

SANDROYD

Sandroyd was chosen as my preparatory school because my elder brother Pat had been a star pupil there. At the outbreak of the war the Government requisitioned many large private country houses and converted some of them into boarding schools. Sandroyd was evacuated from London to such a house near Tollard Royal that was quite near to Chute Standen and so was the obvious choice for me.

My mother drove me to the school on a cold wet January day to start my new life as Number 61. Ever since being numbered for the first time various authorities have been trying to label me in some form or another. For some extraordinary reason I have always thought of 61 as my lucky number and chosen it in raffles, although it has never won me a prize! Maybe one day it will, and one can't change horses in midstream at my age.

The day my mother took me to boarding school, aged eight, I was wearing my first pale-grey flannel suit with long pants and feeling pretty smart. Being expected to grow it was of course too big for me! As clothes were rationed and required coupons, they had to last a long time.

Actually it lasted at least two years, and still fitted when I was aged ten. This is remembered very well because my parents took me to Copenhagen in the *Dove*, the company's four-seater aeroplane, and on our way we became lost over Holland's Zuider Zee. In those days there were no commercial flights so the Zinc Corporation had its own aeroplane. My father was on a business trip to meet a man who sold bone calcium, which the Bristol aluminium smelters used. We had taken off on a nice sunny day but ran into bad weather over the English Channel. The only way then to find out one's location was to pick up a landmark so we had descended below the cloud, which meant the flight got very bumpy. All this happened only minutes after being given a tomato juice to drink and through my lack of concentration and not holding on tightly, the liquid jumped into my lap when we hit a bump and made an awful mess. My father was very cross about this, but probably because he was extremely worried about our safety. We found out where we were and eventually arrived safely in Copenhagen and the hotel cleaned my suit.

The trip was very memorable as the wife of the businessman we were visiting was a leading actress and stunningly beautiful, according to my mother. We had dinner with the couple and the wife signed a photograph for me, which I kept for years. The business was not a success as my father found out that the calcium came from India and was suspiciously like human bone!

As we drove to the school I was feeling very apprehensive, as this would be the first time I had been left alone in the world without a friend. All my life there have been occasions where I have experienced a feeling of my being out of place and being different, and my arrival at the school was just such an example as all the other boys were dressed in grey herringbone coats and knee-length knickerbockers. A confrontation must have taken place between my mother and the headmaster, as my mother explained to me when she said goodbye that there was no way she was going to waste clothing coupons on such a ridiculous outfit. So my school days began with my being the only one improperly dressed amongst a hundred boys. It was a great start!

They soon discovered that I was also illiterate for although I had been at school for two years in Australia my reading and writing abilities were way

behind all the other eight-year-old pupils. Moreover my contemporaries were learning French and Latin, neither language used by *Captain Marvel*! A crash course was needed and thank goodness there must have been a brilliant teacher because by the end of my first term she had me up to scratch with the reading and writing and moved back into my correct class.

The race to catch up with Latin, however, was always a non-starter. My first Latin lesson was a total mystery to the extent that as England was still at war I thought that the teacher was trying to teach us some kind of Secret Code the Germans wouldn't understand. My introduction to the Dead Language will never be forgotten, or the freezing cold converted horse-stable classroom where it took place. The lesson started with the master asking us to repeat after him the verb 'I love': *Amo, Amas, Amat*. Believing he said, "A Mole, A Mouse, A Rat," that is what I shouted out. A roar of laughter filled the room so from that day on my mind was completely closed to Latin.

French was not quite as bad and I still retain enough of the language to understand a menu and book a double room with a bath. Luckily all my friends in France have perfect English. It really would benefit World Peace if we all spoke one language. A couple of years ago Professor Ronnie Brown was commissioned by the University of Lisbon to compile a CD-Rom on mathematics, which he illustrated with some of my Symbolic Sculptures. We were both asked to the official launch of the CD-Rom which had been distributed to every school in Portugal where English is an obligatory language for all students. One step forward to peace!

Listening to Italian is a pleasure, although I can't understand a word of what is being said. To be surrounded by chatting Italians in a restaurant is a bit like having a picnic beside a babbling brook.

My one piece of good fortune at Sandroyd was that the teaching of mathematics didn't start until students turned eight years old. I was slightly behind the class, but was soon able to catch up as they were only doing adding, subtracting, division and multiplication. When algebra and geometry were introduced, guess who came top of the class, much to everyone's amazement! I was overjoyed to receive the prize that has remained the only academic award I have ever won. The leather-bound volume is still on my shelf, although it has never been read. Fancy giving a ten-year-old a book about road building and transport in medieval England!

