

RATTIE GOES TO SCHOOL

ROBIN PERCIVAL AT PRIOR'S COURT, 1958-1960

Introduction

School Histories as a rule annoy me. For two reasons. The main one is that they tend to exclude the experiences of the boys and girls who went to them. They are about headmasters, or headmistresses, and the colleagues who served under them. And buildings, of course. On the other hand, if they are actual memoirs by alumni, they have a predilection to romanticise the author's school days, or to ignore and suppress the more unpleasant aspects of their life in the school.

I hope to avoid this with my recollections.

In putting together this memoir of the two years I spent at Prior's Court Preparatory School in Chieveley, near Newbury, I have relied on several sources.

The first is memory. I am very conscious that memory can be a false friend. As one grows older, the falser it can become. I was at P.C. over 60 years ago. I am trying to remember events which happened then as accurately as possible. I know that is difficult especially in terms of feelings and emotions which can change over time, and perhaps become more benign. So there is a health warning. I have tried to be as accurate as possible, but I am aware that my memory may differ from others, and indeed that my memory can sometimes be wrong.

I do have one considerable advantage. At Prior's Court there was a requirement that each boy write a letter home once a week. I did so and to his eternal credit my father kept them all, 62 as it happens! They are not masterpieces. In some respects they are quite poor, badly written and they go all over the place without any sequence or logic. They are full of demands and requests and often very short on actual news. They also never refer to some events, such as the beatings, and sometimes they only make a frustratingly passing reference to an event, such as when Mr Maltby, the School's Headmaster, "sacked" a Clan Leader and a number of dormitory leaders in the Christmas term of 1959.

But still the letters are a contemporary record of my life at P.C. and so have an accuracy which can be missing from memory. Indeed they can sometimes

challenge memory. One small example, the incident of the aluminium studs in my rigger boots, I thought took place in my first term at P.C. It did not. My letters reveal it took place in my second term.

I have also used an account I wrote of my school days in 1973, though that dealt mainly with my time at Kingswood, the senior school. But it did recount some of my experiences at P.C., such as my traumatic run-in with Bligher Burton in his first term at P.C. This account was written only 14 years after the event and so it is the one I have used as the basis for the narrative in this memoir.

The 1973 account reminded me of things I have now completely forgotten. One interesting example of that is the row I had with Johnny Roebuck about who was Mike Nix's best friend. No doubt a silly argument, one that we would all have a good laugh about now, but which nevertheless in 1973 was a "vivid" memory but by 2022 there is no memory of it at all!

I have also used some official Kingswood documents¹. The Kingswood Register, published in 1975, contains the name of every old boy of the school from 1900 to 1972. I'm sure if the school was to publish such a document now it would probably breach all kinds of privacy laws. I have also used occasionally the little blue book which we were given each year containing the names, forms, houses etc of every boy currently at the school. I retained the one I was given in 1965. The Magazine of the Kingswood Association, the school's alumni organisation, has two stand out articles. The first, "Prior's Court Remembered", contains a substantial number of reminiscences, (Vol 1, No 7, March 1999). This was followed in the succeeding year by a piece written by Maltby's successor as Headmaster, Bill Mountford (Vol1, No 8, April 2000).

I did not use the one account of a boy's time at PC which I found on the web, and this for obvious reasons. David Ledgard, a son of the Manse, was at Prior's Court from 1979-1981. If you do choose to read his account, it's certainly a lot shorter than mine, it is interesting to note the changes which had taken place in the 20 years following my time there.

It can be found at: <https://dledgard0.tripod.com/me/prep.htm>.

I would like to thank the four contemporaries of mine at Prior's Court who responded generously to my request for them to read my memoir and identify any inaccuracies or omissions. David Mumford was one year ahead of me at PC but is still a good friend. John Roebuck, David Cox and Peter Cornwell

¹ Kingswood School, Bath was the senior school. At this time all boys enrolled at Prior's Court went up to Kingswood after completing their year in the Third Form.

were in the same year as me, all three friends, but with whom I have no real contact since the day I left Kingswood in December 1965. All four have reminded me of things I have forgotten and who brought quite different perspectives on the school which I find interesting. To them I say “thank you” but, of course, as the old cliché goes, any errors which remain are entirely mine!

Finally, I have included some photographs in the Gallery section of my website which readers of my memoir might find interesting. The photos taken by my father in 1954 was when my brother Michael went up to P.C. The two photos of rugby teams show many of the P.C. boys mentioned in the script about six months after they had left Prior’s Court. Finally the colour photos have been lifted from the web and show P.C. as it is today.

Robin Percival

1st May 2022

There can be no doubt I wanted to go. My elder brother Michael had gone to Prior’s Court (PC) in 1954 and was now in his second year at the main school, Kingswood School (KS) in Bath.

It seemed like a great adventure. I certainly didn’t have any thoughts questioning my parents’ decision. Those were to come much later.

My first attempt at the Entrance Exam had ended in failure. This came as no surprise. Fred Turton, the Headmaster at Farnworth School in Widnes, where I lived, had told my father I had got many of the arithmetic questions right at my initial attempt but later had gone through and made changes which turned right answers into wrong answers.

So I was given extra coaching at home by Mrs. Barber. Her son Richard was in the same class as me at Farnworth and we were quite friendly. She coached me in Maths which was undoubtedly my weak subject.

I took the exam again and this time I passed. I was over the moon. It was what I wanted.

Mum and Dad were conscious too that my Lancashire accent would be a handicap. After all those were the days, before the Beatles came along, when so

called “regional” accents were seen as a handicap. That I should speak “proper” BBC English was what my parents aspired to. In our local Methodist Church we had a member of the congregation who gave elocution lessons, Miss Mainwaring. So to her I went. I even got a certificate of sorts as reported in the *Runcorn Weekly News* in July 1956.

Shortly after my success at the entrance exam, I was taken to London and felt so pleased with myself as I went into Daniel Neal and Son² with my Mum and Dad to get fitted up in the Prior’s Court school uniform.

My brother Michael had finished at P.C. the previous year, so I was already familiar with many aspects of life in the school. Most of the masters at the school were well known to me by name and reputation. The headmaster, of course, Mr Maltby³, known affectionately as M.Y.; Mr Geoffrey Mellor (he didn’t have a nickname) the Number 2 master who taught Latin and coached Rugby⁴; “Sammy” Selwood⁵, French, and Mr Vic Black⁶, Maths; finally Mr. Graham (GG)⁷ who taught Geography.

So it was on Tuesday, 23rd September 1958 (the Autumn Equinox, as it happens) I was driven down to Prior’s Court by my Father and Mother.

² Daniel Neal and Sons, Portman Square, London existed at this time almost exclusively to supply children’s clothing and school uniforms. It had an arrangement with Kingswood to supply uniforms for both K.S. and P.C. It closed in 1977.

³ Barrie Maltby was a former pupil and Senior Prefect at Kingswood (1916-24). He was P.C.’s second Headmaster though he was with the school from the beginning. Born in 1905, he retired in 1965. Both he and his wife, Ruth, died in 1967.

⁴ Geoff Mellor came to P.C. in 1942 and left in 1959 when he was appointed Headmaster of the Junior school of Kent College, Canterbury, another Methodist establishment. He died in 2005.

⁵ Ray Selwood first came to P.C. in 1948 and eventually retired in 1985 and died in 2005. His nickname was “Sammy” for reasons unknown to me.

⁶ Vic Black had an appallingly racist nickname; a word frequently used in those days. I have not used it here and so shall refer to Mr Black by his proper name all the way through. He taught at P.C. from 1953 to 1985. On retirement he went to live in York and died in 2014.

⁷ B. Graham had left P.C. by the time the 1962-63 Blue School Year book was published. His nickname was “G.G.” for reasons unknown.

I have no memory of the journey, partly because much of the journey from Widnes to Prior's Court was already well known to me. I had aunts, uncles and cousins living in and around Ascot and as far as Oxford, the journey was the same.

We would always laugh at Dad because as we passed through Oxford, he would predictably point out the two colleges whose names he knew: Balliol and Magdalen, pronouncing the latter wrongly as many people do.

I can only imagine what went through my mind sitting in the back of the car. Nervous, of course. How would I get on with the other boys and the masters? Would I be homesick as soon as Mum and Dad left me in the strange and totally new environment?

But I had little doubt this is where I wanted to be. I wanted to be a Prior's Court boy. I wanted to become a Kingswood boy.

The story of Prior's Court School itself is a short one. It began in 1939 when the war began. Earlier in the year the Headmaster of Kingswood, Alfred Barrett Sackett⁸, had been told by the Government that in the event of war, Kingswood would be evacuated to Uppingham school so the Navy could take over the buildings.

The prep school at that time was based in Westwood, part of the expanding Kingswood estate. It too was required to evacuate, but not to Uppingham; instead it moved to a large private house owned by the Conservative M.P. for Winchester, Colonel Gerald Palmer⁹. The private house was Prior's Court and after the war was over, Colonel Palmer sold it to Kingswood and the prep school stayed there until it eventually moved back to Bath in 1998¹⁰.

⁸ Alfred Barrett Sackett was Headmaster at Kingswood from 1928-1959. Seen by many as Kingswood's "great" headmaster.

⁹ Col Gerald Palmer was the M.P. for Winchester from 1935 to 1945. He later became an authority on the Orthodox Church, publishing several books of Orthodox texts. He died in 1984.

¹⁰ After Prior's Court was closed as a prep school in 1998, it opened its door as a special school for severely autistic children in 1999.

Prior's Court is set in the rolling countryside of West Berkshire, a few miles north of Newbury on the road to Oxford and Abingdon.

Travelling south out of Oxford along the road to Newbury, you pass through the suburban towns of Abingdon and Didcot until you come to a crossroads. On the right, the small village of Chieveley. On the left Prior's Court. Take this road for a little less than half a mile and enjoy the sublime and picturesque English countryside. The fecund land stretches away into the distance, pock-marked by several disused pits and small woodlands. On your left through the trees you get your first sight of Prior's Court.

Prior's Court was one of many private preparatory schools loosely jumbled together in and around the counties of Oxford and Berkshire in southern England. Often remote from any town or city, they focus their young pupils (both boys and girls) to pass the Common Entrance Exam which will be their entrée into Britain's infamous but elite public (sic) school system. The only difference was that PC did not prepare you for the Common Entrance exam like most English prep schools.¹¹ Once you were admitted to PC you were destined for Kingswood, the main school in Bath.

My first letter home began ominously. "*Dear Mum and Dad,*" I wrote. "*I am not very happy here*¹²". But, as if to throw my parents feelings into confusion, the next sentence was much more encouraging. "*I have got some friends*".

In those days I made friends easily. In many ways I was very different from my older brother Michael. He tended to be shy and withdrawn, whereas I was outgoing, boisterous, and noisy.

I must have come as a bit of a surprise to those masters who had known my brother. I was nothing like him. Physically I was stockier and much more into games, a major selling point within the school system.

¹¹ It did later, apparently.

¹² Letter 1, 28th September, 1958. This the first of 62 letters I wrote from Prior's Court between September 1958 and July 1960. Thanks to the perspicacity of my Father, something he would be surprised to hear me say, I have them all.

I did not write again that I was not happy. I have no memories of homesickness other than in the first few days. By my third letter I was writing, "*I am very well and happy here.*"¹³

All the dormitories in the school, 14 in all, were named after birds¹⁴. We used the word "dormey"¹⁵ for short, one of several P.C. slang words. ("Pets" for toilets was another.) My first dormey was called Heron. It was one of the larger dormitories with eight boys sleeping in it. It was situated at the back of the main building, ominously close to Mr and Mrs. Maltby's flat which was across the passageway, and above the teachers' common room, something I pointed out to my parents in my second letter home.

In the bed immediately to my right was Chris Morley. He was in his second year at P.C. and destined to become Senior Prefect at Kingswood in 1965, followed by a spell at Cambridge and then into the family business, the Methodist ministry.

Chris was like so many of the boys at both PC and Kingswood. A son of the Manse¹⁶. Both his father and grandfather were Methodist parsons. His grandfather, at that time enjoying his retirement, I remember, liked to learn foreign languages as a hobby, using the now dated system of polyphone records. His father was an old KS alumnus as was his uncle. Chris and I were never particularly close, but he was someone I liked and came to have a considerable respect for.

On my left, in the window recess, was James Monahan¹⁷. He was to become my best and closest friend at Kingswood. Like Chris Morley, Jim's family had strong links to Methodism. Originally from Ireland, his grandfather was the Rev Charles

¹³ Letter 3, 12th October, 1958.

¹⁴ The names of the 14 dormitories were: Heron, Mallard, Grebe, Swan, Cygnet, Penguin, Kestrel, Buzzard, Osprey, Plover, Curlew, Petrel, Shag and Tern.

¹⁵ This was also spelt "dormy"

¹⁶ I have the figures for 1956. They are: 29 sons of clergy in a total of 77 boys. In 1959/60 the figures for the Third Form only were 15/33.

¹⁷ James Monahan left K.S. in 1965. He went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge and played Rugby for Cambridge University twice in 1967 and 1968. He died in 1969.

Monahan¹⁸, one of the key people in establishing the Church of South India and who in retirement had translated the Bible into Tamil. Jim's uncle, the Rev Dermott Monahan¹⁹, had died a year earlier. He had been a member of the Anglican-Methodist Unity Talks, drawing on his experiences in South India where he had served in Medak in what is now the Telegu speaking state of Telangana.

Jim's father was an accountant called Brian²⁰. As far as I could make out, he had by this time become an Anglican.

Jim was a new boy too, in the same clan as me, Rats; and the same form 2B.

His family, like Chris Morley's, had strong links with Kingswood. (In the 1974 Kingswood Register²¹, there are eight recorded Monahans. Since then there have been several more!)

Other people in my dormitory included Peter Bennett²² who was very briefly my best friend, if my letters are accurate. Also in the dorm was Peter Wright. He was the son of Judge Percy Wright, who had been a contemporary of M.Y. at Kingswood and who died suddenly in 1959. Peter, also like Morley, was destined to become Senior Prefect at K.S. in 1966, before following his father into the Legal Profession via a Law degree from Cambridge.

Our dormitory leader was the Badger Clan leader, a boy called Robert McGregor or Mac for short. In my letter home I described him in gushing terms, "*I have a super dormy leader name McGregor. We call him Mac and sometimes Mummy.*"²³

¹⁸ Rev Charles H Monahan (1869-1951). One time Chair of the Madras (now Chennai) Methodist District.

¹⁹ Rev C Dermott Monahan (1906-1957) was an exact contemporary of M.Y at Kingswood, 1916-1924.

²⁰ Brian Monahan (1908-1981) was also a Kingswood Old Boy (1918-25)

²¹ Published in 1975, the Kingswood Register was a project of the Old Boys Association. It was compiled by the recently retired Headmaster, A. Lowry Creed, and includes every person who attended the school from 1901 to 1972, including one girl, the daughter of an earlier Headmaster.

²² Peter Bennet-King left Kingswood in 1966. A former school master

²³ Letter Five: 26th October, 1958.

I didn't have much to do with him after he left P.C. He went up to Oxford a year before me.

I've mentioned that Jim and I were in the same clan, Rats. The school of around 80 pupils was divided into four "clans". These clans were used to organize school duty rotas as well as sport competitions. Each week in rotation one of the clans was responsible for a variety of domestic tasks and chores. Doing the washing up after meals (never very popular!) or ringing the bell which was the signal throughout the day for something, such as lessons, to start.

My first "duty" was to clean the Reading Room, a large room just off the main foyer in the school where we all lived. In my third letter to my Mum and Dad, I noted wryly that M.Y. had complained that Rats had not done their duties very well that week. I for one had not finished tidying up the Reading Room. Oh dear!

One task which was always very popular, and of course I never got to do, was to ring the gong as a signal that a meal (breakfast, dinner, or tea) was about to begin. All boys love making a noise, to be sure. When you can do it officially, what more could you ask for?

The clans were named after animal characters in *Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. The four clans were Badgers, Moles, Rats and Toads.

Jim had an older brother at the school. John Monahan²⁴. He was the Clan leader for the Rats. (You were always in the same clan or house as your elder brother/s. So Michael was a Rat before me!).

Each clan had someone who was a clan "leader" and a clan "second". In my first year (1958-59), John Monahan was the Rats Clan leader and as I have already

²⁴ John Monahan left Kingswood in 1964 to attend Cambridge University. He later became an chartered surveyor returning to live in Bath, to become very much part of the Kingswood establishment, as a school governor.

noted, Robert McGregor, my first dormitory leader in Heron, was Badgers'. The other two clan leaders were Roger Davies²⁵ for Moles and Martin Bridge²⁶ for Toads.

