



**The Ex-Pupil/Ex-Teacher Series**  
**Number 3**



**Eric Austin**  
**(at the School 1925-1932)**  
**1914 - 2006**

W. ERIC AUSTIN

[This is an edited version of the transcript of a taped conversation held at Eric's home on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2005. The conversational tone has been retained, as this is essentially an exercise in oral history.]

I was born on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1914 at 127 Melfort Road Thornton Heath. According to my mother I was a very sickly child, but here I am in my 91<sup>st</sup> year.

My grandmother was a widow for nearly 50 years. She lived in Stuart Road, Thornton Heath: by the Clocktower. We used to walk up to the top of Streatham Common on a Sunday morning through the brickfields, no houses in Green Lane in those days. My grandmother used to take me out on Mondays to get me out of my mother's way, so she could do the washing - across the fields, with all the cows. My Dad had an allotment in Melfort Road opposite Braemar Avenue, where all the houses were later built.

I went to a little private school opposite where we lived, run by Miss Rosa and Miss Louie Brooks. In the wintertime my mother used to put leather leggings on me, which you had to do up with a buttonhook, just to go across the road, and poor Miss Louie had to undo them all, and then put them back on when I had to go home. In 1923 I went to Winterbourne Road School. I sat for my Scholarship in March, or April, 1925.

I turned up at Selhurst Grammar School in September 1925, and there I met Raymond Carter on my first day. Mr H A Parkinson was the form master; a good man, but he was very sarcastic. We went round the class in turn to read. When it was my turn, I came to this word b l a c k g u a r d – I had never seen it in my life, so I said black-guard. All the boys dissolved into laughter, and I felt most embarrassed. Mr Parkinson said, "Eric Austin, it's better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt".

I didn't do very well that Winter Term, or the Spring Term, because I was invariably away with asthma. In the Summer Term, I think I finished up about 10<sup>th</sup>, so I moved up to the Second Form, still with Raymond Carter. I was hardly ever at school in the Winter Term 1926. Then, in 1927, there was an epidemic, in Croydon, of diphtheria and scarlet fever. I was in the isolation hospital in Waddon, where the A23 now goes round.

Mr Bentley was headmaster and he reviewed my case. As I was probably the youngest boy in the form, he said I could stay in the Second Form. So, I stayed and Johnny Wedd was my form master. From then on I always did very very well. George Kinch, a well known Old Boy, was in my form: he was a very clever boy.

I always got a very good report for work, but I wasn't such a good boy really. I always had the bad luck to catch the duster or the chalk when it was being thrown round the room. So, there came a time when I got a Head Master's Report which said, "work excellent, conduct calls for immediate reform". The Head Master said, "Eric Austin, if you come before me again this term, I will recommend the Governors to withdraw your Scholarship". I doubt whether he would have been able to do that. I was on my best behaviour!

You probably dare not write the next bit. Mr Hollinrake was our Geography master. When he entered the class, we were always banging our desks. One day I had the bad luck to be sent out to stand under the clock: right outside the Head Master's study. He would bring you in and give you two, four or six of the best. I hid in the cloakroom and hoped he wouldn't see me, because he used to walk round to see if the boys were hiding. Eventually, some of my chums said, "Don't worry Eric, the Head Master hasn't come to school today and Mr Hollinrake just left on his bicycle". There was worse to come. In the Register, I saw "Austin: C for conduct". Thank Goodness, he wrote it in pencil, because I rubbed it out! I was scared stiff.

Tubby Hollinrake was a lovely man. Bang! Bang! Bang! Contrary to that, H A Treble, Sammy Chambers, the Baron, F T B Wheeler, – when they entered the classroom you could hear a pin drop. We used to call Wheeler, "pouffant" because, when he cleared his throat, he made that noise. Ever heard that before?

