

How to Flatten Your Learning Curve Aided by the Demon Bowler

Life has been a steep learning curve for me, and I guess for other Chailey old scholars too, but for me it began very early in life, in fact I would say it began on the playing fields of Chailey.

I have never been a sporty-type person. Cricket? Well it's a bat and ball game. Every now and then someone would scream 'Howzat' and, if you were close enough to the culprit, it could give you quite a shock, whaa... It wasn't until I became older that I realised what they really meant to say was 'How was that', but even that had me stumped. But it gets worse, I was really flummoxed when somebody said the 'silly mid-on' had missed a catch. I thought he was referring to his girlfriend, silly me. I was simply bowled over by all the technicalities that come with the game. It's pretty slow to watch, so I guess I was doomed to failure from the start.

Then along comes Football, well, there's a lot of running about in muddy fields. I think the real name is 'pitch' but I've even heard it referred to as a park, but I won't argue. But kicking a bladder of wind about all over the place and generally tearing about like a madman with some bloke blowing a whistle like he's at a train station and waving his arms about, which in my ignorance I thought was to keep the pigeons off the pitch, fine. But to my mind it appears far too chaotic to make sense, so I guess there's not much chance of that either.

Digging deeper into the whirling mysteries of meaningless rules and games, we have golf, ice hockey, tennis and even horse racing. Nope, even when shown in high-definition on a telly with an extra wide screen and three monochrome images (RGB), I'm afraid all of these are no-noes to my now agitated mind.

So, it's no wonder that when looking back to the annual Sports Day at St Georges I could never work up enough enthusiasm to excite the sports master whose job it was to organise events such as the sack race, egg and spoon race, three-legged race and the wheelbarrow race, all of which were on the menu during Sports Day.

These were serious competitive events between the houses of Lloyds (Blue), Benson (Red) and Sturdy (Green), along with cricket and football matches to be played on separate days and entered on the score sheet, but of course not horse racing, ice hockey or golf. For some strange reason these seldom or I

might say never appeared on the printed programme of the day. Hmm, understandable I suppose. For years during my stay at Chailey I would walk past the highly polished plaque in the entrance hall, proudly displaying the names of winning houses down the ages in gold lettering.

Having given the above hint as to my slight aversion to the pastime of sport, I can now tell you that this was somewhat violently reinforced on a bright, sunny, happy Sports Day in the mid-20th century on the front lawn of St Georges, from where we had extraordinary views across Chailey's North Common with St Martin's spire shimmering in the sunny distance.

The programme had been drawn up with the names of the players on each team, chosen from the three houses. This was to be the first cricket match of the series. The field had been set by the team captain while the rest of us sat waiting our turn to bat, enjoying relaxing moments in the sun.

There is just one name that stands out from this heroic game, and it isn't mine, and it is not a name that would be regaled in glory or bedecked with medals. Nor in this day and age would people stand on their door step at 8 o'clock at night clapping it. Although I must hasten to add here before I go further, that it was not entirely the lad's fault who I am about to name. It was just a freak accident and possibly one reason why I am not an aficionado of sport, it can hurt.

The unfortunate boy's name, well there were two boys really if you count the sorry victim, although it is just one that will always stick in my mind but, for family reasons, only his initials M.H. can be divulged. Even so, his name is to be remembered, to be handed down through the annals of cricket. Now, M.H. had another name too, when on the field he was known as the demon bowler. A fast bowler, not just fast but you could also call him rocket man, only the name hadn't been invented then. The reason, so it was said, that gave him his unique bowling skill was his disability, it is known as ectrodactyly, and left him with just his index finger and thumb on each hand, this enabled him to project a fierce spin on the ball making him the most wanted player to have on your side.

When faced with him thundering down the wicket to make a super-fast delivery in your direction, it could instil fear and trembling to the extent that you wished you were in another place. His deliveries were wicked, especial if it turned out to be a ferocious bouncer when a bed on the sun-baked veranda of

St Martins hospital may well have been preferred. At any rate, a quick decision needed to be made to avoid injury, to sidestep or duck. The other alternative for the very brave was to stand your ground and take a wild swipe hoping to connect with the ball when the result could be rewarded with a six. But if you missed it looked more like you were playing tennis to the spectators, only to be followed by a chorus of groans.

This particular over had been pretty devastating for the batsmen but very lucrative for the demon bowler. Wickets were falling faster than skaters on an ice rink. M.H. turned on his heels and slowly paced away from the wicket looking to be deep in thought, when having thought deeply enough, he quickly spun on his heels again and came pounding down the wicket to make the most ferocious googly delivery ever seen at Chailey (nothing to do with Gmail, it too hadn't been invented). The batsman did extraordinary well, with a tremendous whack his connection sent the ball at the speed of light into space, it defied gravity and continued to rise steeply, ultimately to momentarily disappear from sight.

The sun was bright, helping to obscure its return to the earth's gravitational pull. Its speed rapidly increasing by the second, fielders scanned the sky for first sight. Unfortunately, the fielder who was directly beneath its flight path, was also facing the sun, he struggled to shield his eyes, but bravely stood his ground, arms outstretched, to make the catch. The ball came screaming down like a meteorite, its speed astronomic, the only thing missing was the sonic boom and the trail of smoke.

