

First Day at Chailey

“Oh Mum it looks like a prison”. Mum thought so too but she didn’t say anything until four years later when it no longer mattered. The March weather did not put the best complexion on St Georges but there was nothing to be done now, and so we finished the climb up the hill and entered the gates, or rather two stumps which perhaps once were a gate.

For the past few months I had been imagining what Chailey would be like but imagination loves to confuse and so we journeyed by train from Wendover to Haywards Heath no longer imagining but hoping. We sat quietly through the dawdling country watching houses and villages fumble past the train but saw nothing. Mum thought of Singapore and Dad eight thousand miles away. In a couple of months she too would be there too with Peter my brother. Yet first I must be settled and before Singapore lay Chailey.

I looked to it as another new beginning. My life had been spent on new beginnings and to me the future was just a little different from the past. Dad had been in the RAF before I was born and I was used to new faces in new places. The last new place being Ward 11, Princess Mary’s Hospital at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire. I had known Ward 11 a time before when my leg was amputated, but Ward 11 was a room that began again with every change of patients and so Ward 11 was the last new place.

At Haywards Heath we left the railway station for the bus station. There I saw two other boys, one with a plaster on his leg and another in a wheelchair - he too with his mother. The first boy I never saw again but the other also journeyed to Chailey and, although I did not see him again for a term, he became part of the past and memory. After a few distant words he and his mother left in a taxi and we in a bus.

The conductor did not have to tell us that on the hill ahead was St Georges. The letter had spoken of the windmill and now it had left the letter for reality, a dim silhouette a darker grey against the sky. A few buildings, a few trees and the windmill stood, all dull, in a distance which was now approaching my life.

In my fantasy I had imagined that I would set some kind of example to the other boys having spent most of my life in normal schools. At the bottom of the hill we thanked the conductor and began the climb. Halfway up I knew that it wouldn’t be I that set an example; it would be I that learnt.

We entered the gate and began our walk to the main building slightly to the left. I heard later that architecturally it was based on a French monastery but there seemed to be nothing of religion in it. It was built of brick, two gloomy stories, dark and wet with rain.

We picked our way over the pitted tarmac to an arch that grew from the end of the building, passing the windmill to the right hung with a board, uneasy in the damp wind, marked Boy Scouts. We entered the arch and my mother knocked on the door as she put my case down. I turned and looked back over the puddled entrance, over the wet bracken and woods, to the blue of the downs and the heavy grey sky.

The door opened.