

A Tribute to St Georges

Having read of the sad loss of Peter Sedgwick and Ian Sowerby's tribute to him, can I say how much I was moved by his past eloquent contributions to the Old Scholars magazine. I have never met Peter; in fact, he arrived at St Georges in 1949, which was my penultimate year. My tour of duty was 1939 - 1950. However, I found his reminiscences of life at St Georges to be very emotional as they practically mirrored my own happy experiences.

Although I had spent ten years of my formative years at Chailey, in all those years it never occurred to me that I was disabled. Upon reflection, it was an idyllic childhood but, as Ian and Peter say, there was always a hierarchic pecking order amongst boys, a kind of top gun who you crossed at your own peril. I held a sense of hero worship for my idol, whose name I cannot now remember (well it is over sixty years ago). It was only after leaving Chailey and entering into a world where I had to earn a living was it that I slowly became aware that I needed to draw on my powers of self-preservation and the sense of independence that had unknowingly been instilled in me by my Chailey upbringing.

It was this that enabled me to carve out my own place in a mercenary world. I too have vivid memories of St Georges' winters particularly the harsh winter of 1946 that brought the country to a standstill. I was in St Martins hospital at the time waiting to have my leg amputated. I slept outside on the veranda. We had rubber bedspreads to defeat the snow and rain, and the nurses would brush the snow from our beds in the morning.

Memories also surface of snowball fights in St Georges playground followed by ferocious chilblains and rushing to the bath rooms to warm our hands in hot water, and again of trying to warm our hands and feet against the lukewarm radiators that never seemed to meet the challenge of heating the cathedral like vastness of St Georges.

Similar to Peter I became imbued with a great love of nature during my ten years at St Georges. It was during this time that Pets Corner was introduced and it engendered a huge amount of interest with us kids. Suddenly we were allowed to keep rabbits, pigeons and I think guinea pigs, and it was at this time that I became a member of the RSPCA and eventually the RSPB. For my fourteenth birthday in 1947, which was spent in St Martins hospital, Sister Simpson gave me her book of British Birds suitably inscribed which I kept all my life until I donated it to the CHOSA archive just this year.

I remember (who could forget) my leg was amputated on 22nd February 1948 at St Martins hospital and was carried out by an eminent London surgeon with war time experience served in the Royal Navy. The first attempt was postponed because of his other commitments and I returned to St Georges until it could be re-arranged. After my amputation the summer was spent in St Martins sleeping on the veranda; my buddies were Ivor Knox, Stan Howarth and Donald Hutchinson. My best mate was Tony Greenfield (Lanky for obvious reasons), then John Chapman. We wrote to each other after Chailey. I was also friendly with Dickie Douch and stayed with him at his home during one holiday. I also stayed with Eric Fryer who lived in Snodland, his father worked in the docks, which became a target for German air raids. Discipline was always strict at St Georges, it needed to be after all there were 150 of us kids who were bent on enjoying life with no thought of our disabilities.

As a junior I slept on ward No.2, which was on the upper floor. Our house orderly was Miss Rappley or Minnie Rappley as we called her. To us (we were just kids) she was a right battle-axe, tall, thin as a rake, with features like a hawk, a large hooked nose on which were perched heavy framed glasses giving her an owl-like appearance. She used to put the fear of the devil into us with just one look from her owl-like glare.

The teachers I can remember were Head Teacher Mr Marchant, Mr Noble Leather Work, Mr Warner from the Print Class, Mr Leggatt, Mr Mortimer Art, Mr Keating House Master, Mr Arthur White House Master.

The nurses; Nurse Buckley, Nurse Vicarage, Nurse Trestrail, Nurse Wadey and Sister Simpson or Simpkins, I can't remember which. As I look back, I embraced all of these people with great respect and, dare I say, affection. With my progress up the ladder from junior to senior so I moved from ward to ward where I met up with my elders and learnt to respect my place in the school boys pecking order, and as the years passed, I

eventually became a Monitor myself with all the privileges that came with it, i.e. my boots were cleaned by my fag in exchange for sweets when my monthly sweet ration arrived from my Gran.

