

Article on Life at Friends' School in the late 40s and early 50s by John Robertson (Year Group 1955)

Start at Friends' School



Above photos of cricket on lower asphalt 1953

Came the day in 1948 when I had to report to my new boarding school. For the first few terms we had to travel there and back by bus, with my trunk travelling separately courtesy of Carter Paterson. But after a while my mother shared the hire of a taxi with Mrs Saul from Swiss Avenue, who's son David started at the Friends' School at the same time. It was the easiest way to get us and all our belongings over to Saffron Walden from Chelmsford. I can remember the first journey, and the uncomprehending dread of what was about to happen as the 30 miles rolled by. The noise of the boys' playroom, and the queuing up in lines ready to file in to the dining room for tea, clutching my pot of home-made jam, with mum peering anxiously in through the playroom door. The school kitchens had been refurbished during the summer holidays, and the work was not quite finished. So for the first three or four days we lived on sandwiches, which again did not make the school seem to be a very inviting place.

The first term, judging from the set of letters that my mother kept, was not my favourite time. Some heartstrings must have stretched a bit during the first few weeks. But gradually I settled in, school became bearable, and I began to take an interest in what was going on. Looking back now, I know that I was very lucky indeed to have been sent to that school. It was coeducational, about equally balanced between boys and girls, and had a two-stream intake each year. Consequently it was of a size (about 350 pupils) where everybody could know everybody's name, and had a real family feel. It had the ethos and commitment peculiar to Friends' Schools, where the staff dedicated themselves to the pupils in a friendly and supportive way. Being a boarding school the staff also took responsibility for the pupils' spare time, and went out of their way to provide a great range of activities, clubs and societies. Being 1948, television was still in its infancy, and even when I left the school in 1955, I do not remember a television set in any of the school rooms. This undoubtedly strengthened the feeling of community as we made our own entertainment in the afternoons, evenings and weekends.

The sixth forms were given considerable responsibility. Bedroom prefects slept in with the junior forms in their dormitories, and acted as table heads at meal times. Four or five full prefects and a head boy and girl were appointed for each school year, who virtually ran the routine operation of the school, from rousing the school in the morning to presiding over "prep" in the evening. Only about a third of the pupils stayed on into the sixth form in those days.

SCHOOL STAFF

The only grammar school in the area was Newport, and that was only for boys. Some girls who had passed the 11-plus were county-funded to attend FSSW, consequently the standard that the school aspired to was reasonably high, and the school had its fair share of acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge following "A" levels. In general the teaching was of a high standard, and above all the rapport established between the staff and the pupils, enhanced by contact in spare time activities, made for a very relaxed and supportive atmosphere. There were a few staff who let the standard down, but it was noticeable that these left and were replaced fairly soon after I joined the school.

The headmaster, a Mr. Gerald Littleboy, kept his hand in at teaching mathematics by taking one form through the school, and it happened to be my form. Consequently we got to know the headmaster better than most pupils. He was a well-respected figure, formal and reasonably strict, but with a nice sense of humour when it suited him. Our class suffered a bit as he was often called out of the class to deal with some crisis or other, but he got me through "O" and "A" levels, so I can't complain.

The headmistress, Jennie Ellinor, was a very prim spinster, thin and upright, with several pronounced nervous habits, such as coughing through her nose while she was speaking. Coughing is not the right word, it was more of a letter "k" pronounced with your mouth shut, but it was of course ripe for imitation. In any public situation she was a very nervous, jumpy creature, and even in private, one to one, the nerves were still there. She taught R.E. My closest contact with her was preparing for Evening Meeting on a Sunday. Two pupils were selected to read the lessons each week, and regularly at 2.15 on a Sunday afternoon Jennie would put us through it. She sat right at the back, and made us read and reread the lesson until she was satisfied and we were fed up. Half a second for commas, a full second for full stops, and every word to be projected in full with appropriate expression. I once spent a full three quarters of an hour reading and rereading a short passage until she was satisfied.

