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'Varmits and Turnips': personal experiences of a secondary modern education, 1958-1962

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ABSTRACT This article is not intended to be an autobiography. It relates to the experiences of the author as a pupil in a secondary modern school in Wiltshire during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He suffered the experience of being an 11-plus failure and a secondary modern graduate at the age of 15 years. Later in life he had a much more rewarding career as a teacher in a comprehensive school. He supports the comprehensive school ethos because he had previously experienced the alternative. This article relates what his perceptions were of being a pupil in a secondary modern school, with a mixture of the 'old guard teachers' brought up on the Hadow ideology of a modern school, and the more dynamic young teachers who entered the school and had a profound influence on the author in shaping his future life and career.

Introduction

The impetus for me to write this article was my reading of two outstanding articles, both published in 2013 in volume 42, issue 3 of the *Journal of the History of Education Society*, the first by Clyde Chitty (pp. 350-364), and the second by David Crook (pp. 365-380). While at teacher training college during the mid-to-late 1970s, I learnt that the psychological testing pioneered by Sir Cyril Burt may have been a fraud. His 'expert' advice was accepted without challenge. Burt had probably fabricated his own research data, into order to fit in with his theory. Therefore the premise for the introduction of a three-tier secondary educational system set at 11 years was probably fraudulent (Chitty, 2009, pp. 107-109). Unfortunately it directed thousands of secondary modern pupils, including myself, into an educational dustbin.

Historical Background

Nelson Haden Secondary Modern Schools for Boys and Girls, Trowbridge, Wiltshire had been constructed in the late 1930s and opened in September 1940. Its existence had been due in part to the planned secondary re-organisation recommended by the Hadow Report of 1926, *The Education of the Adolescent*, and the provisions of the 1936 Education Act that intended to statutorily raise the school leaving age to 15 years.

The 1944 Education Act was followed by the implementation of a tripartite system of secondary schools, consisting of grammar, technical and modern schools, though few technical schools were provided. The 1944 act successfully raised the statutory school leaving age to 15 years and Wiltshire Local Educational Authority (LEA), unlike some other authorities, did introduce secondary technical schools.

Nelson Haden Secondary Modern (SM) School was built on a 22-acre site and was named after a local entrepreneur. The boys' school was designed to take a maximum of 300 students and opened for its first intake of pupils in September 1940, under the headship of Mr Ernest Hughes.

The pressures of war caused the arrival of many evacuee children and the limit of 300 pupils was soon exceeded. Teaching accommodation was further reduced as the War Office commandeered a sizeable part of the school in 1943 for military use. Mr Hughes retired in 1951 to be replaced by Mr BC, who was assisted by 13 male teachers. The first woman teacher, Mrs L, was appointed in 1960 and taught history. The curriculum included arithmetic, English, reading and writing, scripture with a purely Christian focus, together with wood and metal work as well as gardening with Mr G. Mr BC was still the headteacher when I entered the school in September 1958.

The Eleven Plus and Streaming

My father was a police constable in the Wiltshire Constabulary, and in 1955 my family was relocated to Trowbridge. Both my twin sister and myself had attended Trowbridge Parochial (Church of England) Primary School in Trowbridge. The school building was opposite the parish church, and had been built in the late eighteenth century, possibly as a bluecoat school. The overcrowding in this primary school was overpowering, and my academic record school was rather poor. For example, during my final year in July 1958 my class position was 32nd out of 39 in the class; my reading score was 109, English 20% and arithmetic 18%, the class teacher endorsing my final school report as 'disappointing!'

The irony of attending this school was that no one ever 'passed' the 11 plus even if your position in class was first! The 'passes' came from the primary school on the other side of town used by the more affluent middle-class families. The school catchment area included the poorer district of the town that represented the marginalised and dispossessed, where the unemployed and one-parent families lived – these single parents mainly comprising widows whose

husbands had been war casualties. Perhaps the biggest hurdle to this group gaining entry to the local grammar schools was the cost, which was prohibitive. Numerous friends of mine were encouraged not to pass the 11 plus by their families due to financial constraints.

One day whilst in the senior class we were expected, without prior warning or practice, to undergo a psychological testing exercise. My particular result apparently was rather pathetic, and I never proceeded to the second stage of a mathematics and English test, although my sister did. She attained 'pass' grades in all three tests, and you could assume that my sister had passed the 11 plus! But there was one final hurdle. The headteacher of the girls' grammar school then conducted an interview with her. No one from the parochial school ever cleared this hurdle!

The Secondary School Experience

Therefore in September 1958 my sister and I entered the local secondary modern schools. There was gender separation: the girls went to Nelson Haden SM School for Girls and the boys went to the equivalent Boys SM School. The two schools were adjacent to each other, separated by the main drive into the school.

