

Basil Twyman CHEVERTON - my time at KES 1933 -1936

King Edward's School was my home for five years. It was one of those in which pupils paid whatever their parents could afford, although for me it was all free and there is much to be thankful for to Lord Wakefield and the other Governors who were concerned about the welfare of orphaned or fatherless boys.

On a depressing winter's morning in January 1933, in a waiting room at Zion College, I met two boys who were to be my special friends during my four years at Witley. Peter Henry Edward Lionel Lukin who had some call to family fame in that his great great grandfather had designed a lifeboat of unsinkable variety, while Maurice William Fitzgerald had a sister who worked in a book binding factory at Hendon. It was also at Zion College that I first encountered a 'North Kid' and so realised that I was a 'South Boy' and became aware of some misplaced feeling of superiority that was to survive my days in school but be lost completely in 1940. All of the North of England, the land of smoky chimneys, dirty streets, grubby and quarrelsome children, was epitomised for me that day at Zion College by one very small boy with the shortest of carrot hair who, at KES, made up in aggressiveness what he lacked in stature.

My turn came to see the Board of Governors, who sat in a semi circle around a table; there was a lady and probably five men. I stood in front of them and if I had a cap it was screwed up in my hands behind me. "*Basil Cheverton?*" came a questioning voice and I affirmed that I was he. There was some conversation with my mother before they addressed me again. "*And what do you intend to be when you grow up?*". Most likely I had not before given any thought to that question and I was fifteen before the subject seriously commanded attention. But my answer came quickly enough. "*I wish to be an undertaker Sir*". They thought my reply amusing. "*So you want to be an undertaker •• well we will undertake to make you a good undertaker*". Then another question. "*What games do you play?*". My answer "*Football Sir*". Then "*Which do you like best, football or lessons?*". Again "*Football Sir*".

The important questions were obviously not for me but I was accepted as eligible for admission. There was a medical examination and a conversation with the headmaster and I was back in the waiting room. "*Are you in?*" asked Lukin, I said that I was. "*What did you say you would be when you grew up?*" •• "*An undertaker*" .. "*What's that?*" again from Lukin. "*Oh, someone who buries people*".

My Grandfather had built up a business that included building, joinery, decorating, and undertaking. The family had always maintained a very proper attitude to the undertaking activity, it was not surprising that I had thoughts of being part of it one day. I knew that my grandfather had no real need to carry a walking stick but he always had one •• it was hollow inside, and contained a six foot rule. One had to be prepared!

One boy and his mother were in tears •• he had not been accepted. He was too fat it was being said, but this was probably a front for some other reason. It was a strange party that found its way to Waterloo Station. About twenty five small boys of ages 10 to 12, and an accompanying band of mothers and friends. My treasures were my mother's photograph and a pound of green grapes in an old toffee tin.

It was dusk at Witley. A walk uphill from the station, a turn to the left and then facing us in the gloom the imposing facade of King Edward's School. Then passing the porter's lodge, up the gravel drive and through the archway, across the quadrangle and into the dining room. There was an awareness of cocoa and very thick slices of brown bread as I had my first conversation with another friend, Willie Wilson, while we waited by the hot plate.

The K.E.S. of 1933 was very different to the school I left in 1936, although 50 years on the further changes are dramatic. Now there are some 500 pupils, about half being girls and about 100 day scholars. Now the School is in the Headmaster's Conference orbit with a fine reputation and impressive fees. There are perhaps four or five on bursaries whereas in my time I did not know of anyone who paid a penny. Charlie Hessel did boast that his mother kept five bars of gold under her bed, while another boy claimed Marie Dressler the film star as an aunty, but there were no fathers, or Parent's Days. My mother visited Witley twice and we had tea in the visitor's room which was Mr Bennett's Office converted for the occasion.

A requirement for being at K.E.S. was that one was poor.

In 1933 there was essentially, a main block of buildings forming three sides of a square, all part of the original construction. The front overlooking the Milford to Chiddingfold Road contained the Headmaster's house, apartments for three unmarried masters, Senior Master's house, the Headmaster's Office, Master's Common Room, the School Dentistry, Monitor's Common Room, and a small School Museum. On the left side of this front block (the Junior side) were the Junior Dormitories, and below them was the Science Laboratory, Tailor's Shop, Boot Shop, Clothing Store and Laundry Depository. On the right side (the Senior side) were the Senior Dormitories, six in all, and below them were six main classrooms of which three were partitioned and could serve as one large classroom as happened on wet Sunday afternoons when the Senior Master read us a story instead of us going for the more usual school walk.

Also below the Senior dormitories was the Bath House containing a dozen or so showers and the dressing rooms. We were required to bathe twice a week when there was a ritual of standing with hands held high for medical examination. During some afternoons the school barber made use of one of the dressing rooms. Haircuts were once a month or so, the names of those required to attend being read out at lunch time when there was also an announcement for those who had letters or parcels to collect. We knew the barber as 'pimp*' because of a large Cromwell like feature. The poor man was probably at the bottom of our popularity charts.