Also team games such as football and cricket were new to me. The only sporting activity at school in Australia had been walking down to the animal sanctuary. I had been taught to swim by my cousins, but as Sandroyd had no pool that didn't gain me any Brownie points.

My cousins had taught me to ride a horse and as there were some ponies, long afternoon rides through the woods that surrounded the school I did enjoy. The ponies were not very well trained and all liked to race for home, so of course one day I was thrown off and landed on my head as we charged into the cobbled stable yard. In those days no one wore hard hats and, as the fall had left me stunned, I was confined to a sick room for two days.

The timing could not have been worse as my incarceration coincided with the one day of the term when mothers were allowed to take their sons out for lunch. It was the only time in my life that I have really felt depressed, and remember very clearly the feeling of utter despair.

We didn't wash much at Sandroyd. Football was played twice a week and after the game we all went to the Tosh to wash, a function that took place in a

cottage which had once been the laundry to the big house. The Tosh consisted of two large rectangular pools side by side full of tepid water, each about 18 inches deep. In the first you were meant to soap up and remove the dirt and in the second rinse off. This was all right if your game was the first to finish but if you were unlucky to be last, it was awful.

As my games always seemed to finish last, by the time we got into the first pool the water was muddy and the second pool was cold! On top of all that, our towels were always damp as the only way of drying them was to put them through the old laundry's wooden roller before hanging them back on your peg. Of course in the winter they never dried completely even though they wouldn't be used again for another three days!

The only memorable thing of pleasure about the bathhouse was the fuchsia that grew around the front door. The flowers were a brilliant red and if you picked one and sucked the nectar from the base, you got a beautiful sweet taste. Those fuchsias were my first awareness of flowers. The one treat during those awful school days was the handing-out once a week of a battered tin that contained five boiled sweets. Sucking a drop of nectar from a fuchsia was definitely an added bonus if you had a sweet tooth.

There were no fire escapes as it had never been intended that the house should sleep 100 boys. The solution was a Dead Man's Winch in the window of each dormitory. The idea was that you slipped a harness around your chest under your arms and then launched yourself out into space in the belief that you would be gently lowered to the ground some twenty feet below. The only practice we had of how to use them was to stand below the window and watch a demonstration once a year by a master!

The Germans were defeated during term-time so the school planned a celebration for VE Day consisting of no lessons and a giant bonfire for us ten-year-olds to dance around in the evening. It was a good excuse to clean up the woods around the school, as we spent the whole day bringing in fallen sticks!

Because petrol rationing was still in force it was difficult for parents to come and see their children, although as the school only allowed the boys to leave the grounds once per term for lunch, this was no big deal. Some boys went the whole term without leaving the school or seeing their parents.

At Sandroyd we all called each other by our surnames and being the only Robinson it was not a problem having such a common name. On arriving at Rugby I entered as Robinson Octus. It took four years to work my way up to Minor and I never did reach the exalted rank of Major.

I had one close friend at Sandroyd and his name was John Barstow. When my mother came to take me out for the one allowed meal Barstow would come with us. His father had been wounded in the Great War, a bullet passing right through his head behind his eyes leaving him blind, although, with the aid of Braille, he had become a successful solicitor in Hampstead.

On arriving in London in 1969 and searching the London telephone book, I found a Barstow living in Hampstead. A woman answered the number and on asking to speak to John she told me that she was his mother and that John had been drowned in a sailing accident when he was 20. It was the saddest news that I have ever heard. John was my one happy memory of those terrible days at Sandroyd School.

The school had a Scout Troop and we were members of the Curlew Patrol. That is really my only memory except that knots came easily to me but not to Barstow, so hours were spent teaching him, as he was quite hopeless.

Once the school was hit by an outbreak of influenza and most of the boys were confined to bed for a week. Twice a day we would be brought a big earthenware jar full of boiling hot water mixed with Friar's Balsam and made to sit, with towels over our heads, inhaling the fumes for half an hour. During the rest of the day we were meant to continue our studies as we lay coughing, but as soon as the door was closed we would of course just talk.

My prize possession as a schoolboy was a wonderful penknife that Uncle Fredrick Bowring had given me. It had a mother-of-pearl handle and contained two blades, a screwdriver, a can opener, a corkscrew, a spike for getting stones out of horses' hooves and a saw. It was the forerunner of every Swiss Army knife that has ever been. It was beautiful and the blades were very sharp.

