

John W. Cartwright

1945 -1950

I was delighted to find that the old school had a website and enjoyed reading the reminiscences of Old Boys, particularly those of John Jarvis who was some three years my senior. I would imagine that I would have known him at the time but I have no recollection now.

Memories came flooding back.

The war had ended earlier that year. I was one of several boys to pass the Grammar School entrance exam from Raddlebarn Lane Junior School and one of four to have selected K.N.G.S. as first choice. This achievement was to the utter but proud amazement of my parents, the thought of not passing was never an issue, it just never entered my head. At that tender age I was unaware of the concept of failure.

I well remember my first day as a 'new bug', I was aware of the likely treatment, that of being used as a pack mule to carry the heavy bulging satchels of older boys. At the end of the Summer Term pupils were required to take all their books home for the summer holidays and return with them at the start of the Autumn Term, hence the bulging satchels. I had elected to carry the satchels of two older boys who were in my church choir and so with my protectors I had a fairly uneventful initiation. I do remember the 'bird cage'. Made by swinging the gate to the playing field back on itself to form an enclosure with the end of the air raid shelter the caged 'new bugs' were encouraged to sing whilst being pelted with sand.

Blast walls were still in place at both entrances into the main building from the playground, a legacy from the war. After I had been at the school for a year or so I wondered why the urinals at the lower school end were open to the elements, whilst those at the upper school end were enclosed. I thought it was just a seniors and juniors thing. It was some years later that I discovered that the girl's school used to share the same site, prior moving to Selly Oak Road. I would imagine that segregation was mandatory particularly as there is evidence that wall ran from the under the hall windows, down the playground, to the outside wall of the gym.

We were allocated to either form 1a, 1b or 1c and one of five houses which, if my memory serves me well, were Greves (blue & white), Jervoise (brown & white), Littleton (green & white), Middlemore (red & white) and Mortimer (black & white). I

recall my form masters progressively through the school as being, Messrs. Donnelly, (1b): Welburn, (2b): Barker, (3b): Levitt, (4b): and Wheeler (5Bii & 5x).

Mr. Reynolds was headmaster and 'Pop' Wright the second headmaster during my time at K.N.G.S.

I was put in form 1B with Mr Donnelly as form master and allocated to Mortimer House. It was quite a difference being in a class of just over thirty boys after previously being in mixed classes of fifty plus. We regarded the forms to be graded but there was never any acknowledgement of this. However the theory did seem to be born out in the second year when form 1a jumped a year and became form 3aii leaving just 2b and 2c, the intake progressed in the same format right through to the fifth.

It was a strange new world but we had to adapt. I suppose the fact that you were with other boys who found it just as strange helped enormously. The unfamiliar practice of the masters referring to you by your surname and also addressing your fellow pupils in the same manner. Having to wear the school cap and touch the peak in deference to a master when you passed in the street.

A new form of discipline had to be learnt. Detentions and bad conduct marks, awarded at the discretion of masters for misdemeanours. A totting up system existed with conduct marks, where exceeding a certain number of them during the week resulted in an automatic detention. You also had to be deferential to Prefects, they also had the power to hand out conduct marks. The ultimate punishment was the cane, administered by Mr Reynolds the headmaster. I can only recall one boy in my form ever receiving the cane. Afterwards we encouraged him to show us the effects, the weals looked angry and very painful, we were assured in no uncertain terms that they were indeed painful.

Set home work, was a new concept to most of us, as were Wednesday afternoons as a half day, that is, unless you were selected for a representative sporting activity or had a detention to serve.

I do remember the dinner queues. You tried not to be the sixth or any multiple thereof in the queue. Each dining table accommodated twelve boys, six per side. The seating was taken up in strict order starting at the bottom of the table, the six and twelfth places being at the top of the table. The job of those at the top of the table would be to collect, scrape and return the dirty plates then bring a tray of puddings back to the table.

There were four female members of staff when I started, Miss Grant, Miss Thomas, Mrs Clarke and 'Ma' Backhouse. Miss Thomas, who was probably in her late teens or early twenties, took us for French during the first term as well as P.T, we all had a crush on her. The ladies eventually moved on and were replaced by those members of staff who had been called up for active service returning to the school to take up their former posts.

The masters remain in the memory mainly for their nicknames and mannerisms.

'Sam' Ecclestone, I can only describe him as being fiery, but well liked and respected by the boys. For practical work, in the physics lab, each bench worked

as a group when setting up experiments. I remember on one occasion when we had set up a bench experiment, to demonstrate some aspect of the properties of electricity, throwing a switchkey across the physics lab. This was because one group had left the switchkey in place and when trying to connect the battery caused a short circuit.

Mr Wheeler was my form master in 5bii, he was also teaching us English that year. One of Mr Wheeler's many attributes was to produce and direct the school play a task which he undertook extremely professionally as the standard of the performances proved.

