

Kings Worthy School 1944-50

A Former Pupil's View

David Hunt

From a paper written by David Hunt just before his death in 2001.

I joined Kings Worthy School in January 1944 aged five years and four months. At that time the school took pupils from the age of five until they reached the then school leaving age of fourteen.

The old school building was already too small to accommodate all the local children, so the infants attended the Jubilee Hall. My first teacher was a young lady called Miss Falconer. Life in the infants school was fairly uneventful and, on the whole, quite pleasant. We were taught the alphabet and numbers and learned to write on little chalk boards. In the afternoons we were allowed to play with plasticine or draw pictures with pastels. At lunch time we had to trek up to the 'big school' for the dreaded school dinners, which had only recently been introduced, and which were presided over by Mr and Mrs Gay. I think the meals came from a County Council kitchen at Chandlers Ford and later from Stanmore. The place of origin made little difference for the food was generally disgusting.

There was only one rule in respect to school dinners: you had to eat everything on your plate. This was not good news for the infants and I can still remember Mrs Gay looming over children and ordering them to eat what they had been given. This involved a lot of shouting on her part and floods of tears from the pupils. It was during one of these lunch time visits that I witnessed a 'public' caning for the first time. A boy of nearly fourteen had committed some misdemeanour and was hauled up before the whole school to receive his punishment. The screen which divided the two classrooms was pulled back and with much pleading and howling, the boy was made to touch his toes and receive six of the best on his backside. This put the fear of God into me and, I suspect, everyone else and I assume that this was the intention.

Sometimes in the summer, while Miss Falconer was our teacher, we took a detour down Mill Lane and through the water meadows behind Abbots Worthy House. We were

allowed to have a paddle in the little stream and then, while our feet were drying, she would read a story. This was idyllic but did not last long for Miss Falconer married a Mr Aldridge and left.

Two supply teachers were then employed: Mrs Chapman and Miss Beck, and they were both old dragons. Mrs Stephens was then appointed. She was extremely kind and very popular with the children. She was a firm but motherly person, who played the piano, sang and read us stories. One of the books was *Naughty Amelia Jane* by Enid Blyton. When she had finished reading it, she donated it as a prize. I was delighted to win it, but I can't remember what I had to do to win it.

The Jubilee Hall was smaller than it is today and at the back was a flat-roofed air-raid shelter at a lower level. The war was still in progress and I can well remember being excitedly herded down the stairs when there were day-time air-raid warnings.

After school, those of us who lived at Hookpit, went along to Taylor's Corner to catch the bus to North End. The cost was one penny. Sometimes we would run along to the village shop, which is now part of the Old Cottage. (The present Post Office was a house at that time.) The shop was owned by Mrs Butcher and she sold penny buns on which we would spend our bus fare.

On one occasion I told Dr Davis, the Rector of Headbourne Worthy, that I had lost my bus fare and he gave me a penny. The next time I tried it, he rumbled me and I never tried again.

I must have been seven when I moved to the 'big school', and by that time the 1944 Education Act had been implemented and all eleven plus children had gone to secondary schools in Winchester. The school was a rundown depressing place. I doubt whether anything significant had been done to the fabric for years. Certainly not during the war. I have always assumed that the high windows were designed so that the classrooms received sufficient natural light but pupils were prevented from gazing out of them. The schoolroom was divided into two by a folding screen. Mrs Gay's classroom was at the east end and had a large open fire. Mr Gay's was at the west end and had a stove with heated pipes running along the north side. This was where senior pupils sat and was much coveted in the winter. Attached to the east end was the 'infants' room though it had not been used as a classroom for many years. It was used as a store room and was the room in which school dinners were served. There were porches attached to each classroom in which pupils hung their coats. No one had bags in those days and nothing went missing!

The playground was split into two by a corrugated iron fence. The boys' playground was at the west side and the girls' at the east. Boys and girls were not allowed to mix. To do so was a caning offence. Along the boundary of the girls' playground were the air-raid shelters – corrugated iron turfed over. They were eventually used as store-rooms and smelt very dank. Mr Gay had a corrugated iron garage in the far corner of the girls' playground where he kept his Standard Flyer, circa 1936 (CEL 993, I think). Each playground had a block of toilets, known as the 'Dubbs' and evil smelling places they were too. There was no running water in the school so none in the toilets, which were the Elsan type, for flushing or washing hands, and there was rarely any toilet paper. In the hot summers a large jug of water for drinking was brought from the Gay's house and left in the infants' room. Other than that the only drink available was the mid-morning one third of a pint of milk.

Playtimes at mid-morning, lunch-time and afternoon were completely unsupervised. The Gays returned to their house and sixty or seventy children were left to their own devices. One of the petty rules we had to abide by was that no balls were allowed in the playground. Another rule did not allow us to run on the large pile of anthracite at the back

of the school – this was a caning offence.

