

MEMORIES
OF A
COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

By
Joe Freeman

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

by

Paul Wardropper BSc - Life-Long Chum

F A J Freeman was born on 8 April 1970. Little is known about his pre-school years except that he was regarded as big for his age as soon as he was born and this turned out to be a trend that would become the norm. At the age of 5 he started his schooling at Dobcroft First School. Apparently he didn't mind going too much, but after his first day was over he was upset to discover that he was expected to attend the next day and for the next several years!

It soon became clear that Joe was set slightly apart from the his fellow man. He found that solitude was usually preferable to company and while it is true that his circle of friends is small (minute?) it is rare that his rather unusual manner is disliked. But beware: being on the wrong side of Joe is not a fate I would wish on an enemy.

Joe went through school with two main rules, which he established early on: first that he should do as little work as possible and second that to get away with this he should suck up to his teachers from his first acquaintance with them so that 'later on you can get away with owt.' This strategy worked well and culminated in actually grovelling at the feet of a physics teacher during his last year at school. Incidentally, he got his wish.

Joe was really the odd one out in our Physics group, it must be said. His don't-care attitude towards work reached levels that we, who had gone through the school in the top band, couldn't even dream of. Usually Joe would not have his exercise book with him. I suspect it wasn't so much a case of "forgot it" as "didn't bother to bring it." He would borrow my reporter's notebook, which I used for taking rough notes in Chemistry practicals and would diligently (it appeared) write the notes from the blackboard. He never showed any interest in seeing these notes after the lesson finished. I suppose I must have got the notebook somewhere, but certain things stick in the mind about it. For example, "Milikan's Experiment" is recorded therein as "Milkman's Experiment." There were other deliberate, and accidental, errors of this nature. Also I suspect there are examples of early Freeman art, such as "Hen Shitting, by Joe," or perhaps "Green Y-Fronts, by Joe." The artistic trends were to continue at Granville. Of course the Y-Fronts were green, as he used to borrow my four-colour biro. Joe's attitude to school was summed up by his actions one day when I met him after a maths class to walk home. He took his exercise book from its place, folded in his jacket pocket and tossed it casually in the nearest bin. I asked him why he had done this. "Well, it's full, innit?" he replied.

By now he had realised that any dislike he held for school was far outweighed by the prospect of work and he resolved to ride the educational gravy train for as long as possible. In this too he performed well and undertook two years study at Granville College in the field of things electrical, for which he had always had a natural gift. By the time he finished this he had acquired an interest in word-

processing as a logical alternative to writing by hand, possibly due to the indecipherable nature of his handwriting, which even he was having difficulty reading, and he went on to do another two years on an information technology course at Norton College. It was during this period that he discovered his affinity with computers.

After this and six enjoyable months on the dole, he got a job working in another of his favourite fields: the maintenance of vacuum cleaners. This employment lasted a very short time, his unfortunate employer belonging to that group who get on Joe's wrong side, and he started his own business: Joe Freeman Small Appliances, the perfect solution since on the rare occasions that work interferes with his sedentary life-style, it is the work he is most likely to enjoy. This leaves him free to enjoy a life of leisure, a large part of which he devotes to reading, preferably on the subject of British railways.

P R E F A C E

This account started life in 1993 following a conversation with a university friend of Paul's. We'd been comparing our educations and how our schools, despite both being state comprehensives, had differed. I wrote this for him and it turned out to be a vitriolic spleen-venting rant.

It's strange how my attitude to school has changed in the years since then. It's now been expanded and, hopefully, made more balanced.

Perhaps I've still painted it blacker than it really was but I don't think so. All I've done is try to record things as I saw and remember them. Obviously, some people went on to academic greatness from Abbeydale so it can't have been all bad.

A few names have been changed to protect both the innocent and the guilty.

The "Life-Long Chum" appellation I bestowed upon Paul proved inaccurate as we went our separate ways in 1999.

Joe Freeman
September 2015

Abbeydale Grange Comprehensive school had been established in 1969 by the merger of Abbeydale Boys' Grammar School, Abbeydale Grammar School for Girls and Grange Grammar School for Girls. The Boys' Grammar was now the Lower School - where the First, Second and half the Third Year was based - and Abbeydale Girls' had become the Upper School with the rest of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Years. The Six Form was accommodated in the old Grange Grammar which consisted of Grange House and Holt House (originally two very large private houses) plus a separate range of 1947-vintage prefabs. Classes could take place in any of the buildings no matter what year you were in; for instance the only Wood and Metalwork rooms were in the Lower School whereas Upper School had far more laboratories.

