

# Chapter 5

## *Transition to secondary school*

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Turning eleven years of age was considered one of life's milestones. The transition from Junior to secondary school seemed to be a giant step towards adulthood, despite the fact we hadn't yet achieved teenage status. I was becoming more worldly, and this was encouraged by my parents through such outlets as reading classical literature, attending cultural events and visiting museums. Social interaction with groups of grownups, which often happened at grandmother's (father's mother) flat in Cambridge Mansions, Cambridge Road, Battersea, became a requirement for learning how to listen and converse with mature people. A change in attire was a true indicator of moving forward out of boyhood. Instead of the trademark short pants and woollen socks, now I was wearing long trousers—a sure sign of growing up, and being addressed as a 'young man.'

## *Nurturing cultural pursuits*

The Islington Central Library, opened in 1907 and located at the corner of Fieldway Crescent and Holloway Road, was for me a huge storehouse of knowledge. The building's solid stone façade and imposing entrance gave it an awe-inspiring personality. Inside, the inlaid marble hallway led to a central staircase. On the left hand side of the hallway, two doors provided an entrance and exit to the adult lending library room. Near the staircase at the right hand end of the hallway was the door leading to the children's lending library room. In the adult section, an archway led to the reading room at the front of the building where newspapers, magazines and periodicals lay on wooden shelves or on the large wooden tables under the tall, segmented windows that provided natural light. Upstairs was the reference library, committee room, chief librarian's office and the large lecture room.

Until I was eligible to borrow books from the adult section, I took full advantage of the lending services of the children's section. The shelves were well stocked with all kinds of books—from rag books for the very young to hardcover adventure stories and works of general knowledge. One wall of the room was reserved for the non-lending section that contained volumes of encyclopædia and large reference books. This was a room that I could be frequently found in. Apart from the classics, which I was introduced to at an early age, my choice of reading material also drew heavily on futuristic and science-fiction subjects. I recall among the series of children's space fantasy books, there were the adventures of Kemlo, an average pre-teen boy born on Space Station 'K'; one of several such man-made satellites that orbited the Earth.

When not in the children's section, I patronised other parts of the library. The reading room of the adult section stocked issues of interesting magazines: my favourites being *Flight International*, *The Aeroplane*, *Autocar* and *Practical Mechanics*. I was particularly intrigued with the cutaway illustrations and other pictorial content. This appreciation must have whetted my appetite for a possible future career in technical



*Islington Central Library, Corner of Fieldway Crescent and Holloway Road*



*Islington Central Library, Children's Section. Picture Taken in 1959*

illustrating, and, indeed, my artistic bent (so scathingly observed by my last Junior school form teacher, Mr. Pulman) was starting to point me in that direction.

The reference library on the second floor was a kind of Aladdin's cave of archival reading matter. The shelves were full of ancient tomes encased in intricate leather bookbinding. Most valuable were the huge bound volumes of back issue originals of the *Islington Gazette* newspaper. The room was always in a deathly hush with only the sound of pages being turned. The staff never seemed to change: two or three studious men and women who seemed to be human catalogues and always found the most elusive article.

On a less academic note, but nevertheless educational all the same, were the many presentations and personality appearances made in the lecture room on the second floor. These were specifically geared towards schoolchildren and proved extremely popular. Before the presentation, a queue would form at the Fieldway Crescent, or side, entrance to the building. After the door was opened there would be a rush up the stairs to the lecture room, and a scramble to sit in the front seats. Everyone was keenly looking forward to the lecture or film show, as part of some of the presentations included a short movie using the old, rickety and noisy 16 mm reel-to-reel projector.

One TV personality who was a regular visitor was Dr. Desmond Morris, the eminent zoologist. At each visit, he would bring a number of live wild animals for the children to admire—even touch—including a chimpanzee, a python, and other small creatures. His presentations were always a packed house, as he had a natural ability to communicate with a young audience and his relaxed manner made the lectures more appealing. I remember Dr. Morris asking for a volunteer to carry a python around the audience. I stuck my hand up and was given the job. Although I knew that the snake's skin wasn't slimy, it was the weight of the python that surprised me. When walking around the crowd, it was interesting to note the various reactions; from curious hands reaching out to feel the snake, to little girls shrinking back in disgust or fear.

