**Victoria**

**By Dave Taylor-Jones,**

Having been disqualified from attending a Technical or Grammar School, not actually by lack of academic achievement but by the dreaded “interview” of the eleven plus exam, I was destined to go to what was reported to be the worst school in Watford, Victoria Secondary Modern School for Boys. Maybe ‘worst’ is a bit strong, but Victoria had a reputation for being a rather rough school, a breeding ground for Teddy Boys my Mum said.

Situated in Addiscombe Road, behind the Empire Cinema past the end of Market Street, Victoria was actually a separated school for boys and girls, there being two large Victorian red sandstone buildings, one for girls and one for boys, with over six hundred children in each. The buildings sat next to one another, the girls’ school on Addiscombe Road and the boys’ school hidden behind it, up a narrow alley bordering a graveyard. The two schools were kept firmly apart at those areas where the boys’ school building did not actually form the boundary, by a four metre high wall, topped by a chainlink fence for another metre. This was long before the idea of co-educational teaching, - boys and girls in the same classroom - was more generally introduced later in the twentieth century. We were, ‘Boys are boys and girls are girls and never the twain shall meet’, except on the waste ground behind the cycle sheds…….

Fortunately for me, my older brother Steve was already at the school two years ahead of me. He and his friends provided valuable protection from the louts of the year just above mine, who couldn’t wait to show the new recruits what softies we were. Being part of the Baby Boomer generation that arrived just after the war, meant that the existing school’s buildings were not really big enough for the influx of children born in 1944/45. For my year the school was required to create an additional class, which made five classes, with about 30-35 boys in each class and these were streamed by academic ability. So I was in Class 1 (Steve was in Class 3), and below me were Classes 1A, 1alpha, 1B, and 1C. The number of classrooms in the school was then insufficient to provide accommodation for the new influx of children, so extra one-storey accommodation called “the New Wing”, far away from the town centre towards Bushey, was used to house us new kids. Even then it required some clever manipulation of the weekly timetable to get everybody to attend the correct lessons at the right time, in the correct classrooms.

Previously at Primary school I had my own desk in my own classroom, so I could leave all my text books and exercise books in the desk, but at Victoria you did not have a designated classroom in the first year of school. You had to carry your books around with you in your satchel. This required judicious planning every day, because you only wanted to take the books and equipment you needed for that day’s study. As First Years we spent about three days a week at the Wing and the other two days when we had woodwork, music or games, we had to attend the main school in Watford. The Wing was a very windy, damp place, situated not far from the River Colne, built I think in the war for some military purpose. My memories of starting secondary school are tainted by the rain pouring down the Wing’s windows so that we could not go outside at recreation times and were forced to stay inside, competing for places to sit on the fat hot-water pipes. I reached the Wing normally by bike, but if the weather was bad I went on foot and took the train from Carpenders Park to Watford High Street station, then walked up the High Street to Water Lane. I then turned right off the High Street into this aptly-named road where there was about a mile’s walk to the Wing, passing over the Colne, which had a tendency to flood its banks, so that the pavement had been pragmatically raised on stilts to allow people to traverse the flood. There was just no way to stop kids from going to school in the fifties!

Our Form Master was Mr. William Spouge, an English Language teacher who was about 28 years old. Spouge was a plump individual with already thinning black curly hair and rather bad skin. He was not actually often with us – in fact only for English and French lessons, but he was our man. He was quite dedicated to getting Hertfordshire boys to try and sound their consonants (try not be “swede bashers” he would say) and to get them to grasp the rudiments of the English Language. Spouge was one of the better teachers – many were surely ex-servicemen, de-mobbed from the Second World War with some basic education, but most of them were hardly seriously deep into the education vocation.

In our first year we studied English (mostly Grammar, very little Literature), History (this is a Roman arch, this is a Norman arch etc), Mathematics (we could already do fractions and decimals so Logarithms were the new torture), Geography (only England), Music (get out your recorders boys), Art (linocuts etc), Woodwork, R.E. (Religious Education). P.E. (Physical Education) Games (Football or Cross Country running in the winter, Cricket or Cross Country running in the summer) and French (we struggled through “Pierre et les Cambrioleurs” and the verbs etre and avoir).

I quite liked English, Maths, P.E., Games (Football and Cricket please), Music (I had private piano lessons so for me it was very basic stuff at school) and French, but Art, Woodwork, History, R.E., and Geography were really boring. So let’s talk about those that I didn’t like.