Forming the fourth side of the square of buildings was the Dining Hall, and leading off from one corner were two more classrooms, box room, changing room and gymnasium. We kept our private possessions in the 'box' room where there was also a very elementary 'spit and polish' boot cleaning facility •• a large cake of blacking which required moistening before application to our boots. The boxes were, in effect, pigeon holes with hanging flaps .. not locked, although I cannot recall any Instance of theft. Each boy had a school number, mine being 250, which appeared over the boxes, as also over the 'tin lockers' in the changing room. We kept our spare set of 'sailor' clothes in open pigeon holes in the dormitories; the 'tin lockers' were for games kit, shoes, overcoats and capes.

Other buildings separated from the main block included the woodwork and metal-work shops, a rifle range, the Sanatorium, the 'Wakefield' open-air playground and the School Chapel. The 'San' was a large building with a mysterious 'upstairs' where there was a padded cell and stories of a 'white lady'! It had once been a sanatorium for TB patients as its name implies. Downstairs there were several wards, for the sick, fortunately never completely full although in January and February there would be several boys with minor influenza and other ailments. A week in the 'San' was for most considered to be a good scrounge and there were those who tried to wangle it. Eating orange peel was said to give one a modest increase in temperature! A Sister was in charge, assisted by a Nurse; they were our only contact with the female sex.

The school day started with the 'call bell' at 6.30 am. By 7.45 we were to have washed, tidied ourselves, and completed a room task. This task could involve the polishing of the floor or attending to the general tidiness of the dormitory. An inspection was made by Mr Bennett and points were awarded for cleanliness. At the end of each school year a 'Cleanliness Shield' was awarded to the dormitory with the best record.

First parade was at 7.45 am in the gymnasium. After a brief inspection, usually by Mr Quelch, there was a 15 minutes service in the School Chapel on every day except Wednesday and Sunday. Breakfast followed, with parade for school at 9 o'clock. The Fifth, Shell, and Sixth Forms had one morning of woodwork and one morning of metalwork a week. All Forms had a morning of housework devoted to the cleaning of school buildings.

To a fortunate one or two would fall the job of assisting Mr Bennett to make up the penny packets of tuck to be sold after lunch. This required a 'chit' from ones housemaster which would permit the purchase of combs, ping pong balls, tiger nuts or Mickey Mouse toffees at 'ten-a-penny'. A particularly unpleasant chore was the housework on Sunday mornings. It was an important milestone reached when ones status excused the Sunday morning sweeping of the Box Room, etc.

After the lunch break (we knew it as dinner break) there was afternoon school on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. During the winter the break was extended to 3 o'clock to allow time for games of football. After tea there was 'Preparation*' in the evening. During the summer, afternoon school followed immediately after lunch with 'prep' before tea. Cricket was, of course, the game for the summer and was played between 6.00 and 7.30 pm.

'Set games' were compulsory and we were required to play on about every other day unless excused by the 'San' as being unfit for games or P.T. The compulsory games of football and cricket were miserable experiences for the few who were useless at them; I was neither brilliant nor useless. 'House' games were on Wednesday afternoons about once a fortnight, and to play for ones House was, for most, a great satisfaction.

Junior dormitories were abed by 8 pm, and lights out for the Senior 'dorms' was 8.45 pm. This followed a supper of lime juice and biscuits, or cocoa with bread and cheese, depending on the season. The duty master made his rounds of the dormitories, sometimes with a goodnight joke, and much later, at about 11 pm, the night-watchman (who was also the barber) visited the dormitories; sometimes in stocking feet, picking his way between drawing pins strategically positioned in the lobby! The early arrival of the watchman might produce a warning call of '*Philip*' but usually, at 11 pm, three hundred boys would be asleep.

As term went by queer writings appeared on the corridor walls .. 20 DTEL might be the inscription. Then this would be altered to 19 DTEL and 18 DTEL. This was, of course, 18 days to Easter Leave. Our holidays were generous but no schoolboy thought them long. There was two weeks at Easter, three weeks at Christmas, and six weeks in the summer.

What a wonderful routine it was, commencing the day before with Mr Radford reading us a story from 'The Adventures of Professor Brainstaum' •• then there was the issue of clean laundry, kitbags, and the pocket money. Holidays always started on a Tuesday and ended on a Thursday; the school was completely closed. We left in two parties •• the main contingent bound for London and the North, and a very much smaller number for places South. We changed trains at Haslemere where we had golden pudding for lunch.

The monthly logmarks parade held high prominence in school life. Misbehaviour was punished by detention, the period varying from 10 to 120 minutes. Detention was spent with exercises of 'running on the spot' inside or outside depending on the state of the weather. Each 10 minutes of detention counted as one logmark. To receive 20 logmarks in a month meant that one was very likely to be caned at the end of that month. Every month 'The Flag' was awarded to the dormitory with the lowest logmarks. In my later years boys without any logmarks were allowed out alone for Sunday afternoon walks during the month following. For the others there was a School Walk with one master in front and another at the rear.

It was an annual custom for the school to witness the daylight rehearsal of the Aldershot Tattoo, and this was much appreciated. There was also the annual hike to Hindhead, where we were allowed to roam for a couple of hours or so in the Devil's Punch Bowl. This will have painful memories for some because on one occasion there was a large scale 'scrumping raid' with retribution to follow. An angry farmer had complained to the Head who asked for those responsible to come forward as we were assembled on Gibbet Hill.