I started there in September 1982 as a Second Year due to previously going to a 'Middle' school as opposed to a 'Junior'. Despite it being in Millhouses most local children went to Silverdale or High Storrs schools and the majority its pupils came from the slums of Sharrow. I was sent to Abbeydale as it was only a few minutes walk away and it had had a good reputation. Sadly this was based on its days as a Grammar school and it was rapidly going downhill when I joined.

A new headmaster took over at the same time. I was told later that the former one had done his best to keep up standards, hanging onto things like the uniform and corporeal punishment for as long as he could, and the new bloke had been appointed as a yes-man for the Education Department. These were the days when the Peoples Republic of South Yorkshire was at its height.

Compulsory uniform had been abolished across Sheffield, despite an overwhelming vote by parents to retain it, but there was a dress-code which was initially enforced. By the time I left though even some of the teachers were turning up in jeans and tee-shirts.

I never understood the educational system. I hadn't much idea what the difference between CSEs, 'O'-levels, 16+ and 'A'-levels was. As my parents had both left school at fourteen with no qualifications they didn't know either. I never 'tried' at school or bothered about exams; I never revised or worried about failing them.

It was certainly a culture shock after Dobcroft. For all that I'd had my share of teasing and name-calling to handle there I couldn't say I was ever actually bullied. That soon changed as I got thumped by one of the class thugs within an hour of starting at Abbeydale. Besides that we now had rigid time-tables; at Dobcroft Swimming was the only lesson that took place at a fixed time. I also found I'd gone from being pretty low-down both in terms of scholarship and social class to being one of the bright ones - in my class - and was also regarded as 'Posh.'

For all that it was a comprehensive school the first three years were streamed by ability. It was universally believed, but never officially acknowledged, that there was a definite pecking-order within the streams. H and K were Remedial; it always seemed that the kids in the H forms were thick but harmless whereas those in K had 'Behavioural Problems.' The middle stream consisted of F E T and J, and the top stream P Q and C. There was also a G which was a buffer between the

middle and top streams. Those pupils did the same work as the top stream but didn't do German meaning they could do it at a slower pace. I was in 2E and my Form Teacher was Mr Longson, who we also had for history.

One advantage of my starting at Abbeydale a year late was that I avoided Swimming as only the First Years were subjected to that. However Games and PE were about as bad to me. Some of the teachers seemed to think that they were Corporals terrorising National Servicemen. I was shit-scared of Steve Cousins. He used to line us up outside the changing room and bawl-out anybody whose attire didn't meet with the Dress Code.

The Code specified a tie for boys but that was all it said so we used to turn up in the most hideous things we could find. For a few weeks we all affected dickie-bows.

We had Games on Monday mornings outside with Mr Scott and on Thursday mornings PE in the gym with Mr Cousins. One Monday morning our lesson was transferred to the gym. Most of us had only got our football boots with us. There was a pile of derelict trainers in the Teachers Office which we were told to wear. Needless to say I had difficulty finding a pair to fit me. I found one pair in good condition that did fit and used those. After the class I went to replace them and found the Office contained Mr Cousins. He asked what I wanted and I said I'd come to return some trainers. He looked at them. His eyes popped.

"Where did you get those!" he bellowed.

"Down there," I said, pointing.

"They're mine!" he said on the verge of apoplexy.

I beat a hasty retreat.

2E quickly got a reputation, in fact some staff refused to teach, or attempt to teach, us. Our Year Tutor was Mr Baker, who we also had for Geography. His lessons become one long bollocking session. He said at one point that if things didn't improve he'd cane us and didn't care if he got hanged for it.

Things did improve as time went on, in fact at the end of the Third Year Mr Longson said it was a shame that we had to be broken up on transferring to the Upper School. One girl did get expelled. I never knew the details of exactly why as she didn't seem worse than plenty of others.

At the end of the Second Year Mr Longson told me that there were two of us who were worthy of promotion to 3G. He said he knew I'd said in the past that I was happy where I was so was giving me first refusal. I chose to stay with the devils I knew as I'd rather be a big fish in the Lower School pond than a small one in the Upper. It isn't a decision I've ever regretted.

