

Mrs Sheila Smith (nee Stoner)

Memories of St Paul's School 1945 - 1952

“I went to St Paul's School in January 1945 as a rising 5, my birthday is in the March. I started school with my friend Ann Davey, who was one day older than me.

The entrance for girls was via the side of the Headmaster's house and into the infant playground. Later on, everyone had to enter the school through the boys' entrance as it was felt that the garage at the side of the Headmaster's house made it dangerous to enter and leave when the Headmaster had a car.

The toilets were outside toilets, one large one for the teachers and small ones for the pupils – I cannot remember there being any water taps to wash your hands after using the toilet. (How we in that era survived I do not know!)

There were two playgrounds up the slopes, one for boys and one for girls. The girls' playground was tarmac whilst the boys' was dirt at that time. The boys were not allowed in the girls' playground and vice versa. However, when we played in the field, weather permitting, the boys and girls mixed freely. At the back of the school playground were large wooden shelters, one for the boys and one for the girls, which we sheltered in when it rained.

The canteen was situated at the side of the boys' playground. This was later used as a classroom when school numbers rose. It was usual to have 40 children to a class. The school meals were cooked off premises and dished out by the dinner ladies at lunchtime. I have never touched tapioca pudding since that time, referred to as frogspawn!

Mr Sayers was the caretaker.

My first teacher was Miss Scrivens and I remember we had desks with 12x12 1" squares etched into them, two children to a desk. I cannot remember a great deal about what we did, other than play with plastercine, but I do remember that first thing in the morning the door to the classroom would be open as we 'little ones' listened to the rest of the school assembled in the hall as they sang the morning hymn, said the morning prayers and listened to the Headmaster making announcements.

I can also remember going to the air raid shelters in the school playing field at this time. Some were situated at the top of the field, just below the boys' allotments, and some were at the bottom of the field. They were dank and smelly places with a row of wooden seats each side and wooden boards to walk on to keep feet off the water that ran in the bottom of the shelters. In 1945 there were still air raid warnings but these became fewer and fewer and were mostly false alarms, and by the time I moved up to the second infants class they had ceased. It is funny, but having been born during World War Two I had never known anything other than this country being at war with Germany, but it never affected me in any way. I still had a secure childhood – except for sweet rationing! I remember my parents talking about the war and events that happened nationally and locally, but that is all.

I believe it was in my second year at the school, in the next class (I cannot remember the name of that teacher) that Mr Wareham joined the school as the Headmaster. He was a very austere man, extremely tall, who never acknowledged you outside of the school. I don't think he knew you anyway, or else he was shortsighted and too vain to wear glasses. He was very strict and many boys had to visit his office for a taste of his cane. It was regarded as something pretty bad for boys to be sent to the Headmaster's office for a caning on the backside, but not an unusual occurrence. Any girl who had to receive the cane received it on her hand, and it was given by Miss Harwood. I can remember this happening only once whilst I was at the school. Girls generally did not misbehave badly – it would have to be something really, really serious for a girl to receive the cane, such as stealing.

It was in the second year infants that we began reading lessons. It was here that I learnt that the word 'the' was a knowing word, something I have passed on to my children and grandchildren.

At 7 years old, I reached the first of the school junior classes. The class was taken by Mrs Burrage. She could be very severe, but I only once received her wrath when, in order to be the first up to her table to have my arithmetic marked, I made a big error! Mrs Burrage took one look at my sum and sent me, and the rest of the queue, back to our desks. She then asked the question "Who has added this sum?". I gingerly put up my hand and had to go out to the front of the class to have two slaps on my hand, administered by Mrs Burrage, with a ruler. It seemed a severe punishment for a small slip-up, but I suppose Mrs Burrage was having a bad day and this put her over the edge! Another reason could have been that I was in line for the school prize for that class for arithmetic and the slip-up could have ruined my chances. In spite of the humiliation, and the determination not to cry at the time, I did get the prize. It was the book 'Peter Pan'.

Mrs Burrage also produced plays for the rest of the school to watch. The year I was in her class it was 'I Want The Moon', a tale of a little girl who had everything she could wish for but wanted more, namely the moon. I did not have an acting part, but I was supposed to organise those waiting to go on, making sure they were ready. In any event, I got too bossy, the other children complained and I had to relinquish that job to someone else.

Mrs Burrage looks stern in the class photo for 1947-48, but I did not find her too bad. I think I might have been teacher's pet. However, many children, including my sister who arrived at the school six years after me, did not like her. She was very strict.

It was during my time in this class that the first of the new teachers arrived. From this period on there was a succession of teachers on teaching practise, young teachers who had either taken up the profession after war service and gone to college to obtain a

teaching certificate or young people leaving school and taking up the career of teaching. Before this time, many teachers were not fully qualified to teach, which didn't mean they did not know how to teach, they just did not have the right sort of paper.

So enter Miss Norman!!!!!! A young teacher, just out of college, who specialised in Physical Education and History. Everyone wanted to be in her good books but she could be unfair at times. My strongest memory of Miss Norman is the Norman Conquest, the Norman Conquest and the Norman Conquest. So I ended up knowing about 1066 and the Norman Invasion and poor old Harold as well as the Bayeux Tapestry, which all seemed to end with the Magna Carta. Not very good when you go on to University later in life to read for a history degree! I had a great deal of catching up to do at University, as history at other schools wasn't much better.

