

BACK TO SCHOOL

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There once was a drapers and outfitters in Bitterne named E.W. Cross & Son. The shop was situated near the Angel public house, close to where the Corporation buses stopped at the top of Lances Hill. Soon after the start of every school holiday, and while I still savoured the prospect of the free time that stretched ahead, a sign would appear in the shop window. The sign read 'Back To School' and it almost seemed as if it had been designed to taunt, by reminding me of the limit of my freedom. It happened year after year.

But it was in the days before E.W. Cross & Son opened their premises that my schooldays began, early in September 1950, when I joined Bitterne Church of England Infants School. This would have been about three weeks before my fifth birthday, making me one of the oldest in my year. My mother took me to school in those early days but living as we did in Peartree Avenue, and there being no busy roads to cross, it wasn't very long before I was making the journey on my own, passing those shops I remember so vividly from childhood. Among them were Harrington's the greengrocer, Snook's the baker, Todd's the confectioner and tobacconist, then the wet-fish shop with its large marble slab before Atterbury's the chemist and the Angel Inn. Just before the Ritz cinema I would turn right into Maytree Road, where terraced houses opened directly onto the pavement, before finally turning left at the end of that road into the infants school playground. The school at that time comprised an

odd mixture of original buildings, newer temporary structures and Nissen huts.

I can't pretend that I have any continuity in my memories of those infant days, just glimpses and impressions of the times. I remember watching the dust motes that drifted in a sunbeam on a hot, languid summer afternoon, as I half-listened to our teacher reading from a book about a farmer named Dan, who had a horse called Dobbin. I recall the mixed cooking smells from a lobby filled with wet raincoats when I arrived five minutes late one November morning. Other memories are of gluing coloured strips of paper together in loops, to form pallid paper-chains for Christmas, and of brightly coloured strips of plasticine which somehow always ended up as a mousey-brown lump. There were lessons spent in a Nissen hut, French knitting using a cotton reel with four small nails set around the hole, of tugging the snake-like finished woollen product down through the hole, to eventually be coiled and sown, presumably by our teacher, onto a circular piece of brown cloth thus making a little mat - a Christmas present for mother. Some of the girls produced mats that were six or eight inches in diameter. Mine was much smaller, but my mother kept it for years anyway.

Occasionally, maybe once or twice a term, we were given a music lesson. There weren't many instruments to go round but a few children were given a drum to bang, and others a tambourine to shake. I had neither. I dearly wanted to bang a drum but possibly I was thought too boisterous already and all I ever had was a triangle, which was worse than useless. At playtime in the morning, we were able to buy a penny bun from our tuck-shop,

and this service later expanded to encompass a Yo-Yo for a penny-ha'penny or a Waggon Wheel for tuppence. Happy days!

When Beechwood School opened in 1953, some children transferred there from Bitterne C. of E. I was only vaguely aware of this happening at the time. Perhaps those from the year ahead of mine were more affected, possibly transferring at the time they moved from the Infant to the Junior school. Other occasions of note that I remember clearly from those early school days include the solemn announcement of the death of King George the Sixth in 1952, and the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second in the following year. We were all presented with a Coronation tumbler in a brightly coloured box and a copy of the New Testament to mark this grand occasion. To own a television set was fairly unusual in those days and I remember listening to the Coronation on the wireless, at home around the dining room table with my parents. It was to me a seemingly interminable broadcast. Coronation memorabilia was everywhere at that time. My cousin Rosaleen and I adorned our pet tortoises with 'robes' held on with elastic bands. I even had a tiny crown, which I had unscrewed from the top of a Coronation pencil, and placed on my creature's head. Needless to say, he didn't wear it for long! Another memorable happening that occurred in 1953 was the centenary of the Church of the Holy Saviour, Bitterne, There was a special children's service held to mark the event. Because Bitterne was a Church of England school, there were many church services held for pupils. I particularly loved the carol service, where I first heard and learnt the carol 'We Three Kings of Ory and Tar.' It was a long time before I discovered the

correct words.

I cannot say exactly when 'streaming' started at Bitterne Infant School, but it was certainly much earlier than the date we moved up to the Juniors. It might have been as early as age six for some, although probably seven for most. Either way it gave older children such as me a distinct advantage. I mention this age as most likely because I well recall the mock 'battles' we fought around that time, against the class we thought of as the 'B' stream. These battles took place on a thin strip of playground, situated between the Nissen huts and the churchyard, an area darkly overhung with sycamore. Skirmishes took place every day for weeks and were, I feel, thoroughly enjoyed by all.