The Art class was given by Mr. Bernard Church, a tall, bearded (of course) man who just expected you to have artistic talent, or not. No way was he going to try and bring out some creativity in you. Church had a short fuse and would not tolerate any misbehaviour from us in class. I mean none at all, no laughing or even smiling. For him art was a serious business. And woe betide you if you didn’t go along with this. Church possessed the biggest pair of feet I have ever seen, and kept a size 13 crepe-soled sandal to administer his justice. How many times did my old friend from Carpenders Park, Colin Heathcote, get Church’s wrath going? Colin was either fearless or was going through an early stupid phase, because at almost every lesson, it would be, “Heathcote, stop slopping paint over Lombardi, and come out here to the front of the class.” The slipper was brought out of its cupboard and then, “Grasp both ankles Heathcote,” and blam, a terrible whack on the bum was administered. Most kids cried, but Colin seemed to be made of strong stuff because he never gave Church the chance to see him tearful. I noticed that after about ten slipperings Colin perfected the art of quickly standing up as the slipper was brought down, a sort of follow-through movement that must have lessened the impact. In this fractious atmosphere it is not surprising that my own artistic efforts were minimal. I just wanted the lessons to end. I remember one boy in our class, David Broom, a thin, dark-haired, quiet lad, who was really quite good at art. He would sidle over to my mess of a distant view taken through a pair of binoculars, and say, “Oh that’s really good, much better than mine.” And then you would see he had produced something that Michelangelo would have been proud of.

Corporal punishment was only outlawed in schools in the 1980s and at Victoria Boys’ school it took the form of canings or slipperings. I must say that it was used frequently for First and Second Year boys but by the time I was fourteen it had mostly stopped. The Head Master Mr. T. Price administered the cane to boys who had seriously offended. His Deputy was Mr. J. Hard, a mild- mannered man, who you should never have crossed because he caned very quickly for minor offences. It must be mentioned that there were some very tough, difficult kids in Watford at Victoria, who were always fighting and bullying other kids. So in accordance with the customs of that time corporal punishment did not seem out of place. I only had the slipper once from Fred Downs, and the cane once from Mr. Price for being caught card gambling for pennies. Kids like my friend Colin Heathcote seemed to not care at all about the punishments – I think it was an early form of macho-ism. As an adult I was very glad to see it put outside the law and banned.

Mr. Jock Chalmers was our Woodwork master, a dour Scot who it was rumoured had lost a leg. I always wondered if his false leg was actually made of wood and, that he had made it himself, in the evenings after classes. I could just imagine him toiling away thinking, nearly finished and at least I don’t have to pay for this. On our first introduction to woodwork classes Chalmers assembled the whole class of twelve-year olds around a couple of benches in the Woodwork shops that lined the end of the playground in the main school in Watford. Very sensibly he then gave us a lecture on the dangers of using saws, hammers, chisels, and screwdrivers. He demonstrated the errors of use that he had seen made by boys in the past, and the one that still sticks in my mind to this day was the wrong use of a pencil compass. He got out a brass compass and showed how, if you used it as just a pencil, by turning the point straight in line with the pencil, when you bent down to see better you could easily stick the sharpened point into your eyeball. Later when we were struggling to produce our fruit bowls from solid pieces of walnut, it was of course Heathcote who was caught out trying to clamp the back of someone’s overall into a vice. Chalmers arraigned Colin in front of the class. “Stop work now everybody. This silly idiot,” slap around head, “thinks he’s being clever,” slap around head again. “Detention after school for one hour and writing out 100 lines of ‘I must not use tools incorrectly in Woodwork classes’.” Poor Colin, he was only bored I suppose, like us all.

My younger brother Victor remembers seeing Chalmers on TV much later in life when he was one of the first patients to receive a ground breaking new hip replacement. He remembers Chalmers speaking to the camera telling the audience how difficult it had been for him to move about and what pain he had been in, but then he started jumping up and down, jogging on the spot and saying ‘But nay I ken jump and skip’. So he did not actually have a wooden leg – it was just Victorian legend.

History, which later in life I realized was so essential to having an understanding of the time we are living in by giving you an appreciation of what has come before it, was restricted to just medieval times and the conquests of Britain. Now, with the fantastic television programmes from BBC 4, you can be captured by the stories of ancient civilizations and learn so much from a story told by a great presenter. Past times depicted by indecipherable languages inscribed in stone can be brought alive and show you the values and lives of people from 3000 years ago. However, with Mr. Crowsher this never happened for me at Victoria. Crowsher finally was the permanent History teacher who followed the three stand-in History masters in my first year, and they all repeated what the last one had told you. “This is a Roman arch, this is a Norman arch…………..’Sigh.

