

George Topple 1945-1952



George in 1951 (front row; 2nd from the left)

REMINISCENCES OF A BOARDER AT RGS 1945 – 1952

I arrived as a boarder at RGS just a couple of weeks after the end of World War II. Air raid precautions were still in place with brown sticky tape criss crossing the windows and evacuation instructions still in evidence. Needless to say, rationing was at its height; food ration cards were not discontinued until seven years later. Clothing had to be made to last and Miss Wilson, the school housekeeper was kept constantly busy repairing and darning all manner of items until they finally expired. But for an eleven-year-old the war and its repercussions paled into insignificance alongside the excitement (and apprehension) of this new, daunting way of life away from home and living in a dormitory alongside a dozen other young charges.

My situation was a bit different from all the other boys because my mother had taken up the position of resident school cook at the same time. From my point of view this was a mixed blessing - it meant I saw her much more than the others saw their parents, but as a rather sensitive young boy I was at pains to be seen as 'one of the lads' unconnected with the establishment.

I mention my mother because it allows me to illustrate how real was the austerity of the post war years. She had to try and work wonders with food rations which would be incomprehensible these days. Two ounces of butter, one ounce of cheese and one egg per person to last a week, and one jar of jam to last a month! A sophisticated bartering currency of breakfast items was developed - e.g. 2 fried breads = 1 bacon, 2 bacons = 1 egg, and so on. So, as the meal was served there was a hectic spell of cross-table bidding before the eating commenced!

Fresh bananas were unknown. Instead, there were dried bananas which had to be soaked in water for several hours - thus producing a brown soggy exterior with a chewable core. One of

the many ingenious, fake dishes was to mash cooked parsnip; add banana essence and some yellow colouring; add custard and call it banana pudding.

From the academic point of view the war meant that the teaching staff were mainly men who were not young or fit enough for employment in the forces. A few of them had come out of retirement and found keeping discipline a bit difficult. But every one of them showed deep consideration and kindness in somewhat trying circumstances. Other resources were also limited. I remember how it was drilled into each of us in the woodwork class that the piece of wood which was given to us for planing practice had to last for as long as possible. Any pupil seen to be planing too wastefully after a warning laid himself open to a tirade and a cuff around the ear from the rather irascible woodwork teacher.

Despite these privations there was a fine spirit in the school and the boarding house which was small enough in numbers to feel like a large family. Pastoral care was not so overtly recognised and practised as it is these days but that is not to say that we were not well treated. On the other hand, these were still the days of corporal punishment. The headmaster was not averse to handing out multiple canings where the offence warranted it (eg a pillow fight in the dormitory). The prefects too, at least in the boarding house, occasionally 'used the slipper' to reinforce their authority. These punishments were borne with fortitude and not a little pride - rather like a boasting of the scars of war. We would never have dreamt that someone was infringing our human rights!

The three dormitories marked very distinct phases in our development. We were still innocents in the junior dorm looking upon Matron and Miss Wilson as mother figures. The very senior boys were heroes or tyrants depending upon your point of view. By the time we reached the middle dorm we were more self confident, more boisterous, more of a handful to manage. I guess testosterone was beginning to make its presence felt. Then, in the senior dorm we began to understand responsibilities - towards others, towards ourselves and towards the school. Work increasingly mattered, though for many sport was a close second.

RGS was a comparatively small school when measured against our sporting rivals, so it was rare for us to win the majority of our fixtures. Nevertheless, we probably punched above our weight and provided our fair share of players who went on to win representative honours. Playing teams like Ampleforth was pretty formidable but everyone wanted to be a part of that away fixture because of the splendid food and the amazing sight of beer flagons at the table (under the control of the presiding monk).

The daily routine for the boarders was probably much the same as it is now. There was pre-breakfast PE, lessons, single meal sittings summoned by bell, after-tea 'prep' and staggered lights out for the three dormitories. At certain times in the summer evenings and at weekends the (unheated) swimming pool was opened for the boarders. (Looking back I am not too sure why this bathing was decreed to be in the nude). On Friday evenings we had the 'pay parade' ie the line-up to receive our sixpence weekly pocket money. Saturday morning saw the much prized freedom to walk into town (to spend our six pence on tea and a bun!). In the afternoon there was usually a match.

On Sunday mornings we always marched in single file to the cathedral for matins and one lucky boy would have the privilege to join the celebrated Dr Moody (who was also our music master) in the organ loft where you could covertly spy on the proceedings below and even pull organ stops to his direction. In the afternoon it was compulsory to go for a walk and be off the premises for at least a couple of hours. I'm not sure that even bad weather provided exemption from this. Town was out of bounds so it was usually an amble across the fields towards Studley Royal. The more adventurous might set up camp and light a fire to bake dough on sticks and brew up tea which, in very cold weather was useful to pour into one's wellingtons. It was even known for one or two to break into the nearby Royal Engineers camp

(surprisingly easily) to play in the mock urban training ground known as the 'French Village'. The weekend ended with the normal prep period given over to hobbies or general reading.

Officially, the boarders generally only came into contact with girls twice in the year - at the school dance with the girls' High School, and the joint debates. In addition a fortunate few shared biology lessons - presumably owing to the lack of resources. Trysts with girls were strictly forbidden. Once, the headmaster had to warn the assembled boarders that some boys had been observed " Wenching under Bishopton Bridge"!

Contact with the Secondary Modern school over the road was even less. There was an unfortunate schism between the two - certainly as far as the boarders were concerned and probably a lot of the day boys. We tended to feel snobbish and they felt underprivileged - all because of an eleven-plus exam which had a dreaded pass/fail connotation.

After a few years the effects of the war eased. We had an influx of fresh, young teachers (at least half from Oxbridge) who brought a new vitality to the teaching and helped us to widen our ambitions. The whole country, in fact, experienced an upsurge in confidence and optimism. New subjects and extra-curricular activities sprang up. Under encouragement from the government we started an army, and RAF, cadet force.

Since then the school seems to have gone from strength to strength, particularly with the amalgamation with the girls' High School and the crucial public vote to stay as a Grammar School. We former pupils are immensely proud of its achievements and forever grateful for the life-enhancing opportunities which it has afforded us.

George Topple July 2014.