

TGS Memories 1955-63

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No one forgets their first day at secondary school. There I was, way back in 1955, feeling very small and insignificant (I *was* small, being 10 to everyone else's 11 to 18), standing in the tarmac playground on the old Leeds Road site, waiting – for what seemed like an eternity – for the assembly at the beginning of the new school year to start. At last, assembly over, we found ourselves in our classroom – one of the pre-fabs, with my desk smack up against both the blackboard in front and the window to the right overlooking the main road. There, as Form 2B, we had our first meeting with our form mistress, Winnie Peel, and an imposing man with sleek black hair named Roy Gittins, then our chemistry master and as new as we were, now the heart and soul of TGSOSA. Now I'm grey, and Roy is white – how time flies ...

At first I hated the smell of brewing, which came off the John Smiths brewery next to the school every brewing day. Within a month I'd got used to it; within a term, I liked it. Now I feel a pang of nostalgia, both when I smell brewing, and when I see John Smiths beer on sale in pubs. I always used to drink it, out of Tadcaster patriotism – but then they switched to this ghastly 'smoothflow', and I stuck to real beer.

I'm 56 now, and an academic (maths; University of London for 30 years, now Brunel University in Uxbridge). The place where I see the ageing process most cruelly at work is that every year it takes me longer to match a list of new names to a roomful of new faces. But some lists of names are hard-wired in one. Take 2B, 1955: Bingham, Burnett, Hebron, Hurrell, Johnson, Reid, Speight, Stones, Vine, Walker, Watson, Webb (and then the girls – first names, this was pre-unisex) – that will stay with me for life.

It's the little details and touches that stay with one. The cheering on of our home team at school football matches – everyone yelling out 'Come on, Tad' in the broadest of Yorkshire accents, and Mr Heselgrave visibly gathering himself up to call out 'Come on, Tadcaster', in Received Pronunciation which reduced us all to helpless giggling. Mr Fletcher's monotonously repeated glee with our form: "2B or not 2B? That is the question." The

nicknames (Giblets, Carnivore, Sam Puke – why? Where are they now?) The awe with which everyone – even big toughs and prefects – treated The Boss (the late, revered and fondly remembered Headmaster, Mr W. N. Bicknell) as he moved among us. The Boss’ most obvious failing was his pathetic inability to sing the hymn in assembly, which he would mouth.

The move to the Toulston site brought much-needed new space, the beautiful Lodge, and eventually all the new buildings – but lost us the Leeds Road site, of which by then I had perversely become very fond. We got a marvelous new cross-country course through the woods (I still run cross-country – for Barnet and District Athletic Club – and anything up to marathons, for that matter). I joined the Army Section of the CCF – and still value my five years’ training there, forty years on (I was more scared of our RSM, the splendid Chippy Taylor, than of anyone except The Boss, or the CO, Major Heselgrave). I graduated to the Sixth Form, which seemed heaven – one could choose one’s subjects and one’s sports (I promptly dropped ball games, only taking up soccer again as a research student, and later as a father of three). I joined the choir (run by Mr Warburton, a lovable and larger-than-life character); fortunately, I had a passable tenor voice in those days – very useful, as we stood behind the sopranos, one or two of whom I was sweet on. Eventually, I became a prefect; then on into the Third Year Sixth, university entrance exams, a stint as Head Boy, and my first taste of working independently.

It never crossed my mind that I might do anything other than teach. I was born into the education game – my father taught French (at Nunthorpe GS, York), and my mother taught, first as a primary school headmistress (Wighill), and then English (TGS – she’s still going strong at 89, by the way, and sends her love to all who remember her). My principal adolescent rebellion against all this education in the family was to opt firmly for maths (at which I had found I was reasonably good, like cross-country, rifle-shooting and reaching high notes as a tenor), as a counterweight to the arts culture everywhere else in the family, in which words matter more than hard facts. I went to Oxford (Trinity – the old college of the Chairman of the Board of Governors, our bishop) intending to become a maths teacher. But this was in the swinging sixties, when new universities were springing up all over the place, and in the resulting expansion I found myself sucked in, first to research (Churchill, Cambridge), then in 1969 to my first academic job (Westfield College, then part of the University of London in Hampstead). I met and married a Londoner (Cecilie), fathered three Londoners (James,

now 19, Ruth, 15 and Tom, 8), have spent my whole career (32 years to date) in London – and become a Londoner by adoption. But to me, within myself, I still feel northern. This comes out in all sorts of ways – passionate support of Leeds United, and going misty-eyed when I’m back north and a bus conductress addresses me as ‘Luv’.

It was a great pleasure, and a real tonic, to get back to the TGS and northern roots within me through the TGSOSA. I’ve only made it to a couple of reunions – but how marvellous it was to see old friends so many years on, some instantly recognizable – indeed, barely changed, some initially unrecognizable, but ‘turning back into their old selves’ before my very eyes as we spoke. Like us all, I owe a great debt to our Chairman, Roy Gittins – still the young sleek black-haired chemistry master in my memory, but now the genial white-haired elder statesman of the school community.

One of the nice things about having kids is their touching interest in one’s own early life. When they were small, often of an evening the cry would go up ‘Tell us a story about when you were little, Dad (or Mum)’. I learned a lot about Cec (whom I met when she was a dishy young 25-year old and I was 33) from her stories. Perhaps she learned a lot about me too – certainly a lot about TGS. Fishing TGS stories out of my memory, and getting back in touch with old TGS friends and Roy, has brought back so much, and given me a lot of pleasure.

There was an advertising campaign a while back for the teaching profession. On the backs of London buses one would see the slogan ‘No one ever forgets a good teacher’. How true. No one ever forgets a good school either. I was very lucky to spend those years at TGS – we all were. Long may it continue.