Raymond Gunstone was a very large man of about thirty. He looked like he should have been playing rugby for England. Mild-mannered, polite and blessed by God to get some religious education into the thick heads of Victoria’s schoolboys. My mother was a sort of believer, erring I like to think on the safe side, so consequently Steve and I had been brought up to go to Sunday School from the age of about six. I went with her to the Methodist Church at South Oxhey every Sunday evening, so I was already familiar with the New Testament and most of the important stories and characters from the Old Testament. “Gunner” Gunstone however, went through it all again by getting boys to read passages from the Bible in class. Thank God the lesson was only for one hour a week. Somehow or another he noticed that I had a good speaking voice and that I seemed to be able to easily read the Bible, even if I had not read the passage before. Victoria Secondary Modern Boys School started every day with an Assembly of the whole school (except for the First Years who were mostly at the Wing). The Head Master, Mr. T. Price, led the Assembly which began with a Bible reading, then a hymn, then a prayer, then announcements. Boys were selected by Gunner to make these readings, but somehow they often failed to turn up, so he was left flapping around at the last minute to find someone else to do it. Once I was in the Second Year he used me whenever he could as a stand-in. I didn’t mind, it gave me the chance to look out from the raised stage on hundreds of boys and watch them surreptitiously mucking about. Gunner, in my opinion had completely missed his vocation – he should have been a Sports Master. With his keenness and friendly manner he could have inspired boys to win, but unfortunately not to believe in God.

Our Geography lessons seem to revolve around drawing maps of Great Britain which is difficult enough – I mean it’s not boot-shaped like Italy, is it? And then either colouring in regions, like the Broads, the Lake District, or Wales. Fascinating stuff. I think Mr. F. Tipler was our master for this subject, who seemed as bored with the curriculum as we were.

Our first year passed fairly quickly and at that time in 1957, nearly all the boys in our class wore short trousers. The school uniform was obligatory and consisted of grey trousers, white shirt, school tie, navy blue blazer and cap. My Mum relented and let me wear long trousers when I was thirteen, but I had to go through the winter of 1957-58 up to my birthday in February in short ones. Imagine doing that in the freezing rain, riding three miles each way to school and back twice a day. I went home for dinner because I just could not stomach the school food. On my first day at Victoria Main School, my Mum had sensibly decided that, like Steve, I would stay for school lunch and I sat down at a trestle table erected in the main hall (which doubled as a Gymnasium). I remember that meal, a sort of stew with potatoes served from stainless steel containers that had just been delivered - there were no kitchen facilities in the school - and which was ladled out by big ladies. The smell had already more or less deterred my appetite, but I tried the meat which was disgusting, so I tried eating some black-eyed potatoes but eventually gave up and surveyed the dessert – semolina with a blob of jam in it. One of the boys, David Pomfret, said, “Oh, this semolina smells really off,” and when I stupidly put my head down to smell it, my head was quickly rammed into my plate. I was forced to retire swiftly to the toilets to clean myself up. So after also trying the meals at the New Wing, which were not cooked on the premises either but delivered, and which I found to be just as bad as those in main school, my Mum gave me the five shillings that the school meals cost every week, and let me decide if I wanted to come home or to buy something to eat in the town. At the Wing there were no shops, only rows of houses around the school, but in Watford if it was raining and if the ride home was not very inviting, I would go with other boys to buy some chips and a bread and butter roll. But normally I rode home by bike to an empty house (my Mum was at work) and made myself a soup or an egg on toast.

In the second year at Victoria our Form Master was Gunner Gunstone, and we were only at the Wing for Metalwork classes for one morning a week. The subjects were the same but we started to do some basic algebra and geometry. Music lessons were lead by Mr. Nigel Sagar, who was a young thirtyish, slender, intense man. Sagar had his own Music Classroom complete with grand piano. We were given recorders to play, that belonged to the school, and the rigmarole of their sterilisation is my strongest memory. A tin pail full of disinfectant was placed in the front of the class. You had to dip the mouthpiece of your recorder into the fluid and then shake it dry into the bucket. The smell was as ghastly as the taste. No wonder none of us seemed to be keen on these lessons.

Once Sagar realised that I could read music, he asked me to stay behind and play something for him. I was now about three years into piano playing with Mr Graves, an elderly teacher in Watford. I was never very inspired and really only played to please my Mother, practising one hour religiously every night. I was at about Grade 4 I suppose, and I didn’t realise that actually I had a poor sense of time but an excellent memory for the musical score. I played Sagar whatever it was that I was practicing with Mr Graves, and needed no music to do it. Sagar didn’t say much but immediately pressed me into the School Band. Steve was already playing trumpet in the band, and Sagar said they needed someone to play the trombone – it was easy, he convinced me. So I stayed behind one evening a week with this big trombone. I got the hang of blowing the notes quite quickly, with Steve’s help, but the slide was the real problem. At this time being 12 years old I was not a tall kid and probably one of the smallest in the class. So my big problem was that when you needed to play a note that required the slide to be extended, my arm was not long enough to reach far enough to play the note and then get the slide back. I finally solved the problem by sort of bending forward, and letting the slide fall out of my reach, blowing the note and then flicking myself backwards to catch the slide so I could continue playing other notes again. Not a great success and I am glad to say it did not last long before a tall boy from another class, who was in the Salvation Army, took over.