In my second year (1959-60) Chris Morley was leader of Toads, Martyn Wade²⁷, as we shall see, was briefly the leader of Rats, John Harrold²⁸ leader of Moles and James Okell²⁹ was the leader of Badgers.

As well as the Clan leaders and seconds, there were six other boys appointed as dormitory leaders. Their job was to see that order was maintained in the dormitory and to enforce the "no speaking" rule after lights out. They didn't have the power to punish anyone, but they could report you to M.Y. or the Master on Duty.

One of my constant gripes about both P.C. and later of Kingswood was that it was unclear how anyone came to be in these positions, other than that they were the favorites of those who made the decisions. I noticed that while I was at P.C. I was never asked to take a position of responsibility, a feat which continued at Kingswood. Neither, incidentally, was my brother. I did observe the extent to which the sons of Methodist clergy, or those of prominent Methodist laymen and families, got these positions to a degree that the rest of us didn't.

The dining hall had been Colonel Palmer's billiards room. It was large and the whole school could easily fit into it. There were eight long tables at which the 80 (or so) boys sat.

The large wood paneled room was decorated with artwork which had been done by boys. These were oils and M.Y. selected which boys got to paint them. If my

²⁵ Roger Davies left Kingswood in 1965, obtained a degree at Cambridge and became a solicitor.

²⁶ Martin Bridge, a son of the Manse, after leaving K.S in 1965, became Head of P.E. at Thirsk school.

²⁷ Martyn Wade was a son of the Manse. Like me he was in Hall House at K.S. and left in 1966. He went up to Cambridge and now writes occasional radio plays for the BBC.

²⁸ John Harrold ended his time at K.S. in 1966 as Head of School House. Another graduate of Cambridge he entered the teaching profession. He died of COVID 19 in 2020.

²⁹ James Okell was another son of the Manse. He belonged to Hall House at K.S and captained the First XI cricket team. He left in 1966. A graduate of East Anglia University.

memory is correct most of them represented a country scene. There certainly was nothing which could be construed as “modern art”.

The food was reasonable. In my letters home I never once complained about the food. Indeed, in one letter home I tersely described the food thus: “*The food is sometimes good and sometimes rotten,*”³⁰ which just about covers every possibility.

The dining hall was also the location for an important function which was carried out regularly throughout the year. The dividing up of a boy’s birthday cake. Some boys, of course, had their birthdays during the holidays and so they never got the pleasure of divvying up their cake, sent from home, and distributing it to their friends.

My birthday occurs towards the end of October and so I quickly realized that a cake was needed and that my Mum would have to provide it. For a couple of weeks this became a substantial topic in my weekly letter to my parents. I was most insistent that the cake should have no candles. In my first letter home almost the first thing I write is, “*Mum, I know it is a bit early yet but please don’t send any candles yet.*” Later I add, “*Dad, Mum when I put don’t send me any candles I mean on my cake that is if you are sending me one.*”³¹

I guess the concern over candles on a cake had more to do with not appearing to be childish and laughable.

On my first Prior’s Court birthday I wanted to give a piece of cake to so many people that I ended up with virtually none for myself. You can be sure I didn’t repeat that mistake twice. My 12th birthday in 1959 dishing out the cake was much more restricted to a few friends, so we all got a substantial amount of my Mum’s delicious cake.

The first memorable thing to happen to me at P.C was a beating. I remember the date well because it was the eve of my 11th birthday, Thursday, 23rd October 1958 and it was at the hands of Sammy Selwood, the French teacher.

³⁰ Letter 8: 16th November, 1958

³¹ Letter 1: 28th September, 1958

My offense had been to chew a small seed I had picked up by a tree outside the classroom during “Quarter”, the short mid-morning break when we often did P.T.³² I was ordered to wait for Mr Selwood outside the dormitory known as Penguin. This was the first dormey you came to as you entered the main school from the classrooms. It must have played host to more beaten bottoms than any other dormitory in the school because of where it was situated.

I was beaten with a hard wooden clothes brush which for some reason was called a “hairbrush” by both teacher and pupil. We never used it to brush our hair, indeed it wasn’t made for such a purpose. Only very occasionally was it used to brush clothes. One hung on the door of every dormitory in the school as a silent reminder of what could happen if you misbehaved.

In the grand scheme of things, it was a relatively mild beating. Yet I was shocked and surprised by it. At my previous school in Widnes, (Farnworth Junior school) I had been beaten with a cane much harder, often on the hand, where it was considerably more painful. The issue for me wasn’t the issue of pain. It was the sheer trivial nature of the offence; indeed, I didn’t even see what I had done as being an offence. And in so far as it was, all it required from Sammy would have been a quiet explanation and that would have been the end of it. I would have left the seeds of the trees alone.

I was to get another tanning from Sammy Selwood in my second year.

Again, I genuinely did not know what I had done wrong when he summoned me after dinner³³ to speak to him as we were leaving the dining room.

“Well,” he said.

“Well, what?” I replied.

He obviously interpreted this as cheek, but it wasn’t. It was a genuine expression of puzzlement as to what I had done wrong or why he needed to speak to me. To this day I do not know what the original offence was.

³² Physical Training, later renamed Physical Education. It was very traditional: running on the spot, touching toes, star jumps etc

³³ P.C. used the term “Dinner” to denote the midday meal and “tea” for the evening repast.

The petty nature of offenses which merited a smacked bottom was extraordinary and was very much at the whim of the master.

One incident I remember particularly well involved Jim Monahan and GG Graham. We were in the Dining Room eating our mid-day Dinner when I heard raised voices at the table next to mine.

Jim Monahan was being ordered by GG to eat his tomato skins which he had put to one side on his plate. He refused.

Jim was summarily ordered from the dining room by GG and escorted to Penguin (again) where he received six whacks of the hairbrush from an irate GG. I can still visualize to this day the red face Jimmy Monahan had as he returned to take his seat at his table and his attempts to fight back the tears.

GG was, I think, particularly fond of the hairbrush. I'm not certain whether he thought it was an effective means of controlling rumbustious boys or whether he just liked, as some people do, beating them. I remember getting a beating from him, admittedly another mild one, in my third term at P.C along with Dennis Rodwell³⁴.

We had done something in the bathroom as we prepared for bed. What I cannot remember. Making too much noise, probably, or being very slow carrying out our ablutions. Anyway, GG got involved in the issue and announced that if Matron "failed" us during our nightly inspection, he would beat us. One of the routines at Prior's Court was that in the evening every boy was inspected by Matron before they got into bed. It involved standing in front of her as she examined first your hands and feet, then your face, giving particular attention to checking behind your ears. Very occasionally you failed the inspection and were made to go back to the washbasins and clean behind your ears or under your nails.

I knew before it happened, we would fail. As soon as Matron entered the dormitory, all the other boys (except Rodwell!) rushed towards her to tell her with a surprising degree of enthusiasm that "Mr Graham is going to beat Percival and Rodwell if they fail inspection!" I don't know whether GG had tipped Matron off as well, but we both failed, despite the fact Rodwell and I had both given ourselves the

³⁴ Dennis Rodwell accompanied me into Hall House at Kingswood and became a good friend. He left Kingswood in 1966 and studied Architecture at Cambridge. Since then he has established himself as somewhat of an authority in the field of conservation and lives in Scotland.

best washing we could. And, of course, as if to rub it in, we were the only two boys to fail the inspection that night.

GG made us lay on our beds while he wacked our bottoms with the hairbrush. Not very hard, I must say, but again I was left with a sense of unfairness. It was clear both Rodwell and I had been set up for a beating. Many people I imagine would laugh this off as a slightly memorable schoolboy incident. I can laugh at it too; but I also believe that Rodwell and I had been treated unfairly.

Another GG beating involved a boy in 3A, the year above me. I was one of the onlookers who hung around the door to GG's room on the ground floor when John Birtwhistle³⁵ got his tanning. I was on the steps leading up to the first floor and the dormeys and I noticed him standing outside GG's door holding the Penguin hairbrush. For what he was being beaten I do not know, but he was eventually called into the room. A few minutes later he emerged very red faced, embarrassed and distressed.

A beating which shocked the whole school when we heard about it was the double beating of Stuart Mitchell³⁶ and Ross³⁷ at the hands of Ifful. Ifful was a master who came to Prior's Court on a one-year stint before going to university or deciding upon a career. His proper name was Richard Wilding and he ended up being called Ifful because he was tall like the Eiffel tower in Paris³⁸.

I think for the most part we all got on well with him, he taught History and English, but for some reason on this particular day he seems to have completely lost it. I did not see what happened, so my recollection is second hand. My understanding is at some point he told the class (2A) to be quiet, but Mitchell and

³⁵ John Birtwhistle, a son of the Manse, was one of two boys who left Kingswood after they had absconded in 1963. Two years later, now based in a state school, he won an open scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where I remember having afternoon tea with him. He is a poet who has had several volumes of poetry published as well as librettos for operas and was for a while a lecturer at York University.

³⁶ Stuart Mitchell, a son of the Manse, left KS in 1965. He became a Probation Officer and lived in Loughborough. He died in 2011.

³⁷ I cannot remember very much about Ross. He left P.C. at the end of the summer term and I never heard of him again. There is no record of him in the 1974 Kingswood Register.

³⁸ Richard Wilding taught at PC for just the one year, 1958-59. I have more to say about him later on.

Ross had begun talking shortly afterwards. Ifful went mad, sent one of them to collect the Penguin clothes brush and then proceeded to give them a harsh and excessive beating while the rest of the class looked on in shock.

There is another beating which I will come to later in my own personal story, but I wouldn't want to give the impression that corporal punishment was rife at P.C. It wasn't. All the masters I believe used it, some more than others. I was unaware of anybody being beaten by Mr Black, who taught me Maths in my first year. He was strict enough for certain. He put me on "silence" early on in my time at P.C. "Silence" required that you did not talk for a certain length of time, usually about 30 minutes.

Misbehaviour and punishment were not a frequent topic in my letters home. However I wrote shortly before my birthday. *"Mellor is on duty on my birthday. I have been late for the gong three times. Once was because Ifful let us out late. If he had not told M.Y. we might of been punished. I am fed up with GG telling us to be quiet. I have been put on silence in dormitory twice; one by Ifful and one by Mr Black"*³⁹.

In those early days I was also sent to M.Y. at least a couple of times for penalty and repentance. In my fifth letter home I wrote nonchalantly, *"I was sent today for singing and making a din to M.Y. Nothing much happened. The reason I was sent last time I was mucking about."*⁴⁰

What had happened here was a couple of us had got into a pillow fight and unfortunately for me, I had succeeded in ripping my pillowcase. The next morning, feeling very nervous and apprehensive, I reported to M.Y., quickly offering to pay for the damage. Instead I got a telling off but that was the end of the matter.⁴¹

M.Y certainly used the hairbrush but never on me and I am not aware of him using it on anyone else either, so it must have been rare.

³⁹ Letter 4: 19th October, 1958

⁴⁰ Letter 5: 26th October, 1958

⁴¹ I can't be certain it is the pillowcases, but the P.C. Shop Account to my parents for that Christmas Term, included 2s 10d for Clothing Repairs. This was by far the largest Clothing Repairs bill they were charged with during my time at the school. I suspect it covered the torn pillowcase.

As for Mr. Black, I was told he used a slipper, but I never found out since he never slipped me or anyone else that I knew.

My time at Prior's Court was not dominated by a fear of a beating; far from it.

In many ways Prior's Court was as close as you could get to an idyllic existence, given that it was a school, a place of learning. Set in the Berkshire downs, we had plenty of space to play and to wander.

Each Sunday, for example, subject to the state of the weather, we would be required to go for a walk. And here's the thing. This walk was completely unsupervised, something which probably would be unheard of these days for children aged between nine and twelve. No masters accompanied us, or at least very rarely, and that was for a specific purpose, like the time we went butterfly hunting.

Close to the school there were several small villages with rather Middle-earth, Tolkienian sounding names such as Curridge, Hermitage, World's End, Slanting Hill, or Chieveley itself. You could either walk along the roads which had little traffic in those days, or take public pathways, often through small woods or by the side of the fields.

Or better still there were wonderful woods dotted around the school where you could go and get lost, playing and exploring to your heart's content. On a wall in the foyer by the entrance to the school, M.Y had placed a large coloured map, so it was easy enough to identify a place to visit and the pathways to get there.

My favourite wood was about half a mile away from the school. It was known as Oareborough Hill. A pathway cut through the wood and at one point, on one side of the pathway, was an embankment. This was ideal for the staging of fights and mock battles. Certainly, we played cowboys and Indians but also being prep schoolboys who were either learning Latin or were about to, we liked played at being Roman soldiers as well.

Then there was Fence Wood, close to the village of Hermitage, which was a great spot in the summer for catching butterflies.

If your interests were of a more studious character, you could always look to find some interesting things in the soil. Flint stones and even the occasional fossil.

Of course, this was before they built the M4 which thankfully occurred after I had left the school.

One of my great regrets is that my letters to my parents make scant reference to these walks on a Sunday afternoon and yet they were for many of us one of the highlights of the week. I did record that my very first Sunday walk was to the village of Chieveley.

In one letter I mention a walk with Richard Garforth.⁴² I write, *"I have just come back from Sunday Walks to Curridge with a friend. His name is Garforth. He can be decent and is sometimes foul."*⁴³

Autumn at Prior's Court meant Conkers. The conker is a seed of the horse chestnut tree which is best described as a hard brown nut. They will vary in size but this is misleading. A large conker is not always the best conker for the game we use to play in September and October.

To play conkers you drilled through the centre of the conker and threaded through a piece of thick, strong string until you were able to tie a knot at the end so you couldn't pull the string back through the conker. In essence, you took it in turns to try and smash your opponent's conker.

The scoring was straightforward. For every conker you smashed you earned one point. But, and this was the thing, if you smashed your opponent's conker, you were entitled to add the score of his conker to yours. So if he had a conker which had defeated, say, six other conkers, then his score was six. If you beat him, you could add his six to that of yours. This meant that in theory you could build up some high scores.

There were also various methods by which you could make your conker harder and therefore more difficult to beat. One was to leave it for a year and let it harden naturally. Another was to soak the conker in vinegar.

⁴² Richard Garforth was a son of the Manse. He left Kingswood in 1966 to read Chemistry at Nottingham University. A few years later he returned to KS as a chemistry master and remained there until retirement.

⁴³ Letter 27, 28th June 1959.

Some boys took their conker fights deadly seriously and over time learnt to become skillful in hitting their opponent's conker. Others just liked to enjoy the fun of the moment and would go look for a new conker as soon as theirs was smashed.

Most of the conker fights took place on the large paddock in front of the main building as there was at least one horse chestnut tree which grew close to the edge of the paddock. But the paddock was also used to play football, including soccer, which wasn't a game officially played in the school.

Another major event which took place at the school in the first term of the year was the Bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night (5th November). Every year M.Y supervised the building of a bonfire while we boys would help by collecting dead timber from the nearby woods.

I remember how the older boys liked to frighten the new boys about the purpose of the air tunnel in the bonfire. We were called "squits", a term which was applied to anyone who was in a lower form than yourself.

M.Y. was an expert bonfire builder and the first thing he did was to put in place the wind tunnel. As I'm not a bonfire builder myself, I don't know how essential these are but clearly wind drawn through the tunnel as the fire took hold was helpful in getting a good blaze.

But that is an adult writing. As a young eleven-year-old boy I knew nothing of such things. So those of us who were gullible, which was probable most, we believed for a time at least what the older boys told us. The tunnel was there for the new boys to crawl through as soon as M.Y. lit the fire, a sort of primitive initiation right. This frightened us, of course, but as the bonfire was gradually built, we even practiced crawling through the wind tunnel as quickly as we could. More reassuring was the fact we never heard any tales of disappearing boys, burnt to a cinder.

The night of the 5th of November came, of course. And a great time was had by all. M.Y. let off fireworks which added to the occasion. £10 pounds worth according to a letter home, which was a significant number of fireworks, almost £250 at today's prices. And those of us who were new boys started to think how much pleasure we would get out of telling next year's new boys they had the crawl through a lighted bonfire!