There were many other devoted members of staff, and I could write a lot about all of them. Being a two-stream intake, there were some staff that I never really got to know, but I must mention some names of those who featured largely in my secondary education, and who contributed in no small measure to my upbringing.

Pride of place I think must go to Norman Rogers, who joined the school at the end of my first year to replace Mr. Stanger and teach woodwork. He also left the school to move on to Cheltenham the same year that I left, so we were in a

sense contemporaries. I took woodwork to "O" level, but not during the last two years, so tended to lose contact a bit, but even so was responsible for his farewell speech on behalf of the school. Why did he leave such an impression on me, and why have I voted him "top dog"? It is partly because he taught a craft, and I enjoy crafts and working with my hands, and partly because we did get on well together. But the major reason was the pride he had in his profession. He taught woodwork, and he insisted that woodwork had an equal place alongside maths, English and all other subjects. He could not abide any hint that it might be considered to be of a lower standing, a blue-collar rather than a white-collar activity. He taught well, and drove us to adopt high standards in our work. He was not universally liked, because those that were not interested in woodwork often found themselves the subject of a tongue-lashing. But it was his insistence that nothing but the best is good enough, and his expectation that we should all aspire to it, was something that was most marked about his teaching. We also maintained contact after school, both by my visits to stay with his family at Cheltenham over weekends during National Service, and his visits to Chelmsford for various reasons, using my parents' house as a bed-and-breakfast. I often joke that his was the only subject that was of any use to me after leaving school, as walls full of amateur cupboards and shelves will testify!

A very close second must be Richard Sturge, a devoted music master at the school, whose specialisation was choral singing. Individual form singing lessons culminated in the entry of a group of us into festival competitions before our voices broke, but he will be chiefly remembered for his work with senior choir and small



choir. Senior choir was voluntary but was well attended, and included a considerable sprinkling of staff, including the headmaster. Main practice night was Wednesday night after prep., with supplementary practices before morning assembly for the girls on two mornings (altos and sopranos) and the boys on the other two mornings (tenors and basses). We learned our parts separately, and then brought them together on a Wednesday evening, when another member of the music staff would help out on the piano while Richard conducted and cajoled. Each year we worked towards a big summer performance of some work or other, usually given in Saffron Walden Parish Church and up in Friends' House in London. The orchestra to support these performances was usually put together from old scholars who had gone on to a musical career, or other friends of Richard and the school. The choice of work was determined by Richard, based on the likely ability of the choir, which inevitably varied from year to year. I was lucky in that the years I was in the choir were subsequently recognised as being the peak of his achievement. I cannot claim the credit, as it has been attributed to the presence of the headmaster in our ranks, which ensured good discipline during rehearsals! Bach's B minor Mass, Verdi's Requiem and the Fauré Requiem were favourite works, but his biggest undertaking was Handel's double choir Oratorio "Israel in Egypt". Our school formed one choir, and the girls of Sidcot and the boys of Leighton Park Friends' Schools formed the

second choir. We all came together for a "summer school" in Saffron Walden to put it all together, ending with the two public performances as usual.

Small choir met for rehearsals on Saturday mornings before assembly, and at other times depending on the need. Membership was by invitation only, and I was fortunate to be invited in after my first year in senior choir. We rehearsed for the Sunday evening meetings, parts and descants for the hymns, and also the occasional motet or other short work. Small choir came into its own at Christmas, when it led the carol services in the school, and was in demand for concerts in most of the local churches. Richard found many new or unusual carols in the same vein as David Willcocks at Kings' College, Cambridge, and we delighted in presenting them in the local churches. Happy memories of nervous gatherings round the coke stoves in the vestries, the intent listening and the spontaneous applause of the congregations, and the tea and buns that usually followed in the village halls. Saffron Walden, Thaxted, Newport, Wendens Ambo, Radwinter, Arkesden, Clavering, Finchingfield and several others all invited us in, but we could not do them all in one year, there were not enough Sundays to go round!