Another renowned speaker was the explorer/adventurer, Ross Salmon. One illustrated lecture he made was of his travels in South America, and in particular along the Orinoco River in Venezuela. The talk had all the elements of a *Boys Own* adventure story with tales of bushwhacking through the Amazonian-like jungle, encounters with primitive tribes, close-calls with wild beasts, and a spellbinding description of the cattle drives across the piranha-infested river. The accompanying film brought a true-to-life dimension to the travelogue. For the lecture, Ross appeared in his explorer's clothes of bush shirt, jodhpurs, riding boots and wide brimmed slouch hat—a true 'white hunter'.

An extension to my search for general knowledge, and one readily encouraged by my father, were the regular visits to London's museums and art galleries. There were three principal museums clustered in South Kensington—the Natural History Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Science Museum. There were also two others of note—the Geological Museum and the Aeronautical Museum. Art collections were found in the National Gallery and Tate Gallery.

For the cost of a fare either on the bus or the Underground, a whole Sunday could be whiled away becoming absorbed in the large exhibition halls and display galleries of these repositories of knowledge and

culture. I had acquired a keen interest in prehistory; learning as much as possible about the geology and life forms from earliest times. Of course, the huge collection of prehistoric animal skeletons were a great influence, and a fascination with dinosaurs soon developed. Children, who were visiting the Natural History Museum, could pick up large sheets of drawing paper and borrow coloured pencils from the activities desk, and tour around the museum sketching any artifact that took their fancy. Dinosaurs were popular, of course, and flowers and birds as seen in the numerous dioramas were also favourite subjects.

The Science Museum had one particular interesting feature. Many of the scale models were animated. For example, a visitor could activate the workings of a cutaway steam engine model by pushing a button under the display case. A timed animation revealed the action of pistons and rods, flywheels and linkages, pulleys and belts all in miniature. It seemed that each succeeding motive display was more impressive than the previous one. Of course, the real, full-scale artifacts were also there: including James Watt's famous beam engine and George Stephenson's *Rocket* locomotive. Everything held a fascination, such as the technology of TIM, the talking clock, and the theory of the Earth's rotation around an axis based on the swinging pendulum experiments of the French physicist, Jean Foucault.

A stone's throw from the Science Museum were the Geological Museum and Aeronautical Museum. The former housed everything there is to know about geology and related disciplines. Eye-catching displays of rare minerals (some that glowed under ultraviolet light), cutaway models of the formation of oilfields and the methods used to extract and refine crude, and how different rocks formed depending on external influences and chemical makeup. The science of flight was explained in the small but interesting Aeronautical Museum. Many examples of pioneering individuals, such as Blériot's monoplane, were displayed, and a chronology of man's efforts to soar above the earth—from mythical Icarus's wings to the rocket technology of the time—guided visitors through the various exhibition halls.

The nearby Victoria & Albert Museum, located in Brompton Road, contained a wealth of artifacts devoted to the idiosyncrasies of the Victorian Era. Examples of Victoriana in the form of fine china, elaborate tapestries and ornate architecture showcased the ideals of the time and the ascendancy of the British Empire.

Outside of South Kensington, other museums were equally patronised with enthusiasm. The Imperial War Museum in Lambeth had an impressive collection of military memorabilia, which included examples of German V1 and V2 *Vergeltungswaffen* that wreaked destruction in London and my neighbourhood during the Second World War. The solid British Museum in Bloomsbury could be reached by riding on a No. 33 or No. 35 tram before it descended into the Kingsway Tunnel. Always fascinating was the gallery of Egyptology with its sarcophagi and mummified remains, and many examples of intricate *lapis lazuli* jewellery on display. Other ancient civilisations and cultures were represented with artifacts from Ancient China, the Aztecs and Babylonians, the *Elgin Marbles* from Ancient Greece, and a huge collection of Roman relics.

Art, too, wasn't neglected, and there were subsequent school visits to the National Gallery near Trafalgar Square, as well as the Tate Gallery with its leaning towards modern art. Being introduced to the masters made studying art at secondary school a satisfying experience. The original works of Titian, Canaletto, Boticelli and Braque became quite familiar, as were those of Cézanne, Renoir, Van Gogh and Picasso.



