



The Mount House Association

Members' Articles

A few memories from Denis Welchman Mount House 1955-1961

My time at the school began as dayboy in September 1955. We lived in Lifton, Devon where my father was the Rector. Each morning, I was driven to Launceston to catch the bus to Tavistock, to Lamerton to intercept the same bus or occasionally to Tavistock directly if friends were going that way. I am not sure why I did not use the train, which at that time, ran, before the Dr Beaching axe, between Launceston and Plymouth via Lifton and Tavistock . I arrived at the school in the WWW period which needless to say, was not the World Wide Web! No, it was Wedd, Wortham and Watts. N Wedd who lived with his family at Herongate was the Headmaster. Tony Wortham(HPW) was Deputy Head and he resided in the main building above the room we knew as A and used as a dining hall/church on Sundays. Mrs Watts taught English. Mrs. Wedd always had Guinea Pigs and several boys were coerced into taking the excess home as pets. Whilst only being allowed to have two, I ended up at one stage with twenty three. I am not sure about breeding like rabbits but they were fairly prolific.

The Suez Crisis put an end to the dayboy thing with petrol rationing. I cannot remember the precise time I became a boarder but it made one realise that to be fully integrated into the culture, one did need to board. I think one thing that made the school at the time was the encouragement to participate and indeed develop new skills and interests out of school hours. One thing that always stuck in my mind was that leaving the school grounds was strictly prohibited. Therefore an activity that legitimised leaving the grounds was to be taken on every occasion. There were plenty of those opportunities from sailing with HPW, the moors, the occasional visit to Plymouth or Tavistock for a concert, usually the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra could not be missed. I still have autographs of Campoli, Perina Gamba, Charles Groves before becoming a Knight and others which we collected during intervals or at the end. I remember one day we followed the Britannia Beagles which met at the school and we tramped all over Whitchurch Down trying the keep up with the hounds!

Most trips out were undertaken in HPW's Bedford Dormobile (reg UHT 1). It had

sliding front doors and when the vehicle was crowded, some used to sit, facing backwards on the front wheel arches with the front doors open. Seat belts, Health and Safety; forget it.

Other fairly regular trips out were visits to the Carlton Cinema in Tavistock. A parent owned it (Mr. Pope, I think) and I recall seeing Reach for the Sky, The Cockleshell Heroes and various other current films. We walked down to the town in pairs in true school crocodile fashion. Doing these trips was in school time, they were an added bonus!

One of the things that always interested me was the chance to help with the grounds etc. There were "Good Works Days" when everyone got involved but there was always a core of those who helped as often as possible. A few "works" come to mind. Opposite Wandy's Stable below the gym (there is a memory for those of us at the school at that time. Wandy was a horse who belonged to one of the pupils and he was permitted to bring him to school for livery), there was a shed not used for much so we converted it to give the Tony Wortham's Sharpie a home when not being used in the summer at the RSWYC in Plymouth. If it is still there you will find 10/10/60 inscribed on the walls in mortar which was the date we finished the work. The original gym was built partly by pupil labour. Much of the stone picking on the then newly created playing fields in front of school was done by us. A lot of the grass mowing was done by the boys using machinery the Health and Safety Executive would have gone into fits about had it existed. Does anyone remember the Atcoscythe ! A lethal piece of equipment if not used properly.

I suppose one ought to mention the academic side of the experience! Classes were small. One's first introduction was generally in Miss Lee's class. There you were given a nickname. Miss Lee always seemed to be able to invent an appropriate name for every member. Some names stuck, others did not. There is one contemporary who I know would use mine if we ever met again! Surnames only were used throughout, even out of school hours as far as I can remember. I am sure that does not persist now.

Generally one teacher taught one or perhaps two subjects and the boys were based in a particular classroom for that year (I think). Teachers therefore moved around the school between classes. At Public School the reverse happened. The standard of teaching was high and I think we were expected to respond and work equally hard. I do remember one incident when Tony Wortham set us a History test. Most failed and we were unceremoniously marched to his study for a caning. The ruler across the knuckles and a bit of ear twisting went on but it was accepted and I don't think any of us suffered long term damage.

