

My Lanfranc Memories by Ian Bell.

I was in the same class and on occasion shared a school desk with Quentin Green at Lanfranc and may have been on that fatal flight had I not passed my 13 plus exam a year earlier. I think I can remember Quentin taking the Exams with me.

Lanfranc Secondary Modern School for Boys had moved into modern school buildings only two years before I started and building work was still going on at the school including draining and landscaping the playing fields. In 1958 there was a single fifth year class of 27 boys, four third and fourth year classes, five second year classes and my year the first year which had six classes. I started in the 'A' stream in a class of about 45. We took a double period each week in new practical subjects like Technical Drawing, Metalwork and Woodwork, which I enjoyed very much. In woodwork I learnt how to plane timbers to size and how to use a mortise chisel and tenon saw before making a mortise and tenon joint. I still remember the smell of the glue-pot, which always bubbled away in the corner of the woodwork room, and was reputed to be boiled horse glue.

Mr Beacham was our form master. He was a very likable master who endeared himself to us younger boys. We would take the old TV advertising rhyme about Beacham Powders and sing under our breath "Beacham Powders do the trick. Yes they do they make you sick" whenever we made our way into his class. Also, there was a fable told to all the new boys about a stream you had to jump over, or get very wet, on the school cross-country named 'Beacham's Brook' which Mr Beacham always supervised.

One day it came as a complete shock to me to be herded into the music room, one of the larger classrooms, with the rest of my House to choose volunteers for the School Boxing Tournament. Rumour had it that if no one came forward at your weight you would be volunteered by the House Master. You would not believe how many new boys managed to shrink completely out of sight at the back of the packed school classroom (me included). Earlier we had all been weighed; I think three first year boys were picked at different weights, all volunteers, thank goodness. Then one summer afternoon the School Hall boasted a huge boxing ring. We all sat around crossed legged in classes and despite being on our best behaviour to keep quiet raised the roof during some of the closer fought bouts. To my surprise most of the fighters belonged to youth boxing clubs and had been trained to jab and duck and bouts were generally decided on points. At the top end of the school however you did get one or two real fights which ended with bloody lips, noses and bundled knock downs. In those days amateur fighters did not wear head protectors, and if you did not belong to a boxing club, did not own a gum shield either. Lanfranc had strong boxing tradition and winners of our school tournament went onto the Croydon Schools Finals where Lanfranc boys did very well usually winning in at least seven or eight weights and taking the Schools Trophy. Each year School Colours would be given out at Speech Day to Lanfranc boys who had represented the Croydon Borough and in 1959, 6 colours were awarded for Boxing against 4 for Athletics, 8 Cricket, 7 Football and 7 Swimming.

I must have been more involved in school life than I remember because I attended the school play held in the evening after school. The school put on Shakespeare's Twelfth Night with girls from our sister school Lanfranc Girls' in Thornton Road. I really did enjoy the play, especially the character Malvolio, and I am surprised that this remains the only live Shakespeare play that I have seen.

I remember our first Annual Speech Day we all told to dress smartly in our school uniforms. On arrival that evening, a boy named Bath and I, being the first two on the class register, were taken aside to sit at the end of the front row to present bouquets of flowers to guest speakers wives. I nervously walked up onto the stage for the first time in my life and muttered (hopefully under my breather) "ere are" as I handed over a bouquet to Lady Stanley Rous, wife of the Secretary to the Football Association..

Later in the evening, I again took to the stage, this time to receive the first year Music Prize, very strange as my musical talent is nil. For a school prize you were given book tokens to purchase a book to be presented to you on Speech Day. I bought a history book which bought a comment from Sir Stanley to which I smiled politely, too shy and slow to answer.

I was very impressed by Sir Stanley Rous he had a stature and a presence that demanded your respect and attention. His speech was simple and pressed the point that everyone was an achiever, be it academic or in sport, if you gave your best and endeavoured in the spirit of fair play. He told a story about boys playing cricket and smallest boy being umpire giving the biggest boy out lbw and the boy walking without question. (How things have changed. Maybe they were changing then hence Sir Stanley's chosen topic.)

I had a paper round by then which bought me a small financial independence and led me to persuade Mum and Dad to let me go on the Lanfranc summer overseas school trip to Bruges in Belgium. I was very determined to travel abroad to see some of the world that my generation had just begun to taste through television documentaries. We travelled in group of about 30 boys and two masters, Mr Budd and Mr Beauchamp (our Form Master), by train to Dover and ferry boat to Oostende where we were picked up by a coach that would take us to Bruges and for outings into Belgium.

We stayed in an old four storey hotel in a narrow cobbled street in the centre of Bruges and slept three or four to a room up a very steep staircase. The food was particularly poor. One evening we were served a grey meat steak which was so tough none of us could cut it; never-mind eat. It was only later that I found out that it still common in Belgium, at this time, to eat horse meat.

In Bruges we climbed to the top of the Belfry, admired the fine Flemish brickwork and the many medieval buildings and Churches. Took the canal boat for an evening trip to see the illuminated buildings at night, which was an all new experience. Walked around the old Harbour and witnessed the women lace makers dressed in their black widows weeds sitting in chairs outside their front doors making bobbin lace on cushions laid in their laps. We took day trips by coach to Ghent (a fine town), the WWI graves at Ypres and a day on the beach at Blankenburg. Where I remember seeing women wearing bikinis for the first time – I must have started growing up.

We arrived home to be met at East Croydon Railway Station. Where Mum and Dad thanked the School Masters for taking care of me and they wished me every success at my new school; a memory that stayed with my Mum and become so very poignant a year later when both the school masters were killed in the Lanfranc School Air Crash.

Next summer I saved up enough money to go on the school trip to Perpignan in the South of France. But, this time it was with my new school, Croydon Secondary Technical School. It was only days before we were due to leave that we heard news of the Lanfranc air crash.

It was a terrible disaster that affected many of the families who lived in the Thornton Road and Mitcham Road area. Everybody knew of a family living in a street near them or a relative working in one of the large factories in Purley Way who had lost a boy. Mum kept in touch for years with one mother who had lost her son and who never got over the shock.

Although, I left on my school trip to France shortly before the funerals, I clearly remember visiting the Crematorium on my bike and seeing the mass of wreaths covering the whole of the Memorial site and spilling over along the left side of the Thornton Road driveway. The flowers were 3yards deep and ran for 50 yards past the Memorial.

I won't forget reading about the 40th anniversary of the Lanfranc Crash in the Croydon Advertiser and seeing the picture of Quentin Green looking exactly as I remember him and my heart sank. The enormity and pain of the crash really hit home to me then. The paper also carried pictures of the masters Beecham and Budd who had cared for me on their previous school trip.