Sagar was an accomplished musician, but slightly big-headed. One time sitting at his grand piano, he said to the class something like, “When Bartok wrote his first piano concerto there were only two men in the world who could actually play it.” And then he gave a little, “Hmm Hmm,” and launched into the piece, bending his head furiously over the keys, his hands flying all over the key board. So he must have been the third............

But Sagar was alright. He had a record player in his Music Room and played us lots of classical pieces and tried to explain their merits. On rare occasions he also played us some jazz and tried to show us the difference between traditional and modern jazz. My strongest memory is of him playing us ‘Strange Fruit’ a song by Billie Holiday and explaining that the song was depicting the bodies of black men who had been hanged from the limbs of trees by racist white fanatics in the Southern States of the USA. The haunting tone of her voice rung about the Victorian ceiling of the classroom and beckoned to another world across the sea where jazz was a part of people’s sad lives. And at the end of our second year at school a traditional jazz concert was performed with parts of the School Band from Steve’s class playing saxophone, tea chest bass, and drums with Nigel Sagar on piano. The school Assembly Hall rocked for the first time in its history.

Games were held for a full afternoon each week in Cassiobury Park, the school having no grounds of its own. We used to assemble in the school playground at 1.30 PM, with our kit, like football shorts, shirts and boots in our satchels and then, with the games teacher, we would walk there. Cassiobury Park is one of the best things about Watford, it being a rather large formal park that would take you at least an hour to walk around. There were some changing rooms and cold (only) showers about halfway down the park. There were probably at least six football pitches set amongst the wonderful ancient horse chestnut and oak trees. Mr. Fred Downs, a young teacher of about 25 years old, was our Games Master for our first year, and I honestly don’t think he really knew the rules of football very well. I had to explain the offside rule to him several times after he had blatantly let some goal-hanging kid score a goal when he was completely offside. He was also incredibly short-sighted.

Most of the children at Vics, as the school was familiarly called, came from the town of Watford’s Primary Schools. However, my primary school was called St Meryl and although it was within the Watford rural area, it was three miles away at Carpenders Park nearly in Middlesex. This meant that they came from primary schools like Watford Fields, Chater, or Beecham Grove and others. Early in our first year the new Victoria First Year Eleven was invited to go back to Watford Fields, the old school of Bugs Martindale and Peter Hancock, to play a game against their first team, who were of course a year younger than us. Now you will remember that one year at twelve years old is almost an eternity, so we considered that they should be easy opposition for us. But no, for there in the shade of Benskins Brewery, by half-time they were already up two nil. Having been elected captain I decided at this moment to remove our Foxy Fowler from his position as goalkeeper, where he claimed to have played for his primary school, and replace him with Cliff Langley, a very tall lad for his age, who was in our class. I had noticed in the playground that he had very safe hands. I also swopped Bugs Martindale to the inside forward position to partner Melvyn Bailey and moved Bobby Keeler to left half. Keeler had a strange ambling gait that fooled many defenders and by the end we won 5 -2, Peter Hancock having scored two goals zooming in from right wing.

Our games against other schools did not fare so well, especially when we played at home with Fred Downs as the home referee. We generally did well when playing away often beating our greatest rivals Leggats Way School, and also Bushey Meads, Langlebury, Clarendon, and Hampden. However, we could never beat the catholic school from North Watford, St Michaels. Not in the five years I played football for Victoria. In about our third year a young guy named Melvyn Brisbane joined the school and played for the School Eleven. Melvyn had a natural football talent and was far above the standard of anyone else. He eventually made a professional career playing for Watford FC. He raised our game enormously because he had a wonderful left foot and could kick the ball really hard. Sometimes we played home matches at the Wing where there was a sloping pitch, and time and again, we would kick off facing down the pitch and Melvyn would receive the ball from the centre forward and shoot from the halfway line, completely lobbing the goal keeper, who could only look astounded as the ball sailed over his head into the goal net. 1 – 0 already, we would grin. However, football does depend upon your physique and fitness, and I noticed that as boys grew over the years, they either got better or worse. Some of the original First Eleven just never grew enough or lost interest perhaps and slipped out of the team. They were replaced by kids who had either improved their skills or grown physically to be better. Colin Heathcote and I were always about the same size when we were eight until thirteen years, and then he started to grow faster than me. Colin grew steadily to reach six feet by the time he was eighteen and by then his football had improved so much that he was playing for Herts County at the weekends. During my fourth year the School Eleven had a football match against the Masters Eleven, they were surprisingly good at first but then faded quickly - we beat them 3 – 0.