Four days later I wrote to my parents in glowing terms, "*We had a super bonfire on 5th of this month. M.Y. spent about £10 on fireworks. They were super.*"⁴⁴

My enthusiasm for the Prior's Court bonfire didn't diminish the following year as I entered my second year at the school. The bonfire was particularly large that year. In my letter home at the beginning of the Christmas term I wrote, "*This year we shall have a huge bonfire. The whole of the orchard is being chopped down and all of it is going on to the bonfire. . . Yesterday as well we went wood collecting in the wood. We got a few loads, nothing worth mentioning.*"⁴⁵

My parents heard no more from me about the bonfire until after it was over. "*Bon-fire night was wonderful. M.Y. kept on throwing "Jumping Jacks" into the people who were watching. The Bon-fire was super. It was soon ablaze. We had Coffee and sausage rolls for supper.*"

Prior's Court was like most prep schools I guess; you lived by a highly structured timetable throughout the day, from rising in the morning to going to bed at night. But within that timetable, we had a degree of freedom to do as we pleased.

In the afternoon, shortly after dinner had finished, there was a compulsory period of "quiet time". Every boy had to go and lie on his bed and read. It lasted about 30 minutes; and you got to choose the book you read.

Jim Monahan, who you will remember was next to me in Heron in my first term, was an extraordinary slow reader. He spent the whole of the first term reading one book. I think it was *A Tale of Two Cities*.

My reading was surprisingly high quality and, unlike Mona⁴⁶, I was a quick reader. It was quite varied but there was plenty of classics. I read a number of Dickens' novels, such as *Great Expectations* and yes, *A Tale of Two Cities*. I also developed a love of French adventure stories written by Alexander Dumas and Victor Hugo. Sadly, this did not lead me to develop a striking desire to learn French, but the books got read and were thoroughly enjoyed. In one of my letters I refer to a

⁴⁴ Letter 7: 9th November 1958

⁴⁵ Letter 34: 4th October 1959

⁴⁶ "Mona" was Jim Monahan's nickname at P.C.

discussion I had with M.Y. about Victor Hugo's book, *Les Misérables*. *"I have finished Notre-Dame by Victor Hugo, and now I'm reading Les Misérables by Victor Hugo. V. Hugo is a very good author, for I enjoyed N-Dame greatly and Les Misérables is even better. According to M.Y when he had finished Les Misérables most of the pages were wet but I'm over 100 pages over ½ and tears haven't come to my eyes yet. Parts of it I have had great difficulty in putting it down."*⁴⁷

I remember reading *Ben-Hur*⁴⁸, *The Silver Sword* by Ian Serrailier and a couple of Agatha Christie's. I informed my parents authoritatively that there was nothing better than a good detective novel, a view I still hold to this day. These all came from the Reading Room downstairs which doubled as the school Library. You picked the book you wanted to read. You then marked the place it came from with a large wooden block which had your name on, and on which you wrote down the books you had borrowed.

Once M.Y told us that no boy had ever read the novel *John Halifax, Gentleman*, written in 1856 by Dinah Craik and which was later televised by the BBC. I took this to be a bit of a challenge and so became the first boy in the history of the school to read it!⁴⁹

We were also required to write home every week to our parents. In the long circular letter M.Y. sent around about March to parents whose boy was about to start at P.C., he wrote, *"Boys may write letters as often as they wish, but it is a school rule that they shall all write home on Sundays, when three quarters of an hour is set apart for this purpose. There is therefore no excuse for short or slovenly letters."* Well, some of my letters I'm afraid, did break that rule!

In our free time, if we were not playing conkers, many of us were playing chess. I had learnt the rudiments of the game back in Widnes from a neighbour who lived a few doors up from us in Birchfield Road. At Prior's Court I was keen to enter my name for the chess tournament which was held in the first term. I guess most of the boys entered it, but it certainly was not compulsory. It was organised by the boys

⁴⁷ Letter 59: 3rd July 1960

⁴⁸ Letter 46: 7th February 1960. I describe "Ben-Hur" as being "one of the best books I've read".

⁴⁹ Letter 41: 2nd December, 1959

themselves and in the following year it was Howard Anderson⁵⁰ and I who arranged the games. Howard went on to captain the Kingswood chess team.

In that first year I dutifully reported to my parents that I had managed a win against Paul Deakin⁵¹ only to lose in the second round to John Harrold.

In the following year's tournament, which Anderson and I organised, I did manage a victory against David Birtwhistle⁵² but I did not record whom I eventually lost out to.

The two chess "giants" in my first year at P.C. were David Mumford⁵³ and Michael Rattenbury⁵⁴. I can still see them in my mind's eye playing against each other at a table in the school foyer. I think Rattenbury won but they were indisputably the best players in the school. Both went on to captain the Kingswood chess team. For myself, I never really developed a love of chess, and I wasn't much good at it either.

Boys were also required to have a "hobby" which you were required to work on each week, and which was supervised by a master. The one I chose in my first year was weaving with Mr Black. Over the year I produced a tea cosy and a matching set of woolen mats weaved in an attractive green and white check design. In my second year I chose woodwork which was supervised by M.Y. I still have the one thing I made which was a book trough, and it stills functions as such in the room in which I am writing this!

⁵⁰ Howard Anderson was a good friend, more so at Kingswood. He left Kingswood in 1966 and went on to do a degree at Cambridge. He was a key figure in establishing the televising of Parliament and was a producer of the BBC's Newsnight programme. He died in 2012.

⁵¹ Paul Deakin left Kingswood in 1965 and became a barrister.

⁵² David Birtwhistle was the younger brother of John. We were friendly enough with each other. After a spell at Cambridge, David went onto establish himself as a painter in the Worcester area where he and his wife eventually opened up a shop which sold his paintings.

⁵³ David Mumford was to become a lifelong friend, though we were not close at Prior's Court. A child of the Manse, his father had died in 1952. David left Kingswood in 1964 before going up to Merton College, Oxford. He is now a retired priest with the Episcopalian Church in Scotland and a strong supporter of the Green party

⁵⁴ Michael Rattenbury, another son of the Manse. Left Kingswood in 1965 for Cambridge. A schoolmaster.

Other hobbies included stone carving, cane work and modelling.⁵⁵

Like most schools, Prior's Court had an assembly hall which also doubled as a chapel when it came to Sunday worship or morning prayers. The hall, known as Bison, had been built several years earlier with a significant input from the boys then in residence. It took its name from the large picture of a Bison on display at the entrance.

It was here that I had one of those moments which was to live with me for a long time and made me realise that in some crucial respects I was not seen as being the same as other boys. An outsider if you like.

The first my Mum and Dad heard about it was at the beginning of the Easter term 1959 when I wrote them on the second Sunday back in stark terms. *"I was sent off the field for having aluminum studs"*⁵⁶. This line, so casually inserted into a letter which was primarily about a sickness that was doing the rounds, was the first indication they had of a drama which was soon to reach a very public climax and in which I was the central player.

Mum and Dad were clearly concerned because in the next letter I wrote, *"Thank you for your last letters. Nothing has happened to me yet. How he found out was that a boy named Cox"*⁵⁷ saw them and said, *"They are aluminum studs" and Mellor heard him and said that he was sorry but you're not allowed to have them.*"⁵⁸

The saga of the studs in my rugby boots had begun back in Liverpool. I needed a new pair. Over the Christmas holidays I went with Dad to a large sports retailer in the city. The shop, close to the Liverpool Playhouse, had been established by one of those sportsmen, much more common in times past, who had made a good reputation for themselves in both soccer and cricket. Jack Sharp had played in

⁵⁵ This is based on the detailed circular letter sent to my parents when Michael went up to P.C. in 1954.

⁵⁶ Letter 13: 25th January 1959

⁵⁷ David Cox left Kingswood in 1965. He later graduated from Cambridge. He went and lived in New York for awhile before returning to England. He lives near Bath.

⁵⁸ Letter 14: 1st February 1959

his time for both Everton Football Club and the Lancashire County Cricket Club. In his retirement he had set up a sportswear shop⁵⁹.

The pair of boots I bought was an example of the most up-to-date boot then available. They had aluminum studs and it was these which were to cause me all manner of grief.

It was January 1959. The second or third assembly of the new term. The whole school, about 80 of us all together, were gathered in Bison for one of M.Y.'s regular "jaw" sessions. He sat behind a table on the elevated stage.

"Where's Percival," he began. "Oh, there you are. Stand up!"

I was sitting right at the front of the hall and as I stood, I was conscious that I had nothing to hold on to steady my nerves and that every boy in the school now had his eyes on me. My legs began to shake. For a time, I thought I was going to faint.

"Percival," he said, in a tone which denoted I was in trouble. "Where did you get your rugby boots from?" He had the boots in his hands and was showing them to the school.

I replied, "Jack Sharp's, sir. They're in Liverpool, sir".

At this the whole school burst into laughing and no doubt my face went a bright red. I didn't know what everybody was laughing at; I felt small and somehow to blame.

"You can't play in those. They're too dangerous. The studs can do serious damage. You'll need a new pair."

"Yes, sir," I managed to reply.

"All right, you can sit down now!"

⁵⁹ For the full story of Jack Sharp, footballer, cricketer and retailer see: <https://liverpoolhiddenhistory.co.uk/1006-2/> Another famous player of both cricket and soccer was Denis Compton of Middlesex and Arsenal. Sharp can be seen playing on the wing for Everton in the oldest Merseyside Derby (Everton v Liverpool) recorded on film in September, 1902. He was awarded man of the match. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMt2n9E61NU>.

Later as I reflected on the laughter and what had caused it, I thought it must have been the name of shop which they found funny. After all it might be considered a bit of an odd name by some, I suppose.

In fact, I discovered later, it was not the name of the shop they were laughing at. They were laughing at my northern accent. So much for the effectiveness of Miss Mainwaring's elocution lessons!

At both Prior's Court and Kingswood school I was a little self-conscious of my voice. It was deeper than most and I was quite loud when I wanted to be.

Sometimes people poked fun at it. Such a person was "Popeye" Arnold⁶⁰ who was the senior housemaster at the Junior House, Westwood at Kingswood. He called it a foghorn on more than one occasion, and in public too.

But then the unexpected twist to the story. At the next rugger game I was sidelined and then, without a word of explanation or apology, I was allowed back onto the rugger pitch, with my aluminum studded boots. I never heard any more about the issue of studs; nor was I given any explanation.

As I look back on it now, I suspect that M.Y. or Mellor probably spoke to someone in authority who knew something about rugby boots. After all, if they were dangerous, why were they being sold openly in the centre of Liverpool? I guess they were told, no doubt with some embarrassment, that aluminum studs were in fact far safer than the leather studs which the other boys had, and which were fastened to the boot by nails. These nails became increasingly exposed as the leather around them was worn away through use.

This event made me conscious of something which, though aware of, up until that point I didn't think was very important. But now I was aware of difference and its importance. I came from the North of England. Most of the other boys came from the south but I was unique at P.C. at that time. I was the only boy who had played rugby league at my former school. Indeed, I was brought up on rugby league, a form

⁶⁰ Phil "Popeye" Arnold had been a teacher at Prior's Court just after the end of the war. He taught French at K.S. and was the Senior Housemaster at Westwood, Kingswood's Junior House. I never got on with him which was unfortunate because he was a good teacher and an interesting character. I eventually ended up a student in his old college at Oxford, St Peter's College.

of rugby only found in the northern counties of Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Cumberland. At P.C., of course, we played rugby union.

Those who know anything about the history of rugby will know it was not just a regional issue. It was a class issue.

Working class lads from the North played rugby league for money; the middle classes played rugby union as “amateurs”. And if you were over 18 and played rugby league, you were barred from playing rugby union ever again.

As a schoolboy my sporting passion was always rugby league and two years at Prior’s Court never shook that. My letters home had a repetitive refrain which must have drove my parents mad. *“Please send me the sports page of the Widnes Weekly News and the match reports.”*

In one of my letters, I even tell my parents that another boy (unnamed and therefore now unknown) had told me he had seen some of the Widnes v Whitehaven cup match on TV during his outing with his parents, as indeed had Sammy Selwood. I obviously considered this noteworthy. In a way it was. My fellow pupils and a member of staff were now aware not just that rugby league was my sport but that Widnes was my team!

So I was now conscious of being a “northerner”. There were very few other boys from the North at the school. Above me in in the Third Form was Dave Mumford who came from Leeds in Yorkshire. Later he was to become a very good friend.

Then in my year there was John Taylor from Southport. John and I got on fine, but we were never close friends. At one point we even considered travelling back to Lancashire together. In a letter I wrote, *“There is one other person from Lancs here. His name is Taylor. He lives in Southport. He said he would come to our place and that his mum would pick him up if it is arranged.”*⁶¹ But that never happened, though we did travel by train together, especially when we were at Kingswood. But also, I should point out, Southport is not typically north. A lot of Methodist ministers retired there.

⁶¹ Letter 9: 23rd November 1958

In my second year there was at least two other boys from Lancashire who came to P.C. Tony Race whose dad was a minister in Poulton-le-Fylde, near Blackpool. We used to travel together by train, sometimes meeting up at Crewe. In one such journey we met up at Crewe and travelled together to London and saw a prisoner under escort. As I wrote home, *"I met Race⁶² in Crewe and he told me us that a Prisoner was on the train, so we went to see and there was a prisoner. At Euston we walked to Euston Square and got an underground to Baker St. There we went to "Madame Tussaud's Waxworks". It is very interesting."* Another was Roger Brown⁶³. His Dad was a minister in Wigan⁶⁴ and while we were at P.C we became quite friendly. He successfully roped me into one of those mail chains where you send a card to ten different people and in a month's time you get about 40 or so in reply. It never happened, of course! I didn't get a single reply!⁶⁵

Bison was, of course, the place where the whole school came together for weekly events. There was a short act of worship each day of the working week before classes started. Then every Saturday night there was either an entertainment organised by one of the Masters, or alternatively there was a film.

Naturally enough the entertainments were somewhat mixed in standard. I can still remember vividly one such entertainment which involved two of the masters together. Sammy Selwood was one and I think Mr Black was the other. It was a performance of a classic magical trick supposedly based on telepathy. One of the masters withdrew from the hall while the other selected a boy. The absent master returned and sat on the stage where on the table he had a magician's crystal ball in front of him. He gazed into the ball and "saw" the face of the boy who had been

⁶² Tony Race was a year below me at P.C. His Dad was a Methodist Minister based in a circuit near Blackpool. I had to change trains at Crewe so that is why we could meet up. He left Kingswood in 1966 and went into education.

⁶³ Roger Brown, like Tony Race, was a "squit", that is he was a year below me. He left Kingswood in 1967 and did a degree at Oxford. I have no idea what became of him after that.

⁶⁴ Widnes was often confused with Wigan. Also, by coincidence, the then MP for Wigan, Alan Fitch was a KS alumni.

⁶⁵ There is another touch of irony in this tale about the North. Doing some of the background research for this memoir I discovered that M.Y was himself born in Liverpool in 1905! But being a son of the Manse he didn't stay there long. Mr. Black was from Yorkshire.

selected as the target. And incredibly, and to our collective glee, it worked every time.⁶⁶

Other entertainments were not quite so dramatic and some even had a bit of learning content in them as well.

I wrote to my parents, "*It was Ifuls entertainment yesterday. He played us some records. One was of Russ Conway the piano player for Billy Cotton and another one was of the Planets by Holst. Strangely enough quite a lot of the tunes I have heard before. For example, Quatermass. The tune that starts it is part of Mars God of War. And Panorama that is from Jupiter God of Jollity.*"⁶⁷

I write in a way which suggests I quite enjoyed it. Iful only played extracts from Holst's Planet Suite. We didn't have to sit and listen to the whole thing which I think, to be honest, most 11- or 12-year-old boys would find a bit irksome.

Another entertainment I wrote about was GG's. "*Yesterday it was GG.'s entertainment. It wasn't all that good. It was a musical one (Folk songs). Some of the songs were: Frere Jacques, There was an Old Woman who swallowed a Fly, Swanee River, Greensleeves, Men of Harlech, Cockles and Muscles and In Famous Lincolnshire.*"⁶⁸

In my second year we had a quiz organised by Michael Bennet,⁶⁹ a new teacher who arrived in my second year. It was a knockout quiz with a team from each class playing at least once. By this time I was in 3A, the top class in the school, and we won. My letter does not record whether I was in the winning team or not, but as I like quizzes, I'm sure it was great fun.

In the Easter Term of 1960, we had an entertainment with a difference, a visit from a chamber group from Oxford with a Kingswood connection.