During my first two years at Abbeydale (ie Second and Third) I got on very well with my Physics and Chemistry teacher, Alan Rastrick. His

great love was sailing and during the winter months I often didn't get home until after six o'clock as I'd have been helping him paint the boats. These skills have proved much more useful to me in the years since than what he was supposed to teach me has. I once dropped a full tin of Woolworth's Cover-Plus Red in the hall, the contents of which were decanted on the floor. I was sent to the boat house, a converted cloak room, to get cleaning materials. Unfortunately paint dripped all the way there and quantities were transferred from my hands to various door knobs/plates en route. The hall floor bore the scars until I left the place.

Cloak rooms were abolished due to rampant theft; my Leeds United hat was lost from one and never seen again. Mr Rastrick was allowed to work on boats on school premises as one of them was owned by the school. There was supposed to be a Sailing Club but for most of my time there there were over-time bans on so there were no extra-curricular activities.

During my Third Year our Red Head decided that a School Council was desirable - shades of a Workers' Soviet. For some reason I missed the election of our Class Rep; I must have been late that morning as I was told by Mr Longson that they'd held the election and I'd lost by one vote. However the girl who had won, Jackie Ross, was absent so they didn't know for sure if she would do the job or not. When she showed up she confirmed her desire to do it.

One morning Mr Longson entered and told Jackie that there was a meeting that morning. She got up and, as she was walking to the door, turned to me and said:-

"Are you coming or what?"

I didn't need asking twice. It seemed quite a few Class Reps needed friends to hold their hands so I wasn't the only person who attended the meetings without any democratic right so to do.

Our meetings were of just the Third Year Class Reps, chaired by our Year Tutor, Mr Cousins in the Year Tutors' office. My relations with him had been thawing ever since the trainer incident and by this point were liquescent. He always thought that I was the Rep and Jackie was my deputy.

Very little of what we discussed was acted upon. Some was but this was a case of things happening naturally rather than being forced by pupil-pressure.

I was re-elected, by a different class, to serve in the Fourth Year. I didn't get the most votes in the election: I won by default as SuperMan and Hitler were unavailable.

If I remember rightly, the whole Upper School Council met together. Our meetings were chaired by John Whitworth, stereotypical swot and Young Conservative. His mother was a Principle Lecturer in the Secretarial Department at Richmond College and he knew how things should be done and did them thus, which was bloody annoying. A bitch of a

teacher, who I'll call Miss X, sat in on the meetings to suppress riots etc.

I failed to be re-elected in the Fifth Year due to a female faction who thought I wasn't doing the job properly. One of their number got the job, but after a few weeks she asked me to take over.

At one meeting somebody complained that no one in authority took any notice of us. Miss X answered that that wasn't the point of the School Council. However she wouldn't say what the point of it therefore was.

Towards the end of the Fifth Year I found myself on the Anti-Racism Committee; I still don't know how. I didn't mind as it meant I was missing more lessons.

The teachers were a mixed bunch. Some of them, Mrs James who I had for English in the Third Year in particular, seemed more interested in left-wing indoctrination than education. Some were burnt-out and merely waiting for their pensions but some were very good.

That said there were very few who I didn't get on with. One of this select band was Miss Eyre, who we had for French in the Third Year. French was a subject I had very little interest in and she managed to kill off any that I did. She gave me the worst school report I ever got saying "Joseph has lost enthusiasm for this subject and does not contribute much in class." This was quite true. By the time she was writing this I knew I wouldn't be doing the subject in the Fourth or Fifth Year so there seemed no point bothering with it.

Oddly she was off for a few weeks and we had Mr Stacy who was the Head of Department. He really was one of those 'Inspirational' teachers you hear about and if I'd been sure of getting him I may well have stuck with French, not that failing to has ever bothered me.

Towards the end of the year we all did the City of Sheffield Education Department Proficiency Test (Level 1) in French. There were three tests for this: a listening test, which, if memory serves, consisted of the teacher saying something in French and then giving us ABC choices of what it meant, a comprehension and an oral test, all of which were scored out of twenty. Whilst she was doing my oral test she was giving me some filthy looks and I thought that I must be ballsing-up in grand style. After the oral exams she read out all our results, one of her many habits that endeared her to her pupils, I don't think. When she got to me she said, through clenched teeth, "Listening Test: 20, Comprehension: 18, Oral 20." I was as shocked as anybody.

