



The Ex-Pupil/Ex-Teacher Series

Number 2



John Gooding

(at the School 1925-1933)

Steve Palmer visited John at his house on the 14 June 2005. John was 91 years old on 14 August 2005. He was at school 1925-1933

The school in South Norwood was very reasonable until one got to the 'higher end' of it. You began to see the cruel and nasty side of elementary school, with the Masters using the cane with some vigour on the pupils. What did I learn? Spelling, writing sentences and I also learnt about fractions, I learned how to recite Psalm 23 and Psalm 121. I also learnt about 'cancellation' which lead up to simple arithmetic. Things like the 'rule of 3' and 'pi' (a three and a seventh). This allowed you to do arithmetic about circular things. One day during that period I was told to go and sit for the scholarship, and I walked all the way along Davidson Rd – the end near the Lesley Arms – DH Lawrence taught there previously. So it progressed from there and I was called to go to a school in 'old' Croydon – I can't remember the name for sure, (Tamworth perhaps) and then a call from Selhurst to go for an oral and I remember we had to read pieces from Rip Van Winkle - and Mr Bentley asked questions we didn't know the answer to! Eventually he asked me if an article cost three farthings how much would a dozen cost, and how much would a gross cost? – I KNEW THE ANSWERS! ..and that's how I got a place at Selhurst!

Selhurst Days

I have recollections that in Form IA, we did very well in Arithmetic, more Writing and Spelling with Mr Parkinson. A gentleman with whom I had difficulty in agreeing was 'Smiler King'. I feel that his classes were almost 'throwaway'. He talked about ancient history and we never had any references or made any notes. Slip tests were the basis of pure recollection! He also had a term on Geology – a jolly good subject but really, you need a good basis in Geography. In addition to that, it's quite clear now in, 2005 that there's a whole lot about Earth Sciences that weren't realised then and that would have made old Smiler's talk about Geology a lot more significant! He also used to keep us in after school, but that was OK because there were always plenty of buses and some boys had cycles. Years later, I had a chance to change my opinion about Smiler. He was a nice man – odd, but nice! The other thing I didn't like was, we had singing classes after hours once a week, but I think they were looking forward to hearing the arrangements for prize giving.

Now, when we got to form 2A, life started to get more serious, we started Latin. We had Johnny Wedd who taught us French – I enjoyed that...plus more introductions to Science, which, eventually, became my life's work

Steve asks: 'Who was your favourite teacher?'

I suppose it was Mr Barlow, you could understand him, and he was a man I could communicate with. The very first lesson he wrote a fractions addition sum on the board and asked for a volunteer to come up (that was me!), and after I had got the correct answer he said "I hoped you would do it more neatly!" but I had never written out front on the board before. We always had a nice little rapport after that, right up to General Schools (1930).

Steve asks: What about friendships?

One day in 1928, when I was in Form 3A, I visited the newly opened children's library, in South Norwood, in Lawrence Rd near the Clock Tower. Whom should I meet but form-mate, Vincent Prechner, his parents had come from east Europe – and I had a very good friendship with Vincent, but the whole thing ended when he was killed in a shooting accident in 1931. Up 'til then, he and I would go around quite a lot. I would go up to his house and go out on lovely picnics with his parents. We went to Penge Empire on occasions. I remember "Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber" about the time of my 14th birthday.

There was another boy, from Selhurst, two doors up the road from Vincent, Joe Sear. We went into his house, sometime in 1928 – it was all quiet – just his 13 year old sister and the grandfather clock ticking in the hallway – and this is the Grandfather clock (*John points out a grandfather clock in his lounge to me*). In the end I married his elder sister! Sorry to say, she's been gone these last 18 years, but would have been delighted at the quality of her children and grandchildren. Incidentally, she was an 'old girl', but the family was crippled when the father died in 1926, aged 54. Work became a necessity

Steve asks: What was your favourite topic at school?

It's difficult to say, but in the end I'd say Chemistry. You may or may not realise that I studied Chemistry, I have a first class degree in Chemistry and I have a Ph.D in Physical Chemistry...I enjoyed French, and I enjoyed the Physics in the 6th form, but not before. Out of thirteen terms, I came top six times, I came fourth once, third twice, and three where I came second. Things moved on to General Schools, I got distinctions in French, Latin, Chemistry, Maths, and passed more advanced Maths. The Chemistry lab was above the gymnasium. About Physics in the 6th form. I cannot say too much about E W King ('Rhino') who was such a nice man and taught us a lot. I used to see him a bit in London in the thirties. When we were young, his voice down the school corridor seemed so threatening! Later human to human he was niceness itself. IN those days, physics problems were 'smoothed' for mathematics treatment –but now, there is a onster called 'chaos' – the real world!

..and least favourite..?

I had difficulty with History with Mr Wheeler! But that was quite misplaced, because I now realise that history is one of the most important topics I could ever learn about...the behaviour of human beings over the centuries. If I've read any subjects since I retired, it's history – you learn so much about people - and their attitudes. Let me tell you a story by a relative of mine about Geography - It was about one chap who taught Geography, he had wanted to be a teacher, but he couldn't teach anything, so he found himself doing geography! – my apologies to all geography teachers! If we look at what has happened in the last 50 years, say, we realise that we know much more these days about geology – it's what the Americans call 'earth sciences' – Volcanoes, Earthquakes, Tectonic plates, Continental Drift etc, and makes a very valuable subject. I was never very good at Drawing. We had a Master called Mr Drew – he wouldn't allow a single sound! He was a product of a very old school, and I was glad he was replaced by such a likeable chap called Gordon Stowell, who later, would edit the Radio Times.

