

SCHOOL DAYS AT HURSLEY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

It was the term before my fifth birthday that I started to attend the infants class at the Keble Memorial School in Hursley. This was in 1942 and the second world war was in progress. We actually lived at Oliver's Battery, so had a long bus journey every day, but I remember that with pleasure, as we saw the changing seasons as we looked out of the window - I especially remember the trees in autumn.

The school only had four classrooms, and there was a removable partition between each pair, so they could be made larger for activities such as country dancing. The ages of the children ranged from five to fourteen (later fifteen), because this was before the 1944 Education Act, which enabled all children to move on to a secondary school at eleven.

I was miserable in that infant class because my mother, bless her, had done everything for me and had made no attempt me to prepare for a time when she would not be there to attend to my every need. Mrs Cutsforth, the teacher, stood no nonsense, and I was terrified! However, she taught us reading using the phonic method, and we copied handwriting letters from the blackboard. For number work we used little seashells. I was one of the clever children, so made good progress, but the teachers had to cope with the full range of ability (and lack of!). I remember two twins having a hard time with Mrs Cutsforth!

The second class was taught by Mrs Dickman, and she was a dream teacher - I do not remember her ever having any discipline problems and I really loved her. All work was done in groups - which had to be the case with such a range of age and ability in each class.

The third class was taught by Mrs Shortoe and I remember her sitting on her desk chatting about all sorts of interesting things - and she would say, "Now here I am going off on a red herring again." She also used to frequently come out with sayings, such as "Two wrongs don't make a right!" and "Be sure your sins will find you out."

The girls had sewing lessons - we made an apron and had to learn to hem the sides and then to put some embroidery on the finished apron - will I ever forget how to make "lazy daisy" stitches! In the summer on nice days we all took our chairs outside and sat under the trees to do our sewing.

The boys had woodwork and gardening. We younger children were also given a little plot to tend, and I remember the thrill of seeing our

seeds emerge and develop into mature plants. Whenever I see "Love Lies Bleeding" I am transported back to that garden at school.

There was a war on and the school had white battlement walls built right round the outside, and mesh covered all the windows. We had no air-raid shelters, but did drills of getting under the desks. The worrying thing (to our parents, but never to us) was the fact that just near the school, on the edge of Hursley Park, was a Vickers Armstrong factory making aeroplanes for the war. It was set among the trees, and the roof was painted in a camouflage design - luckily the Germans did not find it!

We always carried our gas masks with us, and every now and again a caravan would arrive and we all had to put them on and enter the caravan to make sure they were working properly - I do not know what they used, but I think it would have been "tear gas" for the test. We infants had red "Mickey Mouse" gas masks, and I remember the big children standing laughing at us - I suppose we did look funny! The bigger children had grown-up black gas masks.

To go back to the teachers, the top class was taught by the headmaster, Mr Toyer, and he had the unenviable task of getting we brighter young ones through the eleven plus exam, (for my elder brother it was the scholarship exam) and at the same time educating the less academic senior children who were still in the school. It is to his credit that he managed this so effectively that he was awarded the MBE for his services to the education of rural children.

And rural children we were mostly, although the workers at the aircraft factory were largely accommodated in fairly local prefabs, so the children from there were not country folk. We had one sad family in the school that arrived inadequately clothed, and decidedly smelly. The school teachers must have reported this, as we learned that both parents were sentenced to three months imprisonment for neglecting their children.

And talking of rural - need I mention the lavatories! They were away across the playground and there was no plumbing - just buckets under the seats - not even chemical loos! We certainly did not linger there a moment longer than necessary!

The playground was in three parts, soft asphalt (where if you fell over the graze was filled with grit!), hard asphalt where we could play games and had PE lessons, and an area of grass. Playground games went in phases - at one time we were all skipping, with long "communal" ropes as well as short ones, then we would be playing in

groups with five stones, in the autumn we would all arrive with our conkers on strings, and when it was icy in winter we made wonderful slides and skidded merrily over the playground. Always there were games of "he" in all its forms. A popular one was when you caught someone they had to join you and so on, until everyone except the last person was in one great chain running around the playground. This was before the days of television, but we did benefit from school broadcasts from the radio (which we always called the wireless). For this we used to walk to Mr Toyer's private house and sit on the floor in his lounge with our notebooks and pencils. There were vivid historical dramas broadcast, which enlivened our learning a great deal. These were the days when nobody travelled anywhere unless they had to - I did not see the sea until I was seven years old. The grown ups had told me that the water went as far as you could see - so I imagined a very, very long river - what a surprise when we arrived at the coast! There was no chance of going on to the beach - it had rolls of barbed wire all along it.

Reading was our main source of adventure, as well as knowledge. At school we were encouraged to read books such as "Children of the New Forest", "White Fang", "King Solomon's Mines" and more Rider Haggard adventure stories. At home it was Enid Blyton and the Famous Five Adventures - oh yes, and comics - the Dandy, the Beano etc.

The lord who owned Hursley Park, alas I forget his name, was a governor of the school and made occasional visits - an elderly gentleman with a drip on the end of his nose (funny, the things that impress a child!). He allowed us to play in the park, so at dinner time we could wander at will, and the school bell was rung twice, five minutes apart, by which time we had to be back in the playground. We climbed trees, made dens, ran all the way to the shop (not that we could buy much - there was rationing) and even went around the back of the aircraft factory among the liquids that were extruding from it. Oh dear, what a risk Mr Toyer took! This must have come home to him one day when my friend from the prefabs and I decided to go all the way to her house during the dinner hour - it was far too far to go in the time, and we were very late back. I still worry about the anxiety we must have given Mr Toyer that day.

During the dinner hour we would sometimes stand by the road as the American soldiers drove past. They would throw chocolate and

sweets to us, which was followed by the inevitable squabble over who received what!

Every year there would be a student from King Alfred's Training College, and it seemed that one of their tasks was to teach us decimals - so every year we learned about decimals - once again!

The students were very varied, and what a difference personality and charisma made - I can still remember the names of one I loved, and one I hated!

School days at Hursley were a joy and I do so hope that they are still so - even if there is no longer the freedom at dinner time. No doubt the dinners are different too. There was no canteen in our day - just an oil cloth put on the desk - and dinners from war time limitations. Memories of semolina with a blob of jam in the middle (acceptable), custard with a cube of dates (yuck! I still can't eat dates!) And as for figs!!!! I am not complaining - we were adequately fed and now enjoy a healthy old age as a result!