I played rugby - we had House Rugby, which we played on the field behind the Girls' School. I was good at scoring tries because I was a stocky little chap who could run fast, and I was good at converting tries too. Mr Stanley, the Games Master, used to put up the teams in the Senior corridor. One day my friend said, "Eric, you're in the first XV". I looked and there I was:  $\frac{3}{4}$  in the first team. I couldn't believe it. From then I was a permanent fixture in the school team. Jack Woodcraft and K J MacDonald were in the same team and I played for the Old Boys', got my colours two years running, which entitled you to buy the special blazer, which you could wear like a big shot.

[IM: How old when you left school?] I was 17. I took Matric in July 1931 and much to the horror of the Head Master, and all the staff, I failed. I got distinctions in Maths and in Latin, but you had to pass English and Maths. I only got about 45% for English. I still haven't any imagination. You ask me to write an essay on daffodils and I wouldn't know where to start. I was good at grammar, paraphrase and parsing, but I hadn't any imagination. The Head had my papers re-marked – unsuccessfully – and I returned to School for one more term. I was given a room to study in and I took External Matric again: and I passed.

[IM: Where did you buy the uniform?] I'm really not sure how I got my school uniform – cap, tie etc, but I think they were sold by the School Secretary – Miss Cayford – from her office. And we bought our Old Boys' stuff up in George Street - Leonard Lyle, later Pickford and Newton. At the other end of Poplar Walk there was a sports' outfitter. I used to buy my rugby boots, rugby jerseys, everything there. That shop was completely destroyed during the War.

Sammy Chambers was a fantastic Maths master. He lost his hand in the First World War, so he had a hook.

What a load of lovely masters. Johnny Wedd really understood me. He became great friends with my parents. He thought that the boys I was hob-nobbing with weren't suitable for me. One boy was Norton. We used to wait at Bensham Manor Road for the girls to come and Johnny Wedd used to see me. He told my mother not to let her son mix with that boy. "He's no good". [IM: Was he right?] I expect he was.

My father wanted me in his business, so I was sent to Pitmans College in Croydon. When I sat the Royal Society of Arts Stage II Arithmetic Exam, I passed and was awarded the Society's Bronze Medal – first place in the British Isles. I got a job at a firm of Chartered Accountants – Binder Hamlyn and Co - where I was the typist, now called a PA, to the Investment Department, at a salary of £3 5s 0d a week. That was very good in 1932 because most boys got jobs at 30 bob a week.

Mr W G Johnson, Head Master of Pitmans College, encouraged me to try for the Chartered Secretaries. I enrolled with the City of London College in Ropemaker Street, which was destroyed during the War, and I used to go there in the evenings to attend the lectures. There were about 1500 candidates but only a maximum of 10% passed. I was No. 115 when I passed my Final in December 1937.

I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party in a little hall in Winterbourne Road, a proper building next to the School. Simpson (an Old Croydonian) came and performed tricks, an old Boy came to sing, my Dad hired a radiogramme, and we danced. The big thing that night was that my Grandma who was born in 1844 came to my party. She died in 1937 aged 93 and a bit. They had a car to bring her and a car to take her home.

In August 1936 I went for two weeks to Shanklin, Isle of Wight. On the pier, I saw one of the most gorgeous young ladies I had ever seen (Rene) with her friend (Phyl). I took Rene out a few times but it was soon clear that Phyl was the girl for me.

Phyl worked in The Empire Stone Company's Accounts office in Fleet Street. She used to watch me playing rugby for the Old Boys on their fantastic Sports Ground in Purley Way – the ground we had leased from the Air Ministry. The lease provided that the ground would be

taken over by the Government in the event of War and we had to give it up when War was declared in September 1939.

I must mention here that that Sports Ground was really state-of-the-art, after playing rugby at Monks Orchard, Elmers End where we had to clear the worst of the 'cow-plops' from the pitch before the game started and then, at the end of the match, we washed off in 40-gallon drums full of COLD water...Phew!!! So, the Purley Way pavilion was really something: two rugby pitches, one football pitch, three hard tennis courts and an excellent cricket square.

