

Richard Button - *Personal Profile*

I attended Harlow College as a day boy between 1959 and 1964. Aged 70, I must be one of the youngest 'Old Harlovians' left.

I was in Keyes house. Being short sighted I wasn't much good at sport. I liked cross country and finished 3rd in the school event one year. I remember the tough little PE teacher 'Spud' Murphy who used to put us through our paces in the Old Drill Hall.

Of the other teachers, I remember Mr Harvey best. He took us for English. I liked him. He smoked a pipe and nicknamed me "dormouse" because I spent so much time appearing to be asleep – daydreaming actually about things I could be doing at home. Then there was Mr Purgavie for geography, Mr Stevenson for history, a rather flashy chap who had a Daimler Dart sports car and left the school following a scandal. He was a good teacher. I can't remember the name of the Art or Science teachers, but they were also good teachers. I did quite well in those subjects. The science teacher sent me to have the cosh once because I kept leaning back on my chair. He got so cross he just ordered me out of the room. A few minutes later he came out to find me, but I hid behind the door and he returned to the classroom muttering 'the silly sod has gone to get himself caned'. At that point I re-appeared, and he laughed heartily. We learnt about the works of John Keats, John Buchan, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare and Arthur Conan Doyle. Our syllabus books included *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Shetland Bus* and *Prester John*. Mr Harvey used to read stories from 'The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard, which I just loved.

The Maths and French teachers were pretty rubbish. The French teacher could not control the class and we ribbed him mercilessly. We must have made his life a misery and I regret that now.

Mr Overton didn't like me, and I didn't like him, especially after he sent me to be coshed for "gross insubordination". It was all a terrible misunderstanding and the mental imprint of this injustice has remained with me to this day. It happened after we had finished lunch and were sitting at the tables waiting to be told we could go. I was sitting with one leg over the long bench seat ready to make a quick get-away and as usual probably daydreaming. I didn't realise Overton was asking me to sit round and face the table until he was right in front of me, red faced and bellowing at the top of his voice. Mr Purgavie administered the cosh – six of the best. It didn't really hurt at all. I am sure he deliberately hit me softly knowing what an idiot Overton was to send me. I was cheeky and a bit lazy but never really misbehaved badly and Purgavie knew that. Emerging from the Head's study I was surrounded by other pupils wanting to know how many I got, and did it hurt. It was almost worth getting the cane for the prestige I gained in student community, certainly a rite of passage.

Prefects were also authorised to administer corporal punishment – nothing short of legalised bullying. They occupied a room above the Fives court that allowed them to scan the playground. I 'got the slipper' once from one of these 'sados'. I can't remember what for. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time I expect.

Classes were divided into ones for the clever students who were in the 'a' classes and ones for the not so clever students who were placed in the 'b' classes. I was in the 'b' classes all through my school career always hovering near the top, but never quite good enough to get promoted. I didn't mind being almost the best of the rest.

I did get into a nasty fight once with an older boy named White and ended up in Epping Hospital having stitches to a cut above my eye. It all started at lunch time. White and a group of his mates were walking along the street outside the school taking up the whole of the

pavement. When I didn't get out of their way, White shoved me to the side. I didn't immediately retaliate but stewed during the first lesson after lunch and hit him as we lined up at break time, knocking him to the ground. Other pupils pulled us apart. Unfortunately, White was waiting for me when classes ended and he punched me, cutting my eye quite badly. Mr Purgavie took me to Epping Hospital. Later that evening White and his father came to our house to apologise, which I suppose, as he was older and bigger than me, was fair enough, but I rather wish they hadn't, and it was embarrassing for everyone. White and I never came to blows again.

The street outside the school had some shops I used to visit, I expect long gone. Two of them were Collins bicycle shop and 'Toms', the latter run by an elderly man, named not surprisingly Tom. This establishment flourished as the school's unofficial tuck shop.

