

## THE SIR WILLIAM NOTTIDGE SCHOOL

The parting words of Mr Wright, the Headmaster of the Technical School in Southampton, were "Remember Upson, you're always the new boy". It took me years to understand what he meant but here I was on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1971, the new boy again in a strange new building, with 40 or so new colleagues and about 650 unknown pupils. It was not quite such an awesome experience as my start at Shirley Warren because I could at least rest on some acquired skill, but it was sufficiently unsettling for the adrenalin to flow freely. I had, of course, had some contact with the school, both by letter after my appointment, and in the days leading up to the start of term, enough to realise that the Headmaster was strangely cold and unwelcoming. In the following weeks there were a number of incidents which gave measure to his personality and management style and which made me doubt if I had any future in the school. It seemed I might have walked into a lion's den!

Within hours of taking up post I discovered that although I had been appointed Head of Geography and History there was already a Head of History in situ. I was instructed that geography should be my immediate priority and to leave History alone for a while. This was not what I expected. Worst still, I found that my appointment was a complete surprise to the man I was supposed to be replacing. Not



unnaturally he was furious at being ignored and treated with such a callous disregard for his professionalism and his feelings. Fortunately, he did not vent his bitterness on me and was both friendly and co-operative, but, as an elderly and very experienced teacher I felt desperately sorry for the way he had been totally crushed and abandoned by the Headmaster. Within weeks he suffered a brain tumour, was admitted to hospital for major surgery, and never returned. In the tragedy the problem dissolved and little more was said, but the situation gave me my first real insight into the ruthless traits of my new boss. Here was a man who was cold, calculating and mechanistic, a man with little or no regard for the feelings of his staff.

My second problem unfolded as the Term progressed. At its root was the discovery that the Headmaster was also a specialist in Geography who had ideas about how the subject should be taught totally at odds with my own. The depth of our disagreement became evident when, towards the middle of the first Term I submitted a temporary, interim syllabus which I based upon the old and meagre textbooks and equipment on the shelves of the stock

cupboard. He shredded it and insisted that I taught a syllabus based upon a cheap textbook series which I thought inadequate and unstimulating. The discussions became abusive and I was sufficiently unhappy to make enquiries of the N.A.S., my Union, about the authority of a Head of Department to organise the teaching of a subject within the school. In the light of growing discontent, the Union group within the school was becoming increasingly militant and the leader of the group, a Welsh firebrand, seized upon my case as the last straw in a string of minor injustices and went into battle. Overnight the Head backed off and I was left to organise things in my own way. It was not, however the end of his criticism. He was a nit-picker who pursued his quarry until they weakened. So obsessed and mean-spirited was he that, after we had broken up for Christmas, he sent me a four-page letter of criticism in the Christmas post, presumably as an attempt to upset my festivities. He seemed to be driven by a belief that he was the only one in the school with ability. He was power-crazed and enjoyed making people wriggle. Many others fell victim to his vindictiveness and could not cope. I witnessed him destroy lives and reduce confident teachers to nervous wrecks.

It was not the end of his initial onslaught. There was another broadside to come. Learning of my ability to play the piano one of my colleagues, a House Master, invited me to play for Assembly. It was not part of their routine and, not surprisingly the children were reluctant to sing. The Housemaster took this as an insult to my effort and ordered them all to return to the Hall at break-time for a hymn practice. When the Headmaster heard this he went berserk. He was not a religious man and for some reason I have never been able to fathom he ranted and raved. During the tirade he told me that I ought to think about leaving. As an innocent victim of somebody else's actions I felt abused. I had never before had to deal with such nattiness and volatility. In these days the Headmasters authority was absolute. He could make or break a career. Only the foolhardy stood against him. In my situation I had no alternative but to swallow my anger and get on with it.

Needless to say I suffered a few anxious moments wondering how I could extricate myself from a situation with such a grim future. It seemed that having moved my family half way across the country, I was stuck with it – not a happy prospect. A number of things saved the day. The first was my teaching. In the classroom I was at home and beyond his reach. I was supremely confident in my ability as a teacher, I hit it off with the children and continued to have a lot of fun. My resilience was also boosted by the staff. They were a superb group of people. They recognised a common foe in the Headmaster and closed ranks against him. In times of adversity they lent their wholehearted support. Above all they put things in perspective. With their help I quickly learned to 'raise the drawbridge' when he went on the offensive and to ignore him. As time went on he seemed to realise how little his power-crazed tantrums affected me and his interference became less and less until he hardly bothered me at all. In a cold sort of way, I think he even came to appreciate the progress I was making, and, although I had to fight for them, I was promoted twice in my 9 year stay at the school. But he was unpredictable and I learned just how easily the worm would turn. I learned to live with him and knew when to lose myself in the Department and keep out of his way. As a result, I went on to enjoy the most creative and successful phase of my whole career. It is just such a pity that my resentment and bitterness towards the man tarnishes my memories and takes the edge off my achievements.