I went back into my firm [IM: What was the firm?] Austin & Young. The diamond business was an ancillary really.

I had known Phyl less than two years when my Father sent me to The Gold Coast. By that time I had persuaded her to marry me. We agreed to become engaged in June 1941. My parents gave a small party for Phyl and a few close friends, at which my Father presented her with a single stone diamond engagement ring from one of the Hatton Garden Brokers through whom we sold the output from our diamond mine.

At the time of Dunkerque, every able-bodied British citizen world-wide was called up to fight for the country. I was issued with a Non-Combatant Service Notice requiring me to remain in the employment of my company as the Acting Mine Manager: evidence that I was in a Reserved Occupation.

The area we mined was over 2 ¼ square miles. We had a European compound and over the other side of the hill we built an African village. But no-one had bothered about the dogs, and the place was running wild. I put out an edict that any owner of a dog was to lock up the dog, because any dog found wandering was liable to be shot. Amos had a two bore shot gun. I don't know how many he got rid of, but in one night we cleared out all the dogs. Believe it or not they were eaten by one of the tribes from the Northern Territories, the Fra-Fra.

You don't have to be a mining engineer to be in charge of an alluvial diamond mine. It's just like market gardening – if you know what to dig, and how deep down to dig: that's all you need. I really cleared that place: and we planted crotons and cannas. Cannas were lovely - purple leaved with a red flower. It was quite a sight.

A three-year tour in West Africa was unheard of for any European but Phyl waited for me. For the entire three years I sent her a dozen red roses every month. I had an arrangement with a florist in Leicester. Having arrived in October 1939, I finally got on a ship from Takoradi Harbour in November 1942 to come home and get married

That ship took about eight weeks to get to Liverpool. Instead of going up through the Bay of Biscay, which was infested with submarines, we went below the Equator up to Norfolk, Virginia. I have never ever seen so many warships. In New York, they assembled a convoy of 107 ships to come across the Atlantic. We were commodore ship.

If you want to believe that the earth is round go up the Mersey River, look out towards the horizon, and you suddenly see the ships coming over the horizon. Wonderful!

I was married in February '43 at Braunstone near Leicester. You know Braunstone? [IM: I do] I was married to a Roman Catholic. When I first met Phyl she was a Protestant. She converted to Catholicism. I didn't mind. She could have been a Moslem, a Hindu or a Sikh. She was mine.

I went back to the Gold Coast in 1943. We sailed from the Clyde, three ships in convoy – Duchess of York, the California and a merchant ship. They were going out to Lagos to embark troops to go to the Burmese front. Wonderful sight. I remember it vividly going down the Clyde with all the work going on on both sides. It was a great ship building area in those days.

Just off Casablanca the ship's bells started ringing. There were three German aeroplanes at 10,000 feet. It was high level bombing. We just zigged and zagged. They took one ship each and dropped bombs, turned and came back, did a lot more damage and then flew off back to their bases. I walked down the corridor to where a lot of people were congregating. The purser said, "Go back, there's no order to abandon ship". Being taught by Mum to obey instructions, I went back but the next salvo took that staircase away completely with all the people on it. I could have been one of them.

There were four nuns in the next cabin. Terrified. They were going out to Sierra Leone as missionaries on their first ever trip. In my cabin the flames were licking through the floorboards, and one of the fellows got out through the porthole. I was too fat; I couldn't get out through the porthole. Don't ask me how I did it, but I got up on the rail of the promenade deck and I jumped. Sea down there, and I jumped into my lifeboat. How I got the strength, God alone knows. I was put aboard a destroyer. I got a billet in the Petty Officer's mess, so I got eggs and bacon for breakfast.

When we got to Casablanca I had never seen anything like it. The Americans were in charge. They sent a ship from Oran to pick us all up and we went down to Freetown, Takoradi, Accra, Lagos and I travelled up by train to our mine. 132 miles: took eleven hours on the Gold Coast Railway.