One year the Art teacher entered a painting of mine and some others in a national competition. Mine was a landscape scene of trees with a road winding over some hills in the background. He labelled it 'sunset with dead trees'. It wasn't actually what I had intended the picture to be, but it won the competition (probably down to the title) and the whole school was rewarded with a day off in celebration.

On another occasion a boy bought a fledgling rook into school in a shoe box hoping to sell it. When this plan failed he gave it to me. I kept it in an aviary at home along with many other pets. We had a house with a large garden at Roydon Hamlet.

As pupils we always called each other by our surnames, very strange. I only knew the Christian names of the boys I was particularly friendly with. The ones I remember were Duncan Richardson, who also had a brother at the school and Richard Lancaster. The Richardson brothers lived in Trinidad. Richard was a day boy like me. He lived at North Weald.

I think Richard Lancaster worked in a garage at Old Harlow after he left school. I did make contact with Duncan Richardson not many years ago through Friends Reunited. He had an uncle who had a shop in the town near where I live. When he wasn't sailing his yacht, Duncan was running a crop spraying business in the Caribbean.

Other names I remember were Gear (older than me and dead cool) Inskip, Bowman, Chamberlain, Smith, Pledger and Kitchener. I can remember one boy (must have been in his final year) who had an Ariel Golden Arrow motorbike, other boys had bikes too, one of whom, Dave Nicol later went on to become a successful motorbike scrambler. I had a motorbike, a pre-war BSA 250, but when I was at the school I was too young to ride it on the road. Several boys were into model aeroplanes and we had great fun playing around with the engines in the classroom. I also remember taking part in an experiment to find out how hard you had to squeeze someone before they fainted. I can vividly remember the hazy feeling as I came round.

Several of us used to go to an area by the river, known as 'the watercress beds' and smoke fags during the lunch break. Pledger filched these from his dad. We also smoked some tiny brown cigarettes called Dominoes. I remember a magazine called 'Health and Efficiency' being passed around.

During my time at Harlow College I travelled to and from the school on the Number 393 bus which ran between Harlow and Hertford. This bus also carried pupils from two comprehensive schools in Harlow, Mark Hall and Netteswell. I was continually taunted by some of these pupils, on one occasion my cap was thrown to the top of a tree. All this stopped after I punched a particularly annoying boy sitting behind me on the bus. After that they left me alone. I often sat close to a girl from Netteswell school. Her name was Maggie

and she lived at Nazeing. I should have liked to ask her to go out with me, but of course I didn't dare and wouldn't have known how to anyway. Going through adolescence at a boys' school, my only real experience of young members of the opposite sex had been my sister. It was only years later, towards the end of my time at Portsmouth Poly that I even began to learn how to communicate with them. That did not apply to all the boys at Harlow College however, I know of at least one who was expelled after a local girl was found in the dormitory. When we had lessons in the single storey brick building next to the church we used to try to get a place next to the windows so we could practice sign language with the local girls who often assembled in the churchyard.

Remarkably I achieved 8 passes in the College of Preceptors Exam, whatever that was and 'O' Levels in English Lit. English Language, General Science, Geography and History. I wasn't much good at technical subjects but loved writing essays. My 'O' level results were good enough for me to continue my education in the sixth form at Hertford Grammar School. After that, I scraped a Geography Degree at Portsmouth Poly finishing up with a post graduate diploma in Town Planning. I haven't exactly covered myself in academic glory, but I probably achieved my potential, at least partly due to my years at Harlow College.

In my subsequent career as a town planner I worked for Essex County Council, Braintree District Council and Colchester Borough Council, specialising for much of the time in conservation and urban design. I spent the last few years of the run down to retirement in 2008, managing Colchester's Planning Regeneration Team. My son Neil is also town planner.

A few years ago, I returned to the site of the old school and found that the building where I spent my first year still existed and was occupied by Harlow College, apparently a college of further education. The Church opposite was in use as a day care centre.

And that's about it. Writing this has certainly re-awoken some old memories, perhaps it will awaken some of yours. All in all, going to Harlow College wasn't such a bad experience.

Richard Button
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