

John Martin's Memories of Lanfranc boy's school

In September 1957 aged 11 years I started at Archbishop Lanfranc Boys School. This was a new modern school completed in 1956 and opened by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Among the first pupils to attend the school was Terry, transferred from the old Lanfranc secondary school that they shared with the girls. The girls stayed put, what I did not know at the time was that one day I would marry one of them.

Lanfranc school may have been new but it was still rough with several gangs and bullying, particularly of first years, was common practice. I got picked on within a few days of starting, but I was the younger brother of a fourth (senior) year boy who ran one of the toughest gangs in the school. The bullying soon stopped.

The teachers kept control and discipline by the use of corporal punishment. Each teacher had their own spin on it. Mr Budd and Mr Naish used large slippers. Another teacher used a drawing board T square. Mr Beacham on the other hand liked to give you a sporting chance and used a set of six dowel rods taken from old school chairs. Rods were numbered 1 to 6, you chose a rod and whatever the number that was how many times he hit you with it.

The one teacher we were wary of was Mr Taylor or Mighty Mouse as we called him. He taught science with the aid of a metre rule. This was held over your head, thin side down, as he asked you questions such as 'define work', 'what is ohms law', if you got it wrong you got a whack on the head! This was not however why we called him Mighty Mouse, it was because although small he used the cane with painful efficiency and was the only teacher who could bring tears to the eyes of the biggest and hardest boys in the school. By contrast the history teacher Mr Cox would not raise a hand to a boy but give him lines to write out. We hated doing lines in our lunch break or after school. Despite the bullying and corporal punishment I enjoyed my school life. My poor English meant I started in the bottom (fourth) grade in the first year. It took me four years to make the top grade class.

In 1960 the minimum age you could leave school was 15 years. It had been that way since 1947 and would not increase to 16 years until 1972. O-levels (now GCSEs) were normally taken at 16 years old therefore most secondary modern schools did little to cater for these examinations and only offered classes covering the four years of 11 to 15. By 1960 Lanfranc had a fifth year class of thirty boys doing RSAs and O-levels, but was averaging less than one O-level per pupil.

There educational objectives were to meet the job needs of local industry in terms of apprenticeship applicants of all kinds from the building industry to light engineering. To this end our education was practical based, the emphasis being on Woodwork, Metalwork, Technical Drawing skills, basic Maths and English with a lot of sport from cricket to boxing. I use to refer to my education as 'training to be factory fodder'. I think this was a little harsh of me. Our education at Lanfranc taught us to build, repair, design, and solve problems, and appreciate the values of team work and discipline. Lanfranc equipped me with a practical approach to life that has served me well.

I was no sports man and struggled with most activities from cross country running to swimming however there was one activity I came to be quite good at.

My mother worked with a Mrs. Roffey the mother of Robert Roffey a boy in my year but a different class. Mrs. Roffey was sending her boy to Ballroom dancing classes on a Saturday morning. My mother, a great lover of dancing, decided this was a social skill that would be good for me to learn. My objections were overruled and feeling very nervous I met Robert one Saturday morning and went off to dance classes.

I loved it! Not only were there twenty five girls and only five of us boys but I found out I was a bit of a natural at it. I also enjoyed the music. It might have been the age of 'Rock-around -clock' and 'jail- house-rock' but I had grown up with the big band sound of Billy Cotton, Glen Miller and even orchestral music like Mantovani. It would be another two or three years before the Beatle would change my music ideas. We were joined by another boy from Lanfranc school, Brian Harris with whom I became good friends. We all became regulars, working our way through beginner's class to junior bronze and on to silver standard. As there were so few boys we were encouraged to attend all the lower classes for free to make up the numbers. It was not long before we were dancing all morning then going off to Streatham ice rink and skating all afternoon. My mother was right! Dancing did become a very useful and enjoyable social skill.

Ballroom dancing was not something that went down well at a rough boy's school. Robert, Brian and I said very little to our class mates, although inevitably some found out. Strangely I got more teasing from my third year form master than anyone else. Mr. Paterson was both a sports and English teacher, both at which I was rubbish but by the third year I was making up for it in other subjects, such as woodwork, maths, technical drawing and even science. As a result it was looking like I might go up a grade, at the possible expense of his preferred good English and sports pupils. I am sure that his few digs at me in class were seen as no more than character building banter by him, and may be he was right for I won the class proficiency prize and went up to the A stream class. I had to wait two years but I finally got my own back on him, on my last day at school!