The Sir William Nottidge School was situated on the edge of Whitstable high on a hill overlooking the town. It was a choice site with fine views overlooking the Thames estuary towards the Isle of Sheppey and Southend. It was built in the 50's by Kent County Council as a statement for the future and the standard of materials and construction was far superior to that found in modern school buildings. It was spacious, light and airy. Classroom size was generous, specialist accommodation state of the art and the sports facilities were outstanding with acres of playing fields. It was quite a change from Shirley Warren. Unfortunately, the outward opulence was not matched by funds to adequately run the school. Book, Stationery and Equipment budgets were meagre, barely enough to maintain the status quo let alone finance improvements. Any change had to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and I soon found I had to fight for money. I remember that although I had blackout curtains in my Geography room there was no projection screen and I had to suspend a bedsheet I brought from home. My screen arrived a few weeks later! By the same token the majority of textbooks on the stock-cupboard shelves were published in the 50's and were wildly out of date – pretty well unusable. The new books I was permitted to buy were therefore gold-dust and had to be counted out each lesson to ensure there were no losses. There was no question of allowing anyone other than the most senior examination students to take them home. Even certain items of stationery, like sellotape and red pens, were hard to get hold of at certain times of the year. But as ever I found ways and means. The person responsible for stationery supplies was the Deputy headmaster. He was the elder statesman of the school – a fine man – and the complete antithesis of the Headmaster. He had been in the school for ever and was highly respected by everyone in the community. He was also on my Geography staff and I soon found he could wangle things so impending crises in supplies never quite materialised.

The children in the School were amazingly different to the 'Warreners'. The pervading culture was, by comparison, much more middle class. The cheekiness and 'live for today' attitudes were not so prevalent and expectations on teachers were much higher. The differences were brought home to me at the end of school trips. In Southampton not one of the children would alight the coach without saying a fairly emphatic 'Thank You Sir'. In Whitstable not one would feel it necessary. It was expected of you. There was also a more nonchalant attitude borne, I suspect, from a slower, more casual pace of life in this relative back-water of Kent. There seemed to be little urgency about anything which took some of the dynamic away from the classroom. There was, however, rather more parental interest, particularly from families whose children were from the upper and middle ability groupings. They were more probing in their enquiries and less inclined to suffer fools gladly. As per usual in Secondary Modern Schools though, the parents of the more problematic children were rarely, if ever, seen and there was more than a few of them. With employment problems in the area, disenchantment amongst the non-academic was commonplace. By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Year they were openly asking 'What is the point?' and began to withdraw their co-operation. When the School Leaving Age was raised to 16 in 1973 keeping them interested and amenable became a major challenge which many teachers failed to meet. Even though Sex seemed to be put on the curriculum of almost every subject there were still a handful of classes which were almost uncontrollable. The situation was not helped by an influx of new teachers. Between 1973 and 1977 the School doubled in size from 650 pupils to 1,250. More

children begets more teachers, more buildings, more money, more organisation and bureaucracy, more challenges and more headaches. For me the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. In 1974 I took occupation of a brand new, purpose built Geography and History Block, separate from the main School building which brought a large part of my expanding departmental team under one roof creating a school within a school. With increasing numbers my responsibilities broadened and I was promoted first to a Scale 4 Head of Department and then to Scale 5 Head of Block. This meant I was responsible for all aspects of learning and discipline in my self-contained domain and was included in the senior management team, for what it was worth. It was then the highest grade a teacher could then reach.

At the beginning there was virtually no geography Department and no syllabus that I was aware of. The staff comprised a young, bearded, long-haired hippy type who had failed his teacher training course, The Deputy head and one part-timer. It did not look promising. But how wrong I was. The young man was not the renegade he first appeared to be. He turned out to be a gifted teacher who won the affection of his pupils by his enthusiasm, youthfulness and his ability to perform with a guitar. He had vitality which drew the youngsters out. Given a firm set of guidelines and some good teaching materials he rose to the challenge. He was keen to succeed, responded to success, gained his qualification and became a good, reliable second in the Department. The part-timer, a small rounded lady a few years older than myself became my rock. She was quietly efficient and effective as a teacher. I do not recall a single incident which she did not master with calm determination, or a pupil she did not charm to obedience. As the School grew in size she became full-time. The three of us set the Department on its feet and established the direction of development between 1971 and 1973.