## *Early secondary schooldays*

**I**n September, 1957, I entered Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys in Eden Grove, Islington. Moving into the secondary school meant a huge adjustment, as the new pupils quickly discovered that the older boys were more worldly and enjoyed pushing their weight around on the newcomers. A new crop of teachers, too, who turned out to be greater disciplinarians; and a Headmaster, Mr. T.J.H. Davies, to match.

A new school uniform became *de rigueur*. The standard black blazer and grey trousers (whether long or short), grey socks, striped tie sporting the school colours of red, black and green, and the optional cap. Soon after enrollment, the new pupils were assigned to one of four school ‘houses.’ Each house was identified by its own colour. Datson house was red; Court house was yellow; Gerred house was green, and Wardman house was blue. I was assigned to Gerred house. The early assignment was important, as the house colours were incorporated into the separate crest to be sewn onto the breast pocket of the blazer. The crest design had two elements taken from the coat-of-arms of Sir Hugh Myddleton—an Elizabethan benefactor. These elements were the bow and arrow, and the water bouget (yoke). Between the two elements was a broad, wavy line that represented the New River that flowed through Islington. The New River was the entrepreneurial undertaking of Sir Hugh Myddleton. Crossing the broad, wavy line were six bars that probably represented bridges over the river, and the colour of these bars was that of the pupil’s assigned house. In general, we kept to faithfully wearing the uniform, but as the years passed, personal tastes in fashion gradually took over and the senior boys were seen more often than not wearing anything but the school uniform.

The school property, bounded by Eden Grove, Geary Street and Georges Road, was originally opened in 1931 as Barnsbury Boys Central School, then renamed in 1947 to Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys; although always colloquially referred to as “Barnsbury Central.” Its popularity was also its curse and the school buildings—originally designed to cater for 400 senior boys only—became insufficient, as enrollment increased year by year. The School Board’s answer to this problem were wooden huts hastily erected in the playground to act as temporary classrooms. These huts were minimal at best; inadequate heating in winter being a significant shortcoming. Later, it was decided that the school should be divided into a Lower School and an Upper School. Eden Grove would continue to accommodate the Lower School (forms 1 and 2), and the Upper School (forms 3 to the upper-sixth) found its quarters in a brand new building at the junction of Camden Road and Caledonian Road, Islington. The building was on lease from the North London College for Further Education, and lasted until 1967 when Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys was amalgamated with Laycock Secondary Boys School and Highbury County Grammar School to become Highbury Grove Comprehensive School in the new Highbury Grove buildings under Headmaster, Dr. Rhodes Boyson.

I entered the 1st form and was assigned to class 1S. According to an old schoolmate, the class numbering system was as follows: 1A, 1Alpha, 1S, 1X, 1M & 1R. In terms of foreign language tuition, classes 1A & 1S studied French, 1Alpha & 1X studied Spanish, and probably 1M & 1R did not have any language lessons. I certainly remember the French lessons being taught by the 1S form master, Mr. T.P. Stanwyck. Following the first half-year, the school report issued in February, 1958, listed my position as No. 2 out of 36 (a quantum leap since Laycock days), I was assigned to the top form 1A under Mr. J.E. Richards. At the end of year, the school report issued in July, 1958, I still retained my No. 2 position, this time out of 34.



*Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys (Lower School), Eden Grove, Islington, c1931*



*Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys, Eden Grove*

*Inside One of the Wooden Huts (Metalwork Shop)*



*2nd Form Boys at Eden Grove (Lower School)*



*Barnsbury Boys Tie and Blazer Crest (Gerred House)*

## *Events at secondary school*

Despite hazy recollections of my days in the Lower School at Eden Grove, perhaps the greatest impact was the influence of the teachers, who expected a high standard and no nonsense from disinclined pupils. The Headmaster, Mr. T.J.H. Davies, (affectionately known by all the boys as ‘The Bonk’ or ‘Bonky’), certainly demanded a lofty benchmark—largely to maintain the school’s criteria of excellence and also to prove the establishment’s worth to the ILEA of the London County Council.

