

My Memories of Russell Hill School Purley 1954-1961

I arrived with my father and brother Colin at Russell Hill School on a sunny day in September 1954 aged 9 years old. My first impression was of a castle like building which had all the promise of living up to my expectations of boarding schools. I had been an avid reader of the Mallory Towers books; how wrong could I be!

Having lost our Mum in 1953 life had changed out of all recognition. Dad had found places for Colin and me at The Warehouseman's Clerks and Drapers School at Purley as we were now officially termed as orphans.

Miss Reade met us on the steps, welcomed us to RHS We had a tour of the building, and then I bid my Dad a very fearful goodbye. Colin was taken to the Lower Boys School and I was put into P3 with Miss Cornwall as my form teacher. I was assigned to Hollenden House.

I was introduced to my school mother Judith who kindly took me through the daunting initiation of putting on my new school uniform. More clothes than I had ever worn in my life! A vest, a liberty bodice with two suspenders to support stockings (always referred to as bullet proof nylons!) two pairs of knicks, one white pair of liners and one voluminous pair of navy blue bloomers with pocket on side. Over this went blouse, gymslip, belt, tie and blazer plus two pairs of shoes lace ups and button slippers; not forgetting a great coat, a raincoat, velour hat, straw boater, beret and of course "knitted gloves". I was completely overwhelmed.

I had so many new things to learn. Communal living was a total contrast to anything I had ever known. Sharing dormitories, stripping one's bed every morning and folding back the mattress so the bed could air, shared bathrooms and mealtimes all took a lot of getting used to. Housework was a novel experience as I learnt to sweep large dormitories or clean basins and baths.

Personal hygiene was regimented with body inspections after washing, which meant showing hands, both sides, elbows, ears and feet. Sister combed our heads with a steel comb in case of nits. Our shoes, which we changed twice a day, had to be polished when removed and shown to the teacher on duty.

Routines quickly became familiar. The most difficult was the weekly letter home. I remember vividly writing and telling dad how homesick I felt and being made to rub it out and tell Dad all was well.

My first term at RHS lasted for fifteen weeks and I really felt that I was going to live there forever. We only saw Dad twice during that time, on visiting day and Sports Day. On visiting day, Dad came about 2pm and took Colin and me to Croydon where we had a slap up tea and lots of sweets!

I had several bouts of tonsillitis during that year and spent several days in the sanatorium being very well looked after by Sister.

Our only outings from school were to walk crocodile style to St.Marks Woodcote for Sunday morning service, where the Rev.Smith started all his sermons with the following words
“When I was out in.....”

Leavers services held at St.Marks were very memorable for the singing of “Lord dismiss us with thy Blessing” which nearly always reduced the senior school to tears for the 5th and 6th form leavers. We sometimes went for walks to Riddlesdown, which was lovely.

Bell, gongs and whistles dominated life at RHS. We got up to bells, went for meals summoned by the gong and the gong timed lessons.

Good manners were paramount and one quickly learnt to stand if member of staff entered the room and remain silent until spoken to. All doors had to be opened for anyone older than yourself and there was to be absolutely NO sliding or running in the very long corridor that connected the dayrooms and cloisters. The cloisters were a tortuous place where we were forced to drink warm milk in summer and freezing cold milk in winter. A highlight of the week was tuck shop every Wednesday when one had the agonising decision of whether to choose long lasting barley twists or soon finished chocolate or Palm toffee.

I was often in trouble with the staff and had many detentions given to me. My favourite was given by Miss West, namely to find 10 words of 10 letters long and learn their definitions and spelling. I think I almost did the whole alphabet! My least favourite detention was sitting in the corridor for hours on end.

I recall lessons as being long and it was very difficult for me to catch up with my classmates. My favourite time of day was when Miss Cornwall read us a serial story. I can still remember “The Provosts Jewel”, a real cliffhanger! Miss Cornwall let us put our heads on our desk to listen.

The biggest ordeal was the weekly reading of our marks; coming 28th out of 28th was painful week after week. I was delighted when I started to make headway and I climbed the weekly marks ladder! Another vivid memory I have is that as soon as we received our GNB (General Note Books) a table was drawn to indicate exactly how many days were left to the end of term!