Recreation breaks at school were held halfway through the morning and afternoon. In the morning break free school milk was offered in third pint bottles. Unfortunately in the winter it was often frozen solid in its bottles. The main preoccupation for me and my friends was then to play football using a tennis ball in the school yard. How many hours did I pass with Peter Hancock, Colin Heathcote, Bugs Martindale, Melvyn Bailey, Cliff Langley, David Elson, and Peter (Bomber) Lombardi kicking a tennis ball around the tarmac? Other pastimes for those less inclined were French Cricket, fag cards, and of course the joys of the Tuck Shop. The Tuck Shop was manned by a boy in his fifth year and sold Pepsi Cola, Fanta and biscuits. You could buy biscuits separately, for one penny each. You were not allowed out of school during recreation, the massive, old, blue, painted metal gates remaining firmly closed.

School began at 09.00 AM and you normally had to be inside the gates by 08.55 AM. Prefects manned the gates and if you were late you were marked into a book and usually received detention, unless you had a valid reason. Having now lived in Europe for most of my life, I have been surprised how other nations do not always value timekeeping. The French, Italians and other Latin nationalities are notoriously late for almost every meeting and have a very different idea of time to British people. I am sure this is because we were brought up, both at school and at home, to be on time, like the Germans and Dutch. So generally I arrived at least fifteen minutes before nine o’clock, and was almost never late. In fact I think I was only ill and absent for one day in my five years at Victoria.

During my brother, Steve’s second year, I think, before I arrived, a photo was taken of the complete school. There were so many boys in the photo that it needed a frame about a metre long and it’s one of his prized possessions nowadays. I often wondered during my time at Vics, when they would repeat the photo, but it never happened. Well actually it did. In my last year after taking GCE ‘O’ levels, on a lovely day in late June, Colin Heathcote and I took the day off, as a sort of reward for all the study we had done. Classes were finished and there were only two weeks left of our time at Victoria so attendance was quite relaxed. We spent a great day at Bushey open air swimming pool, only to be told by Peter Hancock the next day that a photo had been taken of the complete school. I never mentioned it to my Mum, who only asked me once about why no photo had ever been taken. I could hardly have bought it and not appeared in it. But it was a bit ironic, because my attendance during five years was almost perfect..............ho hum.

Lunchtime occurred at 12.00, midday and lasted until 1.30 PM. You were free to leave the school or stay for school dinners. On the corner of the alley that lead to the boys’ school was a sweet shop offering all the normal delights like Ha’penny Chews , Black Jacks, Sherbet lemons, Arrowroot sticks, and in the summer the wonderful frozen Jubblies, which were a triangular prism of frozen orange juice. A well-beaten-up bubblegum dispenser was set into the pavement outside the shop displaying its brightly-coloured gum balls that could be bought by inserting a penny.

By the time I was in the third year at Vics I could afford to buy a good bicycle, so with my savings from my paper and grocery rounds I bought a French racing bike, an A. S. Gillott for fifteen pounds. With this bike I could cycle the 3 miles from home to school easily in fifteen minutes. So when school finished at four o’clock I was normally home by 4.30 at least. However, it was out of the question to keep the bike at school, because it would have been stripped immediately. So luckily for me Peter Hancock, who lived nearby in St. Mary’s Road, allowed me to leave it safe in his back garden. Peter had become my closest friend at school, and we sat next to one another when we could. Peter had very good handwriting in long script, and I, having been taught at St. Meryl Primary School to write in italic, decided at the age of fourteen to change. I just could not write fast enough in italic to get down dictation, so I copied Peter’s writing and this helped me to write faster. It eventually morphed into my own style. I think the italic script looked good, but as you printed it and didn’t join up the letters, it was very impractical for me.

