

Thank you for trudging with me so far through the grim weather of my first years at Chailey; but you will be glad to read that from now on the climate will be more varied and clement -- even with sunny spells. First, for a short space, Colbourn shared the burden of us with a temporary chaplain called Exon. My main memory of this duo is of them squatting together on a step, chortling over a dirty mag, presumably confiscated from a boy. I wasn't shocked: I just thought it an odd thing for them to do -- and besides, I would have liked a closer look, myself.

Then came a false Spring: out went Colbourn and Exon: in came Keavney. Mr. Keavney resembled something like a decent human being. Although no push-over -- firm-but-fair -- we quickly got the idea that he not only cared, but actually liked us. He welcomed small, random, groups of us into his rooms, gave us small treats (I remember a taste of cider -- my first booze!) and introduced us to a friend of his, a newly arrived House Doctor, Dr. Stroud: the saintly Dr. Stroud who ended his days as a monk somewhere in Wales. And our interest was piqued by a strange picture on Mr. Keavney's wall. I couldn't follow all it was about, but I gathered it was a picture of Jesus and was called the Turin Shroud.

It was quite a miracle how quickly Mr. Keavney turned that place around. I remember a sudden realisation that I was now so less afraid -- and shocked by how much more afraid I'd been until that moment. Could it be something to do with that picture of Jesus? And that warm glow that seemed to emanate from Mr. Keavney's room? Catholic boys had always been catered for, inasmuch that special transport was provided every Sunday to take them to the nearest Catholic church. But was Rome, now, about to swallow St. George's? So it must have seemed to Mr. Knott. The Reverend Knott was our new Chaplain. He was a youngish, slender, slightly pompous-with-his-nose-in-the-air sort of man: every inch a career Church of England cleric. With his part responsibility for St. George's, The Town jus' weren't big enough for both of 'em. So Mr. Keavney had to go. I was privy to these councils through my source, Mr. Archer, the malcontent of the Isolation Ward. I quite understood Mr. Knott's position, but nevertheless felt betrayed. And I still feel betrayed.

Dr. Stroud, although tainted with Rome's tar-brush, stayed on for a while, devoting himself to the care of broken bodies rather than souls; but his saintly influence was still felt. In place of Mr. Keavney we got 'Bomber' Hudson. He was a youngish, beefy, hale-and-hearty type, who's last position had been that of Borstal Governor. But he was no martinet: a man of modern, progressive, ideas, his tenure with us was no stop-gap for him, but part of a professional career. Well, if we couldn't have love, I suppose the next best thing was professional expertise. He had a nice Labrador dog called Justin. Good move, that.

CULTURE and other diversions.

My comics I have already mentioned, and no change there. But suddenly, one evening, in the refectory -- a television. I doubt if any of us boys had ever before seen one. It was acquired, as per national trend, in time for the Coronation, and I expect our overseers realised its value as a pacifier of unruly children. Most of what we watched was -- well -- puerile: fit only for toddlers, anyway. I despised Andy Pandy, Noddy, even Muffin the Mule -- but I made an exception, as I still do, for The Flower-Pot Men. And I did enjoy a puppet cowboy called Hank for the good reason it was funny. In one episode, Hank's bandit enemy gets his comeuppance by getting his foot stuck in a gopher-hole. No one knew what, exactly, a gopher-hole was, but for a good week after, for no good reason, boys would suddenly bellow, in a tried-for mid-western drawl, "'Ave got ma foot stuck in a gopher-hole!" And everyone fell about laughing.

We duly watched the Coronation. I was moderately interested, and had a rather nice model of the coach and horses. (Sounds like a pub! But you know what I mean).

We were allowed to stay up to watch "The Quatermass Experiment". I was about to write 'unaccountably', but I now suspect it was on account of the wardens not wanting to miss it. It was truly frightening: watching week by week as some poor chap's body was inch by inch taken over and changed into a loathsome, creeping, plant (rather like the Russian Vine at the bottom of our garden) until it was poised to devour Westminster Abbey and then, of course, Civilisation-as-we-know-it. But what really got to me was the title-music: Holst's Mars, from the Planet Suite. Hearing that "Dum didly Dum didly Dum, Dum Dum" set my heart galloping away in my chest till I thought I'd die.