The chap we had for Geography in the Third Year's idea of teaching was to plonk a book in front of us and tell us to copy a chapter while he sat reading the Daily Telegraph. He was one of those who just gave off an aura of authority. Despite our reputation it was an instinctive thing to not piss-about in his class. I don't recall him ever even raising his voice. In fact the only disciplinary measure I remember him taking was, when one lad had been cheeky, to draw a donkey on the black-board and say "Now kiss my ass."

He was also compassionate as he once showed us a video about whaling but before putting it on warned us that it was somewhat gory and anybody who thought they'd find it upsetting were welcome to disappear.

When I took my options during the Third Year I went for the subjects which I thought would be easiest and have the least home-work. Unfortunately all the thick thugs also went in for similar tactics. I learnt later that I wasn't doing any 'O'-Levels; all CSEs.

At the end of the Third Year we sat exams in all subjects, the results of which decided which sets we'd be in thenceforth. I came top of the class in most subjects, the exceptions being English, Music, Art and, I think, Maths. This isn't much of a boast when the opposition is considered. For instance, I only got twenty-one per cent in Physics, but the next highest mark was twelve.

I'd got a good enough mark in the History exam to go into any set and Mr Longson, who was by now the Head of History, let me pick my own. I plumped for Mr Jepson, former bomber pilot, Deputy-Head, Head of Upper School and damned fine bloke. He said he'd thought I would and would get on well with him as "He teachers what you call 'Proper' History." He was right and we got on like a house on fire, despite his tending to call me Jason.

When I went up to the Fourth Year I was placed in 4R. This was a purely administrative grouping as we were all in different Sets for lessons.

An early task in all Wood and Metalwork lessons was to make a weapon to defend oneself with. I had a different Woodwork teacher during the Fourth and Fifth year, Howard Stringer, from the one whom I'd had in the Second and Third year, Charlie Bland - a good-egg of the highest magnitude. I soon came to an arrangement with the latter that, as he was free during one of my Woodwork classes, I could use his workshop and thereby avoid being menaced.

The school had no money with which to buy wood so it had to be scrounged. One source of was scrapped desks. We had the traditional type of school desk, though no one dared to leave anything in them as it would either get pinched or suffer some other unpleasant fate. It was not unknown for them to be used as lavatories and I personally saw somebody throw up in one. Demand often out-stripped supply and on these occasions Mr Stringer would send out a search party to find an empty classroom and pinch one which he would then saw up before any questions could be asked. He bought screws and nails himself and knew a place which made industrial sandpaper where he used to get sacksful of oddments. It's now the best part of thirty years since I left school and I'm still using it, along with various other tools he gave me - not that they were his to give.

Every year the school staged a musical; this was one thing that continued in spite of the over-time bans as the staff enjoyed doing it.

In either my Fourth or Fifth Year it was Oklahoma. Another school had recently done it and we borrowed their scenery. Mr Stringer and I went to fetch it in the school mini-bus which we left parked outside our

house for the rest of the day as the back doors couldn't be closed and parking it thus at school would have been asking for trouble. I then helped him adapt and erect it, which was certainly better than the classes I should have been in.

One dinner-time the 'phone rang and my Mother answered it. She came back looking puzzled and said "I don't know who that was. He just said 'Hello, it's Howard. Tell Joe to meet me on stage at one o'clock.'" It made perfect sense to me but she seemed shocked by him introducing himself by his Christian name and referring to me as "Joe" rather "Joseph." In fact he was one of the first people to use the abbreviated form of my name.

I ended-up at every performance as I was selling ice creams.

I'd opted to do a subject called 'Physical Science' which was a combination of Physics and Chemistry. It was a louts' paradise. The Physics part was taught by Mr Howe and the Chemistry by Mr Roberts. One of Mr Howe's classes was immediately before dinner-time. One day he decided we couldn't go until he'd had 5 minutes quiet. This was an unattainable goal. However he kept trying, but after about four and a half minutes some prat would always shout "Can we go now, you bastard," or something similar and we'd have to start again. After half an hour he ate his sandwiches which nearly caused a riot of hungry school-boys. (I can't recall any girls being in that class).

He kept us in for the whole dinner hour, save 5 minutes. One lad jumped out of a window to escape, the door having been locked. When I was finally freed I bumped into my Year Tutor, Suzi James, who said my mother had been on the 'phone wanting to know why I'd not turned up at the trough. I explained the reason and was then taken to her office for questioning about the occurrence as "I know I'll get the truth off you." I told my story, saying it was "Perfectly justifiable" and shopping the window-jumper. I was told I wasn't allowed to have any dinner.