By this time, I had very firm views of what Geography was about. My first task was to sell the ideology to the staff to persuade them to become disciples to a common cause. This was not difficult but had to be taken slowly, step by step to wean them from the old towards the new. At the time Geography was still content bound. It tended to concentrate upon 'How' and 'Where' and was unduly dependent upon learning facts, writing notes, and drawing maps. I felt strongly that this approach was a massive turn-off for average and below-average pupils. I was much more fascinated by the 'Why' of Geography, of explaining why places and things are where and like they are. To me this was much more intellectually stimulating and much more motivating for inquisitive children. My experience also led me to believe that whilst Secondary Modern School children might struggle with language and writing they were just as capable as Grammar School children of thinking through practical problems, indeed, some were better at it. They were not stupid children. My experience at the 'Warren' had shown me that the subject rested upon a number of basic concepts, common truths, from which sprang a myriad of lesser, interconnected ideas, rather like the branch network of a tree. Given an understanding of these ideas it becomes possible to predict the 'What' and 'Where' without having to learn it by rote. I therefore set about a syllabus based upon a hierarchy of concepts describing how Relief effects human life in Year 1; how weather and climate effects it in Year 2; and how Geology and Geomorphology impacts upon it in Year 3. Of course we still taught the facts, but now only as an illustration of an idea. This meant that teachers had a

well-defined set of messages to sell to their pupils. Selling ideas demanded something more than a textbook. If they were to be persuaded they needed a variety of authentic evidence to convince them. The use of filmstrip, slides, movies, samples, statistics etc. all became central to classroom methods. So too did Departmental meetings to discuss the consequences, refine our sales patter, and nurture our enthusiasm. Quite soon, not only were we sharing materials and setting common examination papers but we were gloating over the obvious improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. We felt we were pioneers of a new style of Geography teaching and that we were really going places.

An important facet of the work was Field Studies. With over 1000 students there was little possibility of the kind of geographical excursion I used to run. The disruption to the School would have been untenable. We therefore concentrated our efforts on the senior examination students and selected the Fieldwork option as part of their C.S.E. To fulfil the criteria, we had to undertake a fairly substantial fieldwork project and we fell upon the idea of running a one-week field study course over half-term in February. For three years running we went to Leeson House, a Field Study Centre at Langton Matravers, near Swanage. The Isle of Purbeck is a magnificent area for geological and coastal studies and I was in my element. I set the youngsters transects and village studies and taught them about the birth and death of coves, natural arches and stacks at Lulworth and Durdle Dor. We also had a few hours in Bournemouth and travelled to Southampton for an escorted tour of the Docks. The riskiest exercise involved dropping children in pairs anywhere between 5 and 10 miles from the hostel and giving them a map to navigate their way back. Although it was all across country I'm not sure I would risk it in today's climate. The most we suffered was a sprained ankle, torn clothing and an assortment of tales about bulls, streams and ditches. During the week the children were given fieldwork exercises with classroom time in the evenings to undertake the necessary follow-up work. Back at School we then ran a special evening for pupils and parents exhibiting their work and sharing experiences with a slide show. There is no better way of learning Geography than through the 'soles of your feet' and there is no doubt that the memory of these expeditions lived long in the memory of the children who were fortunate enough to go.

In 1974, a course I attended in Maidstone allowed me to put the final pieces of the syllabus jig-saw into place. It was a one-day introduction to 'Geography for the Young School Leaver' a project being developed by the Schools' Council. It was a powerful combination of Geography and Environmental Studies designed specifically to motivate the less able by getting them involved in real-life problems, all beautifully illustrated by a wide range of really good resources. I took the ideas back to School, sold them to the staff, and introduced the project to the lower-ability 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Year. Within two years a small group of like-minded teachers in several other schools combined to produce a Mode3 C.S.E. exam based on the tree facets of the project – 'Man, Land and Leisure'; 'Cities and People'; and 'People, Place, Work'. This involved writing a proposal to the South-Eastern Regional Examinations Board and of subsequently writing and marking our own C.S.E. examination papers. The more I worked with the project the more convinced I became that it was the direction in which Geography should go. I was sufficiently excited by it to write 2 case studies – 'Waves of Anxiety' about flood problems in Whitstable, and, 'Battle for Water' about the construction

of a large reservoir near Canterbury. Both were widely acclaimed and were printed by Kent County Council for distribution to Kent Schools. They were also commended by the National Project team and were used elsewhere in the country. The success fuelled my enthusiasm still further so that, stage by stage, I sat down with the greatly extended departmental team to integrate the ideas into the lower school syllabus. Slowly, therefore, the emphasis changed to include a variety of micro-studies to illustrate the processes of human decision making. It was all cutting edge.