I was no good at sport. No wind, you see. I could run from one end of the pitch to the other, but when I got there I was so winded that I was good for nothing else. And as for cricket: I never could understand why anyone might want to put themselves in the way of a block of wood travelling (so I'm told) at 90 miles an hour. I did see a boy brained that way -- dead centre on his forehead -- and he was only sitting watching at the side of the pitch. He fell straight back as if dead. Mercifully, he recovered consciousness and was apparently OK.

I flirted with the Scouts; but it was more a refuge from the anarchy of St. George's than any commitment or sense of fun. However, I gained Proficiency Badges in Fire Lighting and Tying Knots. Then the troop took over the windmill as headquarters, and what I mainly remember of that is the bitter chill and damp of the place. And the smell: of what? Rats, wet-rot? Both? Anyway, it can't have been very healthy for us.

We had regular film shows. I find it difficult to say at what age, during my eight years at Chailey, I saw what. There was a lot of pap, of course, but we had screenings of Olivier's Henry V, Disney's Fantasia, some classic Laurel&Hardys, and lots of wonderful Popeye cartoons. African Queen we had, also Fred Astaire, and Bing Crosby. Bing's The Bells of St. Mary's (dreadful schmaltz, if that's the right the right word for something so Catholic) I particularly remember for an exchange afterwards: Young Urchin to dignified C. of E. churchman: "Cor, vicar! I bet you enjoyed that picture!" I knew, of course, that our Reverend Knott had not enjoyed it. I shot him a glance, and he caught my eye. A look of indulgent amusement mixed with discreet complicity passed between us. For a moment I was the equal of an educated grown-up: that moment meant a lot to me at the time. And if there was one film hero I identified with, it was Mr. Belvedere, played by Clifton Webb (who, it now occurs to me, looked not unlike our own Mr. Knott). Mr. Belvedere was an expert in everything. He was upright and dapper, correct and unfailingly courteous, prim even; but any obstacles thrown in his way during the course of his adventures would be overcome by his unfailing expertise in whatever was needed. As he said to a bully he had put on the floor with the utmost economy, "I should have warned you -- I am also an expert in fisticuffs".

But perhaps the greatest, single, gift the film-shows gave me was newsreel footage, in colour, of, -- I think -- The British Grand Prix at Silverstone; with superb panning shots of -- I think -- Fangio in a Tipo 159 Alfa Romeo. I was thrilled -- and hooked. I had, at last, a consuming passion and a sport, and was soon devouring motor magazines and drooling over Dinky Toy racing cars. It was all a great comfort to me, right until I left school. So, what was the attraction? What held me, and still holds me to a certain extent? First of all, it's a childhood fixation, so it is very much of its time: in this case, cars and motor racing of the 1950s and all years before that. Then there are the usual rivalries. There is (or was) real and ever present danger, and the gallantry to go with it. There is the romance of a road or track winding through a landscape and people chasing each other along it by whatever means -- by

car, bike, horse, foot. And lastly, to me, cars are sculptural objects. I once wrote an article on the subject in the school magazine. But here's the really odd thing: have you ever heard of a petrol-head who never learned to drive? That's me.

However, my obsession set me rather at odds with the friends I was beginning to make, most of whom were football mad. I had to put up with some ribbing, even taunting, when it came to the all too frequent fatalities in the sport of that time, particularly with the awful carnage at Le Mans in 1955 -- over eighty spectators killed. A few years later Manchester United lost half their team in the Munich air disaster. I commiserated whole-heartedly with my friends; but it afterwards rankled when I compared it with the treatment I had received. It helped to form in me a life-long dislike of football.

THE SEA OF BRACKEN.

