

INTRODUCTION

This is the first excerpt from David “Nipper” Hatton’s forthcoming autobiography to be entitled *As It Happened*. David was at Chailey from 1951 to 1959. After Chailey David eventually became an actor featuring in many films, TV programmes and advertisements.

CHAILEY Part One

“What’s wrong with you, then?” Just an enquiry, and something like it was a normal form of introduction among the boys I now found myself with. Leaving mothers forlornly standing against the grimy wall of a large dark shed called Victoria Coach Station, we clattered aboard the three Southdown Coaches, all callipers, sticks, useless limbs, and misshapen bodies. How on earth did I get here?! Well, by train to Paddington via the Westbury White Horse cut into the hillside. (There’s a wonderful -- and for me, poignant -- Ravilious painting of this -- and seen through the train window, exactly as I remember it.) Then by bus to Victoria. It was a journey I was to make some forty-odd times in the next eight years. And how was I cajoled into this? The usual: it was for my own good. It was felt I should have my education under medical observation and with access to specialist treatment. So there. To be fair, I was asked and said yes, but didn’t feel I had the option. And, of course, my mother was ‘under the doctor’, So there.

Journey’s end was the Heritage Craft School. It was built on Chailey Common, an isolated sea of bracken and gorse with a splendid view of the South Downs. The living quarters, set apart on high ground, was known as St. George’s, and built in the style of a red-brick monastery. It had a ‘quad’, a sports field, some wooden service and other ancillary buildings, and, notably, a smock windmill, still in good order and painted in wartime camouflage. Standing beside it was a conical yew tree, said to be the exact centre of Sussex.

The school had its origins in the Edwardian era and was, I suppose, typical of the philanthropy of its time. The creation of a well-connected woman, Grace Kimmins, later Dame Grace, it was the progeny of a charity called The Guild of The Poor Brave Things. (Or was it The Brave, Poor Things?). Capital was collected by the sale of Golden Apples and Golden Leaves, and there would later be a large ledger on display, recording the generosity of the donors. The purpose was to found a boarding school for the education and occupational training of lower-class crippled children. The ethos would be God, King, and Country, the discipline strict, and the conditions hard. The children would be expected to overcome their disabilities, and go on to lead useful and self-sufficient lives. The motto chosen for the school was *Laetus Sorte Mea* --- Happy In My Lot.

And so it came to be.

But by the time I arrived, in 1951, the school was no longer in private hands, but part of the fledgling National Health Service. In the old days (the good ol’ days) only physical handicaps were admitted; I have the impression that amputations were the impairment of choice. There is a photo of boys swarming all over the half-built frame of a wooden hut, one of their school rooms, allegedly helping in the construction. Now, I’m sure it was a PR stunt: but nevertheless, that was the ideal. Now, however, the NHS were throwing neurological impairments into the mix. All very laudable, except the school, particularly the residential bit, St. George’s, still clung to the old harsh regime; very often hardly appropriate to the needs or, indeed, the comprehension of its new residents. Try making a child with ‘learning difficulties’ understand the importance of folding his clothes neatly on his bedside

locker; or the necessity of standing in line for roll-call. I have seen a boy, who failed this last point, beaten with a bamboo cane until the cane broke and flew off his back in splinters. The boy howled and screamed and tried to drop to the ground, but was held up by the warden, the better to belabour him. 120 boys, standing in line, watched in silence, stunned. Roll-call was followed, as per routine, by a forced march of nearly half a mile, across the common to the school buildings and chapel. This happened four times a day, there and back, come rain or shine. In bad weather we were issued with capes. I've called it a forced march, but I'm not exaggerating by much: we marched in line, and the rule was that if anyone fell over he had to pick himself up -- no-one was allowed to help him.

The wardens -- those in charge of our domestic life at St. George's -- were an odd, disparate, lot. Lord knows how they had been recruited, but with the war recently ended, the military seem to have been a fecund source. Mr. Colbourn (the above Thrasher) had a decided soldierly bearing, and, I gather, had been a colonel. But here I must mention that I don't remember him as a sadist -- I reckon that, on this occasion, out of sheer frustration, he just completely lost his rag. Then there was the stop-gap games master, another ex-soldier, who resigned after a boy tried to strangle him with the man's own tie. And there was the one-time 'Captain' Eliot, so habitually drunk that he once fell asleep on his feet, taking dormitory prayers. He was sacked. Also sacked was fat, blustering, inept, Mr. Gross (I kid you not with the name) who made great play of being an ex-officer, and who also lost it big by throwing chairs at his young tormentors. But my heart can only go out to poor Mr. King, likewise inept, but certainly not military. He was a Christian of the wet sort, timid and gentle, and who thought he could do it all by kindness. Faced with a prison-film type dining-room riot, tables being banged in unison with hostile howling (I've no idea what the pretext was, and I'm pretty certain I didn't join in), Mr. King burst into tears and fled the refectory. He resigned soon after. [In my memory, his name was Carter, not King. - Ed.]