The original Adcroft Higher Elementary School situated close to Trowbridge town centre became the Adcroft School of Building in 1958, a secondary technical school. Also in the centre of Trowbridge what had once been the site of the nineteenth-century Mechanics Institute, built at the time of Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, became the Victoria Commercial Technical Institute for Wiltshire. The Victoria School had both male and female pupils, although the boys represented a small proportion of the overall pupil community. Entry to the Victoria Commercial School was through a '13 plus' examination, which consisted of a mathematics, English and general knowledge paper. The majority of the pupils were girls from across the wider Wiltshire area, and they were accommodated as boarders in a Victorian house called Ethendune.

A number of boys who passed the '13 plus' entered the Victoria Commercial School, but they were still pupils at Nelson Haden SM School. Also a few boys in my year were admitted to the Adcroft School of Building, and one to Bath Technical School, although this was in a different authority. However, one friend of mine, C.H., was 'downgraded' from Bath Technical School and entered Nelson Haden SM School. He later had a successful career as an electronics engineer and entrepreneur. Another boy, a year lower than me, passed a test at the age of 12 and was admitted to the local grammar school. He later went on to graduate with a first from Bath University. Other notable achievements include twins who came from an outlying village. One was a talented musician who was given a place at a specialist music school in Oxford, and his brother was transferred directly to the sixth form at Chippenham Grammar School. This was announced with great acclaim by Mr BC, the headteacher, on Speech Day in the summer of 1960 (F8/700/24/8/6/1).

When I arrived at Nelson Haden SM School with the intake of 1958, my school entry number was 30, and I and my fellow pupils were set into streams of A, B and C. Streams A and B were sub-divided into upper and lower, so you had 1A upper and a 1A lower, and so forth. The entire annual intake was placed in four groups, or houses: these were Sydney, Jefferys, Wren and Pitman. A sizeable number of pupils were brought in by bus from the outlying villages.

Which particular stream you were placed in related to your 11-plus scoring, and we were placed into a particular stream from day one, there being no further testing to determine this. I entered the 1B lower class; the form teacher was Mr C, from Pembrokeshire. This was Mr C's first teaching post. He had graduated from a teacher training college and had recently completed his military national service. Mr C had arrived with a number of other newly qualified Welsh teachers from similar backgrounds, and these 'Welsh wizards' were actually dedicated to their pupils and tried very hard for us. Education and teaching for them was a passion. Mr C and other new teachers, particularly Mr DD, gave personal interest and time to their pupils and helped them gain confidence. In my case, Mr C gave that initial spark that education could be stimulating and fun and this paid off for me later in life. The Welsh teachers also introduced rugby into the curriculum. There was also Mr D, a Yorkshireman who later became my form tutor and general teacher when I was upgraded to 3B plus. Mr D had been a national service army officer and had been decorated while on active service in Malaya. He too was a dedicated teacher and inspired confidence.

The Secondary Modern and the Post-war Baby Boomers

The school was designed to take 300 boy pupils; however, by the time the 1958 intake arrived, the 'baby boomers' had pushed this number up to over 500 and classroom space was at a premium! The previous year the educational authorities had rented two classrooms from the local Anglican and Baptist churches about a mile from the school campus. For eighteen months, the classroom for 1B lower was an old and rather dingy classroom behind the Baptist chapel and next door to a public house. The LEA was then negotiating with the War Office regarding a recently vacated spider block of wooden huts. These were refurbished as classrooms and were ready for September 1961, despite being two years late. Thus, I spent my second and third years being educated in a classroom within the spider block that smelled of creosote and stale sweat. The location of Nelson Haden SM meant that the military were never far away. This was the era of the Cold War, and least twice a year the deputy commandant of the county civil defence organisation, a retired brigadier, would come with a regular 'horror movie' called *Protect and Survive*. He told us to be positive about nuclear war, as most of the population would survive! Later, while serving in the Army, I learnt otherwise!

Being away from the main school campus did have a positive side, as Mr C appeared to organise his own curriculum. As we were about one mile from

the main school campus, Mr C gave us stimulating lessons in history, geography and English, although I was not keen on mathematics or scripture. However, Mr C also took us on nature walks where we explored local ponds, streams and hedgerows and observed wildlife, and handled frogs, toads and newts. He even took the class out one Saturday to the fringes of Salisbury Plain, where we searched for fossils in the chalk.

Mr DD used to organise visits to local farms on Friday afternoons. Every summer he would take some of the lower B and C stream boys camping at Ilfracombe in a trailer towed by a tractor (F8/700/24/8/6/1). One boy who received extra tuition from Mr DD and Mr G, the gardening teacher, stayed on in the fifth form and sat two or three O levels in the summer of 1961 and eventually entered the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester (F8/700/24/8/6/1).