Summer holiday school trips were always popular. It was difficult for my mother, as a single parent, to afford all that a young boy's heart desired. She managed to send me on a trip to Bruges in Belgium in my third year. It was my first time out of the UK. Forty of us boys and two teachers spent eight days on canal trips, beach trips and windmill trips, but the main things I remember were bar-billiards in the local cafés and paper cones full of chips. I had a great time and wanted more.

In the fourth year I moved up to 4H (Mr. Harper). I had gone up a stream every year I had been at Lanfranc, which meant my class mates kept changing. The boys I got to know in 4H would also be in the fifth year O-level class and many would remain friends for years to come. The school trip this year was to Norway and although I knew I had little chance of going because of cost, I asked (begged) anyway. Several of my new class mates were going as well as Robert Roffey. I had no luck with mum, we needed a new cooker and given a choice between eating or flying to Norway there was no contest. Robert told me not to fret as he was going to spend time with his grandparents in Ramsgate on his return and I could go to. We had done this before on day trips with his mum and dad.

They left for Norway on the 9th August 1961. All the details of the events that followed are difficult to recall clearly some 50 years later but many are so clear they will be with me of ever.

The first I became aware something was wrong was later that day when a radio announcement said a plane carrying a party of school children was missing. For some reason missing did not mean crashed to me and I did not get too concerned.

I clearly remember the moment it did hit home. It was the following day, the radio was on in the front room and I was climbing the stair. A voice on the radio announced that the plane on flight to Norway with the school party on board had crashed and there were no survivors. I stood motionless on the stairs in disbelief and shock. In the hallway behind me was our new cooker waiting to be installed.

My mother went round to spend time with Joan and Don Roffey. For me the next few days are a bit of a blur. I had no experience of death apart from the odd rabbit. My friends and I had a mixture of feelings from disbelief to sadness to inquisitiveness about what it must have been like. We had nothing tangible to focus on and being a school holiday no school with which to unite.

The bodies of the boys and teachers were flown back to Croydon and their coffins put out in the school hall. Access to the hall was limited to close relatives and passes were issued to cover the school, service at the Parish Church and the committal at Mitcham road Cemetery.

The Roffey's were a small family of only Mum and Dad plus one set of grandparents. Robert was an only child. Joan wanted my mother and I added to their list. This meant I was given a relatives pass (I still have it). I needed something tangible to make this tragedy real, there was a part of me believing they were still on holiday and would be back soon. So I walked to school presented my pass and entered the school Hall.

The school Hall had always been a place of noise, assemblies, activities and choir meeting. This time it had the silence of a church. The thirty six coffins were set out in rows, filling the Hall floor. All the coffins were placed on trestle tables and therefore three feet or so off the ground. I stood in awe at the spectacle. Slowly I walked up and down the rows, looking for the names of friends and classmates. I found myself wondering what was in the coffins, how had they died, what happens when a plane hits a mountain, were they burnt, broken, had they found everything? I left knowing it was for real. Accepting for the first time the true magnitude of what had happen and knowing they were not coming back and that many of our lives would change because of it.

The burial service took place on the 17th August. We were all taken by bus from the school to the Parish church. The whole thing was a little surreal with press interest and the people of Croydon turning out to pay their respects and wanting to be part of this big event. It was difficult to stay focused on what we were about and that was saying goodbye to 34 young teenage boys.

After the service at the Parish Church we were taken to Mitcham Road Cemetery. All the boy's families had agreed that the boys would be buried together. A large grave had been prepared and the boys were laid out in two rows with their coffins placed toe to toe. At the end of the committal service, given at the grave side, the families had the opportunity to walk slowly along the edge of the grave. I had a disconcerting moment while doing this. Robert Martin one of the victims and my classmate had a middle name of John. As I looked into the grave the effect of the edge meant I could not see all his name plate and all I saw was 'John Martin'.

That evening we were all back in the Roffey's front room watching the news on the television. Robert grandfather, as the news presenter started the talk about the service, said 'well if you see an old bugger with a walking stick that me.' The first shots shown were from outside the Parish church. There was grandfather with his stick and the rest of us following him into the church. Everyone in the room started laughing. The first time some of them had laughed in a long time.