Two girls in our year took A level music, so as part of their course Richard formed a sort of music club, and invited a group of us into his study in the evenings once a week for music appreciation. He also organised a visit to the opera. I believe it was Covent Garden, so it must have been before the prices went beyond most people's reach. "Der Freischutz" by Weber, which proved a superb introduction to opera. After my last year at school he arranged to meet me up in London for a concert in the Royal Albert Hall, but I can't remember what it was. Another dedicated enthusiast who devoted his whole being to the school, and who has left me with a legacy of love for choral music.

Cyril Mummery, the history teacher, a real solid citizen and a friend to all with his boundless wisecracks but sober and thoughtful teaching. My history disappointed him, but we kept close through my appointment as librarian, and my final year's appointment as secretary of the Boys' Reading Club, both of which were in his charge. Kelvin Osborn, who taught French, and who seemed to befriend me particularly by inviting me up to his study to listen to evening concerts on the radio while he did his marking. He also finally got me to swim a length of the pool when he temporarily took over responsibility for swimming when the normal swimming master ("Barney" Jacobs) was away for a term on sabbatical. And of course Stanley Pumphrey, that grand old man of pipe and whiskers who had seen service in the Friends' Ambulance Unit during the First World War, and who taught Physics and Chemistry throughout the school. He appointed me Chemistry Lab curator in the fourth year along with Tony Osborne, and it was the tradition for these curators to cook themselves a meal over bunsen burners on a Sunday afternoon, just to make lesser mortals feel jealous and themselves feel sick. During my last two years, taking Maths, Applied Maths, Physics and Chemistry at A level, Stanley Pumphrey and the headmaster were my only two teachers.

And many others of course who all contributed in their various ways to making the Friends' School a caring, thoughtful family.

SCHOOL LIFE

Where to start and what to say? So many happy memories. It is odd how the minute you leave a school it changes. You are suddenly amongst strangers. What has been your life for seven years is suddenly, irretrievably lost. Even the first Old Scholars' Weekend amongst a number of your contemporaries is different. You have lost the thread, no longer in tune with the school's soul, which has moved on with the appointment of new staff and a new generation of pupils. I loved the school so much that this change surprised and disappointed me. There is no way you can regain the family feeling that you once enjoyed. It was also a time of great change, with the spread of television, the approach of the "swinging sixties", and a more relaxed regime in a number of ways. My headmaster also retired as I left the school, and Kenneth Nicholson came in from the very relaxed environment of St. Christophers, Letchworth to lead the school, so it was inevitable that the school would change its character to a certain extent. So what was there can never be recreated. I just count myself very lucky to have experienced such a close-knit, caring and supportive community.

A typical day started with the prefect-on-duty being woken up by the alarm clock, as far as I remember it would have been about 6.50 a.m.. A quick dress and a cursory wash before grabbing the hand-bell from its shelf, and then a spirited clanging up and down the stairs at 7.00 a.m. to raise the first wave of pupils. A repeat clanging at 7.15 to raise the second lot, and then a three minute warning bell at 7.27 a.m. for the first collect of the day. All gathered in the boys playroom in form rows, and once silence had fallen - not too difficult at that time in the morning - the school filed into the dining room for breakfast, junior forms first. Everyone had an allotted table for breakfast and lunch, so you always ate with the same (mixed) group. Only at teatime were you seated at the tables in the order that you entered the room, but this time the boys sat separately from the girls.

Breakfast was cereal or porridge, dispensed from a bowl on each table, followed by a cooked breakfast handed out from a trolley for the head of the table to serve. Toast, butter and marmalade followed, although I must admit that I am finding it difficult to remember the exact details. Did we have tea to drink, or was it just water?