Members of staff I recall are Miss Reade Head, Miss Fearon deputy head who taught Biology and RE, Miss Bradford English, Miss Mills History, Miss Donohue French, Miss McBride Geography (who became Mrs Howlett), Mrs Slee Art, Miss Lancaster PE, Miss Foster House mistress, Miss Jones English Literature, Miss Turner Biology Miss Hatton boy's school, Miss Naylor housemistress Mr Harrison (who we all had a crush on) boy's school and Miss Lester boy's school.

We had a prefect system, which at first terrified me and I can still remember with disbelief one occasion when hauled into the prefect room the following was said: -

“Are you insinuating that I should tolerate such diabolical insolence from an insignificant reprobate such as you or are you insufficiently sophisticated to comprehend”?

Needless to say that all went right over my head!

In 1957 my younger sister Janice started in Hope Morley. I used to make weekly visits to her and often stopped to chat on my way round the field from the JR Roberts Hall to the Science block.

Annual highlights were Sports Day because Dad came to school and Speech Day because I never had to face the embarrassment of Dad wearing a silly hat! Also, Christmas parties as we wore our own clothes and had loads of lovely party food and playing games and doing the Dam Busters march round the hall. The Christmas dinner also sticks in my mind for the spirited way in which the whole school sang to Matron for our Plum pudding.

Birthdays were celebrated with a birthday tea, to which one could invite 12 other friends to share cake and biscuits.

Bonfire night was always exciting; we danced round the bonfire in the staff car park and had “Wally's wee”, a strange lemonade, for supper.

We had film shows in the JR Roberts hall once a fortnight the most memorable being “A Tale of Two Cities” at which the whole school cried with the exception of a classmate called Ann Jones.

Names of my classmates that I can recall are: -

Ann Jones, Brenda Kennedy, Brenda Shipley,
Carol Fairweather, Christine Sanderson, Irene Frood,
Jean Manley, Jill Allen, Judith Tattersfield
Lavinia Booth, Linda Brent, Pamela Lermon,
Pat Ward, Rosemary A, Susan Arnold, Sue Firth,
Thea Chavez, Vicky May and Wendy McDermott.

We came from all over the country Linda, Pat and Irene came from Scotland. Brenda S from Kettering, Thea from the USA and Jean from Berkshire, so contact during the long summer holidays was by letter and phone.

Another fond memory is of queuing outside Sister’s surgery to collect “Fish and chips” to deal with that time of the month. The junior boys always believed that we were collecting food!

One night great excitement was had when the fire alarm went off in the small hours and the whole school was made to sit in the indoor playroom in dressing gowns and pyjamas. The fire brigade duly searched the building but took so long Miss Fearon read us a story to keep our spirits up!

Forbidden escapades included visiting the school tower to write one’s name up, midnight feasts in the sports pavilion despite eating runny jelly and chocolate spread from the pot with our fingers! and being downstairs after lights out, all of which I did and thoroughly enjoyed. We were also not supposed to eat the Beechnuts from the plentiful Beech trees lining the Drive but we did!

In the senior school, we were allowed exeats into Purley. Brenda Shipley and I used to take Simon Mayo (of BBC fame) and his sister Sarah for walks which we loved doing.

Mr Mayo and his family joined RHS after Miss Reade retired in 1959. Miss Fearon also retired and Miss Brown took her place.

One of the final memories I have is of the Leaver’s Ball held at Ballards, the one and only time we mingled! In our own dresses and shoes, we all felt very grown-up and very nervous of meeting the boys. It turned out to be a fun evening.

End of term was always heralded by the arrival of the suitcases on Payday, when any remaining pocket money was returned. Cases were packed and left ready to go home the next morning. Not much sleep was had that night!

I left RHS in the summer of 1961, since when I have visited Ballards several times. Unfortunately RHS amalgamated with the school at Ballards a few weeks after I finished and this really was the end of an era for RHS old boys and girls.

Happiest days of my life? No, but certainly full of so many memories, of good friends, kind teachers and close community sharing. I missed my family too much to ever be really happy and was overwhelmingly lonely at times, especially if I was in trouble.

I have stayed in touch with several of my classmates and I have been delighted to find more on the Friendsreunited.com site, and in the Old Russellian Magazine.