

CRAFT

The Chailey Heritage Craft School was the name of the place. But what of the Craft? And the School? And I think I mentioned a chapel. All three were at the other end of the route march across the common, and I haven't mentioned them so far because, for the first few years, what they mostly meant for me was relief from St. George's. The crafts were supposed to prepare you for a trade when you left. The big three were Shoe-Making, Woodwork, and Printing. I showed no interest in any except Printing (although, oddly enough, I was later in life to partly earn my living by woodwork). I never got very far in the craft of printing, but I did get a lot from it by osmosis, like an abiding love of books, typography, and calligraphy. The printing shop was very well equipped, and produced professional and beautiful work for the school itself, an outstanding example being the school magazine. The shop was the domain and creation of Mr. Warner. He was thin, middle-aged, and nervy; a prim and proper man. He was strict, but the strictness was that of the fastidious craftsman who demanded the best. He was also, underneath it all, very kind and helpful. I recall I once sat upon Mr. Warner's knee in the front row of a large crowd, and, following the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh stopped and had a few words with him. It was the unveiling of a monument to the merchant seamen killed in the war; it's on Tower Hill, where Thomas Moore and others had their heads chopped off. Mr. Warner had volunteered to take me there, and took the opportunity of showing me a few of London's sights. He then wrote a nice letter to my parents, describing the day. Later on, he took a few of us round The Times printing establishment. And later still, the ultimate accolade, some of us for tea at home with his Missus. On this occasion he surprised me with a minor rant against the Third Programme broadcasting 'arrangements' of original music. I suppose it surprised me that someone could feel so strongly on such matters. He was one of the saving graces of my patchy education. He had one foible, however, which was mercilessly taken advantage of: he couldn't abide anyone farting in the print shop. He would make a dreadful fuss, flapping his arms about, throwing doors and windows open, expelling from the room culprits identified as expelling. It was good sport. But God bless you, Mr. Warner.

The only other craft teacher I remember with any clarity is Mr. Holgate, the boot & shoe man, who also doubled as Sports Master. He was an old scholar with a tin leg; and wasn't a bad chap; but apart from his mastery of shoe-making and the sports field, he had very little, or no, training as a teacher. It must have been difficult for him: sharing a common-room with people more educated than himself. He tried to keep his end up with a John Prescottian way with the professional jargon he would hear from his colleagues, coming out with things like, "Put those sweets away, boy, and save them for future reference". I was no good to him on the cricket pitch, but he did give me something: as I write, I have a pair of shoes on the shoe-last -- being re-soled and heeled by yours truly. Thank you, Mr. Holgate.

Mr. Leggatt, woodwork and choir-master, was, as the phrase goes, a mere shadow of his former self -- almost absent in his presence. His wife had recently died, and it was understood that he was heart-broken. Eventually he left, leaving the choir to a new man, Mr. Richards (more of whom, soon). But we never had another woodwork teacher. The writing was on the wall: Crafts were being sidelined, becoming ever more irrelevant. More and more pupils, now, were incapable, physically and mentally, of following such occupations; which left the few brainy ones -- for whom mending shoes held no interest or prospects, whatsoever. I can't remember taking anything like an Eleven Plus, but I was given an Intelligence Test. Lord knows how well or otherwise I did with it, but from then on I was 'streamed' with the other clever-clogs, and understood that we were being groomed for exams. These were watershed years at Chailey. I was aged about twelve at the time. Before moving on, however, there was a curious interregnum in the form of a temporary headmaster, Mr. Hoyland. His firm

conviction was that what the school desperately needed was for the lot of us to be dragged from our lessons, into the school hall, and there drilled to sing Gilbert & Sullivan songs. Ignoring the choir-master, he took charge of this himself, and it took place at least once a week. I enjoyed it, but it could very well have put one off G&S for life.

One further item I haven't yet mentioned --- GIRLS. Yes, there were some, so rumour had it, tucked away in some obscure corner of the school --- a whole dormitory full of them. For the most part they were strictly out of bounds --- separate lessons as well. Though I do remember a mixed Christmas party, possibly in the hospital, where I took a liking to a little girl called Janet Sharman. She is now Janet Wilkins, and is a leading light in the Old Scholars Association. In some way that baffles me, my mother got involved (how?) and wrote to little Janet's mother (why?). I can only suppose that, to keep Mum happy, I blabbed about making friends and, on her part, she was just being an anxious and conscientious parent. Don't they show you up! But in any case, I never saw the little girl, again -- nor the present Mrs. Wilkins, since I haven't been to an Old Scholars Reunion for many years.