On the way out I bumped into Mr Jepson who said my mother had been on again. I said that I'd been told I couldn't go home. He told me to go and he'd handle the flack. I did so and nothing further was said.

The lad who jumped out of the window got expelled, not exclusively for that - his escape had simply been the final straw. His mates made various threats against me. One tried giving me face to face intimidation so I kissed him, which sent him screaming down the corridor. None of the threats were ever carried out.

After this I spoke to Mr Gregory, the other Fourth Year Year Tutor who I always dealt even though I was supposed to be in the Red Suzi's care, and said I wished to drop Physical Science and do straight Chemistry. He said he'd see what could be done. The Red collared me a few days later and said that she'd spoken to Mr Howe who said that as I was so good at Physics (?!) he'd transfer me to his top 'O'-Level group. This left me with a blank option due to some administrative quirk I still can not follow. She put me down for Private Study in the library for this time as "I can trust you to be sensible." I went a couple of times and read James Herriot books but thereafter pissed off home or went and chilled out in the Craft Department which was becoming my

second home. I often spent an hour or so with Mr Stringer after school sharpening the tools and doing other odd-jobs.

I was totally out of my depth in this elite Physics group. Mr Howe thought I was marvellous as all we'd done with him thitherto had been simple electrics, which I've understood form the egg. Things like "300 times 10 to the minus 3" meant buggger-all to me; I didn't do Standard Form in CSE Maths until about a fortnight before the end of my school days. We had done it with Mr Richmond at Dobcroft but I'd long forgotten it. After only one lesson Mr Howe left never to return and was replaced by a Mrs Wheeler.

At the start of the Fifth year the Physics groups were re-shuffled and I ended up in the same class as Paul. We were taught by Mr Holt, aka Bull-frog. Much fun was had in these lessons with the good Paul and another chum, John Whitworth, stereotypic swot and Young Conservative. My lack of understanding never bothered me at all. I knew I'd got little chance of getting anywhere so just enjoyed myself.

Before Christmas Bull-frog told us that after Christmas he'd only be having people who were likely to be going on to 'A'-level and do 'Advanced Physics.' The rest would be taught my Mrs Wheeler for 'Further Physics for Today's World.' I was not a happy bunny. I was having too much fun and preferred Bullfrog to Mrs Wheeler. I never missed a chance to drop hints about this but I was getting nowhere and time was running out. Something of Brunellian boldness was called for.

I was in the habit of carrying a boot-polishing kit at this point. I waited until Bull-frog was lecturing, walked over to him, dropped to my knees and started to polish his shoes. The said amphibian was non-plussed by this and said:-

"Joseph, are you trying to tell me something?"

"Sir, I don't want to go."

He tried to console me by saying that they'd be doing about electricity etc.

"I don't care," I whined. "I want to stay with you."

"Mrs Wheeler is a very good teacher you know."

"Look, no matter which class I'm in, I'm not going to do very well am I, so please can I stay here where I'm happy?"

He capitulated.

I missed the electrics, but got the radioactivity.

The exam turned out to be 16+ which meant I finished up with a CSE Grade 2 and an 'O'-Level Grade D; the latter I try to forget about.

Another teacher I didn't get on with very well was the one I had for Metalwork in the Fourth Year; I'd also had him in the Second but he'd seemed OK then.

He gave me a pretty poor report which, not un-naturally, I was invited to explain. I said that I had trouble with my teacher and sited the example of how he'd decided that whatever I wanted to make had to be drawn first and when I showed it to him he screwed it up and thrown it on the floor with the words "That's crap" without saying what was actually wrong with it.

After taking our reports home our parents had to send back a receipt on which was a space to make comments and my Mother availed herself of this chance.

The next thing I knew he'd been up to the house. Apparently he'd said it was difficult as a two-hour class for twenty kids only equated to five minutes per pupil.

In the next class I was using a lathe and he shoulder-charged me, a very safe thing to do, and had a go at me for "Snivelling" to my Mum. I, politely, put my side saying that he'd given me a poor report which I'd been asked to explain and had merely told the truth. Nothing further was said or done.

