

WHEN I WAS A CHILD.....

I arrived at St. Georges in September 1949, an eight year old polio victim, as weedy a specimen as you ever saw who could neither dress himself nor get in the bath without help. I had been sent to Chailey as a result of the GP convincing my parents that were I to remain at home I would be spoilt and most likely spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. I know he was right and I still thank Dr Harding for his foresight.

I met some remarkable characters at Chailey who coped with disabilities far worse than my own and if they could manage, then so could I. This was my first and most important lesson, and the one that has been in the forefront of my mind all of my life.

After the first couple of years, during which I was taught the routines of life at St Georges, I began to enjoy life as a lad experiencing the wonders of nature, digging and building camps, raising bantams, cricket and football team visits to and from other villages, Scouting, snooker competitions, film shows and the excitement of Christmas. We were away from our families and homes, and yet we missed out on nothing. We even experienced the thrill of breaking bounds for clandestine meetings with the girls who dormed down at the school site.

Holidays were a strange affair with lots of spoiling by the family, but also the difficulty of dealing with local children, none of whom knew you. I remember an innocent young lad's enquiry about my mobility which, much to my shame, I responded with a threat – the chasm between our sheltered Chailey life and the real world was, at that time, awesome. With our return for a new term there was almost a thrill when the Blue coaches turned into Mill Lane bringing us back from holiday to the safe, ordered world of St. Georges with new adventures ahead. We were 'home'.

The food could never be described as gastronomique – it was plain and simple and looking back on it, I'd go so far as to say that on many occasions it had been murdered. But it was nourishing and we flourished, even with the likes of lead buckshot encrusted rabbit stew that was always served up at harvest time. Equally, we received medical expertise and treatment that resolved our ailments and in many, many instances improved our mobility. Though the one great moment of irony must be when I was offered the polio vaccine! Nice one.

By the time I left Chailey in 1958 I felt equal to all, and sorry for those that had missed out on the St. Georges community. Living in London again I yearned for the wide open space of Chailey Common and the feeling of comfort that I had experienced at the Heritage for 9 years. St. Georges really was 'home from home' for me and I have not forgotten the very many friends I made and the great childhood you all contributed to that helped shape me into the person I am today.

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