It's hardly surprising there was bullying among the boys. Thank god I was never the target of any general, concerted, persecution. I had only one persecutor who I am going to describe as 'evil' despite not knowing what the word really means; he was a sadist, a psychological sadist, a cunning manipulator of emotion and fear. His game with me was, "I like you. I want you as my friend. If you don't play ball, I will hurt you". I remember a Chinese-burn as a gambit in one such play. As much as menace, it was the sheer boredom of these attentions that got to me. In the end, it was on the common when, for some reason, I threw a feeble punch at him. In retaliation, he threw me in a gorse-bush. I feared further consequences -- but nothing happened. In fact he never bothered with me again; I think I must simply have changed the rules of the game, so he was no longer interested. In any case, he was soon to be expelled -- it was he who tried to strangle the games master. Another hate of mine was a boy skinny with a large head, and two withered, useless, arms. He had an irritating, complacent, air about him, and an even more annoying charisma that attracted other boys. Very soon he had a gang -- acolytes, rather -- that lapped up his every word, catered for his every need, and obeyed his every whim -- which included beating up anyone who displeased him. And what displeased him most was anyone calling into question his ascendancy. One of his chief social assets was that his father was farm manager to John Mills, the film star, and thus partly grew up with the two daughters. God! How he bored me with that one. He reminded me of The Mekon, tyrant of the Treens, and Dan Dare's arch enemy in Eagle comic. I was able to steer clear of him and just loathed him from a distance.

One way out of all this was to 'do a bunk', an attempt being made every so often, the sport necessarily confined to those with reasonable use of their legs. They never got far, marked, as they were, by a disability and clothes that were the next best thing to prison uniform. And of course they were only children. I think there was one repeat-offender who got his wish and was expelled. Hurrah for him! Complaints? I wasn't aware of it happening, and there were no procedures that I knew of. I certainly

never pleaded with Mum and Dad to get me out of there. One odd thing has just occurred to me as I write: aside from being force-fed sprouts, I can't remember ever crying. What I did do, however, at the end of my first term, was to produce a psychosomatic illness: a nagging pain in my stomach. But I'd shot myself in the foot, as it were. Appendicitis was suspected and I was rushed to hospital in Brighton, and then to Chailey's hospital, to be kept there under observation all over the precious Christmas holiday. -- Bummer!

That said, it was a relief to get away from the mad-house of St. George's for a spell; and, back there, it was always a blessing to have a bout of flu or some such, requiring isolation in a special set aside dormitory. This was the domain of Mr. Archer, an intelligent, humane, staff nurse who kept a cynical and subversive eye on the doings of St. George's, and had no qualms in sharing his observations. God bless you, Mr. Archer. But Oh! The bliss! A whole week in bed, doing nothing but reading, and away from anxiety. It was even better when I had measles: away from Chailey, a room to myself for a fortnight. In this room there was a small, square, window -- I remember the proportions -- set in the door, with a tantalising view of pine trees swaying in the middle-distance, silhouetted against the sky. I spent a lot of time gazing at this: it deeply moved me, and the image has stayed with me ever since. I've no idea why.

Back at the surgical-boot camp, bed and getting-up routines were very much in the kindly hands of dormitory prefects and orderlies. The 120 boys were divided, by age, into six dormitories, supervised by one each of the above. My first prefect would hurl his tin-leg at you for talking after lights-out. The orderlies were in charge of washing etc, and did the donkey work such as cleaning. They had no real authority, but behaved as if they did. Ian Dury (of Blockheads fame) tells of a nasty episode of humiliation at the hands of one of them, Hargreaves by name. Hargreaves was an 'old boy', an ex-pupil, and had a surgical-boot. I remember him: he was a morose bully. I must explain, here, that Ian Dury was for a few years at Chailey at the same time as me. The odd thing is that I have no real memory of him -- just his name, it being slightly different from another boy named Drury.

And the dormitories were always so cold. "Doors and Windows Open Wide -- Open Wide!" went a school song. The feeble radiators would be turned on at a specific day in the Autumn, and off at a specific day in the Spring, irrespective of what the weather was doing. A couple of months in the Summer Term was the only time I was warm. I used to feel sorry for poor Frankie Dean: a skinny little thing without an ounce of vitality in his body. Even in Summer he was shivering, teeth chattering, arms held slightly akimbo as if in shock. I thought, "Oh God! -- They're slowly killing him. He can't survive this for much longer". Whether or not he did, I don't know: he was suddenly just not there -- moved on, I hope, to somewhere they were not trying to kill him. When I finally left that place I made a vow: That I would never again be cold, at least not indoors. Most of the time I've managed to keep to it.

The other constant misery was Dinners. I would pray to God before going in to the refectory, begging Him to please don't let it be cabbage, or turnips, or -- or especially sprouts! Sometimes, a staff-nurse, a dreadful old hag called Miss Field, would force-feed me, ignoring my gagging and tears. "Don't be silly --- it's nice". She wasn't a sadist -- just a moron. Upon leaving, I made another vow: That I would never again eat anything I didn't like. I have since overcome a number of aversions -- cabbage, for instance, as long as it's raw in a salad. But sprouts? Forget it. I have read in *The Telegraph* -- which is fond of such stories -- that for some people, eating sprouts is exactly, scientifically speaking, just the same as eating dog poo.

It wasn't all doom and gloom. In contrast there was, for all too short a time, an intelligent and funny (witty, that is) boy called Keith Haddon. He was a great performer -- a stand-up comedian, in fact. (And at a venue where just standing up was something of an achievement) He also drew a following but, in his case, not so much a gang, as an audience. I hung around on the edge of the group, hoping for acceptance. I wasn't rebuffed. But come the next term, he had vanished -- moved on to a new school (Somewhere, it's to be hoped, he might get a decent education). I sometimes wonder what happened to him, and wonder, had he stayed, what difference it might have made to me. I could have been his stooge, or straight-man: "Haddon and Hatton" -- it has a certain ring to it.