



The Other End of the Boarding Houses

The following article was kindly contributed by Chris Barry OP

A number of events recently have got me thinking. At the Boarders' Reunion I was asked what it was like to be the teacher's son there, and at an earlier OP dinner some of my contemporaries said "actually, we felt quite sorry for you" – I wish they'd said at the time! In a recent telephone conversation with a current Perse boy I was described as 'the son of the legendary Mr Barry' and lastly I have just read the history of the Perse Preparatory School, in which my parents were mentioned several times, and my mother (who taught there before the War) was quoted at some length. In my father's last years, my wife & I tried to persuade him to write his memoirs – his earliest memory was of a Zeppelin bombing London in World War 1, and in the speech he gave at the opening of the Barry room he commented that he had known every Headmaster the Perse had had in the last century! We were unsuccessful, though we did get as far as a title - 'from Zeppelin to Alzheimer's'! I cannot emulate the depth and breadth of his memories, but I have always been aware that mine was the only year that had experienced both Prep buildings and both Upper Schools, and of course my experience of the Boarding Houses is unique. So what follows is a collection of rather random recollections, and something of 'what was it like?' which I hope will be of some interest to readers of any age.

As the oldest Old Perseans will know, when I was born in 1945 my father was House Tutor at the School House, the other house being Hillel House for Jewish boys. This arrangement was changed when I was two; the Headmaster, Mr Stubbs, took over the School House, and Hillel House became the Junior House, with my parents in charge. Of course I have no memories of that, but it is worth pointing out that the Housemaster was not paid for doing the job, nor was his wife paid for running the house; it was just

expected. But, of course, accommodation and food were free. The Junior House is now, of course, the Pelican Pre-Prep; the Senior House was demolished some years ago, to my great regret.

My recollections of the Prep School in Bateman Street are somewhat hazy; I remember the playground at the back, kicking a ball about in break and standing in lines to queue for something or other, but even stimulated by the above-mentioned book I cannot dredge up any more memories. I was there for only a year, and in 1954 we moved to Leighton House, which the school had bought for the princely sum of £5,000! The transformation was incredible – to us, the big windows and wide open spaces breathed new life into us, and this awareness was soon taken up and cultivated by that wonderful Nature Study teacher, Susan Taylor. She taught us to observe Nature with all our senses; we learnt to identify birds, butterflies, and numerous plants. Once she blindfolded us and led us round the grounds to feel the bark of various trees, showing us how to identify them by their texture. We observed the swallows nesting, and under her guidance hand-reared a baby squirrel; when he opened one eye before the other we called him Nelson. For several years, if we were walking in under the trees from the Long Road entrance, Nelson would scamper down, run up to a boy, run right up him and perch on his shoulder! Then he suddenly stopped coming, and we learnt a harsh lesson in the frailties of life as a squirrel – especially as, at the time, there was a bounty of £1, I think, on Grey Squirrel tails. We learnt an even harsher lesson a few years later, when we were told of Miss Taylor's untimely death in a car crash – my eyes filled when reading about it in the recent book, and fill now at the memory. She certainly gave me a love of nature, and an interest in biology which led directly to my subsequent career in medicine.

The only other teachers I remember are Hugh Lindeman, the Master in Charge, Mrs Spence and Mrs Billingham. Mr Lindeman always seemed rather remote and fearsome to me; Mrs Spence was always a model of calmness and capability, and Janine Billingham, who will probably read this, gave excellent, enjoyable and stimulating French lessons, so that when, aged about 12, I spent the summer holidays with a French family, I had a good enough grounding to acquire the language to the extent that I ended up thinking and even dreaming in it! It's been slowly declining ever since...

During this time, the fact that my father was a teacher at the Upper School was not of much significance to anyone, with the exception of the boarders. At that time we were in the Junior House; we lived at one end, the boys at the other, and the resident staff lived above us on the top floor. Their fire escape was a rope, which ran through a braking device; each end had a sling. You were supposed to get into the sling and cast yourself out of the window; there was a runner across the outside of the window sill, which is still there! I remember going down it for fun, but I doubt if the cook or maids ever did! I suppose our family life then was fairly 'normal', given that I was an only child.