⁶⁶ A classical magic trick. The identity of the boy is surreptitiously revealed by the master who gave "clues" to the other master by where he stands and the number of fingers he had placed on a card he held. Or something like that!

⁶⁷ Letter 19, 15th March, 1959

⁶⁸ Letter 51, 13th March 1960

⁶⁹ Letter 45, 31st January, 1960

“Yesterday 4 boys came to P.C. to entertain us. I am sending you the programme. Their Clarinetist, Robin Macklin⁷⁰, was ill, so, at very short notice, a man named Hill came in his place. The numbers are the order in which they did it. This man Sykes⁷¹ is the head music teacher at K.S. His music was very good.....”⁷²

Unfortunately, my Dad did not keep the programme.

I once commented on the Saturday entertainment without telling my parents very much about it. *“Yesterday was ENTERTAINMENT,”* I wrote on 18th October. *“It wasn’t much good as they usually are.”⁷³*

These were formal, Saturday night entertainments, provided by the school masters on a rotational basis. We would also provide our own entertainments, done at any time, out of class, or at least out of teaching time.

My particular forte which I now am somewhat embarrassed to recount, was an impression of Adolf Hitler giving one of his Nuremburg speech. Of course, I couldn’t speak German, so had to make do with Double Dutch, which to someone who knows neither language, sound remarkably the same. I would climb up onto a chair, I remember once doing this in the main foyer, and before a small but growing audience began to speak slowly in German sounding Double Dutch, gradually building up the tempo of the speech until I was roaring like Hitler, spittle flying all over the place, arms waving all around until I ended up finishing with a magnificent crescendo. No one stopped me, or even tried to. And Mr Wilding, apparently, was very much taken by it.⁷⁴

Instead of a Saturday night entertainment organised by a master, we often had films. My letters home regularly included the title of the film we had been shown,

⁷⁰ Possibly Robert Macklin who left Kingswood in 1958. Unfortunately, the 1974 Kingswood Register tells us nothing more about him.

⁷¹ John Sykes was a legend at Kingswood. He was the last person to teach me the Piano. An organ scholar at Balliol College, Oxford in the late 20s, he himself was taught by Vaughan Williams. He died in 1962.

⁷² Letter 48, 21st February 1960

⁷³ Letter 36, 18th October, 1959

⁷⁴ According to David Cox.

sometimes with a brief description as to content. In one of my letters⁷⁵, I make the point that the film we saw, *Campbell's Kingdom* with Dirk Bogarde, was not a war film. I guess this might have been a response to a comment made, probably by my Father, as to the number of war films we were being shown.

The war films included *Carve Her Name with Pride*, and *The One that Got Away*. But there were plenty of non-war films, such as *Scott in Antarctica*, *Kid for Two Farthings* (with Primo Carnera, the Italian ex-World Heavy Weight Boxing Champion), *Bambi* and *Touch and Go*. We had plenty of comedies as well, such as *Abbot and Costello meet the Keystone cops* and *Doctor in the House*. One comedy film I particularly noted in my weekly letter was *Pluto and the Zoo*. "Everybody was laughing their heads off."⁷⁶

Bison was where we had a morning Service every Sunday. It was led by a visiting preacher or one of the masters. I didn't say much about what I thought of the preachers. I would just report that so and so was the preacher last week or this week. Except once when I wrote enthusiastically, "*The preacher today is M.Y. He is usually very good. The preacher last week was the best we have had. His name was Rev. A.M. Ward.*"⁷⁷ *Our table had the pleasure of dining with him.*"⁷⁸

The summer term of 1959 was in many ways quite memorable. The term had several standout incidents which stuck in my memory. Some I mentioned in my letters home but others I did not.

I arrived back at school to find myself in Swan dormitory. This was another of the larger dormitories, not least because it opened out into a second dormitory called Cygnet. It was on the third floor right above Mr and Mrs Maltby's flat, something I immediately drew my parents attention to!

⁷⁵ Letter 42, 6th December 1959

⁷⁶ Letter 7: 9th November, 1958

⁷⁷ Rev. A Marcus Ward (1906-1978) was a Kingswood Old Boy (1917-23). He was a prominent Methodist minister who was at one time a missionary in India (Bangalore 1936-54) and Principal of Richmond College in London, a Methodist ministerial training college. Involved in establishing the Church of South India and also a key player in the Anglican-Methodist Unity conversations.

⁷⁸ Letter 39, 8th November, 1959

It was also where the school's ghost was meant to reside. In my first letter home I referred to Jasper Jelly-Bones but though we knew of his existence, he never figured very much in our lives.

In the first letter home that term I wrote:

"Dear Mum and Dad,

I arrived safely at School. On Thursday we had a super game of cricket. When we were batting I got 1 run but in my innings I had 4 wides. We scored 66 all together. Saturday we were bowling, got 2 wickets in 2 overs. They scored about 30 so we won. Iful chose me to be a captain in the next game. Nix is my Vice-Captain. My new dormy is called Swan. It is right above M.Y. so you can see he wants me right in front of his nose.

(.....)

On Wednesday we unpacked and were weighed. I was 103 pounds (7 stone 5 lbs). Has master Pip been a good dog? On Wednesday Prep English we did a composition. The point is I want to finish it so I am going to finish it so that I can send it home. My new dormy consists of these people:

Monahan, J.R. (Rats Clan leader); Watts (Rats), Fisk (Badgers), Rodwell (Rats), Okell (Badgers), myself (Rats), Strawson (Badgers).

In Cygnet: Archer (Rats), Kissack (Badgers), Deakin (Badgers), Boys (Rats), Wright (Badgers).

So you can see that the two dormys consist of Rats and Badgers. In my History test (we had two) for the first one I got 20/20, the only boy in II, and (in the other) I got 15/20 one boy beat me. And about 2 had the same so I was not doing so bad. And in French to my surprise I got 16 this how we marked you Had to bring them in three's and there were 7. I finished 6 so I got 16. One boy finished 7 and one boy was level with me. So I have started this term quite well. Well I will be going now because the bell has gone. Hope you enjoyed this letter.

Yours sincerely

Robin

P.S. I am on table 5⁷⁹.

I have quoted this letter extensively. It gives you some idea of the kind of things I wrote in my letters home. This one, unlike some others I could reproduce, is quite informative but it shows my scatter gun approach to writing as I move from one unrelated thing to the next without paragraphs. Pip, by the way, was our pet dog we had from 1957 to 1970. He was a corgi. It illustrates my not always correct grammar which must have left my parents a bit unsure as to what I was trying to say.

The summer of 1959 was exceptionally hot throughout the whole of the British Isles with temperatures in the 80s and 90s Fahrenheit. There was very little rain and it was not long before the school faced a water shortage.

One day, I remember, M.Y announced to the school we were not going to be allowed to use the toilets because water was in such short supply. We were going to have to dig trenches in the nearby Prior's Court wood and this was where we were to evacuate our bowels until such time as there was enough water to start flushing the toilets again.

It is difficult for me to express the level of anxiety this announcement caused at the time. The thought of having to void my bowels, crap in more contemporary language, in front of other boys, filled me with dread. I did try it once but found I was unable to do anything and happily scurried away from the open pit. In fact, so disturbing did I find this prospect I took to sneaking into Bison by the back entrance (which led into a room at the back of the stage where there was a toilet) where I secretly dumped my load until such time as we were allowed again to openly flush the toilets. Looking back, I feel somewhat ashamed of myself, but the thought of others watching me have a shit was just too much. I don't know whether there were any other boys who found their way to either a toilet or to another part of the wood.

The long, hot summer certainly had its moments. One night there was a humongous thunderstorm which lasted ages or so it seemed to my boyish mind. The

⁷⁹ Letter 20: 3rd May 1959

night sky was lit up without warning by huge flashes of lightening which were followed very quickly, too quickly for me, by loud claps of thunder. The storm seemed to be right above us and to stay there. I have one other memory of a frightening thunderstorm, unrelated to P.C. when I camped in the woods of East Berlin in 1968. But the P.C. storm remains one of only two I was never going to forget.

Another incident which took place early in the term was M.Y. shooting rooks. In my letter I wrote, "*I saw MY do some shooting at Crows. He got quite a few.*"⁸⁰

Sixty-Two years later (2022) I can still visualise the incident of M.Y. shooting the rooks. The rookery was just behind the main school building, closed to where we did art and woodwork. M.Y. had a double barreled 12 bore shot gun. He shot about 5 or 6 rooks which he tied to his belt and took back to the main house with him. I guess he and Ruth Maltby probably eat them as their meat is dark and edible. During the war they were probably quite widely eaten given the level of food rationing and the scarcity of meat during those times.

David Cox remembers the occasion of M.Y. shooting rooks, but adds a significant twist to it. "I witnessed the shooting of the rooks' nests. It was by the brick and flint garden wall leading to the art room as you say. I told M.Y that I shot on the farm with my grandfather, a lie. He allowed me to shoot the 12 bore and I tumbled backwoods and he caught me. After that I went home and told my grandfather that I had shot the 12 bore and he allowed me from then on to shoot with it at the pigeons, which my mother cooked; they were delicious but they had bits of lead shot in them."

In that letter home, after mentioning the rooks, I also wrote, "*Nix, Roebuck and I have found a lot of nests including a skylarks. Mr Black wants us to find a Green Finch's nest.*" The reference to Nix, Roebuck and Mr Black is revealing. Michael Nix and Johnny Roebuck were indisputably my two best friends at Prior's Court and we would spend a lot of time together both in class, all three of us were in 2B during our first year, as well as during our free time. A greater contrast between the two of them would be hard to imagine. Though both were sons of the Manse, there the similarity ended. Nix was a country tough from Devon who reminded me of a character straight out of *Lorna Doone*. Academically not the sharpest tool in the

⁸⁰ Letter 21: 10th May 1959

box, he had a natural intelligence which he could use to solve practical problems. He was good at sport, particularly rugby. He was thickly built with dark curly hair and freckles on his face and if it ever came to a fight, he would have won hands down. Of course, we never did fight but would go for walks together on the Sunday afternoons. We were all into birdwatching and again Nix was the best because he came from the Devon countryside where he lived alone with his mother. His father⁸¹ had died a few years earlier, though Nix also told me he was adopted. His two years at P.C. were followed by three at Kingswood. He left immediately after finishing his "O" Levels to join the Royal Military Police. He died in 1998 and I wrote his obituary for the Kingswood Association magazine.

John Roebuck's family had a military connection. His father⁸² was the chief Methodist chaplain to the Royal Navy. He would frequently joke whenever he saw me that I was always eating something which seemed to be true more often than not. John, the youngest child, described himself as more a city boy. They lived in Bromley, later Orpington, in Kent. Unlike Nix, John was quite studious and did well in his exams, eventually earning himself a place at Cambridge in 1966. Both John and I loved history and were good at it. Later at Kingswood, we formed our own little history society and read history papers to each other. Like Nix, John had curly hair but was physically much thinner than him. Athletics was more his forte, but I do not remember him as outstanding in any of the team sports⁸³. At Kingswood, however, he became a fencer, a very good fencer at that, and he ended up the school captain in a sport which was very selective as to whom could do it. At fencing, he was a natural.

Nix certainly got more mentions in my letters from P.C. than John Roebuck. And in my first year, there was a prolonged discussion about me going to stay with Mike in Devon (Tiverton) and him coming up to Widnes. All of which came to nothing. I suspect neither Mrs Nix nor my parents were very keen on the idea because it would have involved both of us travelling by ourselves from one end of England to the other.

⁸¹ Rev. Joseph Leslie Nix (1905-1951) Obituary in the Minutes of the Methodist Conference, 1952.

⁸² Rev Owen Roebuck (1899-1981) Obituary in the Minutes of the Methodist Conference, 1982.

⁸³ John Roebuck was awarded a half blue in the Modern Pentathlon at Cambridge.

In one letter I noted I was to have had a Special Permit (S.P). with Mike Nix when his Mum came up from Devon, but M.Y. wouldn't let me go⁸⁴. I'm not sure why, but both Mike and I had been ill around that time, and it may have been something to with that.

Another friend, but at this stage of my life, he was not in the same league as Nix and Roebuck, was James Monahan.

You will remember James Monahan was next to me in our first dormitory at P.C. His family lived nearby, close to Swindon. When Jim had his first S.P. in November 1958 which allowed him to go home for the day, he took me with him. I have no real memories of the day but no doubt we had lunch with the family and played some games in their garden before returning to school.

Another traumatic event for me during the summer of 1959 was "swimming" the beginner's breadth.

The school had a large open air swimming pool in its expansive garden behind the main building. It had been built, again with the help of some of the boys, several years before I arrived. It came into its own during the summer.

In the large entrance to the main building, M.Y. posted a chart on which the names of boys who could swim were listed. By each of their names he drew a red line across a series of columns, signifying what they had achieved. The first level of achievement was a breadth; then a length. And so it went up until you reached 22 lengths of the pool in one swim. Several boys were able to achieve this.

I was not one of them. I could not swim at all. I had an unhealthy fear of water, a fear I still retain. It goes back to the time when I was four. I fell off my bike into the small pond in Birchfield Gardens, Widnes. Thankfully I was hauled out by Mike, my brother. Since then, I have always been afraid of water and have resisted every effort to get me to overcome my fears and learn to swim.

⁸⁴ Letter 17, 23rd February 1959

I have to say none of the schools I attended made any great effort to try and teach me to swim and certainly no effort was made at P.C. However, I was resistant I must admit, so it's a black mark against both of us.

Towards the end of the summer term there was a day set aside for the swimming competitions. The thing was, though, and this sent a shiver of fear down my spine, everybody had to participate. For people like me who could not swim or could barely swim, we were entered into what was called the Beginners Breadth. M.Y. did not mind how you did the breadth. You could swim it certainly. You could also wade across the pool if need be. The sting for me which set the alarm bells ringing, was you had to jump into the water from the side of the pool. Nothing to worry about, you might think, but worry about it I did.

In 1959, I did it. Along with the other weeds in the school who didn't take to swimming I managed to jump into the water and wade across. As I jumped, I didn't stumble or fall as I feared. I valiantly waded across and finished the breadth. I didn't come last, but for certain I did not come first.

*"Yesterday was the swimming Sports and so that every one has a chance they have a Beginners Breadth which is all the people who cannot swim 2 lengths you have to get across some how but you have to jump in. I didn't come last. Rats won so we come equal to Badgers."*⁸⁵

I was definitely putting on a brave face to my parents!

By the time the summer of 1960 arrived, I decided I could not face jumping into the water again. This time, shortly before the race of the beginners breadth was to begin, I quietly slunk off, making certain nobody could see me, and went and hid myself in the toilet in Bison. I stayed there for about 15 minutes, long enough for it to be certain the race had finished. When I got back, nobody had noticed I was not in the beginners breadth. At least nobody who mattered. What a relief!

There was no mention of it in my next letter to my parents.

My fear of water found its way into the public domain. John Monahan, my dormitory leader in Swan, came to hear about it. He had this not very bright idea of

⁸⁵ Letter 31: 17th July 1959

holding my head under water as a way of overcoming my fear. He took me down to the bathroom where we used to wash and bathe. He filled up a wash basin until it was brimming full and pushed my head into the water and held it there. Yes, looking back, I could say this was bullying, but it was done with the best of intentions of that I am certain. John certainly wasn't a bully by nature. He just thought it would cure my fear of water. It was one of the unpleasant things which happened to me at P.C. but I can smile about now. As a teaching methodology, I would not recommend it. It was certainly not successful. To this day I retain an irrational fear of water.

Looking back, I am conscious I had nobody I could go and talk the matter over with. At Kingswood we did have a chaplain who might fill the role of adult friend or counsellor. But at Prior's Court there was no one. Maybe one of the masters might have been sympathetic if I had approached them, but it never occurred to me to do so. Today I guess things have changed.

One of the most memorable occasions for me that summer was the U12 cricket game played against a school in Basingstoke in July 1959.

Cricket was a subject I returned to regularly when I wrote my letters home during the summer. It was a game I was genuinely fond of.

On 21st June⁸⁶ I write, "*I have heard that we play a school called Basingstoke⁸⁷ but the big team don't play it, the Under Twelves do. So if I try hard I might get in it. The Preacher today is Mr. Trump⁸⁸.*"

Several weeks passed and there was no reference to Basingstoke in my letters home. Then on the 14th July I write: "*Thank-you for your letters. I am in the*

⁸⁶ Letter 26: 21st June 1959

⁸⁷ As far as I know there is no school called Basingstoke. Basingstoke is where the school was located.

