

Mrs Janet Roodbol (nee Birkin)

Memories of St Paul's School 1950 - 1956

Janet Roodbol (born Janet Birkin) was the second daughter of Mr George Birkin, a teacher at St Paul's School after the war. Mr Birkin went on to be Headmaster of Powell Corderoy School.

“Please excuse me for starting with a little of my own history. I was born in Stoke on Trent in April 1945 and moved to Dorking in January 1948 (not that I remember the move as such....). The reason for the move was that my father had done a crash course in teacher training after the war, as it was something he had always wanted to do and there was of course a huge shortage of teachers, especially male teachers, at that time.

He applied for a post at St. Paul's, thinking that opportunities for me and for my elder sister Pamela, who was then 5, would perhaps be better in the south than in the Midlands.

His name was George Birkin, and the then head of the school was Mr Walter Wareham. He had three daughters, the youngest of whom was just a couple of months younger than me. He arranged for my mother to meet up with his wife - as of course she knew no-one down south - so Barbara and I first met at the bottom of Chequers Yard, aged 3+, and are still friends to this day.

My sister was, of course, already of school age and used to go to school on the cross-bar of our father's bike!

I started school in 1950. Mrs Marsh was the teacher of the first infants, Miss Everson of the second infants. And if you think it was easy having one's parent teaching at the school, it wasn't! Staff tended to be stricter, both with Barbara and me, to avoid any

semblance of favouritism. I remember Miss Everson smacking me (a real no-no in this day and age) for talking when we were not supposed to. Someone had grabbed my crayon off me and when I protested, I got smacked.....

After the first infants came class 1a, where Mrs Wareham, Barbara's mother, taught. She was a lovely lady and so kind. It came as a bit of a shock when moving on to 1b where a Mrs Burrage ruled the roost - a very strict lady. We also had lessons from Miss Norman. She became friends with my parents and in fact attended my wedding in 1969.

In class 2 my own father was my form teacher. Not easy. The other kids used to say "I bet he gives you higher marks" which was far from the truth. My sister had also been in his class, and used to get a bit confused from time to time and tended to call him "Sir daddy".

In class 3 we were taught by Mr Truscott, a lovely man who had the fascinating ability to wiggle his ears! He also had a prosthetic hand - presumably a consequence of the war - so he always wore a leather glove. Again he became a great friend of my parents, and attended my wedding, as indeed did Barbara's father.

The final year was class 4, divided into 4a and 4b, 4a supposedly housing the brighter pupils.... And lo and behold, my father had switched classes by that time so I had another year in his form!

I remember my primary school time as a happy time. We were all either in the blue house or the red house (I was in blue) and everyone's housemarks (gained for good work or having done something special - or lost in the opposite case!) were totted up. At the end of each week it would be announced in morning assembly which house was the winner of that week.

I think the school must have been ahead of its time in some ways as we formed groups in the last year to do certain projects, usually for geography or history. We had to research some aspect. I remember being in a group researching lumberjacks in Canada. In that year a Miss Harwood gave needlework lessons (I produced a very lopsided

romper suit) and we had vocabulary lessons from the great Mr Wareham himself.

We were well blessed at the school, having two playgrounds, a smaller one for the younger children and a very large one, and of course the school field which seemed enormous to us. An annual sports day was held - I have vague memories of running a race but doubt very much if I won!

I've just remembered Mr. Harry Sayles - how could I have forgotten him. He was the music teacher, and so enthusiastic. Great fun, and always had a twinkle in his eye. The school used to do well in the local choir festivals. He was very strong on articulation, and I can remember to this day being in the Dorking Halls and singing a song about coconuts at a fair: "Three shies a penny, come try, come try, three shies a penny, no need for to buy, Maybe a coconut, maybe a pair, maybe three-ee coconuts home from the fair" The song ended up with the narrator sadly going home without a single coconut....

He, Mr Truscott and my father were commonly known as Tom, George and Harry as opposed to Tom, Dick and Harry.

Two other important people were Mr Sayers, the caretaker, who kept the place spotless, and Mrs Osborne, the school secretary. When she retired my mother was asked if she would like the job - she accepted hesitantly but did fine, and was there for quite a number of years.

It was, of course, a Church of England school and we used to attend services from time to time, such as Ascension Day. In those days the fair used to come to Dorking around Ascension Day and we had the rest of the day off after the service - no prizes for guessing where we spent the afternoon.

In those days the school had a 'Roll of Honour' up on the walls of the hall - all pupils who passed their 11+ were on it, so if they are still there, my sister's name and my own are up there for 1953 and 1956 respectively."