

Revisiting Bickley Parva School,

6 October 2018

I remember looking out of this window forty-six years ago. It was raining that day too. I had just turned five and had been at Bickley Parva School for all of four weeks. Raindrops were bouncing off the pathway, a real South London downpour. I had never seen such a deluge. I knew that very shortly we'd have to line up in the yard by the back door in our purple blazers and grey shorts and then, having been dismissed, we'd be expected to walk out of the school and greet our mothers. Running was not permitted. At the school gate we would have to raise our purple caps and sweep them low and say "Good afternoo-oon, Mrs Mortimer" – with a long drawn-out sing-song descending note on the 'noon' – and then repeat this elaborate performance to all the other mothers of our acquaintance who were waiting. But in this rain? Did we have to line up? Did we really have to walk? Would our mothers not get wet? Would we still have to raise our caps? All my youthful anxieties contracted within my mind until they became inextricably knotted and fixed in my memory. Now they are still there, less distinct perhaps. But they still have a message. Even though forty-six years have passed, the school is still teaching me.

The lesson that now drips into my mind is not English or maths but the importance of the ordinary things in life. We often talk about how dramatic events shape us – a serious accident, for example, a relocation to a different country, or the premature death of a parent – but although these things do have a big impact, our characters are principally formed of the everyday moments that everyone experiences, such as walking out in heavy rain, or worrying about catching the morning train. The things I remember most about my time at Bickley Parva between 1972 and 1975 are the little surprises embedded in the routine of my education. For example, coming across a magnificent stag beetle by the stump of a cut-down tree in the path that ran around the playing field. Discovering in a science lesson that water was heavier than the same volume of wood. Becoming very distressed when, on returning for my second term, I was informed that the date I had to write at the top of each page would never include the year 1972 again. Now it was 1973. My old, familiar, trusty 1972 had gone forever.

I walk around the Victorian building and try to recover the day-to-day memories from the architecture and artefacts around me. There are very few of the latter. A bit of wainscoting, the bannisters of the main staircase. The doors are now all fire doors, the lights modernised, the windows airtight. In my day there was a lovely panelled dining room, the memory of which has lasted with me down the years. The dark patina of the wood had a grand feeling, the huge bay window swept around in a majestic arc, and the ceiling was plastered like the chamber of a Jacobean manor house. On the long wooden tables, boys' napkins were neatly arranged in rows, their napkin rings attesting to that little bit of personality amid all this revered heritage. The dust turned slowly in the light when the room was not in use. It seemed a vast, dignified space: portentous, as if legions of boys would go forth from its hallowed silence to do great things, just as they always had done. But everything changes. Now it is the staff common room. It is much smaller than I remember it. The plaster ceiling is still as it was in my day but the oak panelling has been covered up and the walls painted white. The seats around the room are light wood, like the floor, and upholstered in light blue. A modern strip light bares its teeth against my nostalgia.

Thinking about all the ordinary things that happened in this building, I start to realise how much of my education was formal and hierarchical. That sense of formality has been swept away, like

the oak panelling. The whole school feels light and refreshing now. The playing field has been covered by timber-clad classrooms decorated with bright colours; what open ground remains is covered with artificial turf on which a large, ship-shaped wooden climbing frame stands. Everything is designed to appeal to a different sort of parent from fifty years ago, with different ideas about schooling. The assembly hall is now a pair of classrooms and carpeted, and again, brightly decorated, with purple chairs for the children. At least the school colour has not changed. It all seems much friendlier than in my day. But it also feels flimsier, less reliable. I liked the solidity of the school's heritage, and its formality was merely a part of that. Did my liking for such things come from my family or the school? It is too late to say for sure but the truth is probably a bit of both. They complemented each other then as much as the greater friendliness fulfils parental expectations today.

As I look around, I see more and more angles of memories which are ordinary yet tinged with formality. We were instructed never to use the front door: that was strictly for the headmaster. We were prohibited from going into the garden of the headmaster's house, which was just beside the school, even to fetch a ball. If we wished to speak in class, we had to raise our right hands and wait to be invited to open our mouths. We were always expected to wear our purple blazers with a pink bee on the badge – the school logo – but we were also required to wear a cap when coming to the school and going home. This was also decorated with a bee. Boys from other schools mocked us at the train station. 'Oi, wotcha mate, there's an 'orrible insect on your 'ead'. And then we'd be thumped on the front of the cap, knocking it off.

Formality. It is ingrained in me. I can still remember the order of names in my class when the morning roll call was taken in the hall: 'Balkwill, Blackley, Bowes-Smith, Christou, Epps, Hollingsworth, Hunt, Lisle, Mortimer...' In my third year, aged seven, my class would be escorted up to the senior school, Bickley Park, to have lunch. We were lined up in two rows and forced to hold hands with our opposite number. Discipline was strict then, as it was indeed throughout the whole day. If you didn't do something properly, you would be reprimanded: I was told off many times for the poor quality of my handwriting. If you misbehaved you would be sent to the headmaster, Mr Tidman. I feared him, as if he were the brutal dictator of a small state that no one could locate without looking at a map. On one occasion, having grazed my knee, he refused to accept that I was allergic to plasters and picked me off the ground and forced the distressing adhesive on to my skin. I was in tears. He no doubt thought it was for my benefit. But, notwithstanding his good intentions, under his headmastership, formality ruled. We had guidelines that we were never allowed to forget, even after the passing of almost fifty years.