Physical Education was held twice a week either inside in the Main Assembly Hall, which was lined on each side with wooden wall bars, or outside, in the playground. All the Gym classes were managed by the same teacher, Mr. Peter Tomlinson. “Tombo” was good-looking, about thirtyish, drove a white sleek Ford car, and was very slim and fit. He was also hopelessly narcissistic, and seemed to be permanently tanned and searching for dark windows to look into. It was Peter Hancock, who had many older, worldly-wise sisters, who explained that the tan came out of a bottle. I was amazed. Tombo organized us into Victoria’s house colours, which were named after the four rivers of Watford: Colne (red), Gade (blue), Chess (yellow) and Ver (green). I was in Chess. The gym classes in the hall varied but used quite a lot of equipment like leather bucks and horses to jump over, and wall bars for stretching and climbing. Tombo always got us to compete in our house teams. Poor old Arthur Lythaby in Gade was the only fat boy in the class and these P.E. lessons were torture for him. Tombo would help Arthur to ascend the buck and watch him struggle with insufficient arm muscle to propel himself over it – poor guy. The rest of us were pretty thin, having been brought up on rationing after the Second World War, when food was still in short supply. Of course at this time none of us were aware of these facts – rationing had been normal for us. There was almost nobody in my class who came from a middle class background – they were all at the Grammar School. We were all definitely working class at Victoria.

Outside in the playground we would play in our house teams games like skittle-ball, where two big skittles were placed inside painted rings on the tarmac and each team had to defend their own and attack the other’s to try and knock it over with a ball. These P.E. lessons lasted an hour and I enjoyed them a lot. It taught you a lot about team play and fairness. I think it also provided young boys with the chance to let off steam and get rid of some energy. Tomlinson had his own classroom on the side of the school that faced the Girls’ school. All the classrooms on this side had sash windows but of frosted glass so you could not see out or in, and they were protected on the far side by chainlink netting, so that when the girls played netball, the windows would not be broken. In the summer when not taking a P.E. class, Tombo always had the window next to his desk slightly raised open so that he could watch the girls play in their navy blue knickers – the lecher!

French was a subject that intrigued me. At twelve years old it seemed like a code that you could speak and no-one else would know what you were saying. I thought that having mastered the verbs etre (to be) and avoir (to have) all you needed to do was learn lots of nouns and you would be speaking French. English is such an easy language to pick up – with 200 words you can hold short conversations and get by. You can learn to speak English by going to a pub, because the verb declensions are easy and the tense construction fairly simple. Of course if you want to speak English properly it’s quite complicated, and actually there are more than twice as many words in English than there are in French. But French is such an exact language and if you don’t speak it grammatically no-one in France will understand you. And that’s before you try getting your tongue and lips around the pronunciation. We struggled through etre and avoir with William Spouge in our first year, and after about four lessons he produced a small book “Pierre et les Cambrioleurs”, a short story about Peter and the robbers. I do not actually remember finishing the book, so I don’t know if the robbers got caught or not. Must look it up on the Internet some time. In our second year a new master arrived at the school, Mr. T. Alford and he became our master for French. Terry Alford had moved out of London from a very rough school in Cricklewood and when he first started he was so hard and tough, tolerating nothing and quickly shouting so that we all felt terrorized. He settled down after a bit realizing that Vics was not in a war zone. I remember he used to pass me in the corridor and say “Salut Salaud”, which later when I lived in France, I discovered means, “Greetings you Bastard!” loosely translated. In our third year we had Mr. Langham, who insisted that we speak French throughout the lesson. He used to stand in front of the class grasping the lapels of his jacket with both hands while teaching. Langham decided that we would all adopt French names. I wanted Henri, but someone else got it before me, so I had to settle for Tomas. I was never really happy with this.

When our third year began we were very surprised to see a whole new addition to Victoria in the form of numerous, mostly red-haired, Scottish lads. These were boys from the Royal Caledonian School in Bushey, who were the orphans or poor children of Scottish parents. The children only boarded at their school in Bushey and due to an increase in their numbers, now it was Victoria’s turn to educate them. So Jock Maclean joined us in Form 3 and became quite a useful centre half in the 3rd Eleven. The ‘Callies’ as they were known were dressed in grey uniforms and wore kilts! No wonder they were involved in lots of playground fights, but then fighting is second nature for Scots.

During the fifties and sixties the education of English children was organised on a selective basis. The best schools in the land were the Grammar Schools and these were for the brightest children. Essentially they were there to prepare children to go on to higher education. The school leaving age then was fifteen years old and most children left school at this age, unless you were at a Grammar School, where you would take the General Certificate of Education at Ordinary level, continuing your education until you were at least sixteen. Grammar Schools were the public education gateway to University entrance which you gained by obtaining three GCEs at Advanced level, normally at eighteen years old. Not a lot different to the requirements that still exist today in the UK. Most Secondary Modern schools did not provide the possibility to let all their children take GCE ‘O’ levels, only a selected few. Victoria Boys’ School provided technical education specializing in trade classes of Woodwork, Metalwork and Technical Drawing, aiming to get boys into craft apprenticeships when they left to go to work. Art and Classic subjects like History were only very lightly covered, as this school was certainly not a feeder for higher education. There were several big printing companies in Watford, founded on the four rivers that ran through the town, which, coupled with the paper industry at Croxley, provided the opportunity for boys from Victoria to most likely find a job in the printing industry.