I was delighted one morning when Mr Jepson told me he'd be retiring at the end of the year. He added that Mr Bland had been granted early retirement as well.

My final class that day happened to be in Lower School so I called to see Mr Bland on my way home to offer congratulations.

He was startled by this and said "How the hell do you know? I only found out during Afternoon Break." I didn't let on that I'd known all day, and neither did I reveal my source.

My friendship with Mr Jepson proved very useful for knowing what was going on. Mr Stringer always said I was better informed than the Staff.

Towards the end of the year we had a test in Metalwork. The teacher said that as it was meant for 'O'-Level pupils we'd only get low marks and not to worry about it; he'd think twenty an excellent performance.

A few days later he collared me in a corridor and marched me to his office. When I asked what was up he said it was about the test but he wasn't going to talk about it in public.

When we got in the office he said "You know I said I wouldn't expect anybody to get more than twenty right?"

I was thinking that I hadn't found it very hard and was surprised I was heading for a bollocking about doing badly.

He then added: "You got thirty-seven. I've never known anybody get as many." I think, in his way, he was saying "Well done" but I did wonder if he thought I'd somehow cheated.

I was one of those annoying sods who could give the impression of not paying attention when I really was.

The powers that be decided to do away with PE for Fourth and Fifth years and replace it with something called 'Leisure Pursuits' which would occupy the whole of Wednesday afternoons. This was still mainly sporty, but you had the choice of what you did and a lot of the activities were off-site. You changed what you did every half-term.

The purpose of this change was that we'd have to learn how to fill our time after leaving school as there'd be no jobs for us. Good to see the authorities having such a positive attitude to our futures.

One option was 'Out-Door Pursuits' which were Fishing, Sailing and Walking. The snag was that it covered two half-terms and you had to do two of its elements. Fishing appealed to me, just sitting chilling on a river bank, but obviously Sailing and Walking were out. The Head of PE, Mr Colebourn, and I came to an arrangement: he'd let me do Fishing for both half-terms as "You've tried so hard in PE."

Fishing and Sailing (run by Alan Rastrick) were to take place at Underbank Reservoir. The Fishermen were supposed to travel by bus, but the Sailors were to go by mini-bus. Due to my friendship with Mr Rastrick, I wangled a lift.

It very soon became apparent I'd not got a clue how to fish and spent most of the time helping out with the boats and riding around in the 'Safety Boat' - a power boat used to rescue people who got into difficulties.

For some reason one week the Sailing/Fishing was cancelled so I had to go walking. I was off the next day due to an inability to walk.

Once the mini-bus went early leaving me behind and I had to make my own way via the bus clad in wellies. I arrived in a temper and was after Rastrick's blood. I saw him and the other teacher who went with us, Pete Dye, by the Safety Boat at the water's edge and made for them in a straight line. Unfortunately I ran into some 18 inch deep mud and fell down in the same and, despite my best endeavours, could not get up again. Mr Dye was about pissing himself laughing. Eventually I managed to get out and waded out in to the reservoir to wash the thickest of the mud off. Somewhere on my wallow I'd lost a welly and a sock. The former was retrieved by a fellow pupil; the latter was never seen again.

I got home in the mini-bus sat on a sail. All the clothes I was wearing ended up in the bin.

I found myself doing Walking for the second half-term so I stayed at home until I was rumbled. After reminding him of our agreement Mr Colebourn put me down for Volleyball. This meant I needed a PE kit and Sheffield failed to yield one up that would fit me. After several weeks spent watching a running-suit was obtained which served.

For most of the remainder of my time I did Ten-Pin Bowling. Later end Paul joined me in this. We would travel by a circuitous bus route, arrive too late to have a game, buy some General Custer's Grits, eat

them and then go home. Towards the end we just went to town for the afternoon.

At one point though I was put onto Badminton and during one of these sessions I had the worst battering I ever had. I reported this - it wasn't a case of 'snitching' but I had to explain and get attention for the split lip. This led to threats of finishing the job off but it was touching how a lot of the other toughs who I'd previously had problems with now elected themselves my personal protection squad. Their services weren't needed for long as the thug in question very soon vanished. I never knew if he got expelled, left or went on a permanent bunk; he wouldn't have been the only one to do so towards the end of their time.

I do remember going to B&Q on a Saturday and dropping a big bolster chisel into my pocket in case I ran into him.