⁸⁸ Robert W. Trump was a physics and maths teacher from Kingswood. He taught full time from 1921 to 1961. Awarded the M.C. in the 1st World War, he taught me physics and then maths at K.S until 1963. Undoubtedly one of the best teachers I had with lots of lovely mannerisms. He died in 1990

*Under 12 team to play Basingstoke tomorrow. I am fielding Mid on and Long Leg. Batting No 8.*⁸⁹

Clearly, I was in to make up the numbers.

The game was an away game, so we had to travel to get to the match. I was told I was to travel with GG Graham in his red sports car (an M.G., I think) because I was the tallest boy in the team. The rest travelled by van. Of course, this thrilled me no end even if it meant I was stuck with being with GG by myself all the way there and all the way back. I certainly enjoyed the thrill of travelling in an open convertible car with the wind rushing past as we built up a bit of speed.

When the match started the Basingstoke Boys won the toss and chose to bat. They didn't do too badly, scoring between 50 and 60 runs. It certainly looked quite a formidable total as our turn came to go into bat.

As the Number 8 batsman I naturally assumed it would be sometime before I might be called upon. Except the Prior's Court batsmen were not doing very well at all. The total we were aiming for began to look even more daunting as the Basingstoke boys removed all our best batsman pretty cheaply. We were down to something like 30 for 6. It most definitely looked like a losing position.

And then it was my turn to bat. I was nervous, very nervous, and was relieved to get through the remaining balls of the over with my wicket still standing. In the next over Basingstoke took another wicket and it looked as if the game was done and dusted in their favour.

At this point something rather magical and unexpected happened. I was joined at the crease by our No 9 batsman, Jimmy Monahan. Again, someone selected to make up the numbers.

And what followed is genuinely one of the high points of my sporting life and certainly my time at P.C. The pair of us just took off and achieved something which still lives in the memory. Together we succeeded in getting the remaining runs to win without further loss of a wicket. Mona was the number one hero I have to say, because he was full of runs, scoring most of the runs needed for victory. He hit the ball hard and sometimes to the boundary. I supported him by doing my imitation of a

⁸⁹ Letter 30: 14th July 1959

solid, reliable Lancashire left-handed batsman (Remember this was the summer that Geoff Pullar⁹⁰ began to play for England, and like him, I was a left-handed batsman). My contribution was not so much in making runs (I made a modest 8 runs. Mona scored something around 20 plus). It was making sure I was not out. While Mona attacked, Percy⁹¹ blocked, going for the occasional single.

Briefly Mona and I established ourselves as school heroes. We had won the game for Prior's Court. Yet you would hardly think so from the letter I write to Mum and Dad at the weekend. I was far more interested in the car ride with GG!

"On Wednesday was the U12 match. I got 8 not out. We won by 3 wickets. There was only one 0 and that was Brown, T.D.K⁹² first ball. I went in G.G.'s car. The fastest we went was 70 m.p.h. along a Main Road. It was quite Exciting. The best part is it had no roof apart from a tarpaulin roof which you can put over if it rains."

As I read through my letters home, one of the things I notice is, both at rugby and cricket, how few matches Prior's Court ever won⁹³. The game at Basingstoke was the exception!

Another small but noteworthy incident also took place in that summer of 1959. It was when I introduced myself to the person many people believe was Kingswood's greatest Headmaster, Alfred Barrett Sackett⁹⁴. It was Parents Day at Prior's Court,

⁹⁰ Geoff Pullar (1935-2014) played for Lancashire and Gloucestershire. He played for England in 28 Tests between 1959 and 1963.

⁹¹ Percy was my nickname as I'm sure you guessed.

⁹² Timothy David Kilner Brown was the son of Sir Ralph Brown, a Judge of the Central Criminal Court. He left K.S. in 1964 and served for a time in the Merchant Navy. He died in 2013.

⁹³ Games recorded in my letters are: Cheltenham Juniors, Lost 36-0; Eagle House Lost 3-0 and 6-5; Brockhurst, Won 22-0; Lord Wandsworth College, Lost; Eagle House, Lost 21-0; Great Ballard, Lost 22-0; Newbury Grammar School, Lost 3-0; Papplewick, Lost 5/4 wickets; Elstree, Lost 5 runs; Crosfields, Lost 20 runs. I didn't report every game but PC certainly were a bottom of the table team in both rugby and cricket!

⁹⁴ Alfred Barret Sackett, M.C. (1895-1977) was Headmaster at Kingswood School from 1928 to 1959. A veteran of Gallipoli where he was wounded and lost a leg.

Monday, 29th June, and Sackett was making his final visit to Prior's Court before he retired at the end of the term.

I mentioned it casually to my parents a few weeks later. *"Did I tell you that on Parents Day I had a little talk with Sackett? I went up to him and we shook hands and I said, "Please sir, do you know a boy called Percival?" He said "yes". We didn't say much after that."*⁹⁵ I guess both of us were a bit shy. I certainly was and small talk was never my forte. I guess it wasn't Sackett's either!

Looking back, I have very pleasant fleeting memories of my two summers at Prior's Court. Buying Vimto with my pocket money on a hot sunny afternoon, drinking it slowly to make it last. Watching people swim or dive in the pool, wishing I had the courage to do the same. Playing paddle tennis on a court established at the far end of the large garden at the back of the school. A version of lawn tennis it is played on a small court with a net with rackets made of wood and small rubber balls. Or sometimes joining in a game of croquet, trying to hit your opponent's ball into the long grass at the edge of the garden. Oh, to be in England

I should perhaps say some more about the teachers at Prior's Court at this time. The headmaster was William Barraclough Maltby. Known by his initials M.Y. His father had been an illustrious Wesleyan Methodist minister⁹⁶, and M.Y. himself was the product of a Kingswood education (as was his father and brother) being a scholar there from 1916 to 1924. In his final year he was the Senior Prefect (Head Boy).

He died in 1967 two years after he retired as Headmaster of P.C. as did his wife Ruth. Both died within a month of each other. M.Y. himself was a heavy smoker which no doubt was a factor in his relatively short life.

The Maltbys had a big dog. It was a large brown and white Pointer whose name I can no longer remember. We boys tended to avoid it, though it was not an

⁹⁵ Letter 32: 16th July 1959

⁹⁶ Rev Dr W. Russell Maltby (1886-1951). Warden of the Wesley Deaconess Order. As noted previously, at the time of M.Y.'s birth he was a minister in the Great Homer Street Wesleyan Methodist Church in the Everton district of Liverpool.

aggressive or biting dog⁹⁷. It rarely barked but when it did it was deep and loud. It spent most of the time snoozing on the floor. I suspect it was quite old by the time I arrived at the school, but like so many dogs of that breed and size, my memory is of its slabbering a lot.

He and Ruth lived on the premises in a flat just opposite Heron dormitory.

If I am honest, I liked M.Y. It is true he wrote some challenging things about me on my reports, and I have a definite feeling he didn't like me much. At the end of my first year at P.C. he wrote on my report, "*He has worked well but his behaviour is often uncouth and he appears to pay little attention when any attempt is made to improve his manners.*"

This was on the back of a letter he had written to my father complaining about the state of my tie. I have a knack, which I have retained to this day, of spilling food onto my shirt (or tie in the days when I wore one). This clearly irritated M.Y. to the point he sent a letter to my father (letters always went to fathers and never to mothers except in those cases where the father was dead or missing.)

He was unquestionably the dominant personality in the school. To a large degree the school was his creation with that of P.C.'s first Headmaster, Hugh Clutton-Brock⁹⁸. He is frequently mentioned in my letters home, and they report conversations with him, usually when he was sitting at the top of the table, which might be considered by some as surprising.

An example of this was when we discussed future developments at the school. In a one of my last letters to my parents I write, "*M.Y. was talking about what he's going to do with the Bothy <old horse stables, I think>. He thinks he is going to make it into a Changing room because he thinks that the present changing rooms are the worst thing in the school. But they're not bad. We have got heaters and Showers and pegs to hang our clothes up. What more do we want? He said as well that he was only having 81*

⁹⁷ John Roebuck begs to disagree. He says the dog did try to bite him once.

⁹⁸ Hugh Clutton-Brock (1904-1986) For more information see Gary Martin Best (1998) *Continuity and Change: a history of Kingswood School, 1748-1998I*.

(boys) next year, but the year after that he is going to take more, so we are gradually building up."⁹⁹

The aluminum studs incident was a black mark against him. I was mortified by being made to stand in front of the school to be told off for something which was not my responsibility; to become a figure of fun if only very briefly and as it happens all for nothing.

I have a memory too about art classes which he took. He made me do my art away from the other boys. I am not certain why that happened. Clearly he didn't think I was much good at painting, which was not an assessment I shared! In the end I was reduced to copying paintings from the great masters. I remember copying several Utrillos¹⁰⁰, the French painter, which I liked and which I thought I did rather well, even if I say so myself.

In my second year at P.C., M.Y. was my maths teacher. As a teacher of maths, he was not as good as Mr Black, but his classes were enjoyable and stimulating. In my first letter home that term, I mention and expound rather tediously the famous Paradox of Zeno concerning Achilles and the tortoise. This paradox attempts to show how Achilles can never catch up and overtake the tortoise, even though he is much the faster of the two.¹⁰¹ Later in the year I write, "*Maths is a great difference than what it was last year. We hardly do any written work. We discuss most of the time.*"¹⁰²

My mathematic skills did not impress M.Y. one little bit. In my first Report from him at the end of the Christmas term, 1959, he writes, "*Very slow to see, but he keeps working. His work is untidy.*" I am awarded a Grade IV, the bottom grade.

By the end of the Easter Term he writes, "*He has worked quite willingly, but his comprehension is soon passed.*" Another Grade IV.

⁹⁹ Letter 54, 22nd May 1960

¹⁰⁰ Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955)

¹⁰¹ Letter 33, 27th September 1958.

¹⁰² Letter 37, 1st November 1959.

His general comment at the bottom of the report sheet is interesting “*He continues to strive against competition which is very keen in this form.*”

In his final report on the year, and my final P.C. report, M.Y. writes, “*His examination papers revealed several gaps in his knowledge of the syllabus.*” A comment which, I would have thought, invited the response, “but Mr Maltby, isn’t it your job to see there are no gaps?” Yet another Grade IV.

His final general comment is in sharp contrast to this “uncouth” remarks a year previously. He writes, “*Good natured and willing. We wish him well when he goes to Kingswood.*” Well, yes, of course.

He was not perfect, but I liked him and enjoyed for the most part his company. I just wish he had seen more in me than he actually did.

M.Y. had a secretary. Her name was Mrs Reynard and so she was known, naturally, as Foxie. We had little to do with her, but at dinner time she did sit at the head of a table where we would try and make conversation. It was invariably difficult and stilted. The two things I remember about her was the way her pursed lips moved up and down as if she was mumbling something when she was not speaking, an affectation we schoolboys were quick to spot and to mimic (when she was not looking). As she was dishing out food, she wouldn’t hand the plate to the boy on her left or right. Instead, she stuck her hand straight down the table and waited until one of the boys took the plate and handed it on down. It’s odd what one remembers!

My favourite teacher at P.C. though I only had him for Year 1 was Vic Black. Mr Black taught Maths and was very good at teaching it. Like most of the good teachers I’ve had in my time, he was a no-nonsense teacher, but he relied primarily on his charisma rather than on threats or beatings. He was also passionately interested in the countryside and encouraged us to go bird watching, something he also did notably when my brother was at P.C. a couple of years earlier.

One characteristic Mr Black had which none of the other teachers had was he only wrote positive reports about me at the end of each term.

After one term he wrote, “*He is keen and shows good understanding.*” (Grade II). No references to untidiness (Ifful, GG) or slowness (GG). By term 2, I was up to a Grade I and “*Good*” was his comment. This was the same the following term.

Now I never was any good at maths, but Vic Black had a way of encouraging and supporting those of us who were not gifted mathematicians.

I have one very distinct memory of him. On a couple of occasions, we had some serial illnesses in the school. One was a flu' epidemic, possibly Asian flu. Most of the boys in the school went down with the illness¹⁰³. I was not one of them. Classes were cancelled and we were allowed, under supervision, to do things which we found enjoyable. One time Mr Black got us to write out stories which we read to the rest of the class. That was around the time Nigel Kneale¹⁰⁴ was writing the Quatermass stories for the BBC and I had watched some episodes and loved them. My story was heavily influenced by *Quatermass and the Pit*, a story which combined the supernatural (ghosts) and science fiction. I always remember Mr Black pretending to be frightened, rolling up his tie nervously as my story reached its grizzly conclusion. A small gesture, perhaps, but one still rooted in my memory and still appreciated.

I began French in 2B at Prior's Court. Our teacher was "Sammy" Selwood. He, like Vic Black, settled down at Prior's Court and spent the rest of his teaching career at the school. Before my time, he had married the school's matron. I did not particularly like him, after all he did beat me twice, which would not be a strong recommendation.

He taught French, and he taught the language in a very traditional and often ineffective way. In those days modern language teaching revolved around learning grammar, and you began with Je suis, Tu es, Il est etc. Your class work involved plenty of grammar with lots of written translation work both French into English and English into French. Learning to actually speak French was very much on the back burner, so Sammy Selwood's classes were no different I guess than what was typical at that time in most schools. It did not change much when I went up to Kingswood.

In his reports he constantly drew attention to my poor pronunciation, something I would have no quarrel with. French is quite a difficult language for English people to pronounce, especially when you start to learn it at the age of 11 at

¹⁰³ See Letter 13,

¹⁰⁴ Nigel Kneale (1922-2006). A Lancashire born TV screenwriter. His most celebrated TV creations were the Quatermass series in the 1950s which were thrillers within the science fiction and horror genres.

a time you are becoming very self-conscious. But as I commented earlier, speaking the language was never a priority either at Prior's Court or Kingswood.

John Roebuck tells an amusing story involving Sammy Selwood and me. "I remembered a game that Selwood got us to play to improve our French vocab. The class (year 2) stood in a line and the boy at the top end was asked to give the French for an English word or expression. If you got it right you stayed at the top end, if you got it wrong you were sent down to the bottom. Selwood asked you the French for 'to start again'. The answer (as I am sure you will remember) is 'recommencer'. You said Rocky Marciano. Selwood was furious and sent you to the bottom and kept you there for several weeks."¹⁰⁵

My grades in French remained consistently poor throughout my two years. At the end of my first term I was graded a III with a comment about my poor pronunciation. By the time I left in the summer of 1960 I was down to a Grade IV, but Sammy noted that "*he has worked willingly on all occasions.*"¹⁰⁶ Let it be noted, three years later when it came to my French O Level which is where it mattered, I did pass (eventually!)

I have one other memory of Sammy. It was when I was in the 3rd form. Somebody found a broken-down chair in the storeroom which nestled between the two classrooms used by the Third Forms. A group of boys decided to play a prank on Sammy and replaced the existing chair at the master's desk with the broken down one. When Sammy entered you could have heard a pin drop. He walked to the table, pulled out the chair and it collapsed. His reaction was not one of amusement. He demanded to know who had done it. Hands slowly went up. Not mine as I was not one of the boys who had played the jape. He then ordered them to put the chair back together again and return it to the storeroom.

"If it collapses, you'll all be for the hairbrush."

You could almost see the sweat pouring from the boys returning the chair which they did successfully. So no hairbrush and the whole class relaxed. But it points, I think to a weakness in Sammy Selwood's personality. A lack of appreciation of schoolboy humour, especially if he felt it was directed at him.

¹⁰⁵ Email communication, dated 27th February 2022

¹⁰⁶ School Report, Summer 1960

When people write the history of schools, they focus on Headmasters first and then long serving masters, usually with more than 30 years continuous service at the school.

The history of Prior's Court remains to be written. M.Y. will get at least a chapter and Victor Black and Sammy Selwood will get honourable mentions.¹⁰⁷

But from the perspective of the pupil, the teacher who is "passing through" as it were, can be as significant to their experience of the school as much as the long-term master.

Over the years P.C. had quite a number of these short-term teachers. One was "GG" Graham who taught during the two years I was there. He also taught for the three years my brother Michael was there (1954-57). But he had left the school by 1962 and appears to have disappeared into the ether.

He taught both Geography and English. He was another tall master, strict and we were all a bit afraid of him. He was also unpopular. It is, I think noteworthy, that all the former boys I consulted, four in all, not one of them had a good word to say about GG.

