

Schoolboy Memories, 1935 -45 Bidford-on-Avon,

Charlie Haywood

Living in Coronation Row, Icknield Street, and going to start Infant School at the age of 5 years old in what is now known as the Parish Hall in Church Street was not too much of an ordeal for me. With home just around the corner one felt quite safe as it was not too far away if help was needed.

The first day was quite a shock to many of us, discipline was very strict as I found to my cost. Being in school was something new, and we could not stop talking about our already changing lifestyle. We were told to be quiet but to no avail, our teacher, probably Mrs Jackson, had had enough of our chatter. For no particular reason I was ordered to the front of the class, made to stand in the corner for the rest of the lesson. Such shame, but it taught me to keep my mouth closed unless spoken to.

After a few days we settled into the school routine, starting with assembly with both classes singing a hymn and saying prayers. Then the screen was closed, dividing the school into two classrooms. One thing that we did enjoy in the lower class was our dinnertime break, it was always called dinner, lunch break was earlier in the morning at 10.45. After we had eaten our sandwiches and had a play outside, we were called back inside and made to lie down on straw mats for a rest. Presumably to re-charge our batteries, after all we were only 5 years old and for many of us, this was the longest time we had been away from our parents.

Winter at the Infant School was something to think back to, there was one fire in each of the two classrooms. Girls were allowed to sit nearest to the fire and us boys had to be brave and keep warm as best we could. As we arrived at school in the very cold weather we would walk past the crates of the school milk standing outside, sometimes with a covering of snow. The bottles were then carried inside and placed in rows in front of the fire to thaw out. This milk was issued free to every child and you were made to drink your third of a pint, sometimes in the summer during hot weather the milk turned sour because in those days there was no refrigerator.

After our first year, everyone moved to the top class, unlike today there was quite a difference in the ages of the children in the same class. Some were two years older than the youngest ones. One of the most enjoyable lessons

were the nature walks round the fields along Grange Road, being shown the wild flowers and different trees.

I hope the following story does not cause offence to anyone. Speaking to several old pupils who were at school at the same time as me, the same subject always came up. The lavatories, the doors to remove the buckets in the girls' loo when full were in the wall of our loo and were fastened with a sliding bolt, there being no flush toilets. Someone, needless to say not me, found that by opening the doors it was possible to tickle the girls' bottoms with a long piece of grass, this came to a stop when one boy used a stinging nettle instead of grass! When this came to the teacher's attention no one would admit to being involved, in those days everyone stuck together and kept quiet. It was more than your life was worth to tell tales. The consequence of this was detention and all boys had to stay in for a week during playtime. A rather severe punishment for us because we could hear the girls playing outside, perhaps this was justice for our sins.

The next big event in our school lives was moving to the Junior School in Victoria Road, now unfortunately a housing estate. Our friends who were already there told us that if we thought the Infant School was strict just wait till you get here! Just the same as my

first day in the Infant School I was unfortunate enough to be caught talking. Mrs Warner had eyes in the back of her head and immediately picked me out as the culprit. This time the punishment was more severe, I had to stand on a chair and have the backs of my legs smacked. Obviously I hadn't learnt to keep quiet! When we moved to the higher class our teacher was "Gertie" Arytage. She was good at getting us to do our work and used to walk around the classroom looking over shoulders to see what you were doing, and occasionally she would come with the remark, "now then, who's letting off the perfume then?" which had the effect of reducing the whole class into fits of laughter.

"Dick" Noise was also a teacher here before he moved up to the High School, which is also a housing estate now.

Then came the move we were all dreading, going into the top class with "Jacky" Warner, the headmaster, as our teacher. If he found you not paying attention to what he was saying, a piece of chalk and sometimes the blackboard rubber was thrown with great accuracy at the offender. He was rather adept at using the cane which in this case was an old army cane with a silver ferule on one end. Boys who had been caned before told us to hold our hands with fingers sloped towards the floor, the theory being that the cane would slide off and not hurt so much. Mr Warner had other ideas and would smartly bring the cane up and catch you on the back of your hand so you received a double dose. I wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea about Mr Warner, he was hard and strict with us but he was fair; if you got punished you probably deserved it.

In late summer a gang of us would sometimes go along the alleyway at the back of what is now Holland Close. Some apple trees hung over the path and we would scump some apples on the way to school. This particular morning I had to leave my bike at home because of a puncture, other boys who had come on their bikes put them down and we started to grab the apples. Unbeknown to us "Daddy Holland", the proprietor of what is now Bidford Boats, was lying in wait for the scumpers. He always seemed old to us but he could run really fast. Anyway, this time we all got away. The owners of the bikes suddenly realised they had left them behind and it was now time to go to school. "Okay", they said, "we will get them on our way home". Later on that morning someone called Mr Warner from the classroom and he marched back in with a policeman. Every boy was asked if he owned a bike and where it was, five boys said they had bikes and did not know where they were. I thanked my lucky stars for the nail that had caused my puncture. The bike owners had to go with the policeman and identify their bikes. Back at school they each received six of the best on each hand and had to write a hundred lines. Mr Holland generously agreed this punishment was sufficient.

Another incident that comes to mind is the day an RAF aeroplane made a forced landing up Middle Road at the top of Tower Hill. The whole school was called together and Mr Warner gave strict instructions that no one was to go anywhere near it. Just imagine it, the only planes we had seen were high in the sky and now we had one on the ground virtually on our doorstep. I think it was an Avro Anson or maybe an Oxford. The temptation was too much for us, especially the boys. This proved quite a problem for Mr Warner because he couldn't prove who had been to see the plane. He somehow found out the names of the boys he definitely knew had disobeyed his orders and they were caned. The rest of us were kept in at playtimes just in case we were guilty. This was another way that Mr Warner used to make sure everyone who should be punished didn't escape scott-free.

At the end of our stay at the Junior School Mr Warner wished us all good luck and said he hoped what we had learnt would help us on our way at the High School and not let him and his teachers down.

I had one year at the High School and enjoyed the time there very much. It was rather

strange at first to have different teachers for the lessons. Miss Free, Miss Lemon and Mr Noise who was in charge of the Army Cadet Corps based at the school, Mr Budden being the headmaster. My favourite subject was metalwork closely followed by games, especially football. There was great rivalry between the four houses, Shakespeare, Elliot, Dugdale and Drayton. Everyone was really keen to earn points to win the School Shield for their house at the end of the year. Points were awarded for good class work, being punctual and good behaviour. A graph was kept in the school hall so you knew what the situation was. Woe betide anyone who lost unnecessary points!

After a year I moved to Alcester Grammar School, but that is another story.

The one big mystery during our schooldays was the "village grapevine", we never managed to find out how it worked. If we had been up to mischief or had had the cane, how come our parents always knew about it before we had got back home?

As these things happened 70 years ago it has been quite difficult remembering everything. I hope my story has given people an insight into our schooldays in Bidford. We enjoyed life in our village as youngsters and had a great deal of fun doing so.