SCHOOL AND CHAPEL

But all that, at the time, was of no concern to me. What affected me more was regime change at both St. George's and the school. And with the school came the chapel which, although only a chapel, had every appearance of a richly endowed parish church of some antiquity, and was dedicated to St. Martin. I've already introduced its incumbent, Mr. Knott. His liturgy was certainly C of E, if a little on the 'high' side; he liked a good frock and a show, and even broke out the incense on red-letter days. (Years later, when at art college, I came across a humorous book of press photos of Archbishop Ramsey with satirical speech bubbles added. I was overjoyed to find one with him in procession, and immediately followed by our Mr. Knott with his nose in the air as per. Ramsey is thinking "I do wish that man with the holier-than-thou expression would stop following me around!").

In the meantime, Mr. Knott was well served by Mr. Richards, the new, energetic, Music Teacher, Choir Master, and Organist. Somewhere along the way he recruited me into the choir, and I rose in the church to become Head Chorister -- until my voice broke. A tragedy for some boys, so I heard, but I wasn't particularly upset. Being busted to the ranks, in the body of the nave, there was more scope for mucking about, like singing certain hymn words with undue emphasis: "As PANTS the heart with faint delight". Puerile, I know, but I still find it funny. And at least I wouldn't, every Sunday morning, have to drag myself through that dreadful dirge, the Te Deum, referred to by me as The Tedium. However, I did enjoy singing the solo of Away in a Manger and, for Advent, the anthem Lord now let thy servant depart in peace; something that still moves me. But on the whole I'm afraid my time as a chorister left me with an abiding distaste for C of E liturgy -- plain chant and all that toe-curling Holy-Joe intoning they use for the spoken bits. Even now, Radio Three has to be switched off whenever Choral Evensong comes on. Sorry, Mr. Richards. But I do enjoy polyphony. I suppose he was quite charismatic, Mr. Richards, and he certainly gave a lot of himself, and I see him as another saving grace of my education. Alongside BBC's Singing Together programme, we had music appreciation via records such as Tubby the Tuba and Little White Duck and Kathleen Ferrier -- who of course Mr. Richards had worshipped -- and now mourned. A few of us were taught to play the recorder, and trips were organised to hear local ensembles. We also went to Glyndebourne for a dress rehearsal of Don Giovanni; don't know what I thought of it at the time. It was he who procured a screening of "Fantasia", and he who coached me for a bible reading at some special church service, and he who invited myself and Paddy O'Hara for a day out on the Downs and tea at home with him and his wife.

It must be admitted, however, that the school already had form, musically, with the release of a gramophone record of the choir singing the school song. The song was embarrassing. Pious and mawkish, it began "The ships in Chailey dockyard lay crippled as they could be" and went on to tell how the crippled ships were made seaworthy again by the skill of the shipwrights under the direction of The Master Shipwright. Towards the end of my time there we class of clever clogs led a revolt: we refused to sing it. I'm rather proud of that. In part it was objection to the word 'cripple', already non PC: 'handicapped' being the favoured word at the time. (I believe it is 'challenged' at the moment). But I prefer to think that more than anything it was the mawkishness that we objected to -- it was certainly so with me. Mr. Richards seemed to have kept his head down on this one; and I don't know where the Reverend Knott stood. Matters got rather tense. But we won. And what I most remember about it, and am still moved by, was the reaction of our English Teacher, Mrs. Bunkle. She listened to our objections. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. It was apparent to me that she was rather pleased that her teaching had not been in vain -- she had taught us to discriminate between good verse and bad.

More of Mrs. Bunkle in a moment, for I see I have strayed from the confines of the church and into the school proper. So, in order of seniority, take a bow our new Headmaster. Mr. Broadhurst was another Mekon look-alike, and that was what we called him. But this Mekon was a Funny Old Stick and a Good Egg; we made fun of him but he was OK and we even liked him. He professed to support a football team, which is, I suppose, a good move; after all, you can't claim to be a proper human being unless you support a football team. And there were suppressed giggles in the pews for his Bible readings in church: full of histrionic colour and narrative vigour, sounding like an inept audition for drama school. I still use his rendering of "Well done, thou good and faithful servant". But his achievement was that he turned the school, for some of us at least, into an academically viable concern from something that, up to then, had known little of such things.

One of his most able teachers was surely Mrs. Bunkle. She was short, plump, and homely, but with a hint of blue-stocking; brisk but friendly and with a dry sense of humour. Again, the accolade, for the whole class, of tea with her family, who were delightful: two bright daughters and a gentle, slow-moving husband, a head of some horticultural research station, who she obviously adored. Not only a saving grace, this one, but queen of my otherwise patchy education.