Unfortunately I shut the big blade on the back of the index finger of my left hand, cutting myself so badly that the scar is still visible 60 years later. On going to the matron to have it dressed she confiscated my knife! The injustice of this action absolutely horrified me and to make matters worse the knife was never returned. My main use for the knife had been to carve the hulls of sailing galleons out of the bark of a giant cedar that grew in the school grounds, so my sculpting career was abruptly nipped in the bud by the confiscation!

Before we boys left Sandroyd the Headmaster, Mr Ozane, called each of us into his study one at a time and gave us a lecture on the Facts of Life. It is hard to imagine anything worse for the poor man than having to repeat this task to some ten boys, year after year. The lecture ended with an instruction about it being sinful to look at pictures of naked women. It was pretty hard trying to keep a straight face!

Another reason not to forget Mr Ozane was because of being constantly sent to his study for *Six of the Best* that were delivered with a Charlie Chaplin bamboo walking stick. The blue stripe bruises across the bottom would last for a week and were admired by the rest of the boys in the Tosh when proudly displayed by the victim. Caning hurts for a moment and then leaves a rather pleasant tingling sensation in the buttocks!

It was certainly ineffectual as it never stopped us repeating our misdemeanours. I was once beaten for using a water pistol in class, which, like the knife, was also confiscated and never returned. This didn't upset me nearly as much as losing the knife.

Everyone had to be a member of the choir. The headmaster would conduct the singing practice in the dining room accompanied by a teacher on the piano. There was always a rush to get in the back row. One day something happened and the back row lost control. Mr Ozane was in a particularly bad mood that day and suddenly exploded, "Robinson, wipe that asinine grin off your face and get out of here. And don't ever come to choir practice again."

The food was awful, which was not surprising as rationing was still in force. It must have been a nightmare to feed all hundred of us. One day we had tapioca pudding for dessert. The slimy white balls went round and round in my mouth and couldn't be swallowed. Because food was so scarce it was a rule that we had to eat everything on our plates. When Mr Ozane saw that everyone had finished but me, he told me to go and stand against the wall and stay there until the plateful was finished. Dutifully following his instructions, watched by everyone, I took a mouthful, swallowed and was violently sick, bringing up not only the tapioca but also the rest of my meal!

Inevitably the dreaded day came when those who were leaving to go on to a Public School had to sit a Common Entrance Examination. I was dreading

this knowing I would fail in Latin. Up to then I had managed to scrape through with the aid of a barter system that existed with my fellow students. Those who were good at maths would pass notes to those who weren't and vice versa with Latin. When exam day arrived we sat at desks that were positioned so far apart it was impossible to pass notes!

Eventually the marks were returned and my Latin score was abysmal. However, Rugby accepted me on condition that I did some extra Latin during the holidays. Barstow was accepted into Winchester on the same conditions but with mathematics. Both of us were relieved, but shuddered at the thought of our holiday being ruined by having to stay indoors with a tutor.

Mr Ozane suggested to my parents that they should employ my Latin master Mr Cookey-Yarborough for the holidays. When my parents told me about this, I couldn't believe it. The master was a crusty old bachelor whom I didn't like and besides it would do no good.

At our first lesson he quickly understood that it would be impossible to bring my Latin up to scratch when, through my tears, I explained to him that I had been having help from other boys for years and knew next to nothing of the language. With that he set me to do a couple of hours of elementary grammar each morning and went off shooting rabbits with my brother, Pat, leaving me free to read an adventure book.

By this time I had turned into a bookworm as my mother had discovered a series of adventure stories that recorded the exploits of two American brothers who were my age. The boys were detectives who helped the police capture foreign spies, contraband smugglers and gem thieves. There must have been at least 15 books in the series and my mother used to produce a new book as soon as one was finished. The boys had access to motorboats and it was very exciting stuff that set my imagination running wild.

Only one of the stories has actually stuck in my mind and I must record it because there is a quite amazing coincidence about it. The brothers were on a holiday on the south coast of England with their parents at a place that had little bays set into white chalk cliffs, a bit like Lulworth Cove in Dorset, which they explored in their motorboat.

One day, when the smugglers were chasing them, they had to hide in a cave and in the process of finding a way out they discovered an ancient sculpture of a bull. Fifty years after reading this story I was taken up an underground river in a tiny bathtub-boat into a French cave. After crawling for some time along a tunnel we arrived in front of a clay bull and cow that had been sculpted 15,000 years ago!

So ended my days at Sandroyd School. Resigning myself to another five years of prison at Rugby, I was quite prepared for this knowing it would be broken by wonderful holidays.