



Memories of Selhurst by Colin Easton (1958–1965, Alpha)

(Extracted from my Memories of Early Life and Schooldays)

...Now a little of Secondary School days. As mentioned earlier, I obtained a place at Selhurst Grammar School for Boys, based at The Crescent, Croydon. However, owing to the post-war 'bulge' there were so many boys in the first and second years, that an annexe was opened in the building that had been the original site of the school, but more latterly the Croydon Polytechnic, before Croydon Technical College was built. This was situated at Scarbrook Road, between the swimming baths and the telephone exchange. It was here, therefore, that I started my new school life on 11th September 1958. A total of 296 boys started on the same day and we all crammed into the school hall to find out which class we had been allocated to. My school uniform had been purchased at Hewitt's in Church Street. This did not apply to the blazer, as Mum believed that those at Hewitt's were of inferior quality and preferred to go to Foster Brothers a few doors away. This meant that the school badge had to be sewn onto the blazer rather than being already embroidered. The last such badge is still in my possession.

The first year boys were known as 'weeds' and were tormented by the second year boys. I for one was put upside down in a wire rubbish basket as part of my initiation. In the first term, I was near the top of the class in ability, but this first class was only a temporary one to grade us. All the boys of better ability were soon moved into a class together, and then I was one of the less capable ones in that group, apart from woodwork and technical drawing lessons, and this situation continued right the way through to the sixth form, when I always did well except in examinations.

During these first and second years at Scarbrook Road I enjoyed most of my lessons, in particular science, maths, woodwork and technical drawing. I was chosen to do a technical drawing demonstration on open day and at that time thought I might like to be a draughtsman. As I have said, I was fascinated by science, and bought a number of test tubes and glass rods for experiments at home. In particular, I liked to try to grow crystals, although I never had a great deal of success. I am amazed now that I was able to buy dangerous substances over the counter at Boots, in particular Copper Sulphate crystals and Carbon Tetrachloride which was probably potentially carcinogenic. I remember having to sign in a register to purchase these items. I also liked melting in test tubes 'Hypo' (Sodium Thiosulphate) which was a fixer used in photographic work. Once the stuff solidified

again, it was impossible to get it out of the test tube. It has numerous medical uses also, not least as an antidote to cyanide poisoning.

On the occasion of the first 'open' day, the sixth formers set up apparatus to manufacture Acetylsalicylic Acid (Aspirin). It all seemed highly complex, and occupied the length of one whole bench in the science laboratory.

The school was a rugby-playing school and I was always centre-forward in the scrum. In play, I always tried to get rid of the ball as soon as gaining possession of it, in order to avoid being tackled. My nervousness of the game was only enhanced, when during a masters-versus-sixth form match, I saw my P.E. master, Mr. Tasker get his nose broken.

In my second year at school, whilst larking about in the gymnasium, I, with another boy surnamed Jackson, pushed another boy called Humphreys, or 'Humph' for short, off a bench where we were sitting. He must have fallen awkwardly, as I later learned that he had broken his femur, with the result that he was in hospital for several weeks! The headmaster Mr. J. Taylor, known as 'Joey', made me go with 'Jackson' to apologise to the boy's mother, who I must say was very kind to us about it. However, other boys in my class punished me by giving me the 'bumps' but they were too cowardly to touch 'Jacko' because he was much bigger than me. Nevertheless, when they let go of me, I went really mad and lashed out in all directions, even at the bigger bullies, one of which was called 'Tarrant.' In spite of everything, 'Humph' and I remained friends after he had recovered, even though I did run off with his school cap from time to time.

At school there were two annual sporting events, apart from the summer sports day, that is. One was the School Gala which was held in the Scarbrook Road swimming baths. I had not yet learned to swim so didn't take part, but the event was very exciting. The second event involved everyone in the first and second years, and this was a cross-country run, over two laps of Duppas Hill. House points were awarded to each and every competitor according to position, and these were totalled up at the end to determine which house had won. The house names were Alpha, Beta, Delta and Gamma. The colours were Red, Green, Yellow and Blue respectively. I was in Alpha House and consequently had a red blazer badge with the caption 'Semper Recordemur' (Let us always remember.)

One schoolmaster at Scarbrook Road comes particularly to mind and that was Mr. Lamont who taught us French and English. He once asked us boys to write an essay about the Second World War, but as my father hardly spoke about it, I found the task difficult. I didn't learn much English grammar until the second year when we were taught by Mr. Benetto (known as 'The Benge' or 'Beano'.) However I found learning about objects, phrases, clauses, past participles and the like rather boring, although I have been grateful for this since, when having to write important letters or reports during my nursing career. He had particularly bushy eyebrows which probably led to the following story from a former pupil who remembered Mr Benetto coming into the classroom with a copy of the Beano comic which he held up and said, 'Is that Highbrow enough for you?' He obviously had a sense of humour that I had never really been aware of myself.

There was another English Teacher, Mr Weeks-Pearson who threw little pieces of chalk at any boy who displeased him but he was really quite pleasant when in later years he was in charge of cross-country running, accompanying us round Shirley Hills.

In the second year our Religious Education master was Mr. Hull, an Australian. He soon earned the dubious title of 'The Holy Abbo.' (The poor man became blind in 1980 yet is, in 2012, the Emeritus Professor of Religion at the University of Birmingham.)

Once in the third year, I moved to the main school at The Crescent. The school hall was impressive, with its own organ which was situated on the balcony. The balcony itself occupied one end and one side of the hall, and was reserved for sixth formers during assembly. How I enjoyed singing the School Song at the end of term. It was a marvellous tune, but the words were rather obscure, unless perhaps you were a Roman Centurion. Only a few lines come to mind:

'Felix ubi nemorum saltus arridebat
Schola nostra condita, genio sit praedita,
Tum qui praesidebat, tum qui praesidebat
Io Selhurst, Silva Felix,
Io Selhurst, Cara Nutrix,
Viget, vigeat, vigebit.'...