In order to give credence to the academic criteria of the school, there was an O-level stream and a very small fifth form that received special mention at the annual speech and prize-giving days. The O-level fifth year had been established due to the influence of one of the two deputy heads, Mr RS, and the first entrants sat their examinations in the summer of 1958. In reality the fifth-form O-level set was a token gesture only. There were only about three or four boys a year in the fifth form and they sat perhaps three or four O levels, and the Union of Educational Institute's (UEI) examinations annually. Rarely were any boys of the B and C streams featured in the annual headteacher's speech and prize giving.

In reality, the school and the majority of its pupils lived off second-hand books and equipment, which were passed down from the grammar and other schools within the boundaries of Wiltshire LEA. Any new material or facility was paid for through the proceeds of the school fete, or constructed by the boys themselves; an example was the canoes, although I cannot remember that the B and C stream boys were ever afforded the privilege of using them. Reflecting on the past, it would have been patently obvious to a later generation of teachers that some of the boys had educational and learning difficulties such as dyslexia. At this time, these were not recognised and were rarely addressed, as they would be today. However, there are two success stories related to my peers who both had dyslexia. One became a successful entrepreneur in the hotel industry, despite never attaining any further schooling or qualifications beyond the age of 15; another had a dual career as a pharmacist and a minister in the Church of England.

Despite this, the boys in the B and C streams were mostly regarded as of low intelligence: after all, we had failed the '11 plus' exam and were labelled by some teachers as 'dull boys'. Thus we were set to undertake tasks associated with projects, recorded in the headteacher's speech day pep talk on 26 July 1961 as benefiting from '[t]he inspiration of Mr F (technical drawing), Mr H, Mr R (woodwork) and Mr L (physical education)'. He went on to say that 'we hope the projects will be used to the full in the pursuit of healthy minds and healthy bodies' (F8/700/24/8/6/1).

For the first two years of my attendance, the B and C stream assisted in the building of the school swimming pool. These allotted tasks, either for a morning or an afternoon, ranged from digging the main ditch or trenches for cables to mixing concrete. The final opening of the swimming pool was in the summer of 1961.

It would appear from the headteacher's zeal for projects within the school that he had been influenced perhaps by the now defunct 1936 Education Act. Although this act legally raised the school leaving age to 15 from 1 September 1939, in reality it was a limited piece of legislation that had its intellectual origins within the earlier educations acts from the late nineteenth century onwards. For example, it had numerous clauses exempting children from attending school due to 'beneficial employment' during the extra year (Dent, 1970, p. 104). Indeed, *The Times* calculated that up to 86 per cent of 14-to-15-year-old pupils could be 'exempted' from attending school for the extra year (quoted by Cannadine et al, 2011, p. 66). In the event, the act was suspended in September 1939 due to the beginning of the Second World War.

In terms of the school's curriculum for B and C streams, I have always considered that the headteacher had interpreted 'beneficial employment' as being an integral part of the modern school curriculum. Much of the secondary modern ethos of Nelson Haden School was about improving the interior economy of the school. Hence the headteacher's enthusiasm for school projects undertaken by the boys themselves. It certainly was not beneficial to me as I have never been competent at wood and metal work, or DIY, and yet had to suffer the indignity of ridicule from the teachers associated with the projects. Nevertheless, I became proficient at digging ditches, which was again put to good use during my first 'career' in the Army!

Outside of Messrs C and D's class I did not thrive. I was poor at mathematics, although it generally improved during my time in Mr D's class. I was promoted to 3A lower, which proved to be a disaster, and I returned to getting low scores in mathematics. This was despite dire threats, notably from Mr A, who had been at the school since its opening in 1940. Mr A was a problem to me; he was also one of the two deputy head teachers and taught by instilling fear in us. Mr A also ran the regular Friday afternoon detention club, where I spent many Friday afternoons. The pupils he liked, normally those in the A stream, were addressed as 'varmits', and those that he did not like, normally those from the B and C streams, he addressed as 'turnips'. Mr A regularly threatened us 'turnips' that our poor school records and our 'poor' attitude towards school would not get us employment in the area and he would make sure of that as he knew most of the local employers.

However, I did well in the humanities, art, English and gardening with Mr G. Every year Mr G used to organise visits to the Bath & West Show and the Frome Cheese Show. During my time as a pupil at Nelson Haden School I was elevated from 1B lower to 3B upper, with Mr D, as previously mentioned, and to 3A lower. It did me no good, however. On arrival at 3A lower midway through the school year, I was miles behind everyone else in mathematics,

although I did well in history, which was taught by Mrs L, and in gardening with Mr G. It did not seem like a promotion to me, but more of a punishment, because I met Mr A on a very regular basis. Thanks to Mr A and his threats, it was back to 3B upper after nearly one term, and I remained there in Mr D's class; as I progressed to 4B upper, my mathematics improved too!