In my first year he taught me Geography in my first and third term. He was the only master to give me a Grade I (The top grade) in my first report. His comments were mixed, "*Good but rather slow. His exercise book is very untidy.*" By the summer term this had been shortened to a "*Good*".

When I was in 3A he taught me English. Occasionally he would read to us in class and one book he read which stayed with me and is still a favourite of mine was Margery Allingham's *Tiger in the Smoke*. Again, memory can be such a strange thing at times. When I reread the book some years ago, there was one distinct passage which I can clearly remember GG reading to us. It is when the villain slips into a room through a narrow window. Many years later I wrote a short review about

¹⁰⁷ They do get such mentions in Gary Martin Best (1998) *Continuity and Change: a history of Kingswood School, 1748-1998*

the book which appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper¹⁰⁸ in 2009. But I doubt GG was a *Guardian* reader.

There is another piece of literature which GG read to us and which has remained rooted in my memory. This was Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which by universal agreement is one of the finest pieces of satire ever written. It certainly worked with the boys of 3A who didn't take too kindly to the thought of healthy children being cooked and sautéed. Which, of course, is what made it so memorable. The way Swift (and GG) took us for a ride until slowly but surely it dawned on us that this was not a serious proposal at all but an exposé of the level of poverty which existed at that time in Ireland and the failure of the British Government to deal with it.

Once GG paid me a backhanded compliment. He had got the class to spend some time writing a poem. My poem was about a fox. When I read it to him, GG's first reaction was to suggest I had copied it from somewhere. I hadn't, of course, but it was nice to think he thought so.

Another blow-in teacher was Richard Wilding who taught me English and History in my first year. He was another very tall young man and within a week he earned himself the nickname of Eiffel Tower, abbreviated down to Ifful or Iful.¹⁰⁹ (My spellings!). I remember his room, effectively a bed sit, was across the small passageway outside Swan.

I have positive memories of his teaching and my letters frequently reference what we were doing in class. Like GG, Ifful sometimes read us a story in class. One such memorable story was Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*. I mentioned this in a letter home. "*Ifful read us a story called the Pit and the Pendulum. It was very frightening. We are not to tell any first former about it.*"¹¹⁰

Other books he read to us were John Buchan's *Huntingtower* and C.S. Forester's *The Gun*. We were at an impressionable age, one of the joys of boyhood, when everything is a new discovery, a new adventure and a step forward. As for the

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/20/1000-crime-novels-recommended>

¹⁰⁹ I am referring to him as Iful in my second letter home: Letter 2, 5th October 1958.

¹¹⁰ Letter 7, 9th November 1958

reference to the first form, I believe this was because he wanted to read it to them later. These stories certainly encouraged me to read.

One of the standard things one did in those days in English classes was to read through Shakespeare plays. In my letters I refer to *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night* as two of the plays we read in Ifful's class. In the latter one I read the part of Sir Toby Belch.¹¹¹

My recollection is that most of us boys at P.C. liked Ifful. I certainly did and to some extent it was reciprocated.

But once he left P.C. at the end of the summer term, 1959, I heard no more about him. There was talk of him becoming either a R.A.F. pilot or an Anglican priest.¹¹²

Sometimes a boy who had just finished at KS came and taught for one, two or three terms. One such boy was Jonathan Sutherland¹¹³. He came in September 1959 and left at Christmas. He taught me Geography. He was strikingly handsome, a tall boy with bright wavy red hair, but immaculately combed. He brought with him a bright red sports car, but I have no memories of him driving any boys in it. His nickname was Su.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Letter 22, 24th May, 1959

¹¹² David Cox has been able to fill in some of the details of Richard Wilding post PC. He writes, "I know a lot about Richard Wilding as he came to stay at our farm in Glos and we knew him over the years. First he decided to become a priest and thus get into Oxford but nothing came of that. Then he was enthusiastic about flying and actually did join up. He trained at South Cerney as a fighter pilot and used to come and see us and entertain us with tales of friends dying in training. He said that if ever he had to bail out he would lose 4" off the end of his legs. He did not complete his training and was invalided out on psychiatric grounds. Then he became a male model and was in some Hush Puppy ads and also featured in some Strongbow ads; he was very good looking as you know. Then he started working for the BBC and there he stayed as a reasonably successful producer of cookery shows etc. I used to see his name in the credits, maybe Delia's show or Mary Berry's." email, 14th February 2022

¹¹³ Jonathan Sutherland was at KS from 1953-59. A member of Middle House.

¹¹⁴ Letter 33: 29th September, 1959

His report on my Geography skills was not very encouraging. Graded IV (the lowest grade possible), he commented, "*His work lacks detail and is often untidy.*" (Untidiness was a common theme!)

When I went up to Kingswood in September 1960, I learnt that Sutherland had been killed earlier that year in a car crash.

Another Kingswood alumni was Michael Bennett¹¹⁵, the brother of Peter Bennett, who was in Heron in my first term. Micky was his nickname and he came to us for the Easter and Summer Terms of 1960. He taught me Geography and my two reports from him were not that bad, and suggested I was improving in the subject.

At the end of the Easter term he wrote "*His written work often shows some energetic thinking, but his application in class is, on occasion, wayward.*"¹¹⁶ He gave me a Grade III. This remained the same for the Summer Term, but his comment was more mainstream, "*A fair term's work*".

Another former K.S boy (I think) was a Mr Brown. He stayed with us for only one term and taught me for Geography in 2B. His nickname was, not surprisingly, Bruno. He did give me a Grade I and described my work as "*Good, but very untidy.*"¹¹⁷

All in all, I had four Geography teachers while I was at P.C. This was clearly not ideal!

I am fascinated by the range of comments and grades the masters gave me in Geography. In the Summer term, 1959, my Geography teacher in 2B was GG Graham. He gave me a Grade I (the top grade) and described my work as "Good". Yet next term, my first term in 3A, I'm down to a IV and some fairly negative comments by Sutherland.

¹¹⁵ Michael Bennett had himself gone to Prior's Court in 1949. He left KS in 1959 and after his spell as a P.C. teacher went to Oxford. He did a second spell at PC as a teacher before going into educational management.

¹¹⁶ School Report, Easter 1960.

¹¹⁷ School Report, Easter 1959

The new school year began in September 1959 and it turned out to be an eventful term.

I arrived back to find that I had been promoted into IIIA which was the top class in the school. Nix was in IIIB but both John Roebuck and Jimmy Monahan joined me in IIIA.

This final year was when we boys began to learn Latin and with Geoff Mellor having left the school to take up his new position at Kent College, we were all looking forward to the new master and what he would be like.

His name was Richard "Dick" Burton¹¹⁸. This is what I wrote about him after just a week back in Prior's Court in September 1959. *"Latin isn't very nice. A new master takes us. He is Horrible. We have him for history as well. The other New Master is a man called Sutherland¹¹⁹. We call him Su. The man's name is Burton, Nicknamed Blighter. He deserves his name."*¹²⁰

It was Chris Pendlebury¹²¹ who gave him the nickname.

A small group of us boys were discussing Burton in the Gunroom where our shoes were kept and where they were polished several times a week by Scottie, a man with a hare lip, who lived in the Gate lodge.¹²² Burton had started with a bang. The methodology was, I suppose, "start tough, show them whose boss and then maybe you can relax a little". We were all taken aback at how overly strict and aggressive he was, eager to punish the smallest of infractions, shouting at us. When

¹¹⁸ Richard M Burton came to P.C. in 1959 and rose to become the school's Deputy Headmaster. He retired in 1988 and died in 2016.

¹¹⁹ John Sutherland. He had just left Kingswood at the end of the summer term, 1959. He was killed in a car crash in 1960, after he had left P.C.

¹²⁰ Letter 33: 29th September, 1959. We had returned to P.C. on Monday, 21st September 1959

¹²¹ Chris Pendlebury I regarded as one of my friends at P.C. He came from South Wales and in my mind at least will always be remembered for the catchphrase, "The best is only just good enough!" He left Kingswood in 1963 to go into the family business, farming.

¹²² Thanks to Dave Cox for reminding me that we knew him as Scottie.

we came to discuss what nickname to give him, Chris Pendlebury came up with Blighter. We all agreed, and it stuck.

I had the distinction of being the first boy at P.C. to be beaten by Blighter. This is how it happened.

Two weeks after the beginning of term a small group of us had arrived late for games. As a punishment Blighter ordered us to run around the games field. When we returned he decided to send me round again claiming I had not done it sufficiently quickly the first time. Nobody else was required to do this additional run. Half way around I got a painful stomach cramp which reduced my running to a walk. He saw this, shouted at me to get a move on and sent four boys, one of whom was Michael Nix, to beat me like a dog with their running shoes until I started to run again. Since I couldn't run because of the pain of the stiches, a rain of blows descending on my backside and thighs given by boys who frankly did not know better. The result was I lost my temper and shouted across the full length of the field to Blighter, "I suppose you think that was bloody funny?" He ordered me back into the changing rooms adding the rider that I should see Matron since I was obviously ill. But before I could get to Matron he caught up with me and led me to my dormitory (Mallard) where he proceeded to beat me with the "hair" brush from the back of the door. When he had finished I was in tears and he ordered me into bed to "cool off".¹²³

I know some will try to justify this. They will say, "But you swore at a master." I did and I would do it again. Children should be allowed to lose their tempers just like anybody else. His actions that day were unconscionable. They were the exercise of power by a bully over someone who had no ability to respond except through a display of anger. In my book, hitting a child can never be justified.

At least Mike Nix apologised for what he did; Blighter never did.

I was not the only one to think I had been badly treated. Chris Morley complained to M.Y. about it.

¹²³ This account is largely a reproduction of an account of the incident I wrote in 1971.

The fact that Chris Morley felt able to complain also I think shows a degree of civility within the school. Whether M.Y. did anything about I do not know.

Dave Cox has an interesting perspective on Blighter. “Blighter was awful at the beginning; he did calm down and by the time my eldest daughter got to the school and he was 2nd master, still, to his 3rd headmaster, he was fairly benign. When he came into 3A the first time he strolled past my desk and grabbed the back of my neck twisting the hair viciously and said ‘you will; be my right hand man, Cox, I will use my right hand on you.’ I smiled but it was very painful and it was meant to be. His way of maintaining order in the class – a stupid strategy.”

Blighter was my first Latin teacher and I seemed to do OK at Latin though I was clearly not gifted at it as some were.

That did not change my view of Blighter which remained consistently negative. In January 1960 I wrote home, in a letter which outlined my morning programme of studies, “*After Quarter Blytor gives us as usual a horrible Latin lesson.*”¹²⁴

Interestingly, I never mentioned the beating by Blighter to my parents in my letters home or anytime subsequently.

In my first letter home that term I naturally told my parents about who was what at the school amongst the boys.

“My dormy is Mallard. It is opposite M.Y. I have been in Mallard before. (. .) It consists of Cox, Percival, Welch / Walker, Morley, J.P., (name illegible). Where there is a line, (i.e /) the people above it are Old Boys, below new. I am still in Rats thank Goodness. The clan leaders and seconds are:

<i>Toads</i>	<i>Rats</i>	<i>Moles</i>	<i>Badgers</i>
<i>Morley, C.J.D.</i>	<i>Wade</i>	<i>Harrold</i>	<i>Okell</i>

¹²⁴ Letter 44, 24th January, 1960.

*Yesterday there was a smashing game of touch Rugger. I was a Prop.*¹²⁵

There was a series of events at the school during the Christmas Term of 1959 which, though we did not know it at the time, of course, were to prefigure those which took place in Kingswood, especially in Hall House, a few years down the line.

I am not sure what precipitated it. But clearly there was a serious outbreak of disobedience at the top end of the school.

It was towards the end of November 1959.

*"Yesterday in Maths," I wrote to Mum and Dad, "M.Y. said we were the worst 3rd formers he had ever had. 3 Dormy leaders have been removed, 2 of them were clan seconds¹²⁶ and when ever he walks in there is deadly silence and he doesn't like that, and whenever he goes into a dormy he can never look into a dormy leaders face without seeing something guilty in it. He says if we go on like we are going on we will have no films so we had better pull our socks up."*¹²⁷

M.Y. had acted the day I wrote the letter. I was able to say more in my next letter. *"Last Sunday M.Y. changed some of the Dormy Leaders. Rats' Clan Leader was changed¹²⁸ and a Badger was put in his place. His dormy changed and he was put in the second smallest dormy. Cox, my dormy*

¹²⁵ Letter 33, 29th September, 1959

¹²⁶ Three Dormey leaders were sacked; one of whom was a Clan Leader.

¹²⁷ Letter 40, 22nd November, 1959

¹²⁸ Martyn Wade was the clan leader dropped. I think he might have been replaced by Adrian Thomas, another son of the Manse. Latterly Professor of Music at Cardiff University

leader was changed and Sanderson¹²⁹ was put in his place. Deakin was changed and Gaunt (Rats clan second) was put in his place. GG entertainment was nothing much good. Just some music.”¹³⁰

Looking back, I have no idea what this was all about. I had even forgotten about it until I started to read through my letters. What their offences were, I don't know. To be accurate, I don't think we ever knew, as nobody, either the boys concerned or M.Y. were very forthcoming. My guess at the time, and it is just a guess, was they had been caught out of their dormitories when they should have been fast asleep.

More than sixty years later, Dave Cox was able to enlighten me, at least in part! “. . . In our dormitory things were fine but Graham and Black falsely informed on me guessing that I was bullying the little ones, which I certainly was not and got me suspended with the other malefactors. It was a great injustice that still rankles.”¹³¹

Cox also reminded me of a schoolboy dare which took place in Mallard during his time as dormitory leader. It was who could sleep the longest on the top of his bed without any covering other than pyjamas during the night. Cox writes, “One night we decided to have a test of our endurance to the cold. We all lay on the top of our beds without bed coverings. It was unpleasantly chilly and one by one the other boys slipped under the covers. In the end I had to give in and Percy lay there seemingly unaffected by the conditions.”¹³²

This does not quite accord with my memory which was that at the end we both agreed to get back into bed at the same time, an honourable draw.

¹²⁹ William Sanderson left Kingswood in 1964. In the 1974 School Register he was described as a Manager's Assistant in Barclay's Bank.

¹³⁰ Letter 42, 2nd December, 1959.

¹³¹ Email communication: 13th February 2022.

¹³² Ibid.

As it happens, Dave Cox, my ex dormitory leader and I, were to develop an odd interest which began at the beginning of the Easter Term, 1960. We decided we wanted to have a boxing fight between the two of us. Cox was never a close friend like Nix and Roebuck, but we got on well.

The new master Micky Bennett heard about our desire to fight and suggested we should do it as part of his upcoming Saturday entertainment. We both readily agreed. The thought of having a boxing fight between the two of us in front the whole school filled us with delight. We decided to bill it as “Killer Cox” versus “Pulverising Percy”.

I eagerly wrote home to Mum and Dad to get them to send me a pair of boxing gloves which we had and which I think my Dad had used as a Scout in the 1920s. Here’s part of the letter I wrote on 24th January 1960:

“Please will you send me before Saturday, 30th Jan, 1960 the best pair of Boxing gloves in the house. I want them because next Saturday I am going to fight a boy named Cox. This is for Mickey’s entertainment. I must have them or else I can’t fight and that would ruin Mickey’s entertainment.

(...)

Please don’t forget to send gloves.

(...)

Micky arranges the fight for Cox and I and please don’t forget about Boxing gloves.

(...)

Love from Robin

P.S DON’T FORGET TO GET THE BEST PAIR OF BOSING GLOVES, PLEASE.”¹³³

¹³³ Letter 44, 24th January 1960

This all came to nothing, as you might expect. A week later you can detect my glumness as I write, "*Thank-you very much for your letters, and for the boxing-gloves. Thank you as well for repairing them. M.Y. wouldn't let us fight, just like him not to let us fight, but I can practice with them.*"¹³⁴

Of course, M.Y. was right. There was no tradition of boxing at either P.C. or Kingswood. There would have been no one there to properly referee and monitor the match. We would have had no protective head gear which is expected in fights between amateurs, and I suspect, that M.Y. didn't particularly like the idea of 80 boys screaming for blood in what was meant to be "entertainment".

What M.Y. probably didn't know was that both Dave Cox and I had been boxing each other almost since we had got back from the holidays. This was in preparation for our anticipated "public" fight. These shadow fights illuminated some uncomfortable truths for me. If a proper fight had took place I would have lost. Dave had what it takes to win a boxing match, a willingness to hit your opponent and hit him hard. I didn't. I really didn't like punching someone, especially when I was not mad or angry with them. Some years later Dave was to demonstrate his natural boxing ability when he boxed for Cambridge University and was awarded a blue. If the fight had gone ahead, I would have been his first win; and probably his first knock out. So well done, M.Y. You were absolutely right.