Hand in glove with the elevated standards of study came harsher corporal punishment. Boys were maturing quickly, and teenage influences started to distract them from normal learning practices. Pupils prone to truancy or dereliction of duty were meted out and dealt with—sometimes in front of the class, but more often than not in the Headmaster’s study. We soon discovered which teacher was the biggest disciplinarian, and who was the weakest to hand out punishment. For example, top of the list had to be Mr. George Rice and Mr. A. Cohen (affectionately known as ‘Killer’ Cohen). George Rice was singularly nasty; indeed, even sadistic. A short man with a permanent stoop, he would prowl along the corridors in a distinct lope and scowl at all and sundry through bespectacled froglike eyes. As our mathematics teacher, he took to task any boy who was inattentive and produced poor results. A case in point was his victimization of one lad in particular, whose name was Leslie Webb. During one lesson, this inoffensive boy was summoned to the front of the class and grilled by Mr. Rice over a trivial matter. Webb blubbered some comment, to which Mr. Rice accused him in a loud voice—“You’re a LIAR!” At which point he requested Webb to remove his eyeglasses, and the boy complied. Next came a complete surprise to everyone, as Mr. Rice swiped the back of his hand across Webb’s cheek, raising a red welt. ‘Killer’ Cohen, the history teacher, was equally uncompromising, but in a different way. His favourite weapon of punishment was the split ruler that was deftly brought down heavily on the palm of any miscreant’s hand. This action was always preceded by the verbal order—“Hold out your paw, boy!!”

On the other side of the coin, our teachers indicated credit where credit was due. Evidence of this appeared in the school reports that were issued twice a year. For the 1957/58 school year, I received high marks and favourable comments in English (language), French, history, geography, art and general science. Subjects such as mathematics and English (literature) received lower grades and comments to the effect—*... his exam results are very disappointing.*

Schoolboy bonding occurred naturally as like-minded lads formed their own cliques, and friendships blossomed as time went by. My mate, Kenny Pratley, was a year ahead of me, but we chummed around as usual. Another old Laycock friend was Philip (Phil) Davies and we were to be joined later by Michael (Mike) Stewart and Royston (Roy) Score. Later in our teenage, Phil, Mike and I became virtually inseparable, and as soon as we were legally allowed to drink alcohol, the occasional pub crawl became a tradition, and continued well into adulthood.

The first two years at Eden Grove were somewhat unremarkable as far as general school life was concerned. Some of the senior boys pushed their weight around, but I recall no outstanding cases of bullying. That was to come in the Upper School at Camden Road—not included in this memoir.



It was more practical for me to eat school dinners at lunch time regardless that home was within walking distance. Of course, school dinners were, themselves, totally unappetising. “Good food cooked badly”, my mother always used to say. There were times when the vegetables were inedible, and because of the patroling teacher dinner monitors keeping their wary eyes open for any boy toying with his food, it was difficult to secrete the offending pieces away. On one occasion I was almost force-fed on some disgusting turnips that I had refused to eat. More appealing, however, were the sweets and snacks available from the tuck shop located just off the assembly hall. The tuck shop was the domain of one of the most revered teachers, Mr. W.C. Matthews (‘Bill’ or ‘Pop’ Matthews as we called him). Outside the school gates on Geary Street, we could count on the ice cream and lollipop vendor. One of the most popular items was the innovative *Jubbly*, a tetrahedron-shaped block of ice impregnated with orange juice wrapped in a stiff, greaseproof paper (wax paper) package. The ‘*Luvvly Jubbly*’ was guaranteed to quench one’s thirst for quite a while.

I didn’t escape corporal punishment, either; being given serious reprimands on at least three occasions. Homework was considered an essential component of learning. Once when I forgot to submit a homework project on time to the teacher (who happened to be the Headmaster), ‘four of the best’ on the open hand was administered. An innocent game of ‘tag’, where touching a player with a plimsoll (running shoe) automatically made that person ‘it’, turned ugly when I threw the shoe to contact another boy. Unfortunately the shoe missed him and broke a window pane. That cost me another caning, this time by Mr. C. Madley, the Deputy Headmaster. Finally, an accidental but audible yawn in class incited the drama teacher, Mr. Colin Lea, to deliver a blow to the open hand in front of the class. There was a choice—cane or plimsoll. As it turned out, choosing the plimsoll was the worst of two evils, as the pain lingered far longer.