The bravery of this very young diminutive fielder was outstanding, never wavering he stood his ground, hands aloft ready for the catch, eyes straining for the first glimpse, but the supersonic speed of the returning ball barrelled its way between his grasp and connected with a resounding thwack on his frontal lobe. He fell like a stone, lying motionless on the ground, and was quickly surrounded by teachers and staff.

It was several minutes before he was able to stand, then to echoing rounds of applause, the conquering hero left the field between two masters on his way to the dispensary to see the nurse. I was due to be the next batsman to face the demon bowler. As I waited to go forward onto the field of the brave, feeling anything but, I licked my dry lips and as the young fielder passed me on his way to the nurse, his forehead streaming blood. I licked my lips again

wishing I was in that other place. It's strange, looking back over the past 75 years since it happened, I can't ever recall seeing that lad again... Funny that!



The Demon Bowler, circled in red.
The 1948 pantomime Long John Silver.
Mr White Housemaster with parrot, centre back row.
Mr Keating, fifth from left back row.

My learning curve has been substantially flattened quite a lot since then, but that was definitely educational and one of life's building blocks. I also have memories of an immortal football match on the playing fields of Chailey. I was playing centre-forward on crutches having recently lost a leg. I don't think karate had been invented then, but they could have learned a thing or two if it had. But that will have to wait for another day.

Having drawn deeply from the well of enlightenment i.e., my ancient memory, on all things sporty in the above piece, and the inordinate bravery of my fellow compatriots on the playing fields of Chailey, I have come across a copy of the School magazine on the OSA website, giving the results for Sports Day in 1956 for both cricket and football matches. The unexpected thing about these results was the fact that the games had moved on and were played not just between the three houses of Lloyds, Benson and Sturdy, but also against other schools with varying degrees of success. This is just five years after I had left Chailey, to go out into the big wide world, and to test the skills and strength of character I had developed on the aforesaid playing fields and on the hospital beds at the Heritage.

Reading through the magazine I was struck by just how much things had changed and how the transformation was continuing since my time, only a few short years before. Education was beginning to take a new direction and more emphasis was placed on the academic side rather than the crafts. The number of teaching staff had increased substantially, as too had the medical staff, while there are early signs of the change of direction for the type of disablements, moving away from orthopaedic, to the more neurological disabilities requiring specialist treatment and equipment.

It brought home to me the immense struggle it must have been for the staff to carry out their duties of care for us during my war years period. There would have been staff shortages due to the war effort to contend with, not to mention food rationing. I can remember there ever being only three nurses at St Georges to deal with 150 children; Nurse Buckley, she cared for me during isolation, and Nurse Trestrale, and Nurse Vicarage. Of course there were also the resident house masters taking care of daily routine matters. We have to remember on top of that we were on the front line during the Battle of Britain when every day we witnessed enemy aircraft overhead, with dog fights marking the sky with vapour trails of white tracery. We were also on the flight path for the doodlebugs and V2 rockets heading for London and elsewhere.

I can't imagine how the three young nurses would have coped with 150 disabled children if the school was struck during the mayhem all around us. As a child these thoughts were not prevalent in my mind, but I bet they were never far from the thoughts of those taking care of us and from the mind of Grace Kimmins, whose overall responsibility was for our welfare at that time and who had both of her sons away serving in the war.

Her eldest son, Brian, served in both world wars, being commissioned into the Royal Artillery in WW1. In WW2 he served initially as a General Staff Officer in France. He finally reached the rank of Lieutenant General after a distinguished career and has a memorial plaque in St Martin's Chapel. Dame Grace's youngest son, Anthony, also had an exceptional military career in both wars. He passed



Commander Anthony Kimmins R.N. OBE
10 November 1901 – 19 May 1964
Film Director, Playwriter, Screen Writer,
Producer and Actor

his training at Dartmouth Royal Naval College and in WW1 became a navy pilot. He had a varied Naval career in WW2 and rose to the rank of Navy Commander. He was Chief of Naval Information, British Pacific Fleet, and later worked in Naval Intelligence. After the war he went back into film making and directing before returning to the Heritage. It was here that he took up a prominent roll on the management committee before he was superseded by his daughter Verena Hanbury.

Getting back to the sports page of 'The Heritage', No.7 Magazine 1956, there was one thing that saddened me. There was no mention of the egg-and-spoon race, the sack race, or the three-legged race. I'm sure these would have been character forming although, come to think of it, I believe potatoes had been substituted for eggs during rationing days. In any case recalling the hectic scramble shown by some of the warriors, not many eggs would have reached the finishing line intact to warrant such a result. Sporting events have moved on since those days, athletics appear to be the de rigueur nowadays. Although I think the E&S, S and TLR. would fit well into the Olympics athletic sports list if given a try. Nevertheless, a brief look back through the pages of an old school magazine certainly took me back to my school days 75 years ago.

This is a true story. Jack Hayward. Chailey OSA 1939-50.