I walk into a large classroom at the back of the school, which is now the library. I am greeted by brightly coloured covers on mobile bookcases. I look around; this room is, strangely, larger than I remember it. We were taught maths here in our first year – this is the spot where I was so distressed at the passing of the year 1972. Here too is where our teacher showed us how to make a mat for a teapot, how to grow cress, and how gerbils and hamsters don't live very long. From here we rushed to the hall at morning breaktimes to take our third-of-a-pint of milk and drink it sitting on benches that ran around the outside of the hall. Having finished it, we would charge around the paths around the playing field or go to the playground at the back of the grounds to play football. Football did not interest me. What did, however, was the overgrown Victorian garden next door. I loved looking over the fence and seeing the leaf-strewn paths and steps, and a neglected statue covered with ivy. I did not need actually to set foot in that magical space: just to look at it enthralled me. It was my own ruined palace, my own playground of the imagination,

where I could see myself stepping out of the world of football and playground bullies into the past, which proved to be my destiny.

Just before leaving Bickley Parva in 1975, we were told to create something that would be put in a book to be a lasting record of our time at the school. At that age I liked the nonsense verse by Ogden Nash and Edward Lear, so I decided to write a poem in a similar style about a cat who wanted to travel to New Zealand. The refrain – ‘he sat on a seal with a steering wheel / but he never got to New Zealand’ – sticks in my mind. Does my first literary composition still exist? No. All these ‘lasting records’ were destroyed in the mid-1980s. The formal way of school life back then has been entirely chucked out. There are classrooms where the headmaster’s house used to stand. The ruined Victorian garden next door has been developed into two smart houses. The boys don’t wear caps these days – they have gone the way of the oak panelling and my nonsense poem. That has been the fate of everything that is old-fashioned. I suppose I too am old-fashioned compared to this new world of lightness and brightness and, let’s face it, a more intense form of academic education with higher expectations and more pressure than ever before. I acknowledge the need for change but I am a little sad. Much of what I loved about the school was its old-fashionedness. Such things made me feel safe. It is a remarkably reassuring thing to be educated in an environment that seemed to my young mind to be very old, and thus capable of withstanding the test of time, and impervious to the short-term shocks of bad news stories.

The visit has jogged my mind in a number of ways. This is, of course, what you would expect. What I did not expect was to find myself discovering my innocence at that age. And I mean *discovering*, not rediscovering. When I was five, I did not know I was innocent. But now, every memory is framed by an awareness of how uncynical and naïve I was in those years, up to the age of seven. One day in the school hall a teacher insisted to the class that Psalm 23 – ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’ – was the most beautiful song in the world. I raised my arm and, on being given permission to speak, I told her that she was wrong because that my mother singing ‘Greensleeves’ was much more beautiful than that psalm. My purpose was nothing other than loyalty to the truth. Likewise, it was at Bickley Parva that I first got to know someone who was black. I was talking about him with my mother one day and described him as ‘the boy with the large satchel’. She always remembered that I never actually referred to him by his skin colour, which, to her generation, was the most obvious way to single him out. I wasn’t being politically correct: at that age I was still unaware that these things were an issue.

Outside the school hall, there is a little slope. I used to charge down it when I was five, frowning, making myself angry – because to be *angry* seemed to me to be *serious* and people who were serious had to get places fast, and sprinting like this, I was very, very fast. I can picture myself there, so lacking in knowledge and understanding, and so much in need of formality and rules. In fact, my five-year-old self seems even more naïve now because, at five, I had no inkling of my naivety. I lacked that self-awareness. That is probably why the word ‘innocence’ tinges every memory. It was not that I was innocent of anything in particular but more that I did not have anything resembling guilt. Everything in life was still about learning – and nothing about trying to forget.

We think of innocence as if it is just simple and light, airy – almost angelic. Ask anyone whether innocence would float or sink if it had a physical form, and they will almost certainly tell you that it would float. It does not weigh us down as our crimes do. No one loses sleep over sins they *haven’t* committed. And yet, as I leave the school, I feel I have dived through the dark, still waters of time to view the memory of those years – as if my time at the school was a Spanish galleon

that now rests on the seabed. Strangers move around me like fish darting in and out of the portholes of the past. This is where I stood. This is where I will always have stood. Everything changes, everything that moves through life with us. Only the past stays the same, many fathoms down: almost invisible and beyond reach. My regrets, crimes and sins – call them what you will – are very different. They float with me through life. I don't even have to stretch out to touch them.

Yes, even now, after all these years, the school is still teaching me.

Ian Mortimer