

## WITHIN THE PURLEY GATES

A Nine Year Old Boy Starts at Russell Hill in the 1950s

One sunny afternoon in early September, a few minutes after leaving South Croydon the green electric train slows for the next station, Purley Oaks – one more stop to go. I glance right. There it is, the distinctive spire poking above the trees, the place where I am to stay until Christmas. I am apprehensive as December seems a lifetime away. Couldn't Mum call the whole thing off as I already want to go home? Answer, 'No!' Help! Purley station next! 'Mum, please!' Answer, 'No!'

Detrained, we walk through the town and up the hill. Mum all smiles, me reluctant. 'Bound to feel strange at first, but you'll soon settle in', she says, rather more confidently than I sense she feels.

Upon entering the Victorian pile we are greeted by the Headmistress, Miss Reade, a kindly soul, intent on putting me at ease. She's certainly not the ogre that I had feared. Perhaps all will be fine. Mother and I are then introduced to the misses Hatton and Chuter who are responsible for the boys and we are taken to the boys' enclave well away from GIRLS.

There are two boys' houses, 'Normans' and 'Vikings'. I am to be a Norman. New boys are then presented with school togs and asked to change so that parents can take our 'civvies' back with them. Kitted in our grey, we say tearful goodbyes to Mums and Dads and we've arrived.

I am soon introduced to my mentor, a lad called Paul Hastings who will show me the ropes and act as Artful Dodger to a young Oliver. I am struck by the lines of beds in the dormitory. I don't know what I expected but this seems like a hospital. Against the walls of the wash-room there are about twenty basins which have had chunks of red carbolic soap, roughly cut from a strip freshly placed in them. Miss Hatton gives each of us our own tin of Gibbs' Dentifrice. Being more familiar with toothpaste, I am uncertain how to use the little cellophane-wrapped pink cake that fits in the tin. No doubt I'll learn. A school is for education after all.

Hastings informs me that it's time for tea so we line up in the day room to be marshalled along the corridor in file by the misses Hatton and Chuter but we halt at the end. A check is made at the corner by our supervisors that the next corridor is devoid of GIRLS before we are allowed to proceed to the entrance hall where we stop again before entering the Dining Hall. All clear so we are then led to the top tables. Ah! – GIRLS are already seated, only our tables remain vacant. After grace, we are served by a prefect. I gather that she must be a prefect as she wears a red sash round her waist and has a little badge that says 'Prefect'. Though obviously a GIRL, she's of little interest to me as at fifteen she can be classified as a young woman practically an adult. I can't say what we are eating but it seems acceptable. I'm more fascinated by the surroundings. Evening sunlight is streaming through stained glass windows. Heraldic crests of the Victorian benefactors

that founded the school are displayed above their family mottos. There is a distinct smell of floor polish. Behind us the GIRLS are eating quietly, speaking in hushed tones which strike me, the onlooker, as untypical. It seems that discipline has been brought to bear here. Meal over, we return to the day room to generally lark about as young boys are wont to do until wash time where I learn how to use dentifrice. Smelling antiseptically of carbolic, we are ushered to the dormitories and so to bed.

Next day it's up, wash, dress, the stop-go corridor procedure, breakfast, same prefect what's-her-name? Thence to the Great Hall for morning assembly presided over by Miss Reade. The Hall is impressive with lots of wood panelling and more stained glass. Also it is full of GIRLS smartly clad in white blouses and Navy gymslips. We, I note, are seated separately. After assembly, we go to lessons. The GIRLS are taught in the classrooms adjacent to the Assembly Hall whereas we are taken below to the Underground Playground from which the primary classrooms adjoin.

Our primary teachers are Miss Lawford, Miss Turner and Miss Cornwell. Surprisingly the classes are co-ed. This allows the scrutiny of GIRLS at closer quarters than I previously anticipated though we are kept to separate sides of the classroom. Our first task, as Speech Day will shortly be approaching, will be to learn the words of the School Song, then to our general education with which I shall not bore the reader.

Lunch, more lessons, then back to our boys' quarters where I unfold my slip of paper.

*'A bold Surrey hill fronts the Caterham Valley*

*'It smiles on the village that nestles below.'*

I close my eyes and recite – 'A bold Surrey hill fronts the something.' Open eyes again – 'Ah! ... Caterham Valley. It towers ... no smiles on the village that spreads... that's wrong ... cowers ... no'. Open eyes. 'Nestles below...yes'.

*'A bold Surrey hill fronts the Caterham Valley*

*'It smiles on the village that nestles below*

*'And on its proud slopes Old Russellians rally....'*

Really that's utterly daft. If the O.Rs have left school, why on earth should they be rallying on Russell Hill? Have they no homes to go to? I give up!

So on to the other delights. It is the first Sunday with an extra half hour in bed. At breakfast I am surprised. The GIRLS' tables are normally a sea of blue and white but today it is two shades of green. Our prefect also sports a green gymslip and pale green blouse. Now I'm a mere nine years old and as you may have gathered a dedicated observer of GIRLS so this causes me to speculate: Are Sunday knickers also green or do they still wear their weekday blues? The answer to that question eludes me but it's a point to ponder.