It was another three weeks or so before we went back to school after the summer holidays. The press were waiting at the school gates. Once we got through the first assembly and we all had a chance to talk about the crash. The practicalities of school life took over. Prefects were needed to replace lost boys as was true of the school play. I stood in for boys who had died in both situations. I would also represent the school, along with others, at the memorial service in May 1962 when the monument at the grave was complete. The headmaster Mr. Fowle was never quite the same after the air crash and died a few years later, the last victim of this tragedy.

It seems ironic to me now some 50 years later that this tragedy is probably best summed up by the closing words of Shakespeare's King Lear, which was the next school play.

'The oldest hath borne most. We that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long'.

I was in my last year of school. I had been made a Prefect, had a main part in the school play and was going to sit six O-levels in a few months. Life was busy and fun. Mr. Harper was the first teacher to take my poor spelling problem seriously. Spending time trying to teach me the rules of spelling and encouraging me to read more. Being in the school play was a whole new experience, not least because we got to spend time with the four girls from Ecclesbourne school, taking part in the play. I even got to date one of them a couple of times, but I was so shy and nervous that I still cringe when I think of it.

On a lighter note the teachers decided that an end of year senior dance was called for. Most of the boys had no idea how to dance, so Brian Harris and myself held dancing classes in the Prefects room at lunch times. Life takes some strange turns. It was great to see the school Hall all decked out and full of music fun and laughter. A great contrast to that of a year ago.

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My lack of sporting ability finally caught up with me. The school organised an inter team competition every year called 'The Governors Shield' This covered a wide range of sporting activities including Athletics, PE, Football, Cross-Country, Swimming, Cricket, and Boxing. The school was split into four teams and the team captains and vice captains were picked from the fifth years. By some major error of judgement I got

picked as vice captain to yellow team. This meant I needed to encourage support and show leadership to the younger boys. Encouraging and supporting was easy but to show leadership I had to take part, but in what? By a process of elimination I chose boxing.

Boxing was a hard sport, no head protection was worn, just a tee shirt shorts and boxing gloves. Boxing was a great equaliser, I saw a number of bullies and so called tough boys lose their playground swagger in the boxing ring, and one or two scores settled by the noble art.

The school had an excellent boxing reputation with some capable and experienced boxers among us, luckily for me, not at my weight of 9st.7lbs. My first bout was against a class mate, Ken Tanner, as inexperienced as myself. Ken was one of the bright kids and had been in the A team all through school so our paths had only just crossed. We got on well and agreed we would hit one another as little as possible. By the second round the referee, Mr. Patterson,(my old third year teacher who did not like boy that dance) was insisting we stopped 'dancing' and started boxing. At the end of the third round I was declared the winner. Ken and I became life-long friends and were almost inseparable for the next five years or so.

My second bout was against a tall long limbed boy who came out of his corner like a windmill. I closed my eyes and stuck out my fist. It made contact, there was an 'ooh' from the crowd and when I opened my eyes the boy was going backwards. This was repeated twice more and in the second round the fight was stopped due to his nose bleed.

Thus I won my one and only school sporting medal and for years to come, I told stories of my boxing prowess.

As year end approached there was talk of playing the odd practical joke. This was overheard by Mr. Cox who said the problem was that most pranks caused damage and showed no imagination. I was not one to turn down a challenge. We came up with a few ideas, two of which I was particularly pleased with. Mr. Cox had a globe suspended from his classroom ceiling. There was a TV program at the time called 'It's a square world'. We painted a square cardboard box with a map of the world and during assembly went into his classroom and swapped his globe for the painted box with a note saying 'It's a square world'. The second prank was a little more personal. During morning break I crept into the staff sports changing room, and swapped Mr Patterson's shirt and trousers for a dress from the drama wardrobe. Mr. Patterson had changed into his tracksuit ready for a PE class. I hung his cloths in the staff cloakroom. By mid-afternoon Mr. Patterson was still walking about in his tracksuit and becoming very short tempered. Eventually Mr. Fowle announced that leaving reports would be withheld unless the clothes were returned. I was on my way to the headmaster's office when the clothes were found. It was a brilliant last day!