approached members of the staff who might be prepared to perform. Mr Spratt was not interested. In 1949 he had only recently joined the staff and could hardly refuse to co-operate. But by 1954 he was well-established and respected and had made his own views clear what school music should consist of. So that was that - there was no more Gilbert & Sullivan.

School drama always flourished at Selhurst, not surprisingly with such thespians on the staff as Will Stanley, Reg Egford, John Hyde and Tony Weeks-Pearson. The stage was enlarged for theatrical performances by temporary flooring in front. In 1949 some prefects led by Robin Chapman and Colin Spencer and their sisters produced George Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man". It was excellent. The official school-play each year was directed by Mr Egford, later by Mr Hyde. It was usually a play by Shakespeare and all the female parts were acted by boys. In addition to the school play some of the staff and their wives produced a play most years. They

avoided Shakespeare and I remember "The Rivals", Charley's Aunt", "You Never Can Tell" and "The Importance of Being Earnest". Mr Egford's and Mr Hyde's skill as directors was well-known to us through their work with boys but these plays showed another skill in members of the staff. I especially remember Mr Hyde as Lord Fancourt Babberly in "Charley's Aunt" and Mr Oakley as the waiter in "You Never Can Tell". All my reminiscences so far have been outside the classroom, which is perhaps just as well. I was appointed to teach Geography and Economics and over the years I received tremendous help from Mr Seaman, Mr Fooks, Mr Bird, Mr Leonard, Mr Newlands, Mr Timms. Mr Wright. Economics was a relatively new subject on the curriculum, taught only in the Sixth Form. It reached its peak in 1965 when 52 boys sat for 'A' level in Economics and everyone passed. Only Mathematics was a more popular subject, proof of the excellent teaching of messrs Hughes, Short, Barlow and Winyard.

I said I was omitting the classroom. Every teacher has a different style and I shall write only of one. I choose him because I have seen no mention of him in past numbers of "The Old Croydonian". It is Mr Eric Waller who came to Selhurst as Deputy Head from outside. He was a Cambridge historian and had served in the RAF. Though senior, he offered to take the history lessons of the more difficult Third and Fourth forms. The senior History master was only too pleased to accept the offer. Mr Waller's lessons were lively; gales of laughter came from his class. History had never been so interesting or amusing before. It was "1066 and All That". Mr Waller was a great success with the boys and popular and respected by the staff but alas his stay with us was brief and he left us to become head master of a grammar school in Surrey.

Another popular master was Mr Graham Povey. He taught science and was a keen rigger coach; he played with the London Welsh. In the dinner hour he could sometimes be seen reading a book which by its dust-jacket was a learned work on education, but look inside and it was a lurid novel. Mr Povey had served in the Parachute Regiment and after four years at Selhurst which must have seemed rather tame, he applied to the War Office to return to the

Forces, hoping to be reinstated in the Paras. They said they would re-commission him but he was too old for the Paras; he could join the Education Corps. So it was back to teaching, in uniform now and he achieved very high rank.

In a recent number of the "Old Croydonian", a list was printed of the cars that some of the masters ran. To correct the list my cars were as follows; first an Austin 10 saloon, then a Ford 'Prefect' (the worst car I ever had), a Morris Minor 1000, and Austin or Morris manufactured all my later cars until 1987 when I bought a Volkswagen Golf. Writing of cars, Mr Bennetto was sometimes absent-minded. On one occasion he arrived home to find that his case was missing and in it was a load of exercise books to be marked that evening. So back to school he drove and as he entered the now deserted car-park there standing in the middle was his case, exactly where he had put it on the ground while he had been unlocking the car door.

I was not an athletic type but with Mr Wells I acted as scorer. On school Sports Day at Waddon in early days, later at Auckland Road, Mr Wells and I and Mr Mills sat at a table entering the results of each event and adding the points to find the overall winning house. Mr Wells and I performed the same duty at the annual Swimming Sports but this was a much less pleasant event; we both finished the afternoon with headaches caused by being exposed to the strong smell of chlorine.

In the September 2005 issue of the "Old Croydonian" there was an obituary for Mr John Evernden MBE. He was the chief Youth Employment Officer of Croydon and a great friend of Selhurst. Many boys in the 4th, 5th and 6th Forms will remember him as he spent days in the school talking to boys about careers and about their interests. Many boys started in their first post after introduction by Mr Evernden.

In 1957 the even routine of the school was shattered by the "bulge in the birth-rate", the immediate post-war increase in the number of births. Croydon Education Committee decided rightly that the same proportion of boys and girls should be selected by the 11+ exam as heretofore and what affected us was they decided that the increased number of boys should all be accommodated by Selhurst instead of them being shared out among all the selective schools. This meant a lot of changes. The junior forms would all be taught in the old polytechnic building in Scarbrook Road. Selhurst School had come home to its roots for the third time. Mr Taylor was appointed Head of the Junior School and additional teachers were engaged. Mr Ackland laid down that heads of department must do some teaching in the Junior School., so as to supervise the teaching of their subject and to make staff and boys realise that they were a part of Selhurst. Time-tables were constructed so that when staff had to move from one building to the other it would be in the dinner-hour or in a free period. The Committee recompensed staff for their travelling by paying their bus-fare and the same amount for those with cars.

The ultimate aim of schools then as now seems to be the passing of examinations - 11+, O level, A level and many intermediate ones today. The school gymnasium filled with desks and chairs at an adequate distance from each other to prevent cribbing, with Mr Wells high up on the platform, must have been an unnerving sight to many boys, knowing that their entry to a chosen career or a place at university depended on the next three hours. Nowadays hundreds, whole schools, appeal against the result and may be successful in gaining a higher grade. In my time, an appeal against a boy's result was very rare. The most that happened was when an individual was given a much lower grade than was expected of him the examining board would be asked for an explanation of the boy's failure.

Now there are only three examining boards; in my day there were eight, all based on universities. Hundreds of examiners, all practising teachers, marked GCE papers in their own subject. They included Messrs Egford, Pritchard, Smith, Honer, Barlow and probably some

others. Pritchard and Smith were chief examiners in their subject, supervising the other examiner's marking and ensuring they marked to the same standard. Mr Barlow and I were also examiners for the Civil Service Commission which set the examinations for candidates entry to the Civil Service. These exams came at other times of the year than in early summer and they were in rather different subjects, e.g. Geography of the British Isles in the Police Sergeants promotion examination, and a General Knowledge paper for some branch of the Civil Service that I cannot remember.

Why did we do it? And at a time when at the end of summer term a teacher's work load was at its heaviest. Primarily for the money. Teaching was never a well-paid profession and the fees for marking papers paid for a good family holiday in August. Secondly the experience of marking papers in your own subject from other schools and the discussions in examiners' meetings were of assistance in your own teaching.

Another source of income was lecturing in the evening at the local Technical College. I taught Economics for many years to classes of bank clerks at Croydon Technical College.

Another master would have completely different memories of his time at Selhurst. For most, I think, it was a happy school, for the staff certainly, perhaps not for every boy, like the one who when approached to join the OCA said "No. I do not wish to be reminded of Selhurst ever. They were the most unhappy days of my life". But the web-site 'Friends Re-United' has demonstrated how much and how many former pupils feel they owe their success and happiness to the education they received at Selhurst.