Next it is church. Formed in crocodile and closely inspected in our coats and caps we are marched through the back gate behind the GIRLS who look particularly fetching in their black felt hats each with a lion and woolpacks enamel badge pinned to the hatbands. The hats are perhaps a little old fashioned, though charming in the way that the Salvation Army ladies' bonnets are charming.

We go down the path and out to the little church at Woodcote whose single bell tolls a rather monotonous ‘ding!’

Inside, merged with the rest of the congregation, we ‘Plough the Fields and Scatter’, we ‘Alleluia, Sing to Jesus’ enthusiastically. We are moved to be good soldiers of Christ before returning to school where the remainder of the day is free. Yippee!

There is an asphalt playground for the exclusive use of us boys. We can roller-skate, play tag or to be more adventurous ascend the steps to a higher level where there is a larger playground, sports field, sand pit and small wooded area. On my explorations amongst the trees I come upon a rotted stump. Prising the bark away (as one does) I discover a colony of stag beetles. Putting the word around, several of us descend on the site to claim the beetles as pets. Males have vicious looking purple antlers though females are ‘deadlier than the male’ as they possess a sharp pair of nippers instead. My beetle I call Albert and soon begin to develop a strong emotional bond with it. Later, we hold beetle races, tickling the carapaces of our charges with grass, egging them toward the finishing line. Fun eh? When I tell a GIRL about these exciting exploits, she doesn’t share my passion. I can’t think why.

It is Speech Day. We boys are scrubbed up and minutely inspected for traces of dirt before being told by Miss Hatton that although our parents and guardians may be here it is not us but the School they are coming to see so we need to behave. Mum duly arrives along with other parents. Of course she’s come to see me! Well, she would, wouldn’t she? That’s only natural. The programme begins. We all assemble in the Hall. Miss Reade, the mistresses and other dignitaries sit on the stage. The GIRLS give a dulcet rendition of ‘Blow the Wind Southerly’ and are rewarded by polite applause. We then join in with the School Song. Some of my words are a little mumbled and indistinct but I don’t think anyone notices.

After that, Miss Reade congratulates the GIRLS on their high achievements and presents prizes to those who have excelled. One by one the GIRLS go up to shake hands and receive their books. Further applause follows from proud parents, governors and the rest of us. I note that the books they are given are not the sort of books that I should be tempted to read. They are academic books. I’d rather settle for a good Western or an adventure story any day. This endorses my theory that, in general, GIRLS are clever. Little attention is given to us junior boys. Never mind. Waving Mum goodbye, I return back to our billet.

In addition to classroom lessons, there is also physical education. Miss Hatton introduces us to the intricacies of football by placing a large wall chart in the day room. The illustrations demonstrate how to pass, tackle, throw in and take a goal kick. The narrative is endorsed by Stanley Matthews who should know a thing or two about football so I study it minutely. This is followed by the practical, Normans versus Vikings. We go to the sports field. It is damp and a bit chilly. I have goose bumps. The Vikings seem to have mastered the game pretty quickly and I am hard pressed to get a look in. They are fast and fleet of foot. I am cold. Miss Hatton urges us on. I’m still cold. I want to go back

and sit on the radiator. Vikings score another goal. Where is our defence? Me, I am rubbing my hands together to restore circulation. The outcome is plain to all - four – nil to Vikings. Nevertheless, I feel I have learnt something. Footballers fall into two categories, the keen and the not so keen. I can proudly claim to belong to the latter.

Then there is gym, another new experience. Clad in vests and shorts we perform various exercises no doubt inspired by the League of Health and Beauty. Arms out, legs astride, arms down, legs together, one, two, three, four, right turn and back again. Forms are brought out, turned upside down and we balance, walking on the narrow bar, arms extended in T formation. A couple of vaults over the horse then it's all over. On special occasions though, we get to play 'Shipwreck' which is much more fun. A game of tag whereby we swing on ropes and clamber over the gym equipment as it is a rule that you must not touch the floor. In the summer, we're told we can go swimming but as it isn't summer, we can't. That's a pity because I like swimming.

Miss Chuter organises the Cub Club. This sounds interesting. Wolf Cubs, junior Scouts, right? Images of campfires, stalking and outings to Brownsea Island spring to mind so I duly enrol. Sessions are held in the Underground Playground if wet or the top playground if fine. A long box akin to a coffin is ceremoniously carried to each meeting by a boy attached to each end. Inside the box are various artefacts in the form of balls, sashes, skittles, copies of Kipling's 'The Jungle Book' and various other bits of random paraphernalia which are solemnly unpacked. Miss Chuter teaches us the Cub's salute. We are instructed to 'dib dib dib, dob dob dob, Akela, we'll do our best!' She shows us a chart of the paw prints of various animals. We learn to identify the spoor of fox, badger, rabbit and domestic cat. We learn to tie a bowline. We learn the semaphore signals. We play the odd game of rounders but on the whole it lacks the spirit of excitement and adventure that I had hoped to gain.

