



MY LIFE AT SELHURST 1956-1963
By Graham (Tom) Steele

**An abridged version of these reminiscences appeared in the 2018
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How I got there: There were a lot of babies born in March 1945, nine months after D Day. Funny that. I was one of them. I grew up as a single child in Tideswell Road, Shirley, a new area built in the 1930s with nice semi-detached houses with large gardens. We were right on the edge of the Green Belt. At the top of our street was a ridge and fields down towards Addington, where my father and I would pick mushrooms from time to time. On my 5th birthday I walked with Mum to Spring Park Primary, only 400m away, got told off for calling the teacher, “Teacher” rather than “Mrs”. Five years later we sat the 11+ and much to everyone’s surprise I got an interview to Dulwich College. No, they did not want me, so next best choice was SELHURST.

First Days: There are a number of turning points in our lives and on that day in early September 1956 getting the 194A to Croydon and then another bus down Whitehorse Road to The Crescent all dressed in a new school uniform from Hewitts was definitely one of them. I was put in 1B, the stream I stayed in for the next five years. The feel and aura of that beautiful school hall, complete with balcony and organ, all the masters wearing gowns, even the senior prefects, made a huge impact on me. I wonder what I said to my parents when I went home that afternoon. I was hugely impressed by the school book we were all given quite quickly into the first term. It listed all the masters and every form and pupil. I really now regret not keeping one or two. The first formers were called “Weeds” and at every opportunity threatened with being thrown down the Coal Hole. I never actually saw anyone receiving such a fate. Thus began a proper education, taught by many fine teachers. I

have to say there were a couple of older Masters who were slightly past their prime, but no criticism. They did their best. Equally some Masters simply resonated with us. What a wonderful talent. More about that later.

One discovery in 1B was putting a string between two empty cans and when held tight found we could talk to each other from one side to the other side of the class room.

We were introduced to the delights of school dinners, tables of 16 operating in pairs, the head and a helper collecting meals from the kitchen where plump ladies boiled cauldrons of cabbage until it was completely dead and the smell was noticeable at the other end of the playground. Did we complain about the food? I don't think so as there was always a huge rush for seconds, especially rice pudding with a dollop of strawberry jam in the middle. Thinking about it now, how would you like to cook for 600 always hungry boys 5 days a week? I would just love to see the menus for each week, and the number of spuds which had to be peeled.

We were given a choice of metal work or wood work. I chose metal work with Mr Nebel, learnt a few skills some of which I still use today.

Assemblies were interesting, forms 1-5 in the hall; both 6th forms on the balcony. I loved hearing the organ being played, originally by Mr Spratt and then by Mr Terry James who revolutionised music lessons. He encouraged Matthew Fisher to play the organ which indeed he did later in the group *Procol Harum* with their huge hit *A Whiter Shade of Pale*.

I remember Graham Cornish who was featured in the 2017 magazine. He joined in the 1st form and came into 1B, but being 2 years older than us was a big boy. He was quiet, smily, and always with a couple of friends. It was great to read what he had achieved and how SGS had enabled him to achieve it.

Learning Foreign Languages: So there we are in 1B and straight into French and Latin. Hum..... French I quite liked but it took me some time to get my little head around the fact that everything was either male or female, but 50 years later and knowing France quite well, that of course makes sense. Latin I struggled with: Coriolanus fighting on the bridge seemingly every week. No thanks, although 50 years on a chorus of *amo, amas, amat, amamus amatis, amant*, always gets a laugh in company. And it's amazing how many people of our type from many places and countries know the basics of Latin. I gave up Latin asap and but did get an O Level in French. I love and enjoy France, but living some 24 hrs flying time away one cannot exactly 'pop over' for the weekend.

Sport: Rugby - after playing kick ball or soccer as we call it here in Australia, we were introduced to "The Game they play in Heaven". It took me a long time to understand the basics and I was a very average player, 2nd grade at best. At our first school game for the U13s we got totally thumped by Wandsworth Boys 45-3, if I recall correctly. They were TWICE our size, Sir!!! It has become a passion of mine, and after living in New Zealand for 15 years, now I actually understand the game. Living on the Eastern seaboard of Oz for a rugby nut is great. We get the NZ Super games at 5.30pm (beer time) and the Oz games at 7.30pm (wine time).

The Welsh Invasion: probably in 1958 we had Masters Thomas, Tasker and Tucker all join the school, all young, Welsh and good rugby players. Funny that! That even caused a Boys/Masters rugby game. I cannot remember too much about that but George Andronov starred for us. He got a run with Surrey Colts. And talking of Colts, I normally got a run in the Colts. I think we did not do too badly.

Pirates in the Gym: we initially used the old gym, adjacent to the Girls' School. Not very inspiring except at term end when every piece of equipment was joined, somehow end to end, and we played *Pirates*. Wonderful fun! I cannot remember the name of the older PE teacher we had then, a nice older Master who wore a grey track suit and had early stages of Parkinson's.

