

A CHULMLEIGH RECOLLECTION OF EARLY SCHOOLING 1948 – 1954

The Fair Committee have asked for my memories of School days here during the decade after World War 2. What follows are just that, a few key, selected memories of each of the three Schools which I attended from 1948, including the teachers. Not covered are Chulmleigh Secondary Modern School or the Private School, girls only, which occupied what is now Wallingbrook House and its then wider site after evacuation from Storrington in Sussex during the War.

At age 5 Chulmleigh children first went to the Infant's School situated at the top of Egypt Lane, it was often also referred to as The Old Boy's School but by 1948 took both boys and girls. The Teacher there was Miss Constance Gillies who had started teaching in Chulmleigh in 1915 so during the course of her long career had taught my mother, brother and myself. Her family were originally from Ecclefechan in the Scottish Borders and her father had been the Head Gardner and Estate Manager for Lady Gertrude Rolle at Leigh House until 1925. By 1948 she was living alone at Cranleigh on Leigh Hill in the most westerly of the two houses at the junction with Dartridge Lane. A tall, stern, somewhat forbidding figure with hair always tied back in a severe bun, she commanded respect and left pupils in no doubt that they were there to behave and to learn.

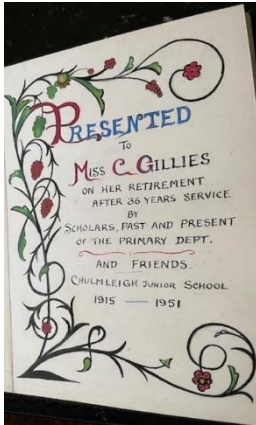


My first memory of the School was being carried kicking and screaming by my father past Davy Park on my first day as I really did not want to go! A reluctance that vanished after day one. The building contained a lobby, where coats were hung up, leading into the main School Room with double desks facing north – there was much scrambling to be sure you got to sit next to somebody you knew and were friends with. At the far end was a small kitchen from which lunches were served. No cooking actually took place in the kitchen, instead the pretty unappetising food was brought in daily by van from Barnstaple and kept warm – well, warmish anyway. My abiding memory is that most days of the week the only vegetable would be large trays of yellow swede, an experience which has left me with a lifelong aversion to swede.

A door at the far end of the big room led out onto a small, tarmac Playground with the toilets situated at the top, east end. PE took place outside when, weather permitted, for which gym shoes were required. Putting these on revealed which younger children did not know how to tie their own shoelaces so had to be shown by Miss Gillies or the older class members.

To learn how to tell the time pupils were sometimes taken out on to the terrace by the main entrance on the town side and instructed by the distant view of the Church Clock. All writing, drawing and arithmetic was done on slate tablets, in wooden frames using white chalk, wiped clean after each exercise.

Miss Gillies was a leading light in the Community outside of the School being having been a founder member of the Girl Guides and then their Leader, Secretary to the Parochial Church Council and the local Conservative Party for several decades. A devout Christian she also ran a Sunday School for under 11s before morning Church Service each week. Those attending at 10.30 a.m. were taken to the Church at 10.55 to attend service but allowed to leave at 11.45 before the Sermon. This left many of us wondering whatever went on after that point which we were too young to witness.



Miss Gillies retired from teaching in 1951 and in recognition of her long and devoted service was given a set of coffee tables and a beautiful hand-written booklet, the frontispiece of which is below. The booklet goes on to list many of the people she taught - this is in my possession so if anybody wishes to check if their names are there just get in touch.

At age seven children moved from Infants to Junior School situated in what is now The Rectory, formerly the Girl's School, off the Shippons. Here we encountered Miss Lillian Tucker as the class teacher. She came to Chulmleigh from a Kings Nympton family and lived for as long as I can remember in The Cot, a small, thatched cottage round the back of the Church.



She taught in the room at the west side of the building with the entrance up the steps on the south side. Junior children were strictly required to use that entrance and not the main entrance on the east which was reserved for older children (see later). There was a small lobby, again for coats, one large room with a door leading out to the toilets under the wall on the Church side plus another, very rarely used, door which led into the main Classroom.