There were few Technical Schools in the country at this time but Watford had one, which provided the possibility to take GCE ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels as a portal to a future technical career. Both Steve and I were fortunate in that Victoria provided the possibility for the top stream at fifteen years old to stay on an extra year, until they were sixteen, and then take subjects at GCE ‘O’ level. Not many other secondary modern schools in Watford offered this initiative. Victoria’s top class was prepared for this at fourteen, when you were in your third year. Potential GCE students were placed in a class called 5 Lower for their fourth year. The fifth year at sixteen was called 5 Upper. So learning became serious at fourteen, History was dropped from the curriculum and I was introduced to two teachers who were to have a big influence on my school life.

Cyril Fenton was our Form Master during our third year and was also the best English teacher in the school. Cyril was a kindly, white-haired man in his late forties. He dressed well, had charisma and because we had been selected to take GCE ‘O’ levels he tried to make us feel special. He eventually left teaching later and became Mayor of Rickmansworth, a neighbouring smaller town. Cyril loved the English language and did his level best to pass that love on to us. In his year we were introduced to English literature and read ‘The Autobiography of a Super Tramp’ by W. H. Davies, the real life adventures of a man who decided to become a tramp in the USA, ‘Jennie’ by Paul Gallico, a fantasy story of boy who has an accident and whilst he is unconscious, fighting for his life, dreams that he is a cat and enters the feline world with all its precariousness, and ‘A Pattern of Islands’ by Sir Arthur Grimble, a funny and charming story of the life of a young British administrator in the Pacific Islands of Gilbert and Ellis. Cyril also plunged us into the more complicated side of English grammar and started teaching us parsing, the analysis of sentences into clauses and phrases.

For Mathematics we were introduced to Mr. Jack Spours, a very talented teacher who was also the senior Sports Master in the school. Mr. Spours had a very ‘no nonsense’ approach to maths and being a tall, dark-haired man with a serious and rather over-bearing manner, he actually put the fear of God into the class. He had a very strong North Country voice that would ring out and hammer home mathematic principles, with which he seemed to have a personal affinity. If you didn’t understand it, Spours took it very seriously (and personally) and had you behind after the class to see where in your dense head he had gone wrong! He actually had a very logical way of teaching maths and if you paid attention and did your homework, normally all went well and progress was made. If you did not understand one of Spours’s favourite saying was, ‘Look to the Book’, which for us lads sounded just like, ‘Luuk to the Buuk’. We were introduced to Algebra in detail, first to simple equations, then simultaneous equations and finally quadratic equations. He also taught us the first 30 theorems of geometry, which are alright for the first 20 or so, but then become quite complicated, especially as you have to prove them each time. We also continued trigonometry venturing into higher ordered functions.

In 5 Lower our Form Master was Ron Atkinson, the Technical Drawing master. French had been dropped except for just two boys in the class who continued and General Science with Mr. T. Heath. We were being prepared to take five subjects in the GCE ‘O’ level exams which were: English, Mathematics (Arithmetic, Algebra and Trigonometry), General Science (Physics, Chemistry and Biology), Geography and either Metalwork or Technical Drawing. So this was our curriculum for the last two years at school, plus of course the mandatory P.E. and Games. Music, Art, and Woodwork were dropped. During the fourth year, 5 Lower still took the national leaving school exam for fifteen year olds which was called the Area Certificate, but in preparation for the GCE ‘O’ level we also took a more difficult national exam, The College of Preceptors Exam.

General Science took place in a recent post-war building that had been squeezed onto the Watford school site and was called the Annexe. In here were the 5 Lower and 5 Upper classrooms, a science laboratory, the Secretary’s office and an Art room. It also contained on its far side a boiler room for the school’s heating system, which I suppose had been modernized and updated after the Second World War. The Boiler Room was the home of Mr. Stacey the school janitor, a man who seemed to be always dressed in blue overalls and had a perpetually lined face. I don’t think life had been kind to him because he definitely did not like boys very much.

Science classes took place with ‘Ted’ Heath (after the band leader of that period) who was a small man with dark skin like a walnut, and furtive brown eyes. The lab contained benches with gas taps in the centre to which we attached Bunsen burners to perform experiments. Of course these taps were dangerous as boys loved to turn them on without lighting them, but at our first lesson Heath explained how dangerous this could be and did we all want the explosion to carry us to Watford FC football pitch? So under his strict control we performed experiments like heating a solution of water with potassium permanganate in it and then allowing it to cool and evaporate to observe the formation of purplish-black crystals. I found science interesting but there was insufficient time to ask questions. Biology was fine and Chemistry was okay, but physics was more difficult. I never really understood how you solved chemical transformation equations, I think the main problem is that in maths an equation uses previously known precepts to solve it, but in chemistry you seemed to need to know the solution already! I guess the rules were not properly explained.