In sociology, Erving Goffman coined the term "total institution" to describe a social unit such as Prior's Court. He argues in his book *Asylums*¹³⁵ that total institutions have a number of characteristics which differentiate them from other institutions. One obvious one is their enclosed nature in which the individual lives a life cut off from the outside world 24/7.

¹³⁴ Letter 45, 31st January 1960

¹³⁵ Erving Goffman (1961), *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*

However, the outside world did occasionally intrude on Prior's Court. Our gateway to that world was *The Daily Telegraph* which arrived at the school every morning. (There was no TV in the school in those days). It was a good fit given the ethos of the school and the masters who worked there. Very much Tory in outlook and interest. From a boys' perspective it had excellent sports coverage and the sports pages were always the first pages of the paper which we looked at and read. "The daily scrum," is what John Roebuck described it as, "to reserve the cricket scores and other articles that boys wanted to cut out."¹³⁶

One day in October a few weeks after I had started at the school, I entered the main foyer to see a group of boys gathered around the table with *the Telegraph* in front of them. Unusually they were looking at the front page. Pope Pius XII had died in Rome. None of us was particularly interested in the Roman Catholic Church or its Popes. However, one of the boys had a connection to Rome and could speak with a degree of authority the rest of us didn't have. John Kissack's¹³⁷ father¹³⁸ was the Methodist Churches representative in Rome and had met the late Pope. We listened attentively to what he had to say.

Sporting events always intruded into the life of the schoolboy. This was the time I began to develop a short term interest in Boxing. There was no boxing at the school and, as we have seen, attempts to get a public fight between myself and Dave Cox came to nothing. But my interest was sparked primarily by the three fights between Ingmar Johanssen and Floyd Patterson, the first two of which took place at the time I was at P.C. Of course, the fights occurred in the middle of the night and though I'm sure some of the masters

¹³⁶ Email communication, 17th November, 2021

¹³⁷ John Kissack was a year ahead of me at PC, but we both left Kingswood at the same time, December 1965. A Cambridge graduate.

¹³⁸ Rev Reginald Kissack, later Chairman of the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church where I was to come to know him quite well.

would have had televisions, I cannot remember any time when boys were invited to watch a programme.

October 1959 saw a General Election. The prime minister at the time was Harold Macmillan and his opponent was Hugh Gaitskell of the Labour party. The Tory slogan was “You’ve Never Had It So Good!” and is perhaps one of the most iconic and successful of election slogans in British electoral history.

At Kingswood School the tradition was always to have a “Mock” election which ran parallel with the real one in the country. This time Prior’s Court was also to have an election. Whether it was a tradition or not, I don’t know. In fact, the truth is I have no memory of the P.C. election whatsoever. Fortunately my letters tell some of the story.

“We are doing something like K.S. We are having a General Election. Only IIIA’s can be candidates.

The candidates are as follows:

Cox and Pendlebury (Conservative)

Norgate¹³⁹ (Liberal)

Percival (Labour)

I have only 3 people in the school who are Labour. They are nearly all Tory or Liberal. There were Posters everywhere

VOTE CONSERVATIVE

ANTI PERCY

VOTE TORY

¹³⁹ Thomas Norgate left Kingswood in 1963. He became a policeman.

I can't get a slogan up because it's ripped down. Every one nearly is anti Labour. They say, "They will nationalise the schools".

Well I will be going now,

Love Robin

P.S. Don't forget to VOTE LABOUR

Robin

I have no idea as to who won the school election, though I can be very certain Labour didn't! My guess is the Tories. Why they had two candidates I don't know or even how the candidates came to be selected. My choice to become the Labour candidate is perhaps not surprising as I was an actual Labour supporter. As to the three Labour votes, who they were, I don't know either. John Roebuck thinks I did well to get three! In fact, I don't know very much! Unlike the Kingswood mock election of 1964 in which I again was the Labour candidate getting 50 votes, the highest Labour vote in the history of the school and which I regard as my finest achievement at K.S.¹⁴⁰

John Roebuck reminds me of another great political occasion. "Budget day made you very excited. You had some sort of a small case that you use to keep your pencils and books in. You pretended that it was the Red Box the Chancellor (of the Exchequer) had on Budget day, held it up and let it open scattering the contents over the floor. Every time I see the C of the E outside Number 11 holding up his Red Box I think of that with amusement and hope his box will behave in a similar fashion."¹⁴¹

It is perhaps worth noting that in the 50s and 60s there was at least some debate about the role of private schools and whether or not they should be abolished or changed. I can say that at the time people were genuinely afraid that a Labour Government would herald the end of private schools.

¹⁴⁰ Jimmy Monahan and Howard Anderson were strong Labour supporters in 1964. In 1959 I don't know, though I suspect Howard might well have been.

¹⁴¹ Email communication: 27th February 2022

Sadly that was never to be. Over 60 years later they still exist and their alumni still dominate the ruling British elite.

Other events which I mention in my letters home were the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the drama surrounding Caryl Chessman's execution in California and the death of the British Motor Racing driver, Mike Hawthorne.

The wedding between Princess Margaret and Anthony Armstrong-Jones gets a mention, where I appear to have had a minor disagreement with M.Y. (See below).

In another letter I briefly report that I am knitting for refugees¹⁴². The U.N.'s World Refugee Year ran from June 1959 to the end of June 1960. One of the ways ordinary people could play their part was in providing blankets which could be sent to refugee camps. The boys of Prior's Court played their part by knitting woolen patches which were then sown together to form a blanket.

The summer term of 1960 was not as memorable as that of 1959. There was no heat wave, no water shortage. But it was my last at Prior's Court and the term therefore had a quality to it which was different from any of the previous terms.

The summer term meant Parents Day which meant a play presented by the Third Formers, all of whom were about to leave the school. The play chosen for 1960 was Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* which was undoubtedly a popular choice¹⁴³. For one thing it had enough parts to include everyone, even if was only a bit part with no lines.

The first my parents heard about it was at the beginning of May.

¹⁴² Letter 47, 14th February 1960.

¹⁴³ The year before, 1959, the play had been *Tobias and the Angel* by James Bridie (1888-1951).

“Dear Mum and Dad, (I wrote)

I hope you are fit and well. The Rev. Dr. Baker¹⁴⁴ (Pres of the Conf) is preaching today. I hope he is a good preacher. My writing will not be good because I’m out of practice.

We are definitely going to do a play. It is Julius Caesar. We don’t know our parts yet but we shall soon know. It is a very good play.

We had a half holiday for the wedding. I thought it was a waste of money, but M.Y. didn’t think so.¹⁴⁵

We went to Piccadilly when we got to London, then walked to Trafalgar Square. If ever you have some spare time in London go to Trafalgar Square and feed the pigeons. You can hardly move for them. They fly onto you and eat the food. You can buy a tin of food for 6d.¹⁴⁶

I will be going on my first moth hunting expedition today on Sunday walks. Please will you send me the cork as soon as possible 10” x 13 1/2”. Tetra Chloride is coming into use now. I think the boys who haven’t got Cyanide are getting it from Mr Black.

I hear Wolves beat Blackburn worst luck. Lancashire beat Hampshire in their first match.

Dr. Walker (school Doc) said I need to put this ointment on but when I didn’t it came on again so I have put some on this morning.

¹⁴⁴ Rev Dr Eric Baker was President of the Methodist Conference in 1959. He was also Secretary of the Methodist Conference from 1951 to 1970. A great friend of Kingswood, a member of the Governing Body and a KS parent, he was also a Member of the Methodist Peace Fellowship, a pacifist organisation affiliated to the Fellowship of Reconciliation for whom I was later to work for on two occasions.

¹⁴⁵ The wedding of Princess Margaret and Anthony Armstrong-Jones.

¹⁴⁶ It’s unclear but I am certain this refers to when we were in London changing trains on the day we returned to school.

I think I and Cox a boy in my form have broken a school record because we have been on the same table 4 terms running. The order is this

TABLE 5 Summer Term 1959

TABLE 6 Winter Term 1959

TABLE 8 Easter Term 1960 And now

TABLE 1 Summer Term 1960

When we told M.Y. he was just about to change us when we said we liked being on the same table.

My dormey is Swan again. The dormy I hate most for the Summer term. It is too hot.

Love, Robin"

This letter which I have replicated in full, references several aspects of life at Prior's Court. The play for Parent's Day which took place in July. The visit of the President of the Methodist Conference as a preacher. Moth and Butterfly hunting. And a rarity, a Royal Wedding.

The hunting down and killing of butterflies and moths was an activity confined to the Third Form. Given the rural hinterland of Prior's Court, the terrain was an ecological paradise for lepidoptera. Once killed, the butterfly was "set" on a piece of cork, with its beautiful wings on full display¹⁴⁷. If you were good at catching the insects, over a term you could build up quite a collection, arrayed like stamps in a display box for full effect. Moths, of course, were harder to catch as they are creatures of the night.

¹⁴⁷ If your interested in how to "set" a butterfly, watch this video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTZ2AFdbqg>

The reference to the use of tetrachloride as a killing agent has an interesting backstory. When my brother Michael was a Prior's Court from 1954-57, the agent used was cyanide mixed in with plaster of paris at the bottom of an old jam jar. Into this jar you transferred your butterfly and then watched it die as the cyanide took effect.

When it came to my turn to hunt insects my parents got a bit agitated at the thought of me using cyanide. For some extraordinary reason they decided I was less careful than Mike and there was a risk of me breathing in the cyanide instead of the butterfly or moths!

Looking back, they were quite right, of course. It seems incredible now, given the emphasis we rightly place on Health and Safety, that it was permitted for 12-year-old schoolboys to carry around with them a cyanide bottle to kill bugs. My parents obviously felt the same and after some research came up with an alternative, which was tetrachloride. This they said I could have in my killing bottle, soaked into pieces of blotting paper and cotton wool. At the time I was not at all pleased about this, but Mum and Dad put their foot down and tetrachloride was what I had. This seems to have impressed M.Y. and the P.C. staff. Soon other boys began to use tetrachloride and it quickly replaced cyanide as the killing agent of choice.

P.C. the preparatory school for Kingswood School no longer exists, but I doubt we would be allowed to hunt butterflies in the way we were over sixty years ago. Butterflies have enough problems engineering their survival without scores of excitable schoolboys chasing after them with nets, wanting to kill them, and put them on display. But in those days it was a major activity for many Third Formers, myself included.

As the term progressed, and the day when we would leave P.C. for the very last time, our horizons increasingly began to focus on Kingswood. At the

end of May I wrote, "*The Preacher is the Rev. Culshaw¹⁴⁸, Chaplain at K.S. He is quite a good preacher. I think next Sunday that is not definite we are having Creed¹⁴⁹, the Headmaster at K.S. We are having some preachers this term. I forgot to tell you. One day, the week before last, the governors came and it took about 5 mins for them to get out of the dining room talking away. Creed was there. He didn't look a bit like his photograph.¹⁵⁰*"

Going to Kingswood meant for the first time I had to choose what subjects I wanted to learn. There were three basic groups. Classics which meant doing Greek and Ancient History for O Level, Modern Languages which required German as an O Level and finally Science, which involved Chemistry and Physics as O Levels.

Briefly I had wanted to do Classics. I'm not certain why because my Latin was poor and I didn't like the subject. By the end of May I had changed my mind, writing home, "*My mind has changed again. I don't want to go into Classics now. (a) because I want to farm until I (or hope to) go into Politics. I don't want to drop Latin because I like it but I don't mind if I drop French or not because (a) I don't like it (b) I don't see the point of it. I think we ought to learn Russian and I'm not very good at it.*"

M.Y. will most likely say that classics will be the best for me but if you take my advice don't listen to him because he'll most likely advise every person to go into classics (...)

¹⁴⁸ Rev J. Clifford Culshaw (1910-1999) was Chaplain at K.S from 1953 to 1961. He was Chaplain at the school in my first year. A lovely man whom I wished I had had an opportunity to know better.

¹⁴⁹ Albert Lowry Creed (1909-1987) was the Headmaster of Kingswood from 1959 until 1970. He was the Headmaster during my period at Kingswood. In 1962 he was Vice President of the Methodist Conference. He had been a pupil at K.S. from 1920 to 1928.

¹⁵⁰ Letter 54, 22nd May, 1960.

I have asked a few boys when they think of socialism do they think anti-democracy. But I say that socialism is democracy. Don't you agree because the things are ruled by the people.”¹⁵¹

Later, mid-June, I return to the theme of my future. “*You must know by now by what side M.Y. wants me to go on, and I fully agree. As you know by an earlier letter I want to go onto science. M.Y agrees and I'm sure you agree. I want to be trained for farming but my ambitions are in politics. When I go to K.S. this is what I have in mind. To get a scholarship in science, then go to Cambridge University. This doesn't mean I'm going to support Camb., certainly not. I'm still for Oxford, but Oxford is for the classic people and I want to do Science, so I'll be aiming for Camb. I hope to get a B.Sc and then got to an Agricultural College. Those are my ambitions. I'll know I'll have to work for it, but I'm determined to do it. If I can do that I can't help but get a job.*

What do you think ought to be done to Eichmann? I am completely lost as what should be done to him. It is surprising how things that happened 20-15 years ago are still be done.

Counting this letter there will only be 7 more letters from P.C. to you, most likely for ever. It is hard to think that soon I shall be at K.S.”¹⁵²

My Dad must have written something about my future in response to this letter. It clearly irritated me, “*In Dad's letter he said that M.Y. had not advised me for Classics; well for the 3rd time I do not want to go into Classics!”¹⁵³*

I didn't go into Classics. And I didn't go to Cambridge either, but that's for another day!

¹⁵¹ Letter 55, 29th May 1960.

¹⁵² Letter 57, 12th June, 1960.

¹⁵³ Letter 58, 19th June, 1960.

A few weeks later the reality of Kingswood came even closer. We were told which houses we were to be allocated to. At that time at Kingswood, there were five senior houses: Upper, Middle, Lower, School and Hall. Their names were based on where the dormitories were located. Hall, for example, was situated above the dining hall. I always knew I was going into Hall because that's where Michael was. Similarly, Jim Monahan knew he was for Upper House which is where all the previous Monahans were sent.

But what of the rest? *"M. Y, told us our houses last Sunday," I wrote. "Not surprisingly he said I was going into Hall. We have got a good lot this year so Mike can't complain. The boys are*

<i>Myself: Rugger and Cricket Team:</i>	<i>3a</i>	<i>: Rats</i>
<i>Okell: Capt Rug and Capt Cricket:</i>	<i>3a</i>	<i>: Clan leader, Badg</i>
<i>Cornwell:¹⁵⁴ Rugger</i>	<i>:</i>	<i>3b : Clan 2nd Badg</i>
<i>Wade: Rugger and Cricket :</i>	<i>3a</i>	<i>: Badgers</i>
<i>Rodwell: Rugger</i>	<i>:</i>	<i>3a : Rats</i>
<i>Anderson:</i>	<i>:</i>	<i>3a : Toads</i>
<i>Pryor¹⁵⁵:</i>	<i>:</i>	<i>3b : Toads</i>

So you can see. We have got a good lot this year. In fact most chaps think we have got the best."¹⁵⁶

I wonder if "most chaps" did think that and whether they'd think that now!

¹⁵⁴ Peter Cornwell, a son of the Manse, left Kingswood in 1965. After training at Westminster College, Oxford he became a primary school teacher. Later he established the Off the Page company to put together imaginative learning programmes for primary children. A good friend, more so at Kingswood.

¹⁵⁵ David Pryor left Kingswood in 1964. That is all I know.

¹⁵⁶ Letter 61, 17th July, 1960.

In June, M.Y. had written to my father (N.B. Not my mother!) about my move to Kingswood in the following term. At the end of the letter which dealt mainly with what subjects I wanted to do at Kingswood, he wrote, "*Robin is growing up rapidly and I think it is time that he had a full, sound knowledge of the facts of sex. In all that he has learned here the subject has been treated openly and naturally, but it is not a matter to leave to chance. At this time of the year I usually talk to all the boys going up to Kingswood, trying to give them all the facts and to help them to meet difficulties which they may encounter. I should be glad to include Robin in one of these groups, unless you prefer me to leave it for you to talk to him during the holidays.*"¹⁵⁷

This was another of the rites of passage between Prior's Court and Kingswood, the sex lessons which M.Y. gave to the Third Form in the final weeks of the final term. I managed to slip in a reference to it in my penultimate letter home as if it were no more interesting than telling them I had gone for a Sunday walk. "*Exams tomorrow. M.Y. gave us our first talk on Sexual intercourse yesterday. He says he is going to continue later.*"¹⁵⁸

I shall never forget how M.Y. started that lesson.