Miss Tucker was a slightly less intimidating figure than Miss Gillies (or maybe we were just that much older) but nonetheless, very much in charge and good behaviour was expected at all times. There were double desks, but this time with inkwells, and paper replaced the slate tablets. Here we were introduced to pens with nibs which were dipped into the inkwells causing much splashing and use of blotting paper to clear up spills and blotches. We were all encouraged and made

to work at our handwriting to produce the best script possible – something I consistently failed to do and to this day have a poor “hand”.

Miss Tucker spoke very clear, well pronounced English and insisted that pupils follow her example, we learnt the meaning of the word “elocution”. She would take the entire class on what were known as nature walks from time to time. Down Rock Hill, into the woods and fields towards the river while she identified trees, flowers and birds expecting us to be paying attention and remember what she was sharing with us. One of her other daily tasks was walking Dr Bush's two Scottish Terriers. Several generations of these dogs were buried at the bottom of the garden in Rocklands House known as Sanctuary. Eventually the good Doctor himself was buried between their marked graves where he and they lie to this day. There were three gardens on the right going down Rock Hill and Miss Tucker had charge of the lower one, with its entrance by the seat, where she grew her own vegetables and produced wonderful flowers. Favoured pupils were occasionally “invited” to visit her there and help with the weeding!

Miss Tucker was also involved in Community activities, singing as a powerful soprano in the Church Choir for many years, always occupying the same seat to the right of the Altar in the back Choir Stalls behind the Rood Screen . As a long serving member of the Fair Committee she was responsible for organising the Old Fair Royalty each year, establishing many of the protocols and traditions associated with the various posts.

At age 9 the pupils moved through to the front room of the School becoming senior juniors under the control of Mr H F Frost. Mr Frost was an ex naval man and again ran a tight ship with misbehaving children being dealt with firmly but fairly. Senior pupils entered through the east door into a lobby with a store room off it and a door on the left into the main, large classroom. In the middle was a large, black, coal fired Turtle stove surrounded by railings which provided warmth in the winter months.



The Times Tables were prominently displayed on one wall alongside a very large, Mercator projection map of the world – at that point large parts of it were still coloured red showing the countries in the British Empire. A long, thick rope hung down from a beam in the middle of the room. This we were allowed to climb on wet days to touch the beam if we could. On good days PE, football and rounders were played on the hard Play surface outside and one year a Maypole appeared there complete with coloured ribbons. To tunes from a wind-up record player with old vinyl 78 records, we were taught various Maypole dances to produce different patterns on the pole. Mr Frost’s time in the Navy had given him woodworking skills which he used to good effect in making superb marionettes. He was a talented puppeteer and, when he could be persuaded, would entertain classes with mesmerising puppet displays.

Mrs Frost would take classes once a week, teaching singing and reading to us well known novels. I particularly remember Treasure Island and The Secret Garden. Once a year the County School Dentist would visit in a furniture van with her Surgery in the back which was parked in the Shippons. She was a Miss Shapland, a truly scary figure, who used a foot-powered treadle drill when fillings were deemed necessary – without any numbing injections!

All in all my generation were well served by their pre aged 12 schooling in the Chulmleigh Schools and by three dedicated and professional teachers who had nothing but their charge’s best interests at heart and were well respected, active members of the Community.

At 11, the great divide of the 11 Plus loomed. Examinations in two parts, one sat in the Junior school and, if you passed that, then the second part up in the big Hall at the Secondary Modern school. Pass that and you were offered the opportunity, not mandatory, to go to Grammar School in either Crediton or Barnstaple as opposed to going to Chulmleigh Secondary Modern. Memory recalls that 4 passed from my year, the two girls opting to go to Barnstaple Grammar, I went to Crediton and the other boy’s parents choose to not take up the Grammar School place that he was offered. At Grammar School the mixed classes of the earlier years ended, Boys and girls were taught in completely separate, single sex establishments, mixing only on the School bus which picked us up in Fore Street at 8 am and brought us back around 5 pm For the boys only, the school week also included Saturday mornings.

Ian Jury

14th March 2024