Then the Art Master took a sudden interest in me. I became the apple of Mr. Blundell's eye, and he, for me, another of my saving graces. But here I pause. It's a difficult subject. For one thing, I feel guilty about Mr. Blundell because I never fulfilled the hopes he had for me; I have never felt able to draw as well as I wanted, or needed to; never able to fully express myself in line or paint --- at least, that's what I believe. But Mr. Blundell gave me every encouragement. He even tried to get me up on stage, acting. He was planning to put on a school play about Henry Lawes' tribulations in producing "Comus", a masque by John Milton, at Ludlow Castle in 1634. He wanted me for the lead, Henry Lawes. I was fourteen at the time, and had never even played the arse-end of a donkey in a nativity play. I was excited by the challenge -- it was a wonderful comic part. But I don't think I understood what Mr. Blundell's conception of the character was. Mr. Blundell said 'fussy' but, with hindsight, I suspect what he really had in mind was 'camp', or something similar. We will never know because I was whisked away, before the projected event, to Stanmore Orthopaedic Hospital for a protracted 'procedure', as it now seems to be called.

'Procedure' is the best word for it, in fact -- it involved rather more than a massive operation, and completely ruined any chance of decent 'O' and 'A' levels. By the time I was returned to class it was all over, or in the process of being all over, and I could only cheer my friends from the sidelines as

they stormed to glory. I was allowed an extra year at Chailey to try for 'O' levels in English Language, English literature, and Art. Art was a doddle -- with a little help from the invigilator, Mr. Blundell! At one point he leaned over and whispered "Put some people in it!". I thought "Why? The suggested topic was 'Lonely Street' and, besides, I can't do people!". OK, I put a matchstick man in somewhere. I passed easily. English Language -- also a doddle. English Literature -- FAIL. Why?! My strongest subject, for God's sake! Mystery to me; mystery to Mrs. Bunkle. We will never know why.

Then I had an artistic difference with Mr. Blundell. There was a boy called Keith Knight. He was severely spastic (or ought I say 'Scope'?), in that he could walk only with elbow crutches, and his limbs were here, there, and everywhere, seemingly all at the same time. Except when he sat down to draw he was a fucking genius! OK, the style owed somewhat to the Bash Street Kids, and possibly to Mad Magazine if he had ever seen it, but here were complex set-pieces, fascinating detail, and characters that were quite original, very funny, and quite blew my mind. I enthused about it to Mr. Blundell. Mr. Blundell pooh-poohed it out of hand. He pointed to a print of Manet's "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère". "That's what Art is all about!", he said. I felt deflated and confused. Which one of us had seen it wrong? But he was the teacher, so I inwardly capitulated but remained resentful -- a bad habit of mind I have always been prone to. Before I left for The Big Wide World, Mr. Blundell ceremoniously presented me with a copy of "Moby Dick". "One of the greatest books ever written", he said. It is still on my shelf -- unread.

At the other end of the scholastic spectrum was Mr. Pettman, the Maths Teacher. But he was unable to teach me anything; between us there was mutual incomprehension: why was this boy so stupid and wilfully ignorant? Why was this man trying to force-feed me (it was a bit like eating sprouts) with these silly number games? I wasn't stupid enough not to realise that number and mathematics underpinned so much of the modern world; after all, I was into cars, was mechanically minded, and was probably the only boy in the school who understood the internal combustion engine. I had already, a few years before and for a short time, earned the nickname "Professor Branestawm". This was due to a teacher reading to us the stories of Norman Hunter, and I had been enthralled. I then went through a phase of hording 'found objects' -- rubbish, in other words. I marvelled at their 'thingness', wondering how they were made, and why, and how they could be made to fit together, etc. When challenged about this odd behaviour, I became ashamed and defensive, muttering "It's 'n' experiment." But now, later, I had already given up the romantic notion of becoming a motor racing mechanic, so why would I need maths? And for God's sake, I didn't know my times tables and couldn't add up in my head! Why couldn't I have been coached in these elementary skills? As it was, I left school almost totally innumerate. Of course, my incapacity was soon to be confronted by the Big Wide World, but that is a story for the future. But poor old Mr. Pettman: he must have been relieved when away I went for my procedure and, as far as Hatton's 'O' levels were concerned, he was off the hook.

Two riders to all this: first, I wasn't bad at geometry and graphs. I could 'see' the point of them -- after all, they were 'only' pictures. Second, although being au fait with the internal combustion engine, I never could get my head around the differential gear in the back axle. It was only in quite recent years, having bought an old Meccano set from a charity shop, that I finally 'got it'. Sometimes these things can take a lifetime.