Metalwork classes took place at the Wing. I only did them for one year with Mr. Pereira, who once again went to great lengths to try to stop boys from hurting themselves with the potentially dangerous tools. First we made a picture hook out of brass, by cutting a sheet into a sort of trapezium and then bending the sheet so that it could hook onto the ceiling rail at one end and a picture frame at the other. I found one of these in a box in my Mum’s house when she moved into a Care Home in 2009. I think my younger brother Victor had made it about fifty years earlier. We also made a fire poker out of a length of quarter-inch square steel bar, sharpened at one end and turned into a closed circle at the other. The poker was twisted at its centre length, giving us experience in using the forge to heat up the metal and getting used to hammering the hot steel into shapes. It was when Lombardi was giving his one a final polishing by applying it to a greased leather buffing wheel, that it became hot, due to friction of course. Lombardi tried holding the metal poker with his overall strap but it got caught in the buffing wheel and would have pulled him into the machine, if he had not managed to press the red stop button in time. Then of course we were lectured with, “This silly idiot…,” clip around ear etc. Some boys loved using the metalwork tools and machines but not me.

At the end of our 4th year at school Bernard Church and William Spouge offered a trip to France in a Commer estate van for about twelve boys. Peter, Colin and I went and we visited Rheims, Paris, Dreux, Chartres and Beauvais staying in either Youth Hostels or Catholic School dormitories, when the French children were on their summer holidays. It was my first trip abroad and I loved it.

Every spring, each year of the school had to take part in a Cross Country race in Cassiobury Park. I remember only the last few races but the distance was about three miles. This race was always organized by Jack Spours and he would not allow anyone to miss it. It normally rained and the course was at first reasonably easy, but halfway through was a stiff climb called Jacotts Hill. Spours would have all the boys lined up in front of him to explain the course, which was the same every year: The first part was through the park to the river Gade and then he got to, “Over the bridge down to the woodcutter’s hut, up Jacotts,” and here he would smile wickedly, because this was the difficult bit and he would post a teacher there to be sure that no-one skived off. In our class was a very thin, quiet, tallish guy called Ian Brooks, who was a member of the Watford Harriers sports club. Brooks would far outpace everyone else and win every time. During my fifth year I did some training with him, and grew to like running too. I came second.

The last year at Victoria was definitely the best. We were the oldest boys in the school, aloof and apart, our classroom on the top floor of the Annexe. Study became a big part of my life, as it would for many years afterwards. We took the GCE Oxford version which was a national exam, but you never knew if they would ask a question that Victoria had not covered. We performed mock ‘O’ level exams answering previous questions. Not everybody took all the subjects. I took Maths, English, Geography, General Science and Technical Drawing and a further subject called Certificate of Proficiency in Arithmetic. I think these were quite testing exams for children of sixteen years old. The level was quite high, so for finding a job afterwards they were an excellent benchmark for employment, or for continuing full-time education to ‘A’ levels they were your entrance into a Grammar School perhaps. I passed all my subjects and managed to find a job in engineering which I studied part-time until I was twenty-three, eventually qualifying as a Chartered Structural Engineer at twenty-five years old.

So the worst school in Watford did me proud. With the help of more experienced teachers like Jack Spours and Cyril Fenton I discovered that if I persevered, I could succeed. And perhaps importantly I made a friend for life in Peter Hancock, who after an apprenticeship as a compositor in the Watford printing industry rose to become Managing Director of two important printing companies in London. My brother Steve did an apprenticeship in production engineering, emigrated to Australia, embraced the computerization of his industry, rose to become a published specialist in his field of flow-manufacturing and Vice-President of an American management consultancy.

My younger brother Victor started at Victoria six years after me in 1962, and a little later the school leaving age was increased to sixteen years old. This had an enormous effect on many schools because existing establishments had to find place for about twenty percent more students. For Victoria this was impossible so a new school had been planned and opened in Tolpits Lane, complete with swimming pool and state-of-the-art woodwork and metalwork shops. Victor too gained his ‘O’ levels, and went on to study full-time for a Higher National Diploma in Business Studies at Watford Technical College, and started his own successful business, which flourishes strongly today.

I doubt if any of the teachers that I mention in this recollection are still alive today, but I would like to thank them all anyway, for their help and also just for being a part of my early life.

**St Blaise, January 2014**