Taking my nose out of "Motor Sport" or "Eagle" every so often, I loved to go and play on the common. As I have said, we were surrounded by a sea of sandy soil, bracken, and the occasional gorse bush. It was all hummocky and pock-marked with what to us were 'camps', but no doubt were dug-outs left behind by army training during the war. They weren't the only things left behind: finds of 303 rounds were common, as it were, and some interesting experiments were performed; such as taking the powder from cartridges and igniting it, and even jamming the complete bullet into a woodworking vice and whacking it with a hammer. I never saw this, but it was well attested. I and some friends once found a small bomb-like thing with fins. Some idiot gave it a tap with a rock. It started hissing. Hasty exit of several boys, with varying degrees of mobility, into the nearest fox-hole. Nothing happened: it must have been air escaping, and the thing itself, I should think, nothing more than a spent smoke-bomb. Then, it might not have been -- and I may be very lucky to be alive.

I fought many a furious battle on that common, entirely on my own and in my imagination. Anyone joining in would have spoiled it. I had a war to win. Seizing my length of fence-paling (a versatile weapon: one minute a Lee Enfield, the next a Sten Gun) I broke cover and made a mad dash for the next trench, ducking and swerving as bullets whistled around my head, throwing myself to the ground as a shell exploded nearby. The blighters thought I was dead. But I continued my advance on all fours, grateful for the cover the hot, fragrant, bracken afforded me. When I judged it right, I sprang up to my full awful height and charged, clearing the enemy trench with a single burst of machine-gun fire. Elated but exhausted, I sank gratefully onto a bed of fern, and slaked my parched throat with a slug of the Tizer I had secreted earlier. In all this, I threw and bounced myself around a fair bit, thus discovering (without sport) an exhilaration in rough-and-tumble. Add to this my rock-climbing in Clevedon, wrestling matches with friends, and an improvised version of the Eton Wall Game, I went through a phase of fancying a career as a film stunt-man when I grew up. I am happy to write that this most unlikely fantasy was, in fact, and albeit in a small and very limited way, realised in later life.

Then the army invaded the common. No! -- this was for real. One fine Autumn morning, it was a Saturday, The British Army suddenly turned up on the common. No tanks or field-guns, but a lot of lorries and soldiers. Lord knows what their game was -- manoeuvres, training, whatever -- but whatever it was, I'm sure it didn't include being over-run by an undisciplined squad of crippled school boys. They put up little resistance: one kindly squaddie even surrendered his weapon to me as, with his assistance, I wobbled the Lee Enfield (it was a lot heavier than a fence-paling) up to my shoulder and took a bead, using the fore and back sights as instructed. We sustained a few casualties: calipers and elbow-crutches were no match for generator-cables and other paraphernalia, but I think we had the situation quite under control until we were stabbed in the back. Orders from On High. "Return to your lines, immediately. Await further orders". Arse! But what a glorious morning.

Oh well! Might as well set fire to the common, itself. This happened quite frequently, despite severe warnings from On High. I never actually started a heath fire, but I did, once, as did others, make sure it kept going for just a little bit longer; it was easily done without being rumbled. It was also accepted that ‘ambulatory’ boys would turn out to fight it. Tee-hee! I don’t believe any person or property were endangered, but I can’t swear to it.

An ecological note. Not so long ago, motoring through Sussex, my lady and I stopped off at Chailey and had a peek at St. George’s. The windmill was open to tourists and in the keeping of a preservation society. It still smelled of damp and decay. But there I learned from the gentleman at the door that St. George’s was about to be redeveloped for residential sale. Mixed feelings about that! I mentioned to him my amazement at the change in the common: my sea of bracken was reverting to forest, with shrub and silver birch everywhere, and the well-trodden paths of my childhood obliterated -- it was an affront to memory. Naturally, with the closure of St. George’s, there was no further use for the paths. And, moreover, the gent told me that common fires were a thing of the past -- without them, other species, aside from bracken, had a chance to grow. Somehow, rabbits and myxomatosis came into the picture: as I understood the matter, it was the rabbits who had kept the common under bracken until myxomatosis wiped the poor creatures out. We boys, then, took over the duty of conservation with our periodic arson. So there. One more thing about our visit: the windmill had some old copies of “Heritage”, our school magazine, lying about. In one, I found my article on car-as-sculpture and, having long lost my own copy, I re-read it there and then. I was rather pleased with it -- at least, I wasn’t embarrassed.