

# DOBROFT DAYS

For all that this is the first part of my education this account is the last to be written. The events are now so long ago that there's very little that I can remember. For all that the details have gone it's certainly I time I look back on with fondness, though it would be going way too far to say they were the best years of my life.

I have always felt that I had a damned good primary education followed by a bloody awful secondary one. I honestly think that if I'd left school at twelve I'd have been just as well educated as regards the basic three 'R's than I was when I did leave at six-teen.

Dobcroft First and Middle schools were built in the late sixties and I started there after the Christmas holiday in 1975, much to my Mother's chagrin as I wasn't five until April. These were the days before gentle introductions and it was full-time from the start. I actually had a stay of execution for a couple of weeks as the heating was u/s.

Nature didn't bless me with great academic prowess. I'm good, I'm bloody good (I cannot agree with those who rank modesty among the virtues. To the logician all things should be seen exactly as they are, and to under-estimate oneself is as much a departure from truth as to exaggerate one's own powers), at practical things but abstract theory has always been a different matter. Of course I could have worked harder but to me school was something which had to be endured.

I can't really remember my first day; what's in my head is a reconstruction based on what I was later told.

Apparently while walking down the corridor to the Headmistress's office I threw-up, which set a pattern for the future. I always seemed to be sick either on the way or at school.

I didn't know it for another twenty years but the doctor put me on Valium. I remembered him giving me some pink medicine which I'd always assumed to be some sort of stomach-settling potion.

Starting school is traumatic for any child but I wasn't helped by the first teacher I had — for two teams and two years — as she was a cow. She really was totally unsuitable for teaching such young children. My puking annoyed her mightily but of course the more she yelled the worse things got.

I was always the odd one out for various reasons; I was fat had no interest in, knowledge of nor skill at football (it's an odd boy who doesn't like sport) and wasn't interested in the normal childish pursuits. My favoured company was that of adults and the only one available, ie my teacher, I hated.

My Mother always believed that as I'd "Shown off" when we went to look 'round, the Headmistress had put me in her class out of spite.

The only piece of equipment with which we were personally issued was a pencil. One day she decided to inspect them. She was mad at me because mine was chewed and bellowed "One week in school and look at it!" What she never knew was that I'd lost mine and the pencil she was looking at was one I'd nicked out of her desk drawer that morning. I'd tried to age it a bit by gnawing but had got carried away.

During the morning we were sent out one at a time for our milk after which we were meant to go out and play. One day I incurred her wrath by not staying out for long enough. I said I didn't know how long I was meant to and she replied "You're to have ten minutes at least." This was the first time I had heard the phrase "At least" and hadn't a clue what she meant. I tried looking at a dictionary with obvious non-results as I thought it was all one word and none of my fellow-pupils who I asked knew either; most of them thought I was asking what "A leaf" was. In the end I went and banged on the headmistress's door and demanded enlightenment.

The school was 'Open Plan' with large double-ended class-rooms. There was a 'Craft' area sticking out of one side and one day I was in there doing something and parked my not

insubstantial rear on the clay bin. Unfortunately I failed to notice that the lid had been removed and I got pretty effectively wedged. Claire Robinson tried to pull me out but didn't get far. In fact it took both teachers to extricate me.

I was happy for the final year I spent at Dobcroft First when I had a much better teacher, Mrs Umpleby. I was still with the same group of children as I had been previously.

I transferred to the Middle School in September 1978. This was a separate, and slightly newer, building across a stream which separated the two play-grounds.

Some new terminology had to be learnt for a start. What we'd up to then called Writing and Number were now English and Mathematics, which was to be expected, but there were other things too. Here class-rooms were Units, we weren't in classes but Tutor Groups. Instead of being in the First, Second, Third and Fourth Years we were M1s, M2s, M3s and M4s.

I was put in Mrs Thurley's class (bollocks to the silly names) but she left at Easter to have a baby and was replaced by Miss Fletcher — with the wisdom of age it was probably Ms Fletcher. Married or not she followed the path to Motherhood at the end of my first year. I can't recall any strong feelings about the change but do know I wasn't upset by it. We were then taken over by Mrs Allen.

In the First School we had the same teacher all the time whereas now we had Mrs Thurley, or whoever, for only most of the time. We had specialist French, Music and Home Economics teachers and other teachers would take us for things they were better at. As in the First School the class-rooms were double-ended with a class at both ends. Up the other end of our room was Mr Cole and his class and he used to take the M1s from both classes for Maths.

Things went downhill for me in the second year as we had to go swimming. The terror which this stirred in my breast blighted the rest of my time there. My mother could have told tales of me puking up all the way to school (again, and no dope this time) on swimming days. It was this that occupied most of my attention and not what I should have been learning. Just what is the point of putting a child through such torture for nothing? I've never had any desire to swim since leaving there and I'm sure the stress involved damaged my brain.