One particular incident that I remember whilst in 3B upper was during a music lesson in 1960. The teacher, Mr W, who had a speech impediment and secreted much saliva whilst speaking or shouting (mainly the latter!), asked the class to name a famous guitarist. A pupil called A quickly raised his hand, saying, 'Sir, Sir, Elvis Presley!' We all assumed that this was a genuine answer. But not so! Mr W was not amused and nearly suffered an apoplectic fit as he exploded into a tirade of indecipherable mumbles and curses accompanied by a foaming mouth and hit the pupil on the head with a textbook.

The Final Term

The headteacher interviewed my parents, as he wanted me to stay on into the fifth form and be considered for O-level and UEI examinations. But by this time I had had enough and left at the end of the spring term in 1962 at the age of 15 without any qualifications. All of us fourth-year school leavers were invited on the last afternoon into the headteacher's study, where we were told that women were different from men, and that women biologically had to carry the heavier load in life. The finale was an order to leave women alone and not to 'knock off' early from our jobs.

The Comprehensive Experience

Later during my life, in September 1979, now holding a Bachelor of Education degree, I obtained a teaching post at a South Bristol comprehensive school. No other teaching colleague at this school had experienced being a pupil in a secondary modern school, and I found the opportunities that were on offer out of this world. The school had been purposely built in the mid-1950s as a multilateral or comprehensive school, along with three others in South Bristol.

However, the first headteacher of the school, who had retired before my arrival, had written papers in educational journals praising the secondary moderns and offering advice on how to approach religious education within the secondary modern curriculum. His paper particularly focused on a fictitious pupil called 'John Smith of Form 3C, aged thirteen and a half. His intelligence quotient as determined at the time of the "eleven plus" examination is 85' (Perry, 1956, p. 101).

Apparently Dr Perry had run the new comprehensive system on secondary modern school principles and considered selection via the 11 plus and streaming as being the way forward. A number of the original staff who had been employed when Dr Perry was the headteacher still viewed his new purpose-built comprehensive school as being a secondary modern.

Whilst I was on my third and final teaching practice at a neighbouring South Bristol comprehensive school in the autumn of 1977, streaming was still the order of the day in the lower school. The children went through two mock tests before the actual one. During my practice I had to console numerous pupils who were emotionally upset, confused and disorientated about the whole process. My attempt to discuss the problem with the head of the lower school was met with a hostile response and a career threat. The four purpose-built comprehensive schools in South Bristol had their own definition of what a comprehensive education meant. There was no blueprint for what a comprehensive school should be or what it should do. As Crook rightly states, 'Many more comprehensives were secondary moderns in disguise' (Crook, 2013, p. 374).

Conclusion

Some six years after I had left Nelson Haden SM School, the number of boys taking O levels had increased substantially. In 1968, ten boys had passed mathematics at O level under Mr BR's tuition. Indeed, the same headteacher, BC, on Speech Day 1968, stated:

> Largely through the encouragement from the Deputy Head, Mr BR, ten years ago [1958] we dared enter our boys (I mean those whose parents were wise enough to see they stayed here for the extra fifth year) for the examination taken only at grammar or public schools. (F8/700/24/8/6/1)

The focus of academic achievement was improving at Nelson Haden SM School after I left. Perhaps one reason for this was the retirement of the older members of staff, including Mr A. By now Circular 10/65 had been issued by the Department of Education and Science (DES), although it was not a statutory document, as the 1944 Education Act had made no specific reference to how secondary schools should be organised after 1945. During the early 1970s, there was initial planning within Wiltshire LEA for the development of a multilateral form of education. However, the headteacher's plans to further increase the scope of the examinations in the school during the mid-1960s were thwarted by the opening of a college of further education just a mile from the school campus. He complained to the LEA and the school governors about this development, but to no effect (F8/700/24/8/6/1).

The two secondary modern schools in Trowbridge were eventually amalgamated and became a comprehensive school in 1974; at the present time it is an academy. The two grammar schools (the boys' one and the girls' one) also amalgamated to become another comprehensive school. It could be argued that from 1974 Trowbridge had a comprehensive grammar school and a comprehensive secondary modern school.

In 1975 I decided on a complete career change and left the military to become a student at a college of education in Bristol. At the time of writing this

article (July 2013), it is being suggested in some quarters of academia, notably by Professor Robert J. Plomin, an American psychologist at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, that children's examination results are largely a product of their genes and are not related to standards of teaching in schools. Plomin is continuing his tests on twins (Plomin, 2012). Has the influence of Burt ever gone away?

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