I had a friend next door, Clifford Cranfield, and I was distraught when they moved away. At bath time I would run eagerly down the corridor to join the boarders; breakfast was always a family affair, but lunch and tea were with the boarders, so I suppose I was well integrated at that stage. My parents were both very loving, and we were quite a tactile, 'huggy' family. But I became quite isolated; if any boy's misbehaviour was found out I was automatically blamed. No-one seemed to understand that, for that very reason, the last thing I would do was to tell my father about any misdeed of which I was aware! Nevertheless, though I would talk and play with the boys, I was kept at a distance and was sometimes overtly the target of suspicion. I'm not sure how aware my parents were of this, but it so happened that there was another only child in my year, Richard Johnston; someone arranged for the two families to meet; it turned out that Richard's father, Ken, shared my parents' love of mountains and birds, so over the years we had many family holidays together, and Richard and I became friends. But there was still a barrier – on occasions, Richard would be with me at the Junior House and come in for tea; a certain amount of jeering and sniggering went on. But we had a 'den' in one of the outhouses at the back; we built a model railway at waist height, complete with a bridge across the middle of the room. Maybe there was a degree of envy amongst the boys.

Apart from Richard and the more distant relationship with the boarders, I actually had very few friends; I can think of only two who ever came to the House, though I went to theirs on a few occasions. John Cheney and Russell Cheng – thank you, especially Russell, who taught me how to use chopsticks! But don't feel too sorry for me – relationships with the day boys were more normal, particularly in the Cubs, Scouts and, later, the CCF, where shared interests mattered more than who came from where.

In the boarding houses, the contrast between term and holiday times was immense. As soon as the boys had gone, my mother had the domestic staff doing what we would now call a deep clean throughout. The doors were then sealed with newspaper, and I was forbidden to go into any rooms at the boarders' end. I was quite annoyed about this, as I was desperate to build a canoe from a kit; there was ample room available but I wasn't allowed to use it! The other thing about our family life was that there was never any privacy. In term time there were always problems to be sorted; I remember what seemed like constant knocks on the door – boys for my father, domestic staff for my mother. In holiday time the domestic staff were still there with their attendant problems; Joyce, the cook, was particularly temperamental; I remember on one occasion my father and I had to go into her room and disarm her of a knife she was threatening to use! There were only a few days in the year when we were entirely on our own; my father would say "hurrah – let's run naked and screaming round the house"! We never actually did, though.

Our own holidays were a wonderful family time. We had the luxury of a fortnight at Easter (always in the mountains) and three weeks in summer, when we would go to Sark; later to France or Spain. I remember being in the Triumph Roadster, sitting on the arm-rest in the middle of the bench front seat, being allowed to steer the car. By way of contrast I was reminded recently by an OP of my father getting 11 people in that car, and being stopped by the police after going rather fast down Brooklands Avenue! 11 people? Three in the front, 3-4 more standing behind the front seat, 2 on the 'dickie' seats in the boot, and a couple more squeezed in there. Both he and Keith Symons would take boys out for a spin in their cars for a treat – hugely appreciated! All this was long before the days of seat belts...

I've got ahead of myself. After the Prep School came the Upper, in Gonville Place. I vividly remember my first day there, struggling to find my way around, the masters in bat-like gowns, the older boys playing Fives, and there being an intimidating yet exciting atmosphere of learning. F C Brown in his chemistry lab creating appalling stinks that filtered through to other classrooms; Mr Stubbs presiding majestically over Assembly, all of us drilling or enlarging holes in the brickwork using pennies – there were hundreds of them; no-one seemed to mind. The prefects sold chocolate digestives, six at a time, starting me on a lifelong habit. There were bullies, too; I had been bullied at school before the Prep; it didn't really happen there, though I was near the bottom of the pecking order that all children establish. But the bullies at the Upper School were few; everyone knew who they were, and my breaks were spent trying to avoid them. For me, it never seemed related to the fact that I was the son of a teacher; it happened anyway, though not very much as far as I was concerned. But I have to say that being bullied was a valuable lesson for later life, in that I learnt how to spot bullying behaviour, and I have been able to put this knowledge to good use to help my patients who have been bullied at work – not an uncommon occurrence. So thank you, Mr Sims!

The most bizarre thing was being taught by my father, with him calling me 'Barry' and me calling him 'Sir'. He taught me - English - in my first year there, but hardly at all after that. I think everyone found it a bit awkward; the fact that I was a teacher's son did colour relationships there for the first few years, but by the time I was in the 6th form it had long since ceased to matter.