After breakfast it was back to the dormitories to make our beds and generally tidy up. Two were delegated each week to sweep out the dormitory following bed-making. Then it was general preparation for the day, ready for the assembly collect at 8.50 a.m. Choir practice of course for some. Bells were rung for the Assembly collect, and then we all filed across the front of the school to the Assembly Hall. Assembly took about 15 - 20 minutes, and then school proper started about 9.15 a.m.

Classes were 35 - 40 minutes long, with a recess in the morning, where milk and slices of bread were distributed to the starving. Bells were rung again to bring us in for the second session, and then again for the lunchtime collect. The

whole running of the school revolved around this brass hand-bell, which was on the go from morning till night! It was quite sizeable, I would guess about six inches across the bell mouth, and of course had to bring people in from the far side of the playing field. Ringing this bell was a sort of virility symbol, some prefects wielding it into paroxysms of clanging, others just swinging it to and fro.

Lunch was the formal meal of the day, usually three courses. Head of each table was a member of staff or a sixth former. On his right or left sat the waiters, and second in were the packers, the least popular seats on the table. After the soup, the packers packed up the plates and the waiters took them to the hatch. The main course was dispensed from trolleys for the head of the table to serve, similarly the puddings, the packers and waiters doing their job between each course. The Headmaster and Headmistress sat at top table on a raised dais together with senior members of staff, and prefects and sixth formers in rotation. The meal started and ended with a silent grace, initiated by the pinging of a little bell on top table.

Lessons recommenced about half an hour after lunch, and school continued to about four. Then came the first real block of spare time of the day. Those doing sport usually ran on later. Others could do what they liked. Various clubs were available, particularly those clubs that needed daylight, and the swimming baths were open for two sessions, one for the girls and one for the boys, supervised by the master or mistress on duty. Mixed bathing sessions were organised, but not on a regular basis.

Then came the clanging of the bell for the tea collect, which was usually the rowdiest, and we all filed into tea, filling up the tables in the order we entered. High tea was provided, anything from scrambled egg to heated tinned tomatoes or kippers, with bread and butter to follow. Occasional special treats of sticky buns or some other cakes were provided. Then one had a free 15 or 20 minutes before prep, and this was traditionally spent walking up and down the "Avenue", kicking the stones at each end to mark each "lap". One walked in social groups, but this was the traditional time for one to walk out with one's "couple", the boyfriend or girlfriend of the moment.

Then the clanging of the bell for prep, which started about 6.00p.m., with one hour for the junior forms and up to one and three quarter hours for the senior forms. Prep was done in one's form room, supervised by a sixth former or prefect, who was supposed to do his own prep at the same time.

And then came the next block of spare time before bed. Many more clubs were available on different days of the week, two or three to an evening, so there was always a good choice of things to do. They ranged from the Natural History Society to the Model Railway Society, and of course choir practice and rehearsals for any forthcoming productions.

First form bedtime began about 8.00p.m., with the more senior forms being summoned in turn up to about 9.30p.m. Up to the washroom for a quick wash, then into the bedroom to get ready for bed. "Lights out" followed a period for reading or chatting, and then one was supposed to go to sleep. This must have

been the most trying time for the master on duty, who had to supervise the whole process through five forms and some nine dormitories, most of which were not feeling particularly sleepy! Slipper fights, pillow fights and water bomb fights were common, usually with a lookout tracking the master on duty, but eventually the dormitories succumbed to the night. Bedroom prefects took over about 10.00p.m. when the master on duty finished his rounds.

So the working week was pretty full. What about time off?

Wednesday afternoon was free of lessons. Matches were organised against other schools, but for most of us we were free to do what we liked. We were able to go off site and walk into town, spending our pocket money at the local sweet shops (complete with ration books in 1948). I think the junior forms had to get permission from the master on duty, but there was no concern in those days of anyone coming to any harm. One could go out for cycle rides if one had a bike at the school, and one was not necessarily expected to go with anyone else. The only proviso was to be back by teatime. On Wednesday evening there was prep followed by clubs as usual.