Although there was little encouragement of our efforts from the Headmaster there was growing interest in our work from amongst the Kent Inspectorate and our reputation spread as they held us up as a beacon Department across the Authority. I was appointed to the South East Regional Examination Board Panel for Geography, and travelled frequently to Royal Tunbridge Wells for meetings to organise Mode 1 examinations in the subject. I was also recruited to work on the Schools' Council project called 'Curriculum in Action'. This involved getting the whole Departmental Team to trial and evaluate a variety of new techniques for studying the quality of teaching and learning. Our experiences were reported to the Project Team at special de-briefing sessions and was used to help shape the final training package for teachers. I was called to the Open University in Milton Keynes to a special launch conference. I remember the embarrassment of mixing with the academics behind the project development. They talked a jargon which was like a foreign language to me. The gulf between practitioner and theorist was huge and it was an education to grasp the nuances of what they were trying to achieve. I felt like a fish out of water.

As far as History was concerned I did little other than to provide a syllabus with suggestions for teaching methods until 1975. During my first two years at the school my teaching embraced History for at least one class in each year group and I also taught 20<sup>th</sup> Century History to exam level. As the School expanded, however, I concentrated more and more upon Geography and delegated the lead role in History to a newly appointed specialist. At the peak of expansion my staff had swollen to as many as five teachers for Geography and seven for History and it was necessary to devise a management structure which would diffuse responsibility and share the work load. From 1975 onwards, however, I took up the reigns of leadership in History in a much more positive way. By this time the ideas of yet another Schools' Council Project – History 14-16 were beginning to filter through. These ideas were about evidenced-based History and, as with my experience for Geography, they knocked me sideways and provided a clear vision for development. Fortuitously, at that time, we appointed a young Masters graduate to teach History – another long-haired whiz-kid straight from University. From the beginning our relationship was electric. We simply enthused each other. We locked on to the new ideas and began to develop them in a big way. Within 2 years the two of us had revolutionised History teaching in the school. We constructed a 3-year evidence based course for Years 1 to 3. Once again out the window went factual teaching, story-telling, note-taking and practically all the textbooks we had hitherto used. Instead we turned History into a quest for truth by using all kinds of historical artefacts and evidence – archaeological, documentary, map, photographs, oral etc. to build up a picture of life and events in the past. So no longer did we just describe life in the Bronze Age or life in Roman Britain, we provided the evidence to enable the kids to work it out for themselves. In much

the same way we used documentary evidence to build a picture of events like the Norman Conquest, not just from the English point of view, but from the French also, and through the biased accounts tried to determine the most likely course of events. So our History became a series of detailed micro-studies, each designed to explore the merits and pitfalls of a particular kind of evidence. The children arrived at the same traditional body of knowledge but in a totally different way, and once again, teachers were provided with a clear conceptual rationale for their teaching. This was an exciting time for me, not least because I found the solution to my own inadequacies as a History teacher. Together we collected the evidence, wrote and printed all the materials for both pupil and teacher. Each week we held a meeting to plan it all between us. Our level of enthusiasm was so high that the others were just swept up and carried along on the tide. As before with no recognition from the Headmaster we bypassed him and sent samples of our work to the national project team. They were so well received that they were published in a journal to illustrate the success of the Project.

By 1977 the department had moulded into an enthusiastic team of like-minded people who were happy in each other's presence. We lived together in the Geography / History Block, we had our own staffroom and we shared our joys and sorrows, successes and problems in an open and supportive way. A number of us took to going for a pub lunch every Friday and so the bonds strengthened further. My contacts with the rest of the school staff were not so strong. We met briefly before morning school and at lunchtime and conversation tended to be dominated by the demands of the day, the reported antics of wayward pupils, and the manoeuvrings of the Head. His divide and rule policies meant that contact on a social level was rare and tended towards informal gatherings at the local pub after parent's evenings. Not surprisingly extra-curricular activities were generally not supported by the staff. Sport, drama and musical events were seen as departmental activities rather than whole school efforts and generally involved very few extra staff.