I finally learnt to swim a few weeks before leaving after all attempts at teaching me properly had been abandoned. The resulting free-style was the arm motion of doggy-paddle and the leg movements of the crawl. I was awarded the last twenty-five YARD swimming certificate that Dobcroft issued, my feelings on metrication being well known. They'd had to scour about every school in Sheffield to find one. I got a standing ovation in the assembly in which the presentation took place.

On our first day there we were given our exercise books and had to go through the futility of ruling margins in them and backing them. Amongst these was a long thin one which we were told was to form a personal dictionary so we had to write a letter at the top of every page. Obviously there were more pages than letters but we were told that we'd use the rest of them when we started doing hand-writing.

I'm pretty sure that we didn't start that until after Christmas and I missed the first class. This would have been the time my Dad was first taken bad and I was in the habit of bunking off one afternoon a week to watch 'Danger: UXB' with him. The following week I started to use the back of my Dictionary. A couple of weeks later I realised that my fellow pupils had been issued with special books for this purpose. I was scared that I'd get a bollocking for using my Dictionary so carried on and hoped for the best. Over the coming weeks my paranoia grew but as time went on I felt less and less able to say anything. Eventually I had an idea: I stole John Owen's, rubbed his name out on the cover and replaced it with mine. I remember him desperately searching for it and being roasted for his carelessness in losing it.

I must say I think that this shows how crap the teaching was when I could pull a stunt like this and it never be detected. Some time later, after the change of teacher, she flicked back through it and commented on how I'd improved. Three teachers in two years, all with

very different writing styles, may go some way to explaining why it's an art I never mastered.

Unlike in the First School we now had written reports issued. Looking back at mine it seems like I was bumping along adequately, probably at the bottom of the middle. There are plenty of remarks about untidy work and rushing things; tendencies which remained throughout the rest of my education. The only things I was really bad at were PE and Art, again things which never improved.

One has a Headmaster's comment which neither my Mum or Dad could decipher, they said there was no wonder my writing was so bad when the teachers weren't setting much of an example. Years later I did manage to work it out and very prophetic it had proved:-

*Joseph has modest intellectual ability and formalised work will never be easy to him.*

The same report, from March 1979, has the comment for Art by Mrs Thurley:-

*Rather untidy immature style.*

This rankles somewhat as I can't help but think "I was eight years old: of course it was bloody immature."

The Powers That Be seemed to think it meet and right to teach us large amounts of what we would later come to call Biology. One term we were learning about trees. One of the teachers brought in twigs of ash and we had to learn the different bits of it, lateral buds, terminal bud &c.

We were then given long strips of paper which we had to mark out in centimeter divisions. This seemed an odd exercise even by the standards of 1970s primary education but all was later revealed. We were to go to the woods, pick a tree and learn about it. These paper strips were to be used to measure its girth. As part of the exercise was to identify the type of tree Smartarse Freeman had picked a holly tree as he knew what that was already. The snag with this was that it didn't really have what you could call a trunk.

Anyway on one of these trips I needed me a piss real bad. I was too frightened of getting caught to just go behind a tree so with the disgusting logic of which only a small boy is capable I decided to let it out a bit at a time, waiting for my pants to dry before emitting the next portion. Of course when I started I couldn't stop. Luckily this trip was just before dinner so I was able to go home with some cock and bull story about falling in the river.

Talking of Biology, we did 'The Birds and the Bees' in the second year. Going on those lessons the act of union was purely for purposes of procreation; pleasure wasn't mentioned at all. In fact several of us, boys as much as girls, speculated as to whether it would be painful.

At the end of M2 we learnt whose classes we'd be in for the remaining two years. I hadn't really got any preference providing I didn't end-up with Mr Richmond. Low and behold I did. I was so put-out by this that my Mother appealed to the Headmaster. He said he'd thought long and hard about where to put me and was convinced this was the best choice.

During the summer holiday I bumped into a lad in the Sheaf Market who'd just left. He'd been in Mr Richmond's class and told me that for all that he was strict with pupils in other classes he gave his own a lot more leeway and the key was to make a good impression in the first few weeks as after that you'd be able to get away with murder. This proved sound advise and we did indeed get on very well.

There were only four girls in this class, one of whom, Nia Blank, deserves the title of my First Love. Unlike later hormone-fuelled obsessions this lasted for the entire two years remaining at Dobcroft; in fact I think it started back in M2. Obviously the feelings were all one-way.

Mr Richmond was clearly a Maths nut, we seemed to do far more of that than anything else, and a lot of it was more advanced than anything I did at Abbeydale. I seemed to do OK

at it and certainly enjoyed it, though this may say more about my lack of ability in and dislike of English. Sadly by the point I was re-doing it, and when I really needed it at Granville, I'd forgotten it.

He really seemed to treat us as adults. Often he'd just sit us down and talk to us. It could be about anything, this was certainly how I first heard about digital recording techniques. No notes were taken and we weren't expected to write about it afterwards; it was just a damned good way of broadening our education beyond the basics.