Our headmistress was Miss Prydderch, She was very well-liked and respected. I can't remember the name of the teacher who taught us in the Nissen hut which was accessed via a concrete ramp. Could it have been Miss Scott, I wonder? All the teachers I encountered at this time were female and kindly. It was in my experience a very happy school and I wish I could remember more names.

I can, however, recall the names from my four years at Bitterne Juniors. The headmaster was Mr Shapley and my Class 1A teacher was Mr Sturgess. This was the first time I encountered a male teacher and I suppose I faced the prospect with a certain, but unwarranted, sense of trepidation. During the years I attended the Junior School, between 1954 and 1957, we were mainly accommodated in the old building, with its vaulted ceilings, painted brick walls, and floor to ceiling movable wooden dividers which separated the classrooms. There were fifty-two



children in my class and we sat at desks arranged in rows facing our teacher and his blackboard at the front of the class. The desks featured white glazed inkwells, set in holes in the woodwork and the ink had to be regularly replenished. In our early days we learned to write with wooden dipping pens. I found it very easy to cross the nib and to make a mess. Perhaps being left-handed didn't help. After a while we were allowed to use our own fountain pens, which eased the situation considerably. As might be expected, the emphasis was now less on play and more on learning but life continued to be essentially pleasant.

Although classes were mixed, with roughly the same number of boys as girls, the playgrounds were now separate, the main school structure being the divider between the girls to the north, nearer to the church and to God and the boys to the south. While the girls skipped in their domain, there was invariably a game of football in progress in the boys' playground during

playtime, using a tennis ball. Presumably those involved in the game knew who was playing and on which side, for the game was played around and through the majority of non-players, who were engaged in myriad other pursuits. Conkers was widely played, in season of course, with all manner of methods including baking, soaking in vinegar, etc. employed to harden the nut and so gain an advantage. Marbles was another popular pastime and most boys owned a drawstring marble bag. We also played Dibs if we could find a quiet corner in which to squat – I wonder how many children play that today? Cigarette cards were played for and won by means of 'flicking'. I learned only fairly recently that production of such cards ceased at the outbreak of war in 1939 and was never resumed, but there were still thousands of cards in circulation in the early fifties. There were of course many other games of a more or less strenuous nature, all in progress at the time; I have barely scratched the surface. One game, the name of which I can't remember, was a form of leapfrog. It involved a boy standing with his back to a wall, with another boy facing him, bent double with his head between the first boy's legs and two or three more boys bent in similar positions. A line of other boys would then one-by-one run and leapfrog the column trying to get as close to the wall as possible. More and more boys piled on until the column finally collapsed under the weight of bodies.

I very seldom stayed at school for lunch – it was much easier to walk the short distance home, where there was always a cooked dinner (as we called it then), waiting for me. Many children brought a packed lunch to school and nearly all who did,

brought it in an OXO tin. I remember wishing very much that I owned an OXO tin, although I had no need of one. Another object of my desire at the time, that other boys owned, was an elastic belt with a snake-shaped fastening, a 'snake' belt.

Our Class 2A teacher was the formidable Miss Mist. You did not mess with Miss Mist. If you did, you were called to the front of the class to be punished with a ruler across the hand. My best friend Ken messed with her once and was ordered to stand by her desk to receive punishment. However, he managed to snatch his hand away as the ruler descended, causing the ruler to hit the desk and break in half. It was a rare moment of hilarity in Class 2A and an even rarer loss of control for Miss Mist.

Miss Mist gave us a gift that would last a lifetime and that was fluency in multiplication. Day after wearisome day we would chant our times tables with the monotony of the introduction to the song 'Inch Worm'. I recall the bemused look on my mother's face when she entered our classroom one 'Open Day', to be greeted by our dreary Dickensian dirge, but having said that, I have never forgotten my tables.

One morning around this time, came the sad announcement that a girl from the school had been knocked down and killed by a bus near the Red Lion crossing. I didn't know the girl, not even by sight: she was probably a couple of years older, but it was the first time death had come anywhere near to me and I glimpsed a sense of its shocking and desolating impact.

I also experienced bullying around this time. It was nothing much and it only lasted a couple of weeks but I didn't know how to han-

dle the situation, other than to flap rather ineffectually at my tormentors. For some reason, at that particular time my face didn't fit and eventually in desperation I took what for me was unnatural and totally unplanned action. There was a boy in my year who was universally acknowledged and feared as the school bully. However, on the occasion I shall describe, he was an innocent bystander and had not been involved in the bullying I was experiencing. One playtime at the height of my troubles I noticed him close by. He was posing no threat and in fact was facing away from me when I attacked. I grabbed his belt and shirt, catching him off-guard and rammed him head first into a wall. Amazingly it worked like a charm. Not only did all bullying cease immediately but even the boy I had injured approached me the next day wanting to be my friend and offering to swap cowboy comics with me.