My other recollections of life at the 'Nottidge' tend to be associated with particular incidents. I remember having my first brush with hard drugs in 1972. I was then Form Tutor for a 4<sup>th</sup> Year group. As the Autumn Term progressed I became increasingly concerned about the behaviour of an attractive young girl who lost her sparkle and became increasingly withdrawn and morose. She came from a good family at Blean, near Canterbury. One day I found her in a sad and weepy condition and took her off to a private part of the school to minimise her embarrassment and to try to discover the cause of her distress. She unloaded a sordid story of being pushed drugs by young men in Canterbury, of her increasing dependence upon heroine, and the nightmarish hallucinations she suffered at night. I saw to it that she got the help she needed but never knew the outcome. She left the school and did not return. Rather more disturbing, however, was an incident that occurred at the start of an Assembly. Because of the difficulty of feeding 1250 children at lunchtime Assemblies were held either side of the lunch break with the senior Assembly held first thing in the afternoon. As the most senior teacher present I was on duty at the front of the Hall simply providing a presence to ensure good behaviour. I suddenly became aware of a boy advancing towards me up the centre aisle brandishing a knife. Fortunately, some of my colleagues waiting at the side of the Hall saw him before I did and, before he reached me, they had moved in behind him and wrestled him to the ground. There was nothing personal in the attempted attack. I did not

know the boy and he was no longer a pupil at the school. For some reason he was bent on attacking authority. It was the nearest I came to personal injury although there were many occasions where I faced down potential attacks by pupils who were emotionally out of control. Indeed, I earned a reputation as a disciplinarian by challenging the bad behaviour of the most difficult pupils whilst they were under my departmental jurisdiction and I became adept at using the cane. It was part of my responsibility to create an aura of intolerance towards any kind of disruptive behaviour and there could be no backing away from the challenges when they occurred. Fortunately, such incidents were rare and never of my making. They were usually the problems of other staff which required intervention to solve.

By 1978 the 7-year itch was beginning to kick in. I was riding high and beginning to contemplate the possibilities of Deputy Headship. I was aware that one of my biggest drawbacks was the lack of a University Degree. The Headmaster reminded me on more than one occasion that I was lucky to have reached my present position as a non-graduate in an all-graduate profession (as it then aspired to be). I was also painfully aware that, in my time at the school, not one person had been promoted out of it. It was well known that the Headmaster wrote references which killed off any hope of advancement and, on more than one occasion, I had seen colleagues accept demotions in order to escape. Early in 1979 the chance for internal promotion arose when the post of third deputy became vacant. The job description was for curriculum and timetable responsibilities which played to my strengths and so, with the support of a large number of staff, I applied, was short-listed and was summoned to interview. Within seconds it became obvious that my presence was sheer tokenism and that there was no way he was going to entertain me in the job. His usual vindictiveness surfaced and he openly began to criticise some of the purchases I had recently made for the department. The mouths of the other members of the interviewing panel dropped open in disbelief at his attack, particularly the Geography Inspector who was well aware of my work in the school. I was distraught. In the weeks that followed I marshalled my energies for the fight back. My one objective was to escape. I organised a complaints meeting with the School Inspector and made arrangements with ChristChurch College, Canterbury, the local Teachers' Training College, to start an evening course leading to a Dip Ed and B.Ed degree. In late September two other local Deputy Headships became vacant and I applied for them both. Within 3 weeks I was invited for interview, first at Conyngham School, Ramsgate, and then at St John's School, Margate. By today's standards where Deputy headship appointments are often a two-day trial by ordeal, the selection procedure at Conyngham School was amazing for its brevity and crudeness. Upon arrival the five candidates were told that the procedure needed to be completed by lunchtime. We were given a lightning tour of the school and precisely timed 30 minute interviews. On the interview panel sat Desmond Smith, the Headmaster, a small rotund man with an army background, the Chairman of Governors, the Divisional Education officer, and my old friend, the Geography Inspector. There could not have been more than half a dozen pertinent questions. Such was the tenuous nature of the affair that it seemed that the whole thing was a foregone conclusion. Fortunately, the conclusion was ME, and I was offered the job. I was ecstatic. My escape tunnel had finally reached beyond the perimeter fence and I was free of the unforgivable tyranny of the Headmaster. Within three years he was dismissed for his treatment of staff!

My departure from the Sir William Nottidge School at Christmas 1979 was surprisingly emotional and I was astounded at the avalanche of good wishes from both staff and pupils. My Departmental team organised a lavish dinner at an eatery of repute and I was presented with a number of tributes both in word and kind. Even the Headmaster invited me to join his Deputies for a glass of sherry now that I was 'one of them'. It was all unexpected and rather special. And so the 'Bionic Gnome', as I was affectionately known, passed into history and applied his energies to a new challenge.