Swimming: I was always a good swimmer and joined Triton swimming club at age 10 based at Thornton Heath Baths, which improved our strokes and stamina. I swam 1 mile at age 12. The school had a small swimming team, for some years led by Pat Mahoney, a nice bloke some 3 years older than me. He was also in the ATC. Later I became School Swimming Captain. We used to take a small team - 7 or 8 of us - to the Croydon Senior Schools Swimming Gala at Scarbrook Road Baths. For my last three years we cleaned up each year and the following Mondays Mr Ackland, the Headmaster, would present me with the trophy, probably the only time he ever smiled at me. In the 6th form Chris Morley and I regularly went to Thornton Heath Baths at lunch time to pound the lengths. There was often nobody else there. Wonderful!

Volleyball: around 1959 volleyball was introduced. We had a court in the playground. Wonderful fun: played it for hours.

The Baby Boom: The baby boom after the War caused a headache for the education authorities. I guess for some years there were twice as many babies as normal. Selhurst was chosen for the extra grammar school entries and the annex at Scarbrook was opened. To us, two

years ahead, it was somewhat unreal but did not affect us too much. Equally we had an influx of new, mainly younger masters. Mr Terry James (music), Mr Tom Alcroft (Physics) were of particular note. They and their generation gave a new feel to lessons and helped us boys into and through the 6th form.

School Reports: I always dreaded them. Mine always seemed to say, "Graham's a nice boy but must try harder".

The Air Training Corps: I joined 714 Squadron with Flight Lieutenant Croker as OC, Pilot Officer Pete Skinner as Adjutant and Flight Sergeant Vince as Sergeant. Pete Skinner was also in the 24th Croydon Scouts with me. He had stunning eyesight. We always said he could tell you the colour of a pilot's socks of a plane flying overhead. I enjoyed the ATC, learned to shoot 22s in the rifle range between the boys' and girls' school and later Short Lee Enfield 303s at RAF Summer Camps. I got both ATC marksman and RAF marksman. The best camp for me was RAF Marham, an active V-Bomber airfield. We had plenty of flying, mostly at RAF White Waltham in Chipmunks. Chris Morley and Steve Brown both joined the RAF, if I recall correctly. I saw Chris 3 months after school. Basic training had hardened him considerably. I also saw on our OCA website that he died last year. Shame.

Mr B's: There was a sweet shop just down Whitehorse Road by the bus stop to get back to central Croydon. We used to hang out there, having penny drinks and trying to get the attention of girls from the Girls' School. I wonder if any of them are OCA Members? Christine Hazeldean, Caroline Presnail, Carol Morton, Barbara Ainsworth, Janice Darby and just occasionally Sandra Payne who went on to become a well-known actress

The 6th Form: I got 5 O levels and whilst a third of our 5th form left I went into Lower 6th Science. I did maths, physics and chemistry, with Mr Alcroft and Mr Hore in particular. Maths at that level I struggled with; not physics or chemistry, went on in later life to become Chief Chemist for a Castrol company before moving into production, sales and then management. The two years in the 6th form were disrupted by the split of the schools. After the exams at the end of the first year we were sent home, effectively getting a nine-week summer holiday. With my friend just up our road we got a job on the school playing fields, paid £7 per week. I was rich!

I don't remember much of that final year, apart from someone hoisting some ladies' underwear up the flag pole. When we were age 18 some of us started occasionally going to The Pawson's Arms just down Mayo Road for half of bitter and a cheese roll. This went on for a few weeks

and the numbers grew. Even Mr Alcroft joined us once. Mr Ackland, the Headmaster, found out and was absolutely furious. He said at the end of assembly one day, "I want to see the entire 6th form after this assembly". After the rest of the school had filed out, he glared at us and said, "All those boys who have been going to the pub at lunch time come to my office". and he stormed out. We walked downstairs, knocked on the door, the green light came on and we walked in. You could see the look on his face, ah yes... Steele, Brown, Wysoski... more and more came in, then prefects, followed by senior prefects, to the point that his office was jammed full. There was little he could do. Most of the Upper 6th was involved and we were not breaking any laws. In the end he weakly threatened to stop our references, until one of us whose father was a lawyer pointed out he could not actually do that.

Friends to me in those days: in no particular order were: Tony Ashplant, Steve Brown, Ed Little, Jan Wysocki, Dave Thomas, Chris (?) Pratt, Chris Cately.

Important Masters to me: again in no particular order were: Mr T Alcroft (Physics), Mr Hore (Chemistry), Mr E Waller (Deputy Headmaster), Mr T James (Music), Mr C A Wynyard (Maths), Mr Tucker (PE but mainly rugby) and I can recall the faces of others but cannot remember their names. Who was our geography teacher, nice man?

The final assembly was quite strange, almost emotional. We stood on the balcony, sang *Jerusalem* and the School Song and then all quietly drifted away. There was no singing, or shouting. Everyone just quietly left with their own thoughts, heading for the start of a new life. After school, apart from just two encounters, I have never met anyone I knew there. At the age of 36 I wondered what everyone had achieved 18 years after leaving school at age 18. Now we are 72, four times older than when we left school. I wonder?

Selhurst Grammar for Boys 1956-1963, it helped give me a foundation for life and we had some wonderful fun. I remember it most fondly.

Best regards to you all.

Graham Steele, New South Wales, Australia

The group pictures below featured in the 2016 OCA Magazine with the names I can remember. The one of me in uniform is in the 2018 edition. Roger Hill (OCA Committee) has the form lists from the 5th and Lower 6th forms at least, which he has copied to me. Thanks Roger.



Off to school age 11



Colts XV 1959



Selhurst Lower 6th Science 1961