A new school magazine called *The Barnsburian* came into print. It was a well edited and compact publication sponsored in part by local merchants such as Keevans, the school uniform outfitters, and Hiron, a local butcher shop. In time, the magazine was published twice a year—summer and Christmas—and was popular with the boys and staff alike. The editorial contained administration news, and the rest of the magazine consisted of a sports section and a literary section. Also, some editions contained pen and ink sketches of which I submitted two renderings.

## *Recreation outside of school*

Boys will be boys, as the saying goes, and I was no exception to getting into trouble or taking unnecessary risks. Sure, you could buy simple and harmless chemistry sets from the toy shop, but my mate, Kenny Pratley, was fascinated with the effects of chemicals, and in particular, explosives and jet propulsion. With the proceeds from his pocket money (allowance) he started building a chemistry laboratory, including test tubes; retorts; measuring cylinders, a Bunsen burner and pestle & mortar. Kenny’s father was a carpenter, and he built shelves, a bench and storage cupboards in the brick air raid shelter that was located in the small back yard of No. 1 Crane Grove. Every so often Kenny and I would go to the local oil shop to buy basic chemicals for experimentation. We made rudimentary ‘ammunition’ for mock battles using plastic soldiers and Dinky Toy army models. Gunpowder was obtained from ‘penny banger’ fireworks and, eventually we graduated to *Jetex* solid fuel capsules for propellents. ‘Shells’ or ‘mines’ were made with pieces of brass tubing. Aluminium cigar tubes made great rockets that could be launched from homemade



ramps. We filed small fragments from a solid piece of magnesium. These fragments made impressive pyrotechnics when set alight. Considering the extreme danger to permanently damaging eyesight or receiving serious burns (protective wear of any kind never entered our heads), we escaped relatively unscathed—probably more by luck than judgement.

The military theme was also played out with another favourite medium—*Hubbard's Plasticine*. This was a compound that could be moulded into whatever shape you wanted. It also came in different colours; green and grey being popular. Kenny was quite adept working with his hands and was able to mould the *Plasticine* into anything his fertile imagination conjured up. He made a large warship, complete with gun turrets and superstructure, that could be floated in a tin bath full of water. We then played out a battle scene with the help of a replica model and fully functioning anti-aircraft gun. The model could be traversed and elevated like the real piece of artillery. It had a separate breech that, when charged with explosives (in our case several gunpowder caps from a 'penny roll' used for cowboy cap guns) and armed with a suitable iron nail, became a powerful cannon. With the *Plasticine* warship floating in the tin bath, we positioned our 'cannon' and systematically fired nails into the boat, inflicting all kinds of damage and eventually sinking the craft.

Warfare and aggression seemed to be part and parcel of the world of young boys before the onset of teenage with its fads, fashions and girl-watching activities. Despite the realism of death and destruction, we considered violent games merely as an escapism for our imaginations. Cowboys and Indians reflected what we saw at the Saturday morning picture shows. The same with cops and robbers or similar gangster scenarios. Cap guns, water pistols and rifles with corks made the games more believable in our minds. However, as young secondary school pupils these pursuits gradually gave way to more mature and constructive recreation. For example, greater emphasis was being put on school homework, and other influences such as popular music filled our leisure time. It was also quite obvious that the 'fairer sex' and *la différence* were becoming more evident with the approach of puberty and its attendant hormonal (i.e. testosterone) activity.

There now seemed to be a shift in friendships. With a greater latitude of freedom, I was allowed to roam further and stay out later (homework notwithstanding). Our little following also had a couple of tomboys—girls who were adventurous and easily led. One was Pamela, and I had a bit of a 'crush' on her. I remember on the bomb site behind the Cossor factory in Kelvin Road near Highbury Barn we spent an interesting intimate time.