Only one boy admitted to the offence so that when we had returned to school we were all given a piece of paper and told to write down the names of anyone seen stealing or eating apples. I recall that the slips of paper had been the same as we used on Sundays to write down our contribution, if any, to the collection. My name was on the list, and I had certainly climbed the farmer's tree. Fortunately for me I had also been given some apples by a friendly householder. The caning session that was to follow went on until after lights out.

I had done well in the classroom, spending my last two years in the upper form. I had once headed the list for mathematics with 101%! The School undertook to find a job for all school leavers as well as to provide a suit of clothes. Some boys had passed the entrance examination for R.A.F. Apprentices and it was decided that, because some of the Upper Sixth would be taking this same examination, all might as well work to the same syllabus. In this way the Exam Form was created. I sat the R.A.F. entrance examination and K.E.S. paid the fee, which was 2/6d. My thoughts had been turning to a career as a Post Office Engineer and to this end I had studied the construction of lead acid accumulators and the charging of such things. But I passed the R.A.F. examination held in November 1935, when I was just 15, and in the January of 1936 I went to R.A.F. Station Halton for interview and medical examination.

I travelled up to London from Witley in the morning of January 29th and met the main body of recruits at Marylebone Station. On arrival at Halton Camp we were given fish cakes and mash for tea. Next day my eyesight failed me in the medical tests and after one more night I returned to Witley. At first I was disappointed but was soon back to the old ways of school and a career in the Royal Air Force for me was quite forgotten.

1936 was the only school year for which I kept a diary but on most pages I had written '*same as usual*'. There were clearly no thoughts for posterity - March 11th noted "*Senior cross country run, I should have gone but Sister says I might catch cold •• booh*". More interestingly, on Sunday June 14th "*Three boys on private pass (walk) found the body of a dead child in a ditch*". This event caused some excitement for quite a while, the boys having to give evidence in the Guildford Court and receiving 2/6d each for doing so.

K.E.S. had its own Cadet Corps with parades held every other Tuesday for an hour. Cadets were instructed on Squad, Section, and Platoon Drill, the mechanism of Service rifles was explained to those old enough and, in time, every boy was familiar with rifle drill.

The training served me in good stead when later, in the R.A.F. I was surprised to find that some could not understand the command '*form fours*'. Our Corps was an efficient organisation, having regard to the ages of the boys involved, I was once a base drummer in the Second Band. There were four Companies, each with a Company Commander and four Section Commanders. The Officer Commanding, who was 'Stinker' White, the Science Master, the Adjutant Mr MacGuinness the P T Instructor, and the four Company Commanders were all School Masters (not all vary Military looking) but the Section Commanders were senior boys, a rank for which I qualified in 1936. Senior boys were also permitted to attend the annual Camp.

During the years 1935 and 1936 when I was eligible the Camp was held in Lumps Fort, Southsea. This was for a week at the end of the summer term and was very much appreciated. We slept in bell tents, eight to a tent, with tent pitching part of the Corps training. At school there was a Corps Inspection every year by someone of high standing, the Inspection being held on Speech Day, followed always by a Physical Training Display.

Also in 1936 I qualified for the position of Section Officer but this was not anything to do with the Cadet Corps. Section Officer was a position occupied by a boy who sat at the head of the table in the Dining Room. His job was to serve the food equally between the 13 or 14 boys on his table. Clearly there were certain advantages, particularly when it came to cutting the cake on Sundays.

By 1936 the old dining hall had become the new box room, while a fine new dining hall had been built and still serves fifty years later. The 'Big School' had been created from the old gymnasium, while a new gymnasium and swimming bath had been built, replacing the 'Wakefield' covered playground that had lost its former appeal. This was also the moment of truth for Willie Wilson who had often boasted about his swimming prowess. To the amazement of us all it had been no idle boast, and Willie - who was useless at football and cricket, and better known for his appetite - was suddenly a sportsman and a trophy winner for our 'Edward' dormitory.

By the end of 1936 I was a Senior and the world was beginning to move towards the events of September 1939. Recruitment was being stepped up in the Forces whilst in the R.A.F. there was some 'easement' in the Medical requirements. Enquiries were made and it was established that I was still eligible for admission. I was to leave school in December 1936 and to report again at RAF Halton in the New Year. From January 1937 the R.A.F. would be my job and provide a Service uniform, so I did not need the suit of clothes from K.E.S.

So it was goodbye to the bugle calls, the sailor suits, the 'tokens' of bread, the cold roast silverside, Friday fish, Sunday cake, laundry parades, 'miggie cricket' on the marble pitch, 'freezing' on the hot pipes and so much else besides.

But of all my memories it is the School Chapel that remains with me. I had served my term as a choir boy and had pumped the organ. Like many more of my time, I remember with thanks Claude Hill, the organist, who believed in fairies and was a master who would listen to our troubles. He was one of several who had served all of their teaching days at Witley.

The war would take some away, but to them all at KES I owe a great deal of thanks.