On one occasion in the first year we were given a translation of each verse by our talented music teacher, Mr. Terry James, but I have long since forgotten it. Although I enjoyed Latin at school I failed to pass it at G.C.E. O-level. On one occasion I was amazed when he once tore off a piece of his black gown to use as a board rubber! He once played various pieces of music on the piano and we had to say if we recognised any of them. He played a Mozart Sonata and immediately I knew what it was as I often played it at home. I think he and the class were amazed that I knew such a relatively unknown piece. I seem to remember Mr James playing a piano duet with Mr Egford, one of the English masters (or perhaps it was Mr Nixon, one of the French masters) on the raised platform of the gymnasium at Scarbrook Road on a special occasion. Our school assemblies were always held in the gymnasium as the school hall at Scarbrook Road was not large enough for the post-war 'bulge' boys. Mr James later became a composer and in his post-Selhurst career conducted some of the World's most famous orchestras. He also gained a Doctorate at Oxford University.

Our third year French master, Mr. Oakley, was a very gentle man with white hair and a white moustache, who had two fingers on his right hand contracted down into the palm of that hand. It always fascinated me to see how he held the chalk when writing on the board. He smelled strongly of tobacco as I think he used to smoke a pipe and that earned him the nickname 'Shag'. He always rode a large green roadster bicycle (complete with chain guard) to school, at a very slow pace, unlike most of his colleagues who used to sweep in by car.

It was the custom, once a year in September, for the whole school to gather at Croydon Parish Church, for the annual Commemoration Service.

Our headmaster, Mr. Ackland, always presided at assembly each morning. The end-of-term assembly was always held during the afternoon of the last day of term. Mr. Ackland always read from the Bible, Philippians Chapter 4, Verses 4 – 8.

At the age of sixteen I decided that I would like to do voluntary work at a school for Spastics in Shirley. It was necessary to seek the headmaster's permission. I remember that he said it was 'Wholly admirable,' which rather amused the two of us that applied.

One pupil at The Crescent was somewhat unusual. His name was Graham Cornish and he was in the year above mine. He somewhat older than the others pupils in his year, having had a delayed education because of very poor sight. He was over six feet tall and heavily built as well. I and my immediate circle of friends became quite attached to him as he had such a pleasant personality. It turned out that he lived in Pemdevon Road, Croydon, just around the corner from where I lived. One day he became very ill with meningitis and when he was recovering I visited him in Waddon Isolation Hospital. I kept in touch with him when I left school. He went to University at Durham and eventually became a Church of England Clergyman. Once we both married, we lost touch with one another. (I made contact with him again in 2002 after looking him up in the register of clergy in Wallington Library.)

When I was in the fourth year, I took English and Maths at GCE O-Level, one year earlier than usual, the rest of the subjects being taken at the end of the fifth year. I can remember the essay title for the English Language exam. It was 'The place I would most like to revisit and why.'

In the fifth year, two young men in my form, surnamed Allen and Brininger, decided to bleach their hair with hydrogen peroxide. When they arrived at school like that they were promptly suspended by the Head Master Mr Ackland. Although I don't remember it clearly, the story got into the National Press with big articles in the tabloids in particular. The boys were eventually allowed to return with their hair restored to a more normal colour.

I wasn't keen on games afternoons, and as I needed orthodontic treatment, always managed to conveniently arrange my appointments to coincide with those days. I could have attended the local clinic but instead went to the clinic at Shirley, which meant, with travelling time, games were sure to be missed.

Once in the sixth form however, I enjoyed cross-country running which took place around Shirley Hills. We used to change in the old windmill which was then in the grounds of John Ruskin School. The windmill is still there but the school has been replaced by a housing estate. The other sport I grew to enjoy in the last year at school, was hockey, perhaps an unusual game for boys in those days.

The subjects I took at A-Level were Physics, Chemistry and Zoology, as I wanted to enter the medical profession. I applied to all the London Medical Schools and the provincial ones as well, but was only offered a provisional place for Pharmacology.

My Zoology master and form master in the sixth form was Mr Ford. For some reason he earned the nickname 'Duffy'. Although I did quite well in course work, I

failed to pass the exam which was in two parts, theory and practical. I remember that I had to dissect a frog for the practical part and found it especially difficult.

The Physics master was excellent. His name was Tom Alcroft. I did well in the course work and passed the exam. I Always found his lessons most interesting.

Our Chemistry master was Mr. Cowing, who always wore a black beret to work when it was cold. I found chemistry to be a difficult subject and never did well, particularly finding chemical analysis difficult in the practical part of the work.

We were obliged to study Applied Maths in the sixth year, even though not sitting the exam. The master, Mr. Winyard was known as 'Winnie'. He was a rather poorly man as I think he only had one lung, but he was a brilliant mathematician. I could never get to grips with his exposition of Calculus though.

During those secondary school years I can only remember being away from the rest of the family on three occasions. The third absence was when I was in the sixth form. As part of the Zoology course we had to have a week away on 'Field Study.' The place we went to was a Georgian mansion at Orierton, near Pembroke in South Wales. The train journey took approximately seven hours. On our free day (Sunday) I walked with another boy called Barry Phillips, over the Castlemartin tank-training ranges, to see the spectacular coastal scenery including Elegug Stacks and The Green Bridge of Wales. The rest of the week was taken up with practical work in the day time and writing up the work in the evening. I can't remember much about what was learned but can recall throwing down square wooden frames at random and then having to note the number of different species of plant within the square. The food there seemed pretty awful. Even the sandwiches had a peculiar taste!

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