Not every child would receive a parcel, so, once we had opened ours, they would be collected up and all the goodies were shared throughout the school. Also, at this time there was food rationing brought in during the war. I can remember Mr White standing on the platform in the dining hall making the announcement that margarine was to replace butter and brown bread instead of white. It came in thick slices as hard as a plank of wood and spread with beef dripping, which I liked when the bread was fresh enough. We were also introduced to desiccated bananas; they looked nothing like the real thing but were transformed into a sticky black elongated compressed stodgy oblong that happened to taste like a banana. We also had powdered eggs, which miraculously tasted like eggs, but were served up looking like a pancake.

Then of course being close to the south coast in wartime we were witness to a lot of enemy activity. While walking in squads to school across Chailey common we saw a Messerschmitt 109 being pursued by a spitfire. It flew very low and machine-gunned the traffic as it went overhead. We all dived for cover in the bracken, later we heard that it had been shot down as it reached the coast.

We were also on the flight path of the doodle bugs (V1) as they flew towards London. Aerodromes surrounded Chailey and we witnessed several dogfights as spitfires and hurricanes chased the doodlebugs to shoot them down, and I can remember one being brought down on the common. Barrage balloons were a common sight and on one occasion a doodlebug sliced through the cable and a hurricane had to shoot it down.

This was the time of the thousand bomber raids on Germany, and we all saw hundreds of American Flying Fortresses (B17) gathering in formation before setting off on their bombing raids. When they returned about five hours later, they would come back in dribs and drabs, many of them badly shot up. Before the D Day landings Chailey common was used as a training ground for British troops, we saw Bren gun carriers, tanks and field guns on manoeuvres; it resembled a huge battlefield.

For a long while the common was out of bounds but when we did eventually get back, I found a packet of live 303 rifle bullets, I had more mates that day than I'd ever had. We pulled the bullets out of the cartridges and set the contents on fire with a magnifying glass held up to the sun, it just went up with a fizz, we loved it!

The closest I ever got to a doodlebug was during the time I was on holiday with Eric Fryer in Snodland. A neighbour across the road was watching a doodlebug go overhead and saw its engine stop but before it hit the ground, she burst through the living room door where I was sat in the tin bath in front of the fire on bath night, scooped me up in her arms and threw me down into the Anderson shelter in the back garden. She tumbled in on top of me and there followed a huge explosion as the doodlebug crashed a few streets away.

During my time at St Georges much of the common was out of bounds, also we were never allowed to go Chailey village nor did we ever mix with or visit the girls' school. It was impossible ever to obtain cigarettes, to overcome this, we would rollup dried hawthorn leaves in toilet paper and light them with our magnifying glasses, it wasn't very successful as they kept falling apart, however my brainwave was to tear off a strip of my shredded wheat box, roll it up into a giant cigarette and set it a light with my magnifier.

It went up like a smouldering bonfire and that was the best thing I ever did in my life, it made me so sick that I have never smoked from that day to this. There are many more episodes that I could relate but we would be here ever more, except perhaps the Royal Visit of 1947 sticks out in my mind, with the Queen and the two Princesses, Margaret and Elizabeth, our present Queen. The whole school turned out in our best clothes, it was a bright sunny day and we all gathered at St Martins where we formed up in ranks to be greeted by the royal party as they walked past. When the time came for me to leave St Georges, I had only been wearing my new leg for a short while, besides which I was very apprehensive about leaving.

I would have loved to have been placed in employment within the Heritage Craft Schools, such was my love of the whole Chailey experience, but it was not to be. However, I did have a talk with Matron and pleaded my case to be allowed to stay on at St Georges for an extra term. This was a bitter sweet experience, enjoying my final term to the utmost, yet realising it was bound to end. Finally, I did leave St Georges but with a heavy heart. Nevertheless, I did go back, one day in 1989, after I had retired from a long career in the railways. I was

expecting to find things as I left them; naïve? I should have been forewarned when the taxi driver said he had never heard of the place.

We eventually arrived, and my heart sank, I was stunned, St Georges was closed and abandoned. I found the janitor who let me into the front office, which had been Matrons office. I found some old school Magazines showing photos of some of my contemporaries. I returned home utterly convinced the Heritage Craft Schools had been wiped off the map. However, it was by accident in 2011 that I Googled Chailey, this put me back in touch with the Old scholars Association where I have met former pupils and built up new friendships which still continue and leads to where I have arrived at now.

Jack Hayward. Nov. 2012