Officially I wouldn't leave school until Whitsuntide in the Fifth Year but rather than any sort of Last Day it was a gradual run-down. It wasn't much after Christmas when some teachers started to say that we'd covered all we needed to and that we could use the time for our own studies. I also started skipping other classes even where this hadn't been said. By this point 'Wagging' was rampant and as most of the AWOL pupils were the disruptive ones the teachers seemed quite happy to let them be.

I know I was at home during the morning when news about Chernobyl first broke as I remember telling Mr Stringer about it in the afternoon.

The only academic subject I was really any good at was History. What I intended doing was staying in the Sixth Form and doing this at 'A'-Level and filling the rest of the time doing some more CSEs, though they may have been GCSEs by then. I'd always enjoyed Chemistry in the Second and Third Years and wouldn't have objected to doing Geography. However when he learnt of my plans Mr Jepson told me that whilst there was no doubt I'd get a Grade I CSE in History I'd have failed the 'O'-Level, never mind the 'A', as my English was so appalling. He also said that even if I did pass it, one 'A'-Level would be of little use.

His prediction was right as I got twenty out of twenty in the first part of the exam, which consisted of twenty questions with one of two word answers. I was assisted by the fact that Mr Jepson had used the same questions for a class test a few weeks before. I'd got eighteen on that occasion and he freely admitted, when I challenged him, that he had forgotten to teach us the answers to the other two. I got thirty-eight out of forty for each of the two essays we had to write.

I did my exams in April so there was certainly no point going into school thereafter. I did go in on the last Friday of term to go to Assembly as this was to be Mr Jepson's last before retirement; we said we wondered how the place would cope with both of us gone. The 'new' Headmaster left at the same time, his work of destruction complete.

The Careers "Service" was trying to shove me into YTS so I went to Granville College (something they'd said I couldn't do) to get out of their clutches.

I'm not proud of my conduct at Abbeydale but I'm not ashamed of it either. I had just the same attitude at Granville and Norton and have only failed two exams in my life: RSA Stage I Typing and Stage III Word Processing. They were also the only exams I was ever nervous about, mainly because I'd had to pay a fee to do them.

My English remains appalling, as anybody who reads this will have spotted. I honestly don't remember ever being taught much grammar, and most of what I can recall was from Dobcroft. I do remember being taught other things which simply didn't stick - long-division and addition and subtraction of fractions being obvious examples - so can only conclude that we didn't do it. The plethora of English teachers I had can't have helped: four in the Second Year, different ones in the Third and Fourth and two more in the Fifth Year. I wonder if they could have squeezed yet another in if the Fifth had been a full year. Add to that the fact that I had three different teachers in the first two years at Dobcroft Middle and a maths nut for the last two it's not surprising. I make no excuses for myself though as whatever deficiencies there were in my schooling I've had thirty years to correct and haven't.

I think most of what anybody learns at school is bilge that they'll never need to know in the Great Wide World. Certainly the most valuable knowledge I acquired at Abbeydale wasn't officially taught: things like painting with Mr Rastrick and I got Mr Bland to teach me how to sharpen tools - a shocking omission from the curriculum.

If I'd started a year later I think things would have been even worse as I was in the final year to do tradition Wood and Metalwork. Those following did a combined subject called Craft, Design and Technology. For all that this was broader in scope, as Mr Stringer said, they hadn't got time to teach any element of it properly.

Soon after I left they also stopped doing Physics, Chemistry and Biology as separate subjects, replacing them with 'Science.' Bull-frog put his notice in over that.

Mr Longson stuck it out and ended-up as Deputy-Head.

It often comes up on the news, accompanied by wringing of hands, that some school-children carry knives. All I can say is that the majority of us did - Paul carried five at one point. The teachers didn't confiscate them, in fact they were often happy to borrow them, and Mr Stringer would always sharpen one if asked nicely. Maybe the difference is that, wild as we were, we didn't try to stick them into each other.

In the late eighties Abbeydale, along with most other schools in Sheffield, lost its Sixth Form and the Sixth Form Centre was demolished. The pre-fabs went first but the historic buildings mouldered on for a few years before they followed into oblivion.

Pupil numbers dwindled to the point that the whole school could be housed in the Lower School building. The Upper School was then taken over by the Sheffield College as the Bannerdale Centre.

The School closed in 2010, by which time it was the smallest secondary school in the city, and was knocked down the following year. The Bannerdale Centre closed in 2013 and was flattened a few months ago.