There were optional subjects; not many, but music was one. Those doing music, at parents' requests, were usually regarded a bit with suspicion or at least a bit cranky. They would be indoors practicing whilst we were larking around outside. Whilst I did not then, nor have now, any natural musical ability, I think many of us now probably regret music had not become a), more popular and b), compulsory. This is particularly as I struggle now to learn the accordion not being able even to read music when I started.

Gradually more dormitories and classrooms were built. The old conservatory at the end of the verandah was probably one of the first space to be changed to a classroom. Drake and Raleigh dormitories were constructed over what had been a grass bank up to the rear courtyard. Talking of the verandah, this area was used extensively for roller skating long before skate boards had been thought of. There were various games we played and essentially speed was important. How any of us were never injured or killed crashing through glass doors or falling off the edge 2 metres down into the bushes I shall never know. I do not recall any accidents at all. Two further classrooms and a new staff room with dormitories over was built in about 1960 to the west of the main building and I think at about this time, roller skating was banned in the vicinity!

Entertainment was basic. Transistors had not been invented but I do recall one boy eventually arriving at school with a small portable radio which we used to listen to the Goon Show. I am not sure I understood it at the time but it made me a fan in later years! As indicated earlier, we were encouraged to have other activities and a small group of us did build crystal sets. Although we were not allowed to use them in the school or set up aerials except in the radio workshop, I do remember fixing up an aerial in one of our summer campsites and using it to listen to Radio Luxemburg. Fairly frequently, the film projector would be set up on a Saturday evening for the film show. I do remember Scott of the Antarctic and Will Hay films. Occasionally HPW would show his cine films ready for the climax of the year when a fully edited version was shown for the whole school and parents around Christmas. We had the odd visiting lecturer. I particularly recall H G Hurrell a pioneering natural history film making coming and being enthralled by his work.

I was lucky enough, later, to visit his home on the edge of Dartmoor near South Brent, to see his Pine Martens, Seals and Otters. We used also to have Sing Songs occasionally. Also those of us who had perhaps been on a ski trip, might be coerced into giving a short talk to the school. Terrifying!

There were of course, the holiday expeditions. The highlight was probably the Ski Trip to Austria. If I recall, one would not be allowed to go until one was twelve. Those lucky enough to go, had to endure Ski exercises for weeks before the end

of the Christmas term, before the cold shower, to ensure we were fit enough . I was fortunate enough to go twice to Oberlech and Hochsolden. We left usually on about 30 December and boarded the train to London, staying at the Eccleston Hotel in Victoria before going on to Folkestone and the overnight Alpine Express to Landeck or Otztal. I recall on my first trip in 1960, I took Reach for the Sky to read, the Story of Douglas Bader. HPW severely ticked me off for reading a book which normally would be looked on very favorably. This time it was wrong as I should have been looking at the scenery as I may never have the opportunity again. It is worth noting that this trip was my first abroad and very exciting. I went again in 1963 after leaving the school with Tony W and Michael Wilkie, nicknamed Sam, another pupil. I did not ski again until 1994 when my wife and I went to Courmayeur. You may imagine my surprise to discover that the skis were not plywood, one did not wear leather boots and they had safety bindings! I have since skied every year except 1996 and until 2008, organised the University of Warwick Staff Ski trip. In 2009, I am returning to Austria for the first time since 1963 with a small group of friends!

Sailing was another activity which if selected to go, was wonderful fun. HPW had his beloved Teal, the German built Sharpie previously mentioned and three or four times in the summer term we used to revel in sailing in Plymouth Sound. The highlight was the summer expedition to Salcombe in the holidays. There we would camp at East Portlemouth and more often than not, Tony would hire a Salcombe pram or other small dinghy and those who were deemed competent, would be allowed to sail on their own. I was lucky enough, once to sail from Salcombe across to the campsite. We ventured out to sea a little and often would find a cove and spend the day swimming. A log had to be written by a member each evening recording the day's activities and other duties would be allocated. Picking mushrooms fresh from the field for breakfast was popular.