From Glebe Road we would either cycle to Gonville Place (opposite the Catholic Church) or take the 106 bus. Often, on bikes, we would try to keep up with the bus, getting a 'tow' in the still air behind it. It was often possible to keep this up from School as far as the railway bridge; after that the distance between stops was too great, but it was fun. All this was to change, however, when the Upper School moved, in 1961, to its present site. Stubbs was in his element; I remember him telling us how to address Royalty – HRH Princess Alexandra was to perform the opening ceremony. I was there, amongst those lining the drive; she never spoke to me. But, as with the move from the

Prep School, I remember being awe-struck by the Hall and its roof, a design which was futuristic then and has withstood the test of time. More of that anon... The general impression we had was that the buildings were modelled on a Roman villa. I've no idea if that's true, but it seemed to me to give a sense of history to add to the existing atmosphere of an intellectual power-house. Leaning as I was towards Biology, I loved the Biology pond, now filled in, sadly. The maths master, Donald Newton, donated three goldfish – Sin, Cos and Tan... The purpose-built labs were, then, state-of-the art; there was even a small lecture theatre! The Gym, now part of the Hall, had a sprung floor, & no-one was allowed in wearing shoes. The balcony round the Hall had little pull-down 'desks' for private study – an experiment that wasn't really successful. But the most impressive part was the enormous stage, with those magnificent velvet curtains, which if I'm not mistaken are still there. Behind it was the library; beyond that was a long corridor leading to, horror of horrors, the Headmaster's study. On being called in there, the first thing to greet you was the tiger rug – a tiger pelt complete with the head, mouth agape, snarling at you. The tiger guarded Mr Stubbs, sitting behind his desk. No matter how friendly or uncontroversial the invitation to that study, it was impossible to go in without a feeling of terror...

Some time after the School moved, we moved – next door. My father took over the Senior House, as Stubbs had had a spanking new Headmaster's House built in the grounds. Family life was much the same, although rather than sharing High Tea with the boys, we had dinner at 7.30 – all meals were ruled by a gong, calling us in to eat with precise timing. I think dinner was taken with the Matron and House Tutor, so again we did not get much privacy. Often a few of the boys were invited to join us for Sunday lunch – something which was much appreciated, I now know. Shortly after we moved in, my parents had the opportunity to have the place redecorated. I can remember my mother's excitement at getting in a professional designer – she was always keen on style! The results took us right away from the drab post-war years; we must have been in the forefront of modern decor, with a harvest yellow carpet and green ceiling in the sitting room. It may sound odd, but it worked. The best part of the Senior House was the library – a long room divided into three by bookshelves forming partial subdivisions with archways across the top. We each had a desk in there; mine next to my father's, so I couldn't get away with not doing my homework! I did daydream a lot, though, looking out of the window across the tennis court.

We were on holiday in Spain when my 'O' level results came in. I had already decided to do Medicine, and to get in to Cambridge I had to have 'O' level Latin – I was the last year for which it was compulsory. I was terrible at Latin, so had a lot of private coaching from my father's great friend, the Latin teacher Hugh Percival. My father had arranged for Hugh to send a telegram with my results; it arrived – 'failed English Lit only. Laughing, Percival'!

So my time at the School was coming to an end. Many people have asked me what my parents were like; I hope this gives some kind of answer. My mother was always there, of course, though often preoccupied and sometimes stressed with all the problems of finding and keeping staff, plus running the house on a budget. Occasionally she would let it show, but mostly she just got on with it, though sometimes she would have to retire with a migraine. But she was always loving and attentive to me – as indeed she was to boys and their parents, as has been attested many times. In a recent anecdote, OP Mark Potter recollected Stubbs instructing my father to give him six of the best; he reduced it to three, after which my mother made him a mug of hot chocolate. It was this kind of combination of firmness, fairness and kindness which, I think, made my parents special to so many generations of boys who passed through their hands. They were the same with me – firm, fair, kind and affectionate, and able to turn a blind eye when appropriate.

This latter attribute is well illustrated by an event which occurred near the end of my time at the School. It was the end of the Autumn Term; a friend, Laurence Rhodes (with whom I am still in touch) had obtained an inflatable Father Christmas. Late on the night before the last assembly he and I climbed up in the narrow window above the balcony into the apex of the Hall, above the stage. The climb necessitated the removal of all the light bulbs there; Laurie took them out and passed them to me, following behind with a bag. At the top, he lowered the Father Christmas on a string, to dangle it exactly over where the Headmaster sits. We came back down, replacing the light bulbs as we went – no vandalism there. In the morning Stubbs was incandescent; the Father Christmas was too high to reach, and only after a very tall step ladder was found and the very tall Head Boy (Nicky Martin) reached up with a long pole was it removed and a much-delayed and very quiet Assembly took place. That evening I happened to walk back down Glebe Road with my father. He said “Do give my unofficial congratulations to whoever did that”. After a slight pause, I said “Oh – thank you”. He spun round – “WHAT??!!” We walked the rest of the way in silence, both of us smirking; nothing more was said.