Mrs Gay took the lower Juniors – Standards 1, 2 and 3., and Mr Gay took the upper Juniors – Standards 4, 5 and 6. The day always started with an act of communal worship and, because the piano was in Mrs Gay's room, all the children crowded in there, three to a desk. Mr Gay had a fine singing voice and was a bass in the church choir. We always sang unaccompanied, partly because the piano was out of tune and partly because neither Mr or Mrs Gay could play it properly. One note was usually enough to start us off. This was followed by a prayer then back to the classrooms. The first lesson of every day was Scripture and I always thought that Mr Gay sounded like one of the Old Testament prophets. As a C of E school there would be a visit, once a year, from the Diocesan Education Adviser, a priest, who at the end of his visit would hand out Scripture Certificates. They usually went to the top Juniors and I remember getting mine in my last year. I was so proud of it that I had it framed and hung in my bedroom.

The lesson after Scripture was always Arithmetic, and was dreaded by most of us. Mr Gay, although a good teacher of maths, had very little patience with anyone who was slow on the uptake. Tables were learnt by rote and never forgotten.

There was a standard text book called *A Modern Guide* and numbered from one to six, roughly equating to the standard you were in. We were moved on by age and it was possible that a child on Book Four might be more comfortable with Book Three. It was a common occurrence for a boy to be humiliated in front of everyone because he could not grasp what was being taught. Mr Gay was short on patience and would gradually raise his voice until he was standing next to the boy, boxing him around the ears. It did a great deal of harm. Everyone became frightened of making a mistake and a slow learner would have his confidence impaired permanently.

The last period in the morning was History or Geography. The text books for both subjects had seen better days. Mr Gay was keen on history and liked to talk about famous battles such as Agincourt and Crecy. He had a book about all the major battles over the centuries and would frequently read to us from it. Most of the history lessons focused on the Romans, Saxons, Vikings and Normans, sometimes going as far as the Civil War, but rarely further.

The first lesson after lunch was always English and would deal with handwriting practice (copperplate), spelling tests, reading aloud, poetry and composition writing. Learning poetry was a key element and from time to time everyone had to stand

and recite a poem. When I was nine years old I couldn't go on with the poem I knew perfectly well, for an angry Mr Gay with a thundering voice and with the knuckle of his forefinger punching me in the back of the head frightened me so much that he drove me to tears.

The last period of the day was used for a variety of activities. One was singing. All the children would crowd into Mrs Gay's room and the singing would be led by Mr Gay. Mrs Gay usually disappeared during the singing lessons – probably to get on with the ironing! Another activity was drawing, and Mr Gay would show us how to construct a drawing in stages.

For the boys the most popular period was Friday afternoons in the winter, because that was when we played football. All the boys went with Mr Gay to the Recreation Ground. As was usually the case in most schools, those who were no good at football hung around behind the goals. Mr Gay refereed at a fairly sedate pace. Occasionally the game was delayed for some time if Mrs Span, the lady who lived in a hole in her land behind the Rec, happened to be passing by with her old pram. Mr Gay would talk to her for ages, while we were impatiently waiting to start the game. While the boys played football, the girls played netball at the school. One of the advantages those of us who

lived in Hookpit had was that when it was time to go, we were half-way home. During the summer term, girls and boys went to the Rec to play rounders.

A few days before Christmas, the daily hymn was replaced with Christmas carols and normal lessons were suspended for a few days. Ancient watercolour prints were brought out and we were allowed to make Christmas cards. In addition, old scraps of wallpaper mysteriously appeared from which we made paper chains. In the afternoon Mr Gay would read stories to Standards 4 and 6, sometimes from *Sherlock Holmes Short Stories* or *A Christmas Carol* or *The Tales of Odin*.

Mr Gay was nicknamed 'Smudge' and was about 5'9". He wore a three-piece suit and smoked a pipe. Mrs Gay was a large woman, and one of her habits was to suddenly throw open the door in the screen which divided the two classrooms, stand feet apart, hands on hips and bellow 'What's all this about?' She would then harangue the school for the next five or ten minutes about some real or imagined misdemeanour. The fact that it had nothing to do with her or the school did not matter. While all this was going on Mr Gay would be sitting at his desk, peering over his spectacles with a bemused expression on his face.

The school was C of E controlled

and had well established links with the church. Rev Williams came to the school in 1946 to recruit choir-boys and ten boys were detailed to join including me and my two brothers, and I had a happy association with the church for many years afterwards. Rev Williams was replaced by Rev Campion, who was liked by everyone, and I remained friends with him for many years after he left the village. He visited the school each Friday to take part in the Assembly and would be mobbed by the children when he got out of his car. He had a good tenor voice and, with Mr Gay singing Bass and Mrs Gay alto, we had a four-part choir.

I left in 1950, and looking back after 50 years I have to say that my years at Kings Worthy school were not happy ones. On the whole, the school was a humourless, joyless place, with much shouting, many petty rules, corporal punishment and no rapport whatsoever with the parents. My abiding memory is the lack of laughter and animation in the classroom. Certainly most of us came out with a good grounding in the 'Three Rs', but few, if any, came away with happy memories. My own sons attended the school during the reign of Michael Wyard and they and their friends have very happy memories of the days spent there. I am afraid I cannot say the same.