Sport was not really a high priority at Bitterne C of E in the 1950s. There were not the facilities. I remember in the summer, we boys would trail off in a crocodile, up through Old Bitterne to the sports ground between Hatley and Winter Roads where an attempt to organise a game of football would be made. We had no boots and played in our school clothes and if you didn't fancy it and preferred to sit it out – well, that was OK. After about half an hour we would form up again and wander back to school, always keen to see the collection of tortoises kept in wire netting frames in the front garden of the house on the corner of Hatley and West End Road. There was one occasion when boys were encouraged to go and watch Bitterne School football team take on Ludlow Road Juniors in a match held, I believe, at the Veracity ground. The score was something like 16 - 0

to Ludlow. I probably exaggerate, but this gives some indication of the standard of our football at that time.

The other sport-related activity that I recall was when it was decided that pupils should learn to swim and to this end we commenced weekly morning visits by bus, to the Inner Baths in Southampton. As I remember there were separate baths for girls and boys. Right from the start I hated everything about it. The primitive changing conditions, the overpowering stench of chlorine and the screaming loudness of it all. Most of all I disliked our swimming instructor. His name was Mr McCormick. He was a Canadian authoritarian, dressed in black and holding a long boat-hook. I like to think that I approached the prospect of these lessons with an open mind but my view soon changed. The first thing we were ordered to do was to jump into the pool at the shallow end and stay underwater for ten seconds and then, when we surfaced, do it again keeping our eyes open. Various other tortures then ensued. No doubt the system worked for some, but there was a good number of my friends for whom it didn't. Even the opportunity to purchase a penny bun at the end of the session was little compensation. After some weeks we were tested to see if we could swim the width of the pool. I, along with many others, couldn't and merely walked across whilst attempting some semblance of the breast stroke with my arms. At this point several of us gave up on swimming and instead of making our way to the bus stop each week, sidled off to play out of sight by the tiny stream that ran between the infant school buildings and Maytree Road. I think our teacher must have turned a blind eye to this. I

made several attempts to learn to swim in succeeding years, all without success. Our teacher in class 3A was the avuncular Mr Mew (Tosher), whom I feel must have been getting fairly near to retirement in 1956. Most of his lessons at that time were given in Bitterne Church Hall, although throughout my Junior school years we were also taught at the Congregational Church and I believe another, perhaps the Methodist Church, occasionally – this as a result of the overcrowding caused by 'the bulge' following the war. Every day, morning and afternoon, we would form up in pairs for the short walk to the church hall, along the pathway between the school and the church, then right into Bursle-



don Road. If the season was right, we would stoop to pick up the furry segments shed by the cedar tree that overhung Bursledon Road from the churchyard. We called these segments 'foxes' because of their shape, colour and texture. Being so close to the

church, we frequently saw funeral processions approaching. When this occurred, our self-imposed rule was to hold on to our lapel until we spotted a dog, when the lapel could be released. I don't know how this practice originated but fortunately there were many loose dogs roaming the streets and so it never took long to see one.

I believe this was my first school year in which the concept of homework was introduced. Lessons under Mr Mew continued in a relaxed way with plenty of time for leisure and in fact I have no memory of any arithmetic being taught at that time, although obviously it must have been. I remember clearly, however, working from a blue, cloth covered book called *First Aid in English* and being tested regularly on collective nouns and various grammatical constructions. I think our parents were expected to purchase this book, as I remember my mother using it to test me at home.

And so to my final year, which led up to the Eleven Plus examination in late spring 1957. Our teacher in class 4A was Mr Wetton and what a fine teacher he was! There was bound to be pressure during the year and perhaps some might have felt it more keenly than I did, but Mr Wetton minimised any stress by handling everything with kindly yet firm efficiency. I knew the exam was on the horizon but I don't think I worried too much about it. I was however identified as being somewhat weak at arithmetic and so for a period my parents sent me each Saturday morning to Mrs Diaper to help me with 'Problems'. Mrs Diaper lived further along Peartree Avenue, at a point halfway down Freemantle

Common.

Special National Savings stamps featuring Prince Charles and Princess Anne were made available for us to purchase during this school year; every week Mr Wetton undertook these transactions. Those who participated presumably did so according to their parents means and this was reflected in the price of the stamps; Prince Charles stamps cost half-a-crown, whilst those featuring Princess Anne were valued at only 6d (!).