Mr Stevens, I can recall the name, see him in my mind's eye but cannot be sure what he did. I have a feeling that he may have been an assistant in the physics lab.

Mr Rogers took us for art during the first term and was replaced by Mr Welburn after being demobilised from the R.A.F.

'Claude' Levitt, my form master and teacher in 4b. He always rode a very up-right bicycle to school with a leather suitcase strapped on the rear carrier.

'Fido' Faulkes, who had a habit of talking out of the side of his mouth, would also from time to time, write on the blackboard behind him whilst facing the class. To do this he would hold the chalk between his thumb and forefinger so that it protruded to the back of his hand.

'Ron' Coultas, took us for French in 4b. When he wanted to get your undivided attention, he had the nasty habit, of grasping the short hair on the nape of the neck with his thumb and forefinger. That really hurt! We did find that he was susceptible to being wound up and could become rather irate, this was much to the form's amusement. He was also a chalk thrower.

There was 'Holy Joe', I can only remember his nickname, he was with us for a short time in 3b and took us for R.E. He would lose his cool from time to time and inform us, in no uncertain terms, that he had been a Major in the army, had had men in his charge and would not be beaten by the likes of us boys where discipline was concerned.

'Pinochio' Hughes took us for woodwork, ably assisted by Mr. Ward. He told us that he was fortunate to be blessed with eyes in the back of his head, therefore he claimed that he could see what we were doing when he had his back towards us. He was extremely canny and you could believe his claim to be true as he caught many boys taking advantage of the turned back.

'Ned' Cooling with his cry of 'Wake your dozy self up!' I did not have the privilege of being taught by Mr Cooling.

'Sniffer' Ellis, I always will remember his opening introduction to us in form 1b, 'I am Mr Ellis and I will be taking you for geography this term, I am also suffering from a terminal illness.' It was years before I realised that that was his sense of humour, and I used to feel really concerned for him.

'Daddy, Jokeover' Barker, was my Form Master in 3b and took us for mathematics and chemistry in 2b, 3b and 4b. He was one of the old school of masters, not as exciting as some but well respected by the boys. I remember him relating his strategy in bowling Bishop, a renown first team batsman, in the annual Masters versus the Boys cricket match. The 'jokeover' reference is to his repeated calling 'joke over' to quieten down the form's over the top reaction to one of his jokes.

There was 'Killer' Cole, who I believe taught English, he was very much involved with the school football and cricket teams. He was known to place a sixpenny piece on the top of each stump to encourage a boy to bowl him out, the bowler keeping any of the dislodged sixpences.

I can vaguely remember 'Hagger' Hargreaves. He had us one games period forking over parts of the cricket square with table forks.

Mr Blundell took me for mathematics in 5bii and 5x, I feel that without his inspiration I would not have obtained a Credit in the subject for my School Certificate. He is a master for whom I still feel I owe a debt of gratitude.

'Dickie' Dalton was our history master in 3b, I felt that he had a peculiar way of instructing his pupils in what I considered, at the time, rather a boring subject consisting of names, dates and places. He would walk into the classroom place his books and gown on his desk and with the minimum of preamble would commence to dictate whilst at the same time writing on the black board. It was up to us to copy this down in our 'pads'. This would continue for the whole period and he would leave as I recall as abruptly as he arrived. We were required to transfer this to our history exercise books and learn the facts for homework. One of his other duties was to issue new exercise books to boys when their current one was full, the book store was off the hall next to the headmaster's study.

I remember 'Splasher' Wareham, he taught mathematics as far as I recall. He appeared to us young boys to be extremely ancient. He lived in the house next-door to the school, one removed from the Tuck Shop.

'Piggy' Hindle was, quite literally, one of those larger than life characters. He took us for biology in the last two years. He would recline in his chair at the end of one of the lab benches and lecture us on the particular subject for that lesson. Some of us learnt the hard way. We were waiting for the points of the lecture to be explained on the blackboard so that we could copy these down in our 'pads' and write them up for homework. Not realising in fact that it was up to the individual to make these notes as the lecture was proceeding. Mr Hindle would on occasions take us to the bottom right hand corner of the playing field. This is where the school garden was established. He would then split us up into groups, allocating each a plot of ground. We had explained to us the ways of trenching (digging) and then had to dig our allocated plots. As careers master, he would interview us individually to help establish the type of job to which we would best be suited. Another of the jobs he did as careers master was to organise trips to various local companies to get an insight to working environ-

ments.