I recall one expedition in 1962 which although I had left the school by then, was to Lands End. There, the group witnessed the dramatic rescue of the crew of the Jean Gougy, a French fishing boat that had foundered just under Lands End itself. Somewhere in Tony's cine archive will be footage of that dramatic rescue.

Mount House as previously indicated, did much to encourage hobbies and development of skills. At the end of the Christmas term there would be the Model Exhibition. All the boys would be encouraged to build something, whether it be a plastic kit, a model aircraft, boat, whatever and each would be allocated a space in a modeling workshop at the rear of the outside classrooms. Usually there was time to build more than one model and aircraft were always popular. We were often allowed onto the roof of the school to launch them into space when invariably they would crash after a very short flight! I recall one boy had a Jetex motor which HPW suggested was tied to a piece of long string between the front

of the school facing the playing fields and the old tennis court area. The motor was duly lit. It screamed up the string at high speed, hitting the cast iron post outside what was A classroom, and exploding into the bushes behind the model boat pond. I do not recall whether the motor was ever found. We also did

woodwork in Ken
Cload's classes and our masterpieces were duly displayed in the exhibition. I have to say that many of the activities I have enjoyed all my life, I owe to Mount House. The outdoor life, the model flying and making, skiing, fishing etc.

Sport was always important and if one had any particular aptitude one was encouraged to try to get into a school team. This would again permit one to leave the school grounds for away matches. I think I got into one team; rugby. One would always know whether a returning team had been successful or not as HPW would be in an extremely foul mood for some days if the team lost. Many years later, during an Old Boys Day in the late 1980's or early 1990's, my wife and I visited the school and of course there was the inevitable cricket match. We went swimming but after, strolled up to the cricket pitch where we found HPW. "Been watching the Cricket" he enquired. "No", I replied. "I could never stand Cricket" To my surprise HPW replied that he could not either!

Golden Retrievers were always part of the school. I recall two Winstons always nicknamed Poops by HPW. Both were always very well behaved generally. The first was brushed each morning by a pupil called Habberly if my memory is correct. The dog would allow no-one except him to do it, however. It is strange that when I relented in about 1991 and my wife and I bought our first dog, a Golden Retriever, he was purchased from Postbridge on Dartmoor from the owners who had strong connections with the school and when you bear in mind, we live in Warwickshire, was rather a strange coincidence. We are on our second and third Golden retriever at the moment.

The summer term was for me a time to enjoy and dread. The enjoyment came from trips out, sailing etc. However I dreaded the breaks between lessons when on hot days the third of a pink milk bottles we were given would invariably be going off. I hated the Russian salad at meals which seemed to accompany everything. I have a long lasting violent dislike for anything containing vinegar.
Thanks, Mount House.

Summer also was a time for swimming and everyone had to learn. Mrs Wedd often taught beginners but of course there was no pool. The leat on the River Tavy in the Rowden playing fields which did not belong to the school, was used. There is a lovely pool about a quarter of a mile further up that was used for general swimming once you had done 25 yards. I recall diving in the upper part

of the pool where invariably, there would be a reasonable sized salmon waiting for the right conditions to go further up the river.

Sometimes on Sundays, instead of the cold shower, the instruction, “towels and Wellington boots” would be issued. We would grab towels and put on boots and run down to the said Tavy pool for a swim. No swimming trunks, just abandon the towel and boots and in you went. Eventually the swimming pool was built and the trips to the Tavy ceased.

I could go on. I owe the school a lot. Many of the things I enjoy now are down to the encouragement received. My only regret is that I have not managed to keep in touch with any of my contemporaries although David Glossop and I shared a flat in Chiswick, London for a time. I hope the revitalised Association can bring more Old Boys together.