Soon it is half term and we are allowed out! Not far, mind, only into Purley. We are marched in crocodile down the drive where I become rather nostalgic. There are red buses in Purley which remind me of London and home. A 109 goes all the way to Westminster. No! - Don't even consider it! Instead we decant into a toy shop to provision ourselves with items essential to the development of young minds. Popular products are Jacks or Fivestones which comprise a small rubber ball and five metal star-shaped objects. You bounce the ball and see how many 'stones' you can pick up with one hand before catching the ball in the same hand. There are plastic submarines powered by baking powder. A rubber plunger allows them to dive and surface. They stock marbles, of course, and cap guns, water pistols, in fact a whole cornucopia of treasures. The more affluent among us purchase balsa aeroplane kits to while away the dark winter evenings with their construction. Importantly, we must visit the sweet shop to stock up on necessary requisites before returning back to base. This afternoon it is a hive of activity. Submarine commanders have ensconced themselves at the washroom basins. Jacks players are perfecting their techniques and the aero-modellers are puzzling over their instruction leaflets. Mouths are stuffed with goodies and a great time is had by all.

Going back to lessons, it seems that GIRLS have rather commandeered our primary classes. A smart GIRL will always come up with the correct answer to a question before I

have even had time to think about it. To redress the balance, Miss Turner suggests that, as Christmas is approaching, we should perform a play. She selects 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. Here's the catch. The cast is to be all boys, no GIRLS. Mmmm! This is indeed something to get agitated about. I am duly cast as a matronly hausfrau, a mother who is not only devastated by the plague of rats but is quite inconsolable at the loss of her little kinder to the evil Pied Piper. This presents a magnificent opportunity for ham acting if ever there was one. I am quite enthusiastic though Miss Turner is a devotee of the realistic school. It seems that despite all my studies of the opposite sex I am incapable of behaving like a woman. 'No, she doesn't hitch her skirt up to scratch her knee!'

'When her children are lured away, she sobs, she doesn't wail like a banshee!'

Personally, I don't think our production is really credible as our offspring are as old as we are and the lad who plays the Piper is actually quite a nice kid who wouldn't harm a fly. Surely it would be far better to enlist a few dinks from Hope Morley to play the little ones. Miss Turner will have none of it as she says they're too young and proceeds to lick us into shape. The play will be performed as our contribution to the End of Term festivities.

Every fortnight we get to see films. This is one of the highlights and a cause for great excitement as we proceed to the Hall where, seated the wrong way round, the screen is lowered in front of the entrance. This is one occasion where it is preferable to be a boy as we are at the front. The entertainment includes a short cartoon, usually a Mickey Mouse of 1930s vintage in black and white. There follows the main feature which may be a war film, an adventure story or a comedy. The film is interrupted periodically as the reels are changed so we fidget. In the week following a film the subject is reflected in our behaviour. A police film 'The Blue Lamp' for example entices us to play at policemen. After 'The Colditz Story' we are wicked Nazis. 'A Town like Alice' causes us to adopt Australian accents. We can't help it. That's the way we are.

It is Bonfire Night. Cold and clear and we are led in the dark behind the Sanatorium to watch the fireworks. Muffled in scarves, overcoats and gloves we stand in the car park as rockets whiz, sparklers fizz, Catherine wheels unfurl and Roman candles do what they are supposed to do. The fire is lit; poor Guy Fawkes meets his end. Songs are sung until we return tired but elated.

Christmas approaches. Our day room is hung with paper chains. There is a tree in the Assembly Hall. Miss Chuter thumps the piano and we sing carols. We begin to wind down as it will soon be pay day then home! Ah! Home! The days seem to pass more slowly as we count them down. At the concert we get to perform the 'Pied Piper' to a slightly bemused audience of GIRLS. Actually they are quite kind to us as I don't think our efforts are anything to write home about. Certainly our Piper cannot compare with their production which is spellbinding. It has pace and polish and deserves rave reviews.

On pay day we are bathed and thoroughly cleansed. We are supervised in scrubbing out the washroom. Our meal is somewhat seasonal and some of the GIRLS have tinsel in their hair. As a special treat we are allowed to listen to 'Journey into Space' on the radio whilst in bed. Home tomorrow! I'm so excited I can't sleep tonight.

We are up early before dawn. Those who live far away take the early coach to the station. They are away before it gets light. Suitcases packed and duly breakfasted, we wait to be collected. Nine - nine thirty - nine forty five – ten - five past ten - seven minutes past ten. Oh! How time drags when one is waiting!  
At last I hear Mum's voice as she speaks to Miss Hatton.  
'Has he been good?'  
'Not too bad, considering', Miss H. replies.

Away down the hill we go, Mum and I. On the train to Victoria, Mother enquires,  
'How was it?'  
'Not too bad, considering', I murmur.  
'What have you learnt?'  
'Well, that GIRLS are clever, beetles make excellent pets, I'm rotten at football and I now know how to use Gibbs' Dentifrice'.

Jonathan Buckle.

Russell Hill 1954-1956