We of that era must all remember country dancing in the hall when the weather was inclement – ‘The Flowers of Edinburgh’ etc. In the summer term it was Maypole Dancing, which required quite a lot of practise to get the correct weave. Actually, I quite liked country dancing and I also managed to get into the school netball team. Every year we played matches against other schools and beat them, but there was one team we could never beat and that was the Convent School – they were champions for year after year. Everyone grumbled that the girls we played against were older than we were! At the end of each netball season, Miss Norman would invite the netball team to take tea with her at her lodgings along the Westcott Road, and it was there I first experienced sliced apple sandwiches on brown bread, a novelty at that time. Miss Norman also explained to us, as part of her physical education remit, the importance of everyone having their own toothbrush and cleaning their teeth using toothpaste, both in the morning and at night before going to bed, as well as keeping ourselves clean – general hygiene we take for granted today.

We had Sports Days in the summer, and in the weeks before we were busy practising our running, long jump and high jump skills. In the summer we also played rounders and stoolball, which I believe is a Surrey/Sussex game. In the winter it was netball and shinty, wearing our white blouses tucked into our navy blue knickers – no shorts in

those days and no chance of modesty either.

The next classroom I went to was the corner classroom age 8-9. This was Mr Birkin's class. We still had the young teachers on teaching practise and it was one of those teachers that taught me the difference between 'piece' and 'peace': "Just always remember 'a piece of pie' and everything else will be the other peace". Mr Birkin was another strict teacher, the first male teacher I had to teach me. I didn't really notice the difference between male and female teachers as they were all quite strict. However, I realise today that boys need a male teacher in junior schools to keep some kind of discipline and act as a role model. I cannot remember much of what went on in this class during the year I was taught by Mr Birkin. I believe he had only recently taken up the position of teacher at St Paul's School.

For the next class 9-10 we had Mr Trustcott, a very nice teacher who only had one hand. I don't know how he had lost his left hand (I am sure it was his left hand) but it was a solid item, covered with a leather glove, and, according to the boys, hurt on the occasion of being hit for some misdemeanor or other. Yes he had a temper, but it was not very often he lost it and certainly never hit any of the girls. I cannot remember much about being in his class but my memories of his teaching and personality are pleasant.

It was in Mr Trustcott's class that we girls encountered Miss Harwood, the deputy headmistress, who taught us needlework. Miss Harwood was a spinster in her 60's, she retired at the same time as my school year left St Paul's School. I have some very fond memories of Miss Harwood. A terrific teacher, a very good model on the lines of Miss Jean Brodie, who stood no nonsense from any of us pupils - half the time I was frightened of her. However, she could be as soft as butter at times and was easily led to tears. But more of that later. Miss Harwood introduced us to needlework and 'seams'. We spent the whole year, some girls longer than a year, learning to stitch seams with scraps of 6"X4" cotton cloth; Run and Fell, French and Lapped Seams. I worked out it was quite easy to get a mark for good work, even if you only did a few stitches during the class, as each girl had to go to Miss Harwood's desk during the needlework lesson

for her to check the progress of the seam. So the trick was to keep the stitches small, minute in fact. I managed to get quite a few blue marks (as opposed to red marks for bad work - I think it was that way round) for my needlework.

Each year the best works of art for the whole school for the year would be on display at an Open Day held in the school. Unfortunately, my Mother never ever came to view any of my work, neither did she attend any School Prize Giving Days, held at the Dorking Halls, even though I came home with class prizes on 3 different occasions. At that time many parents thought the same as my Mother, school was school and home was home, unlike today when parents are encouraged to communicate with their child's school. I think of all the teachers I had during my education Miss Harwood was my inspiration. In appearance she was a short and dumpy person with heavy jowls, and wore glasses. I always see her in a brown, long-sleeved, heavy cotton dress, decorated with small flowers, wearing old-fashioned black, highly polished shoes. Miss Harwood always had her cup of tea with no sugar and no milk. Miss Harwood's end-of-year reports were always beautifully written in copper plate handwriting: she expected us all to produce written work like she did!

And so we come to the year 10-11 when everyone was crammed for the 11+ exam. There were two classes for this year, 4a and 4b. The clever ones were in 4a under the auspices of Miss Harwood, and the less able in 4b. This was the first time I experienced homework, and I can remember spelling tests, English essays and sums each week - always last minute efforts on my part. We had two chances at the 11+ and the second year I got through to Part II taken on a Saturday morning (I think) at the local grammar school. I did not, however, get to pass the Part II to go on to a grammar school education – probably because my father's occupation was too lowly, a painter and decorator, or I just wasn't clever enough. There has been much debate about grammar schools and the 11+ examination, but it is a fact that nearly all teachers' children managed to get to the grammar school. However, that is another story and I did manage to get a University Education as a mature student. At that time I received a free University Education and received a grant as well, so I am not complaining about unfairness of education. The majority of pupils who failed the 11+ examinations were destined for Sondes Place (for thickos). Actually, the year I began at Sondes Place was

the year Educationalists realised that pupils could go on to further education; my thanks for Mr Earle, the Headmaster of Sondes Place School at that time.

As I said earlier, when I left St Paul's School it was the year Miss Harwood retired and a collection was organised by the pupils in 4a to buy something for her. Because we knew she was always on some sort of diet, we decided that fruit would be a good idea, and so Mr Grumbrell in Dene Street kindly put together a box of fruit for us. Well, Miss Harwood was obviously very touched and the tears flowed for ages.

Another time Miss Harwood cried was in 1952. We were all called together to receive the sad news that King George the VI had died. Poor Miss Harwood was very upset about this. We children just sat watching her wipe her tears away.”

SS June 2011