Preparation for the Eleven Plus exam continued at an ever-quickenning pace. I remember very well the spelling tests where Mr Wetton would go round the class asking individuals to spell words such as 'beautiful' and 'necessary', among countless other words. We continued with Mental Arithmetic, 'Problems', Grammar, Composition and related subjects.

However, it wasn't all work. On one occasion each pupil was called to the front of the class to sing. The purpose of this was to select a few of us to represent Bitterne Juniors in a massed school choir at a concert to be held in the Guildhall. I believe this was probably an annual event. I was one of the lucky ones to be chosen and after a couple of rehearsals at Beechwood School, where I remember being very surprised that the conductor could pick out a child who was merely miming, we performed before a full house, which I imagine was made up mainly of parents. We sang about four songs but I can remember only the wonderful 'Jerusalem'.

Once a week we had a lesson called 'Handwork', given by Mr Statham, who happened to be the father of one of the boys in my school year. Mr Statham was an easy going sort of chap and I'm afraid I rather abused his good nature by using this lesson, away from more academic work, to indulge my principal interest at the time, that of messing about. On one occasion Mr Statham decided he had had just about enough of my disruptive behaviour, and sent me to see the headmaster. Mr Shapley occupied a very small, brick-built, add-on to the main buildings, facing the girls' playground. I was instructed by Mr Shapley to stand in the tiny corridor outside his office for the remainder of the lesson. I can recall standing in this tiny space very clearly. There appeared to be several layers of coconut matting on the floor, which gave it a strangely yielding nature as if one were standing on the deck of a ship, but the reason the occasion has stuck in my memory all my life is because I overheard the Headmaster's secretary say quietly to him, "It does make one wonder about the parenting in these cases". Suddenly I felt a dreadful sense of shame and I wanted to shout out "It's nothing to do with them - it's me!" I didn't, of course.

Oddly, my memories of the Eleven Plus examination seem almost non-existent. I have some vague recollection of sitting at an individual desk in one of our large classrooms puzzling over mental arithmetic, but nothing else comes to mind. Obviously it couldn't have made much of an impression on me. Was this because the build-up to the exam had been so skilfully managed by our teacher? Partly perhaps, but also my inability to think be-

yond the moment at that stage in my life might have had something to do with it. I believe the exam must have taken place in either May or early June. Earlier in the year my parents had been required to make their choice of which Grammar School they wished me to attend if successful. I wanted to go to Itchen Grammar, for several reasons, not least because my cousin was already there but also because the school was mixed and close by. My parents view was that King Edward VI School was the best and therefore should be my choice.

I can't imagine that lessons continued as before once the exam was over and the purpose of those lessons had been removed. We were aware that a stage in life was coming to an end. A lot of time was spent collecting autographs of classmates and teachers. I recall my autograph book clearly: A5 in size with a royal blue cover decorated with golden fleur-de-lys. I had just about everybody's autograph, and then I remembered Mr Matthews. He had never been one of my teachers but I was going for the full set. He said he didn't have time to sign at that moment but to leave the book with him and collect it later. Whether this was on the last day of term, I can't remember, but for some unknown reason I never went back for it and so it was lost forever.

I remember very well the morning the eleven plus results were published; it was a wonderful moment of congratulation and celebration. I believe that fifty children out of the fifty-two in our class had passed the exam and to my shame, amid the rejoicing I gave no thought at the time to the remaining two, who sat at their

desks and cried, having gained grammar courses at the local secondary modern schools, one being Merryoak School. It all seemed a wonderful success for Bitterne but of course we never considered the large number of pupils in the B, C and D streams. I'm not certain but I don't think any of these children gained a grammar school place. Looking back from a distance of sixty years I now think that in some respects our destiny was pre-determined from too early an age. It was as it was.

As for '4A' at least, we departed with high hopes and full of confidence in our futures. We said our casual goodbyes not thinking that most of our friends we would never see again. It was just as well we didn't think of it, for as the years rolled by and we were each shaped in body and mind by life's events, we turned slowly into different, perhaps unrecognisable people, until eventually, all these years later, I am left with the sobering thought that most of us who remain alive would not recognise each other if we passed in the street. I know it is entirely natural but I still find that fact rather sad.

It is often remarked that one's school days are the happiest days of one's life. Would I agree with that? Well, if I were to take my school days in total, then no, but if I consider only my time spent at Bitterne Church of England, then my answer would be a resounding Yes - I feel privileged to have been there.

The above account is I believe, essentially true. However, it is heavily reliant on my individual memories, and the older I get,

the more aware I become that my memory is not necessarily totally dependable, and whilst I may believe something to be true, sadly it is not always the case. If any reader spots an inaccuracy, I would be very happy to hear from them and to be corrected.