I remember on one occasion he was overseeing the detentions on a Wednesday afternoon when I was unfortunate to be serving one. He had us all standing in the hall, well spaced out, with our right arm extended to the side, level with the shoulder. We were informed that this was an experiment but not given the reason behind it. So there we stood, arms out to the side at right angles, dipping one by one as the pain intensified. We all succumbed until no arms were extended. What was Mr Hindle doing? He was timing the endurance with a stop watch, exactly how he was evaluating it wasn't revealed.

Other masters who come to mind are 'Licker' Graham - Biology; 'Percy' Pickering - Physics; Mr Hawkins - Physical training; Mr Love, took over music and the school choir when 'Plum' Thomas retired.

As far as I can remember the following were my form mates, not all of them went all the way through the school and some others joined at various stages. Aldhouse; Appleton (Pip); Ashton; Austin; Bamfield; Barrett; Craddock; Crighton; Crooker; Fessey; Garrett; Gibbons; Hobbs ; Holmes; Hurcombe; Kingsnorth (Kiny); Knowles; Latimer; Lawrence A.; Lawrence K.; Maddox; Marlow; Mellors ; Pritchard; Rimmer; Saunders; Sharpe; Singer; Southgate; Steele; Tarring; Whitehouse; Wood (Darcy); Yates (Dickie);

The Tuck Shop was popular at dinnertimes. A queue would be formed at the lower school side entrance and overseen by a prefect who would regulate the number of boys going to the shop at any one time. Lemon buns 2d and cream buns 2 1/2d, I forget now how much the bottle of lemonade used to cost.

There was the time when rugby football was introduced for a trial period. This was my chance to shine and I duly made the school fifteen. Since none of the boys had experience with the oval ball it wasn't too difficult. I believe that a couple of masters augmented the side, even so we suffered some horrific defeats which was only to be expected as we were playing schools who had rugby on their curriculum. I must say that I would have liked the school to have persevered but then I was biased.

Sports Day was eagerly anticipated by most boys and I suspect by parents who love to see their offspring competing. In the weeks immediately prior to Sports Day, during lunchtimes, there were a number of boys who would continually pound round the running track. I don't know whether it was just because the track was there or whether they viewed it as training, I rather suspect it was the former. I remember 'Ned' Cooling was very much involved with the organisation of the Sports Day, and as far as I can recall started the running events with his own starting pistol. I can still see his navy blue blazer with the Olympic rings on the breast pocket, he was entitled to wear it having been an official at the 1948 Olympics.

There was a great cricketing occasion for the school one year. I can't remember which, but probably 1947 or 1948, when the first eleven won through to the final of the Docker Shield, played at Lords, and won the trophy.

Another annual event was the Schools Choir Festival staged in Birmingham Town Hall. 'Plum' Thomas, who was the Music/English Master was responsible for honing the voices of the school choir of which I was a member. It was pretty boring listening to all the other school choirs do their test piece, the real excitement came with the performances by the two schools who were able to support orchestras - King Edward's who were quite accomplished - St. Philips who were not - the discordant sounds of the latter provided the young audience cause for mirth, somewhat constrained with the stern gaze from masters around the auditorium.

I was pleased to read that the War Memorial has been refurbished. It was during my time at K.N.G.S. that the War Memorial was constructed and unveiled. I can't recall being at the unveiling ceremony, maybe it was just for the relatives of the fallen. I do, however remember that a competition was initiated for boys **to take photographs of the Memorial and the winner's photo would be reproduced in The Eagle.**

In June 2002 I made a return visit to the school where I was welcomed by the current Head, Ian Sonley. I also met several members of staff with whom I had 'then and now' comparative discussions. Two young lads were allocated to guide me through the seeming maze of corridors to visit various departments, all new since my day!

It may have been a mistake to return after fifty years. I fondly remember the school as it was when I was a pupil there and I viewed the inevitable structural changes that have been made with mixed feelings. I am so glad that the facade remains the same except for enclosing the upper and lower school side entrance porches. I very much regret the removal of the wood paneling that used to be a feature of the main hall and also the Headmaster's study. The loss of the library to the reception office.

The extension, of what used to be the Art Room, taking in the tiered seating at the opposite end of the hall to the stage, looked most incongruous.

The stage, which allowed many a boy, under the direction of Mr. Wheeler, to make his stage debut, thankfully seemed intact. To find that the gym had been gutted to make extra dining facilities didn't seem right, it was such a fine gymnasium.

I think one of my biggest disappointments was to discover that the old cricket pavilion had been burnt down. On reflection it could have caught fire ages ago, with potentially tragic consequences. The loft space was regularly accessed during lunch times by boys for the purpose of smoking a cigarette or two. I was delighted to see what appeared to be the original groundsman's hut still there.

Why did 'they' mess with the house system, the five houses were such a tradition of the school, with each boy being proud and partisan towards his respective house.

Having expressed some of my disappointment I will also express appreciation of

the advancement that has taken place in facilities now available for subjects such as Music , Art and of course IT.