Saturday morning was filled with lessons, but Saturday afternoon was just like Wednesday, with the ability to go off site if you wanted to. After Saturday high tea came the high spot of the week, an entertainment for the whole school, usually in the Assembly Hall. Normally this was a film, but often the school invited in speakers to present on their specialised field. Two I remember were Eric Hosking on bird photography (needless to say beautifully illustrated with slides), and Carl Dolmetsch and Joseph Saxby talking about and performing on a variety of old instruments. The standard of these evenings was extraordinarily high, but I suppose one has to bear in mind that it was before the general availability of television, so perhaps ones expectations were more modest in those days.

Sundays were quiet. Later morning bells for a lie-in, and later breakfast. Morning Friends' Meeting in the town was compulsory for the third form upwards, the two junior forms having their own meeting in the library. The walk to and from the Meeting took up most of the morning, while the junior forms had a compulsory slot to write their letters home. After Sunday lunch was the traditional time for "Bad Eggs" on the lower boys' playground, watched by most of the school, and then it was time for the Sunday afternoon walk. All the boys had to be off site for a minimum of one hour from 2.00p.m. to 3.00p.m. The junior boys were taken on a "pig drive" by the master on duty, and every one else could go where they liked. I can't remember what the girls did during this time, probably they had to sit quietly and read, or some such ladylike activity. The pig drive varied depending on the master on duty. Some took the easy option and marched us half a mile to the local copse, and then organised simple games like "kick the can". Others took their walking responsibilities more seriously, and marched us round what seemed like half of Essex before returning us footsore and weary to Sunday tea. There was no shortage of walks in the area; almost any direction took you into interesting and varied countryside. Audley End Park and Conker Avenue were perhaps my favourites, but there were many others.

Sunday evening was taken up by Sunday Evening Meeting, a school meeting for worship in the Assembly Hall. Hymns, readings and a visiting speaker, very different from the silence of the morning session in the town. Small choir often performed a short piece, and the hymns from "Songs of Praise" are ingrained in my memory, sung at full throttle by over 300 people, small choir providing parts and descants. The visiting speaker was usually interesting, though often members of staff used to "fill-in" if needed. And so a quiet day was concluded with a school family act of worship, ready for a new week to begin.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

I have described a typical school day, and the staff and their impact on my life. At the risk of going on too long about the school, I feel I ought to say something more specific about my activities at the school while trying not to duplicate what has already been said.

It took me I suppose a couple of terms to settle in, and I cannot remember that much about the early days at school. I did not join many clubs, so spent most of my time "hanging around" in the form room or the boys' playroom. I detested sport, and avoided it at every opportunity, so that cut down my choice of spare time activities. But crazes swept the school, as they probably still do. Folded paper "fortune-tellers", paper aeroplanes, folded paper "water bombs", seasonal games like conkers, and other games like chess, battleships, attack and card games. I still suffered from migraines, so was a fairly regular visitor to the school sanatorium, and also got caught by a chicken pox epidemic. But I gradually became more sociable, joining in more things from junior school plays to sport. I even appeared once or twice representing the school in the under-thirteen cricket and football teams, but this must have been through coercion rather than choice!

It was about this time that my parents bought a piano, and paid for me to have piano lessons at the school. This was a great benefit to me, as there were four practice rooms available, so instead of "hanging around" in my spare time I could now go and play the piano. I only had these lessons for about eighteen months because it was thought prudent to stop them during preparation for "O" levels, but I made rapid progress during that time due to the amount of practice, and I very much enjoyed it. These practice rooms were next door to Richard Sturge's study, and I think I must have driven him mad with my never-ending practice, particularly when I learnt some piano accompaniments to my father's banjo pieces!

By the third year I was pretty well integrated into the school, joining in most things and beginning to accept responsibility. Art room curator was probably the first, followed by chemistry lab curator the following year. The school celebrated its 250th. anniversary in 1951, and I had a small part in the play that dramatised the history of the school. Edmund Rubbra was commissioned to write some choral music in celebration, and this was performed by the school choir before the curtain went up on our piece. Standing backstage behind those dark velvet curtains, listening to "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that

build it”, dressed up in costume and greasepaint and full of nerves, was my first introduction to amateur dramatics.