I was in Alpha house, the same as Ray Carter. I used to walk to school, a mile and three furlongs. I sometimes afforded a penny ride on the tram or the bus. In the 1926 General Strike we all had walk all ways for 9 days!

Steve asks about school hours

School started at ten to nine and finished at a quarter to four and you could time it quite well. It used to take me 20 minutes to get there, and I could time it just right! and get there just as the first bell rang. One thing, you were not allowed to use the front entrance pathways until you got to the sixth form or you became a prefect, or a Master asked you to park his bike in the Masters' shed!

Steve asks about the school uniform

It was very simple really, the only uniform I can remember was a cap and a tie. Later on, I was proud to have a coloured blazer, that I think we had to pay for. I wore short trousers until some time in the middle of 2A, when I changed to long trousers. My Mother used to say, "you're get chapped legs...", so I had long trousers.

..and school dinners...

They were quite nice. I think we got them free if you were a duty Prefect. I think I had school dinners on and off for a whole term, when I was a prefect, otherwise I used to walk home each lunchtime.

..and you were a Prefect..?

Yes, Mr Wheeler (Alpha, Housemaster) asked me to become a house prefect in July 1930 (for September 1930). I think there were eight house prefects (1st year of 6th form) and eight school (2nd year 6th) prefects year-on-year. I also became School Head for two terms in 1932-33, had extra responsibilities like Prefects' meetings and used to discuss things like the boys being saucy and what should we do. Prefects at times ran detention classes. We also had Prefects on the doors. Prefects most wore the regulation long flowing gowns. On roster, I used to sound the gong for the end of lessons, (first year) – a job that needed a nice touch of individual skill. Later, the gong disappeared and we had a bell. We had seven lessons a day, three on the trot in the afternoon. We also had Saturday mornings until 12.15 ending with Mr Katz and the Debating Class (5th forms and above). At morning break (10.30-10.45am – 'playtime') the 1st to 4th formers occupied the large playground. The 6th form, by and large used their dignity to stay inside – while the 5th form had virtually exclusive use of the small playground. I saw a first in 1931 or 32 – a small green car driven by a second-year 6th former, parked in the small playground.

..and tell me about your sporting achievements..?

In 1A there was a pick up of soccer. Mr Hollinrake, the Geography master trying to run a game of soccer! I had played soccer out of school, for a year or two, but the School was turning us into rugby players.

In 1928 when I was in the 3rd form, The school doctor rang an alarm bell. My father took me to Harley St and he paid 5 guineas for me to have my heart tested on an early form of ECG machine. The man who did it was called Strickland-Goodall and when his son died some seven or eight years ago, it was recorded in the Telegraph obituaries. The doctors decided that I had to rest and for the whole of the Summer Term of 1928, I only attended mornings at school. I had to lie down in the afternoons. By the time I got to 4A, I was playing a bit of games again by Summer Term. By the time I got to 5A, I was into the football and cricket again. I started off in the 1st XI (in 1930), but I got demoted back to the 2nd XI. Who did I join there, but Ray Carter. He and I dismissed Whitgift Middle, 2nd XI for 6 runs! Ray took 4 for 3, and I took 6 for 0! After that, I remember I scored quite a few runs and was re-promoted. I didn't do very well in the 1st XI until the Old Boys' match – they were dismissed quite cheaply for 98. When I went in, it was 69 for 7 to partner Ken McDonald, who now lives in Toronto and we have corresponded in rc. We knocked off the last 30 runs and won the game - we won the game! That was a wonderful thing! I did much better in 1931 and made quite a lot of runs. – 62, not out against Woolwich County School. In 1932, I became Captain and scored 50 against the parents and won the bat. I continued to hold the captaincy in 1933, but could not play Wednesdays because I was at work. Later, I played cricket for the Old Boys making initially, a rather bad start, but then scored a lot of runs for the 2nd XI and was re-promoted. I played continuously for the Old Boys 1st XI until it all came to an end in August 1939. After that I hardly played again.

Rugby – we had a very, very good year in 1932, a good year indeed and I played amongst the forwards and I got my colours cap. I enjoyed playing Rugby. I was lucky enough to get in another full season – 1932/33 playing forward. I experimented later with the Old Boys (A and B) XV as a back.

FINAL SCHOOL YEARS

As I entered the 3rd year of the sixth form, I found myself running around with George Kynch, who later became a Professor of Mathematics at Manchester University. He and I would go around to empty classrooms. I was studying for an examination for the civil service. In the end, I didn't take it because Mr Pritchard who had a friend who worked for a Government laboratory got me an interview sometime around the beginning of May 1933, and I was interviewed by the Deputy Government Chemist and offered a job as an assistant at 30 shillings a week! I worked at the lab bench for four and a half years after that. I can say, that I served my time as a worker in the chemical industry. We took risks that would be abhorred now!. I worked in a laboratory that few people would recognise today. There were two models, I saw in a museum, one was OLD Government and one was NEW. I looked at the OLD one and thought "This is the one I know!". Nowadays, chemistry is preparing samples, putting them in machines, reading the results (hey presto!). In the old days it was all colours, gases and precipitates, plus your sense of smell!

Later (1937-39) when I was a research student at University College, London, I was able to improve a lot of laboratory skills, manufacturing and purifying unusual chemicals and subjecting them to carefully controlled tests. This was the ending point of my work as a pure experimenter. Afterwards, it was a slide back into administration and paperwork.