

Recollections of Russell Hill School and Ballards School by Neil Barbour 1916 – 1925

My mother died on 29 November 1915 ten days after giving birth to my sister. Father died on 12 January 1916 leaving three sons aged 13, 6 and 3. Father worked as a warehouseman for F and R Morley, Wood Street, City of London and subscribed to the school at Purley. This firm was one of the largest and best known in the textile and drapery trade from the 18th century. They manufactured stockings for Queen Victoria and for Princess Elizabeth and all the bridesmaids at her wedding.

Russell Hill School had been opened for orphans and necessitous children of warehousemen and drapers. Backed by Morley, I entered the Hope Morley House at the age of seven and went on to Ballards on 4 May 1921. I was one of the 40 pupils, all around the age of 11, chosen to occupy the existing mansion later to be known as St Andrews House. My outstanding memory of the Russel Hill School at Purley was of the JR Roberts hall with its stained glass window. The other end of the hall was, on Speech Day, banked up with specially erected wooden seating. This was to take all the boys, about 150. They sang rousing songs and some were trained to answer difficult mathematical questions at speed. The dignitaries on the platform consisted of the governing body and important guests. Behind the President's chair would be Mr G. Ridley, the school secretary, who had organised the gathering. He led this post for many years and was an Old Russellian. I also remember Sergeant Emberson (ex Boer war) and a teacher, Miss Hogg with her Victorian button up boots.

Times were harsh during the 1914-18 war. We had 2 slices of bread for breakfast spread with margarine, followed by porridge. The prefects would pass a tin round the table and the youngsters were expected to scrape off all the margarine from their bread. The prefects then took most of the sugar supplied for our porridge, mixed the marg and sugar and, let us roast it on the radiators. You would be asked later if you wanted to buy any toffee! Plain boiled white rice was my most hated dish.

As reported previously by Norman Cox, I recall Zeppelin raids and sheltering beneath the billiard table in the prefects' room, just to the left of the main entrance. One piece of excitement was when a plane, probably making for Kennedy, landed in one of the trees near the laundry.

Easter holidays were spent at the school. On the lower floor beneath the JR Roberts Hall, goodies brought up from Croydon were laid out on tables and were distributed to us all. This was the Easter Feast, paid for with our pocket money. This floor was used by those who lucky enough to own roller skates. The Easter Feast was the only occasion when boys and girls were not strictly segregated. I understand that in 1917 Bill Hill, aged four and a half, was punished for actually speaking to his sister!

A flag staff with cross stays and a weather vane atop used to be sited on the land to the right of this hall and the national emblem flew on special occasions. A boy named

Wigmore climbed to the summit unseen. He attached his black bow tie (which we wore with a stiff starch Eton collar) to the masthead. It remained there for a very long time. One winter influenza struck the school and only 24 boys out of 144 did not suffer. No school work was done and I was one of the lucky ones! Later Crystal Palace FC were playing in a cup match and the prefects, numbering about 11, asked GARoberts the Headmaster if they could attend. The answer was NO. All but one went and suffered a caning from GAR on their return. We 'juniors' considered this a just punishment as some of us had suffered a bullying from prefects.

4 May 1921: the 40 boys (around the age of 11), chosen to go to Ballards walked down Russell Hill, accompanied by Mr Orpen and took the train to the bottom of Coombe Lane. Up the lane we walked. At Ballards we were met by Mr Turner, our new headmaster. A group photograph was taken next day with alas only 39 boys. Sydney Napper was in the infirmary at Purley and followed a few days later with the milk van drawn by horse and cart up Coombe Lane.

By the end of May all senior boys together with Messrs GARoberts, Irnswell, Orpen, Pizzezy, Bettie and Miss Barker transferred to Ballards to join the 40, total about 150.

23rd July 1924 was the official opening of the Russell School by HRH The Prince of Wales, later the Duke of Windsor. The khaki clad Guard of Honour was drawn up outside the old St Andrews House facing the sloping lawn. He spoke to the tallest and shortest in the ranks. I was the tallest and the shortest was R Twynnam.