More amateur dramatics followed, of which “Love’s Labour’s Lost” was probably the high point. But by far the most enjoyable performances were sketches prepared for the End-of-Term concert, a ritual that the whole school revelled in on the last night of term. These concerts were informal occasions in the Assembly Hall, and were a mixture of music, sketches and sing-a-long songs, presented by staff and pupils. Ken Whitlow was in charge of drama at the school, and he usually found some uproarious sketches to put us through. At the end of the Autumn term in my last year, my parents came over on the last day of term, and Dad and I wound up the concert on the Hawaiian guitars, which went down a treat.

I was now in the school choir, and this also occupied a lot of time. It was also more satisfying, as the standard achieved in choral singing was far higher than in amateur dramatics, if such comparisons are possible.

By the fifth year, “O” levels beckoned. A system of time sheets was introduced, and one had to record all the time spent on work during each week. These sheets were reviewed by the staff, and anyone not doing enough time on a particular subject was taken gently to task. I took eight subjects:- Maths, English, French, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, English literature and Woodwork. Despite this being exam year, I do not recollect any slackening off in spare time activities. I was appointed librarian under Cyril Mummery, and learned the Dewey system of classification and how to mark the books with a hot iron and some white ink transfer technique. Discipline in the library, i.e maintaining reasonable silence and checking books out and in (and overdue), and taking part in the regular stock check were all part of the job.

Once the exams were over, one still had three or four weeks of term remaining. Time was filled in all sorts of ways, and for those leaving at age 16 it was a poignant time. Boys taking cookery lessons, girls taking woodwork lessons, Scottish dancing and ballroom dancing classes in the assembly hall, strawberry picking trips by bike to Elsenham, the annual fifth form cycle ride to Castle Hedingham organised by the form master Richard Wright, choir performances, etc. etc. Plenty of things to do, but all of it under the cloud of not knowing what your exam results would be, and consequently what the future would hold.

And so into the sixth form. Four subjects to take at “A” level:- pure maths, applied maths, physics and chemistry, with only two teachers, the headmaster for the first two and Stanley Pumphrey for the second two. I can’t remember much of the first year sixth, but for the second and final year I was appointed one of four prefects on the boys’



side, whose duties have been outlined earlier. Two of us were actually appointed prefects for the last half of the preceding summer term, partly to help out the preceding years prefects and partly, I suspect, to help the staff make a decision on next years head boy. In the event Tony Newton was appointed head boy, to my short-lived chagrin, but as he eventually became Leader of the House of Commons I suppose I should not feel too upset about it. It was typical of the atmosphere of the school that the Headmaster called me into his office before making the announcement. He explained that he had made this decision because he thought that I would take the position too seriously and worry too much about the responsibility, which could affect my work. Wise words indeed. Other duties during my final year were senior librarian, secretary of the Boys' Reading Club, bedroom prefect for the first year boys and table rota organiser, i.e. determining who would be head of which lunch table on a weekly basis.

The prefects had their own room, which we immediately set about redecorating. Alan Sillitoe and Anthony Wallis were the other two prefects, and we soon settled down into a routine. Duty prefect came round once every four weeks, so for one week in four each of us lived with the alarm clock, watched our watches all day to ring the bells and take the collects, and supervised evening "prep". Last thing in the evening we would spend in the girl prefects' room for a drink (coffee or tea I might add) before going to bed. The prefects who were "couples" would seize the opportunity to say their goodnights privately in the boy prefects' room, about the only opportunity during the school day for any privacy.

And so my last year at school drifted to a close. Both the headmaster and Norman Rogers left with me, and the school never seemed the same again. I was so very happy there, and it is tempting to regard it as the end of an era. Post war and pre television, the school was a wonderful community, and I was so privileged to be part of it.