

Brian Marsden attended Perse Boys' School from 1948-1955. He and I became friends when I joined the school from 1951 to 1954. He had an interest in astronomy even then and completed an illustrious career in the subject to become a Supervisory Astronomer at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Director Emeritus of the Minor Planet Center. His death was announced by the Harvard Smithsonian Centre for Astrophysics and obituaries have been published by the International Astronomical Union as a Minor Planet Electronic Circular (MPEC 2010-W10: BRIAN MARSDEN (1937 Aug. 5-2010 Nov. 18)) and in newspapers including *The Guardian*. These can be found on the internet:-

<http://www.universetoday.com/79392/astronomer-brian-marsden-has-died/>

<http://www.minorplanetcenter.org/mpec/K10/K10W10.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/nov/23/brian-marsden-obituary>

This brief note records some recollection of mine on what Brian did when he was at The Perse.

Brian cultivated his interest in astronomy right from his school days. It was a time when there were sports every afternoon on Tuesday and Thursday instead of lessons. It would be rugby football in the autumn term, hockey in winter, that was replaced by "doing the triangle" (cross-country running), when the ground was frozen hard. The big triangle for seniors, the small one for juniors and a short-cut for those who managed to dodge the prefects and teachers. Round about Easter time, it would be swimming in the river. The Sports Master, Mr Finch, would have the water temperature tested. As long as it was above 40 F (15 C), we'd have to jump into the muddy water to thrash about among the tall reeds. And either tennis or cricket in the summer term. I do not know how Brian got away with it, he always came with notes to school from his mother asking for him to be excused sports because he was sick and he went off to the library of the Cambridge University Observatory for the afternoon.

The MPEC obituary about Brian stated that "Together with a couple of other students he formed a school Astronomical Society, of which he served as secretary." I was one of the "couple of students". He was the driving force of the group and co-opted me as president actually. I can see the scene even now: I was in the teacher's seat behind a long desk on a raised classroom dais, chairing a meeting of the society, and Brian would be hovering about directing the event. One Christmas holiday, he ran a competition. He compiled a list of astronomical questions. I spend many engaging hours in the Cambridge City Library researching the answers and won the prize, which was a book on astronomy, of course. He obtained permission for the Astronomical Society to be excused lessons so that the members could go to the school sports field to observe an eclipse of the sun. Just as he learnt from his mother, we learnt from him how to project images of the bitten sun through smoked glass onto paper.

England, only a few years after WWII, was still much deprived and the habit of having to cope with resources being scarce, continued. In school, we were given rough notebooks to make notes in. Brian would use pencil and when the pages were all filled up, he would erase the pencil marks on every page so that he could use them again. We catalogued the

school library one school holiday. He was a member of the CCF (Combined Cadet Force) and I remember him in his blue RAF uniform on parade days. As I write, I recalled that I invited him to my home one time and he stayed for tea. I thought we would introduce him to Chinese food and my mother gave him a hard boiled egg cooked in soya sauce to try. He did not like it because the egg had taken on the brown tint of the sauce. I cannot remember if it was Brian or not who originated the excavation of a corner of the school sports field for Roman remains. Nothing of significance was found. But someone unearthed an oyster shell and proudly showed it around. For a long time afterwards, he was followed around the schoolyard by taunts of “Jacob and his oyster shell!”

There was little TV in England then, not until the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1952 put a boost to that. Home entertainment was listening to the radio. We all grew up with the many half-hour comedy shows on air: *ITMA*, *Much Binding in the Marsh*, *Take it From Here*, *Educating Archie* (a ventriloquist's dummy), *Ray's a Laugh*, *The Arthur Askey Show*, *Hancock's Half Hour*. Newly arrived in England from Hong Kong, I learnt my English while doing my maths homework accompanied by the anarchic Goons (Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan, Michael Bentine and Harry Secombe) in *The Goon Show*. Brian was inspired by all these and wrote comedy sketches that he and his ‘couple of other fellow students’ (that’s me and Geoff Price) would read them to each other. We performed one time at a Sports Concert in the evening of the school’s Sports Day. We stood behind the curtained little stage under the school library balcony on the side of the packed school hall in Hills Road waiting to go on. We three shook hands with each other for luck just before the curtain went up. The headmaster, Mr Stubbs, sitting in the centre front row, laughed encouragingly. Later, after the performance and back in my seat among the audience, I saw to my chagrin that, well-lit behind the curtain, everything on stage was clearly on view through the reddish material, our nervous handshakes and all. Luckily, the audience was polite and no one tittered at us.

These are fond memories I have of Brian. When he went over the Atlantic Ocean to America, the distance was too far for us to keep in close touch. In 1984, 30 years after leaving Perse and returning from an international congress in Mexico, I dropped in on Brian and his wife, Nancy, in Harvard and Lexington. It was not until I began visiting America more frequently after meeting Carol, teaching English at East China University of Petroleum in Dongying, Shandong Province in China, that I linked up with Brian again. We visited them in Lexington in 2008 and he and I reminisced about our times at Perse. We tried to meet up again in 2010, but his final illness was running its cruel course and we did not manage it. His Memorial Service was held at the Hancock United Church of Christ in Lexington, Massachusetts, USA, on 16 January 2011.

*David Cheng, January 2010*

PS. An incredible video was made in 1956/7 by Perse pupil, Eric Mival, showing a year in the life of Perse School for Boys fifty years ago. It contains many of the scenes that I have described above: the school sports field, rugby football, hockey, cross country running, swimming in the river, cricket, sports day and parade of the CCF. There is a link to it on the Old Perseans' website <http://www.oldperseans.org/> or it can be accessed directly, <http://www.oldperseans.org/videosExtra/video1.asp>.