Luck did run out, however, and through misadventure both Kenny and I were injured in a small chemical explosion. Kenny was inside the air raid shelter at the bench and mixing a compound using the pestle & mortar. I was standing at the entrance when all of a sudden there was a flash and an explosion that sent both of us reeling. Kenny's mother came rushing out from the small scullery in time to catch both boys in a disoriented state. I sustained severe hearing loss, and Kenny's face was pockmarked with wounds inflicted by small pieces of the ceramic mortar that had disintegrated. He was also temporarily blinded. Despite some quick first-aid, it was determined that we had to visit a doctor as soon as possible. The nearest was Dr. McCormick in Holloway Road near Etterbeke's dry cleaners and the monument engraver. I guided Kenny along the pavement to the doctor's practice and was able to obtain treatment almost immediately. Kenny was certainly lucky that he didn't sustain any permanent eyesight damage, but his face was to show the

pockmarked wounds. My hearing, further impaired by a future bicycle accident (see Chapter 6, *Teenage beginnings*), was to suffer and I have permanent tinnitus to this day.

The chemical experiments; often incorporating toxic fumes and loud reports, didn't go down too well with the neighbours. We had a number of run-ins with the elderly widow on the top floor of No. 1 Crane Grove, and specifically with the workers in the garment sweat-shop that had a window overlooking the Pratley's back yard. When the window was open, sometimes our smoke and noise activity would greatly irritate the girls in the factory. They would complain to us and to their foreman. He would lean out the window, shake his fist and give us heck, threatening all kinds of retribution. The Desmond family next door in No. 2 Crane Grove were even more vociferous, and the father, Cornelius (Connie), berated us more than once. This came to a head with a very serious incident involving bodily injury, and my father had to apologise for my boorish behaviour. My parents eventually banned me from playing at No. 1, and so I was required to distance myself entirely from Kenny. I never knew what became of him in later life.

## *Changes in the neighbourhood*

In 1958, I witnessed a huge change to the community. As described in Appendix 3, *The Second World War*, Highbury Corner was irretrievably altered by an exploding German V1 flying bomb that landed at the end of the Compton Terrace gardens at 12:46 p.m., Tuesday, 27th June, 1944—killing 26 people and injuring 150. Now this area was to change yet again with demolishing and rebuilding the corner's signature pub, *The Cock*, and construction of the Highbury Corner roundabout or gyratory system.

*The Cock Tavern*, which comprised the southern wing of Edwin Henry Horne's magnificent North London Railway Station, was heavily damaged in the V1 explosion. This grand old lady soldiered on as a pub until the brewers, Watneys Ltd., decided to build a new public house on the same footprint as the old tavern. In 1956, the old remnants were demolished. I distinctly remember this happening and can still smell the combination of rubble, plaster and stale beer as I walked past. It wasn't long before a new brick structure sprouted, and named *The Cock at Highbury*; a soulless modern building without the trace of its ornate Victorian forebear. Much later it was re-christened *The Famous Cock*, but I never drank in it at all.

The town planners decided that a roundabout would improve the vehicular flow instead of the existing congested corner controlled by traffic lights and point duty policemen. The bomb site between Upper Street and Canonbury Road was appropriated, and a gyratory system free of traffic lights constructed. It was exciting to periodically check the progress as the bombed out remnants were transformed into a spacious island of green. Trolleybus wires were redirected and brand new street lights installed. For the time, it was a decided improvement, even though drivers had to keep alert for the unfamiliar traffic flow pattern.

Possibly because Mr. Bettridge had retired, I was now tasked with the weekly errand of buying fruits and vegetables at a different greengrocers—this one at the bottom of Laycock Street. Being accountable for handling some of the household purse strings was just one of several extra responsibilities. Again, my parents' strict sense of values were emphasized, and this translated into discretionary spending so I would not be easily enticed into following frivolous fashions—one of the banes affecting the parents of teenagers.



*Highbury Corner Showing The Cock Tavern on the Left Hand Side, 1900s*



*Demolition of The Cock Tavern Remnants, 1956*



*The New Pub, The Cock at Highbury, Seen in 1965*



*Comparison of The Cock Tavern, c1905, The Cock at Highbury, 1980s, and Upper Street at that Point*





*Highbury Corner before Construction of the Roundabout or Gyrotory System, c1958*



*Highbury Corner before Construction of the Roundabout or Gyrotory System, c1958*



*Highbury Corner during Construction of the Roundabout or Gyrotory System, 1958*



*Highbury Corner during Construction of the Roundabout or Gyrotory System, 1958*



*Highbury Corner Completed Roundabout, 1959*



*Highbury Corner Completed Roundabout, 1959*