That was good - only been married three months, but I was still alive. The Germans were well into North Africa and the authorities thought they were liable to come across the Sahara Desert and capture the diamond mines. They were very short of diamonds. Stupid – they *couldn't* have come across the Sahara desert.

In February 1946 my gorgeous wife came out. I worked in the Gold Coast from 1938 to 1949.

[IM: Did you live in Africa again] No. In 1957 I started to go abroad to get business.

[IM: sport?] I played rugby. I was due to skipper the Old Boys' A XV for the season 1939/40, but the War came.

Melfort Road was one and a quarter miles from the School so I walked in the morning, back for lunch, back to School, and back home. That was five miles a day. That's where I met Kathleen East. East's ran the hairdressing salon in Brigstock Road, next door to Hartwell the butcher, who only packed up a few years ago, opposite Williamsons the paraffin shop and tools whatever you call it [IM: Hardware?] That's right. Joan Williams went to Selhurst Girls' School and was a friend of Kathleen East, and Yvonne East is John Hunsworth's sister in law.

[IM: Old Croydonians?] I did join, but I didn't take any jobs because I spent all those years in Africa. A.J. Raynham used to send me the Magazine; he was the Editor before Herbert Cornell. I used to love getting my Old Croydonian out in Africa. I used to write.

In 1953 I went to the AGM and Mr Pritchard piped up "We've got Eric Austin here tonight, he's just got back from Africa, he hasn't done any work for the Old Boys' yet, I'll nominate him". I became an additional member, then I became the Membership Secretary. Herbert Cornell did the Magazine and I did all the collating at my house in Carshalton Beeches.

I must also tell you about the Old Boys' Annual General Meetings. They were held in the School Hall and we always had an act. Have you heard of a man called Simpson? He was a member of the Magic Circle. He was an Old Croydonian. He used to come along and do tricks. We also had singers - Arthur Martin and Norman Hayter.

Ask me some more questions. I haven't given you enough about the school. [IM You've given me a different perspective of it] The Old Boys' had a stall up at the school sports. Roma Mauri used to sell her plants. [IM: At Duppas Hill?] They had an Old Boys' 220 yards invitation race and an OCA Athletic Club 220 yards race. In the Invitation Race, you ran in what you wore. That silly bugger Gordon Parr decided he would be clever and run the reverse way round the track. He ran straight into me with the inevitable clash of heads which left the blood streaming

down my forehead. And then he blamed me!! I finished up at my Doctor's to have my head stitched up. And I've still got the scar.

IM: When did you retire?] I retired in 1997. Officially retired in '97. One day, in 1996, May 2<sup>nd</sup> I agreed to do some telling for the Conservative Party. That morning Phyl was not feeling very well. I was very worried, so I decided to ring the doctor. We were sitting in that window: Elizabeth, me and Phyl. ... I told Elizabeth 999 quick. They took Phyl to Epsom Hospital.

Eventually, they said they couldn't do anything. Elizabeth asked for the Anglican Chaplain. A gentleman came, Revd Vallins, and he saw this tie. He said, "Selhurst Grammar School". I said, "You wouldn't know that". He said, "I would, my uncle, George Vallins, was a master at SGS". [IM: the poet?] Yes, small world.

#### Additional Notes:

Eric has a son, Anthony, who has four children, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who has two children. He also has three great grandchildren.

Amongst his photographs, Eric has found some which include School trips under Mr K M (Smiler) King and his Scout Leader to Veyrier-du-Lac in 1931, a similar trip probably in 1933 which included scouts, schoolboys and Old Boys and also the disastrous trip to Suances, Spain, near Santander in 1935 or 1937. On that occasion it rained continuously and the party was washed off the hill-side camp site. They were rescued and transferred into accommodation in a School, or Church Hall.

The to France in 1931 cost Eric's parents £14.14.0 – the cost included two nights in a Paris hotel, and the stay at a campsite at Veyrier, alongside the lake.