He told of us that when he was a boy at Kingswood at the end of the First World War (no prep school in those days), each boy was given a short booklet which contained the so-called facts of life. Its opening line went, "You may have noticed that between your legs is something which looks like a tassel." The class exploded with laughter. "You may have noticed". Gosh, yes! Of course, it was an absolutely perfect opening which put everyone at ease and had us all laughing.

M.Y.'s sex lessons were not unlike the ones he received as a boy, very much of their time. We did not get a booklet (which I gather was all the K.S.

¹⁵⁷ Letter from W.B. Maltby dated 9th June, 1960.

¹⁵⁸ Letter 61, 17th July, 1960

boys got in those days. No class, no questions, no discussion). But the focus was on the biology of sex, the contribution of the erect penis, its discharging of semen into a women's vagina, the fertilizing of eggs and so on. We certainly didn't have any discussion about relationships, about non-exploitative sex, or gay and lesbian sexuality, or issues around transgender. A little of that was to come later in our second year at Kingswood with the new Chaplain, Rev Gerald Needham¹⁵⁹.

I remember asking a question about twins. Why did twins happen? You know, to this day, I'm not that certain as to what his answer was. Sadly, I can remember very little else of what we were told, though as my letter indicates it stretched over at least two lessons.

Sex, of course, was not a big issue with us boys at that time. Yes, we could be smutty and given to the occasional double entendre, but that was about the height of it. Once on a Sunday walk, about four of us went behind some bushes, opened our flies and began to masturbate, more to see what would happen rather than to have a great time. None of us were able to produce anything which was rather disappointing. The bushes were close to where the M4 now runs so the scene of our small illicit adventure has probably been obliterated.

When I got home for the summer holidays, I had an embarrassing ten minutes or so with my Mum and Dad who wanted to know what M.Y. had told us. I rarely broached the subject of sex with my parents, though one time, when we were staying on the family farm in North Wales, I did ask Mum if Dad did to her what the bull did to the cow. When she said yes, I let out a groan of disgust. No doubt they both had a good laugh about it later.

Finally came my last letter from Prior's Court, written two days before I finally left the school. Very mundane and devoid of emotion.

¹⁵⁹ Gerald Needham replaced Culshaw as Chaplain in 1961 and stayed until 1969. He died in 2010.

“Well here is your last letter from me at P.C.

*The train list has gone up and as usual I’m on the first train.*¹⁶⁰

Yesterday we had terrific fun. M.Y. had the Lanchester and sledge out. I went twice on the sledge; once with Nix, and as you can guess, we fell off.

Nix is going into S(chool); Wickham is going into Lower and so is Cox.

We packed yesterday. My trunk is extra heavy

I haven’t come bottom in any of the exams.

*I understand now about what you meant when you told me about the Grunwald and Murray Fraud case*¹⁶¹.

There isn’t any more news

*So love from Robin.”*¹⁶²

I should perhaps say that when we embarked on our train journey’s to and from Prior’s Court, we were very much on our own. The Newbury train took us as far as Paddington and then I had to cross to London Euston to catch the train to Liverpool or Crewe. Fortunately that only involved one ride on the Tube, getting off at Euston Square and walking the rest of the way. Still, I doubt many 10 to 12 year old boys would be allowed today to cross London by themselves.

In the 38 years which remained for Prior’s Court School after I left until it was closed as the prep school to Kingswood in 1998, it underwent many changes. As this memoir does not attempt to be a history of P.C. I will just mention a few. To begin with the M4 motorway was built. This road runs

¹⁶⁰ I was scheduled to arrive at Warrington Bank Quay at 2:44 pm where Dad would pick me up.

¹⁶¹ A fraud case at that time before the courts involving illegal speculation.

¹⁶² Letter 62, 24th July 1960.

from South Wales to London and was constructed between 1961 to 1971 and runs very close to the school. M.Y. retired as Headmaster in 1965 and shortly afterwards the school began to grow in size. In fact it almost doubled in size. It began to admit day boys and then eventually girls. Not all parents wanted to transfer their children to Kingswood, and so it began to prepare children for the Common Entrance Exam. Science also became part of the curriculum.

Looking back, I have reached the conclusion that for the most part I enjoyed my two years at Prior's Court. I have never been back so it now holds a warm but distant memory for me. Many of us today would not be so keen on a boarding school education as our parents were back in the day. The main justification for boarding at Kingswood and P.C. had been the role of the school in educating the sons of the itinerant Methodist ministry, where a minister in the Methodist Church would almost always stay in a circuit for a maximum of five years. But even that began to change. Ministers stayed longer in their circuits with an increasing number disapproving of private education.

The only sore point I have now was the use of corporal punishment. Some reading this will probably think I have written too much about it. Perhaps. But for me it was the one thing I carried a resentment with me, and still do. It was to be another twenty years plus before the practice came to an end, thanks to the European Court of Human Rights.

The quality of the education we got at PC was fair. We did no science which was to change in the years to come. I have criticised the language teaching but as I wrote earlier, it was of its time; and in those days children and teachers were limited in the educational technology they could use to support any kind of learning, never mind modern languages. A blackboard and chalk, plus exercise books and pens, and textbooks. And that was it.

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The Letters: A selection of edited highlights

Letter One

Prior's Court

Chieveley

Nubury

Berks

28/9/58

Dear Mum and Dad,

I am not very happy here. I have got some friends. I like M.Y and (Mr Black) best. Thank you for your letter and the Hymn book it is superb. Mum I know it is a bit early yet but please don't send any candles yet. Will you please send me some stamps. I know a bit of French not much. I will have to hurry this letter if I am going to write a big one. I have not spent any of my money yet. The film last night was a good one. Sorry I have written the wrong way up. I will give you a list of the teachers take me for. M.Y. takes me for Art. Sammy for French. Ifl (Eiffel) Tower for History, Scripture and English. G.G. takes me for Geography and Mr Black for Maths. Dad, Mum when I put don't send me any candles I mean on my cake that is if you send me one. How is Aunt Beryl¹⁶³. Did you know that there is a ghost here. He is called Jasper Jelly-Bones. He lives in Swan. Heron is worse than you think. It has M.Y.'s study across the passage and the staff room underneath. Prep is awful. We have it at 7 o'clock. Mum and Dad come and see me as soon as possible. And don't forget the rugby results. Mr Black is going to show me a photograph of Michael with the owl on his shoulder. I have not been into the wood yet. My clan leader is Monahan. Mr Black is the master that sits on our table at Lunch. The music teacher is quite nice. The Matron is a new one. The brush that you said was the cloths brush is also for hit people with. I have not had it yet, nor have I had my bed stripped. I will have to be going now.

Love from, Robin XXXX

¹⁶³ Aunty Beryl was the younger sister of my Mum. She died in 2011, aged 91.

Letter Three**12th October 1958**

Dear Mum and Dad,

I am very well and happy here. I have two really good friends here. Their names are Bennett and Nix. In ruggar I scored two tries. One was a run from roughly our 25 line and another from about 10 yards away. Morley said that he thinks I will be in the Rats ruggar team. Rats so far are doing rotten. I won a race of right round the ruggar field. I am doing much better in maths now and if I keep it up I will get a one or two I think. We had a superb film last night. It is called a *Kid for Two Farthings*. You remember that World Champion boxer who came from Italy, Primo Carvenell or something¹⁶⁴ like that. Well he was in it. He was a big heavy weight wrestler who was boasting about not being able to be beaten. Well this man named Sam beat him. Will you please send me a big birthday cake if possible please. And if you are coming please tell me as soon as pos because I will try and get him to come. Sorry the ink has suddenly changed. I put my pen in some ink on the table and this is how it came out. I had a letter from Christine¹⁶⁵ and Auntie Ethel¹⁶⁶. I write to her. That is the reason I let a boy refill his pen in my ink and now it is a different colour. Would you please send me more stamps please. I have won a bet of four pounds in money off Bennet. Today is much finer than last Sunday. Next Saturday PC plays a school called Cheltenham Juniors. In dormey I am the highest new kid. At this school they call you squits. I can call all the first formers which means first form squits and a few other capes (?) I can do a bit of turfing (?). I am sorry that my spelling is so bad. I would like you send money if anything for my present or books. Please not toys. P Bennett is going to have a fight with a boy named (Monerham) Monahan. When rats were on Duty Mr Maltby said that we did not do it very well. I did the reading room. He said not complete. I'm grateful that thank goodness a duty lasts for a week. The moles are on duty this week and the Badgers next. I have been sent once this term. I will soon be thinking of going home. I have four practices in a week, one is on Mondays, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I hurt my finger when I scored my first try. I am better at ruggar than Michael is because Michael only got into the Seconds and I have got into the Firsts. I will have to be going now. Toodle Ou

Love from younger son, R Percival

Letter Four**19th October 1958**

¹⁶⁴ Primo Carnera (1906-1967). He was world heavy weight champion from 1933 to 1934.

¹⁶⁵ Christine is a cousin. My Dad's sister's daughter. She is a year young than me.

¹⁶⁶ Auntie Ethel was my Mum's eldest sister. She died in 1997, aged 92.

Mum it is not Mike's fault when he was at P.C. that he never came home with a good haircut. They are rotten barbers.

Letter Seven

9th November 1958

My worst subject is French but Mike said that he was hopeless in French here but at K.S. he is in the first set. Those dip pens make blotches. I have bust my nibs for my dip pen. The preacher today is H. Wright. It is not Wright's dad. In History I am getting a bit fed up because all we are doing is writing pages and pages about the Norman Conquest.

Letter Nine

23rd November 1958

Some of the people in our form are hopeless at maths. I am not one thank goodness.

Letter 12

18th January 1959

I am in the dormy of Mallard, and it is nice. My dormy leader is Sandry¹⁶⁷. He is nice. My dormy consists of Ogden, Boys, Fisk, Taylor, Bowers and myself. Of course Sandry is in the dormy as well. I arrived safely. At Liverpool the train was about an hour late, and at London it was two hours late. Aunty Vera¹⁶⁸ met me and went to Euston Square to the underground to Paddington. We did not have lunch because we were late. I met a few boys there. We change at Reading. I thought I had lost my ticket but I found it in my pocket. When I arrived at Newbury was my best friend Nix. There is a new master named Mr. Brown nicknamed Bruno. He looks nice. Nix said he is positive it is all right to come to Widnes. We unpacked on Saturday. G.G. helped me. I hear that Wales beat England 5-0 at Cardiff. How is Pip? Yesterday while trunks were being unpacked we had quizzes and books read to us. Michael could not see me onto my train because his train I think went before

¹⁶⁷ Robert Sandry left Kingswood in 1965 to become a successful accountant. He later became a Kingswood Governor and President of the school's Alumni Association. I use to tease him by doing an imitation of a gorilla! He took it in reasonably good spirit.

¹⁶⁸ Aunty Vera was an older sister to my Mum. She died in 1996.

mine. I found my seat though. What would Pip like for his birthday? I am still in 2b. Yesterday I played with Nix. There is not much to say now so I will go.

Letter 13

25th January 1959

There is a very horrible illness going around the school. More than half are ill there dropping day after day into the Sick room. There are several dorms that are sick bays, and we are having the needle on Monday three times in our bottoms. It's going to be horrible. I was sent off the field for having aluminium studs. I am writing my letter in Three A because there it is no use all been sitting about. To show how many are sick there are three table which are not very full and 1 table holds 10

Letter 14

1st February 1959

Sorry I said that we were having the needle, we are not. The master who said it was joking.

Letter 19

15th March 1959

Thank you for your letters. This week was a week of sport. 4 clan rugger matches and 1 match against a school call Brockhurst. The results in clan rugger for Tuesday's games were: Rats 8 – 6 Moles. Badgers 3 – 0 Toads. On Thursday: Rats 10 – 0 Toads. Badgers 8 – 6 Moles. So as you can see to win clan rugger we have to beat Badgers. The result of the match between Brockhurst is P.C. 22 – 0 Brockhurst. A boy named Bridge¹⁶⁹ nearly knocked himself out. Some boys were chasing him and he ran into the hall and collided with the door. He is alright now.

Letter 20

3rd May 1959

¹⁶⁹ Martin Bridge, the youngest son of the Rev S.K. Bridge, left Kingswood in 1965. In the Kingswood Register he is recorded as being Head of P.E. at Thirsk School in Thirsk, Yorkshire.

My new dormy is called Swan. It is right above M.Y. so you can see he wants me right in front of his nose.

Letter 34

4th October 1959

Nix is in 3b. He said that he had a bed all ready for me. This year we shall have a huge bonfire. The whole of the orchard is being chopped down and all of it is going on to the bonfire. The new kids are cheeky. Think they are the bosses. I can't tell you how many there are because I forgot to count them. Yesterday we had a game of Football (?). M.Y. versus Blyter. Blyter won. I was on Blyter's side. Yesterday as well we went wood collecting in the wood. We got a few loads, nothing worth mentioning. We are doing something like K.S.. We are having a General Election. Only IIIA's can be candidates.

The candidates are as follows:

Cox and Pendlebury (Conservative)

Norgate (Liberal)

Percival (Labour)

I have only 3 people in the school who are Labour. They are nearly all Tory or Liberal. There were Posters everywhere

VOTE CONSERVATIVE

ANTI PERCY

VOTE TORY

I can't get a slogan up because it's ripped down. Every one nearly is anti Labour. They say, "They will nationalise the schools".

Letter 43

17th January 1960

I am glad to say I arrived safely at P.C. I hope Mike did. Before I forget, what do you want making in Carps? Nothing big, please. I met Race¹⁷⁰ in Crewe and he told me us that a Prisoner was on the train, so we went to see and there was a prisoner. At

¹⁷⁰ Tony Race was a year below me at P.C. His Dad was a Methodist Minister based in a circuit near Blackpool. I had to change trains at Crewe so that is why we could meet up. He left Kingswood in 1966 and went into education.

Euston we walked to Euston Square and got an underground to Baker St. There we went to "Madame Tussard's Waxworks". It is very interesting. We then took a tube to Paddington where we met a boy named Pryor¹⁷¹ accompanied with his father and mother. We then had a cup of tea. We got the train to Reading Central and there changed for Newbury where a bus met us and took us to P.C.

My new dormy this time is not near M.Y. It is still on the third floor. M.Y. is in the east. My dormy is in the West. It is called "Shag". It consists of Cornwell (dormy Leader), myself, Joynson¹⁷², Morley, J.P¹⁷³., and Dawes¹⁷⁴. My table is table eight.

On Saturday we unpack the trunks that have come. My job is to work in the cellar, that is after the trunks have been unpacked. Cox and I put away the empties in the cellar till we pack. After (Un)Packing we go to form room and play "What's My Line". Then we had dinner. After Quiet time we play football. I was goal keeper. The score was a draw 0 – 0. After I was dressed chose (a) library book titled "The Silver Sword". Have tea, M.Y. reads to us then go to bed.

The Preacher is Mr Cook¹⁷⁵. I have told you everything now so

Love from Robin

P.S. The new master is named Bennett (Micky)¹⁷⁶. Robin

Letter 47

14th February 1960

There isn't much I can write about, because I have been ill. I have finished the book "Ben-Hur".

¹⁷¹ David Pryor left Kingswood in 1964. He was in the same house at K.S. as me, i.e. Hall House.

¹⁷² David Joynson, another son of the Manse left Kingswood in 1967. Cambridge.

¹⁷³ Jonathan Morley, brother of Chris. Left Kingswood in 1966. A solicitor.

¹⁷⁴ Peter Dawes left in 1962. I'm not certain whether he made it to K.S. or not.

¹⁷⁵ Francis Cook taught at K.S. from 1915 to 1959. He was Second Master under Alfred Barrett Sackett. A historian who, amongst others, taught E.P. Thompson. A lovely, friendly man who ran the Old Boys Association until 1971. He died in 1976.

¹⁷⁶ Michael Bennett, elder brother of Peter, had just left K.S. He graduated from Worcester College, Oxford.

Please could you send me my stamp album

We have had some snow here. Sorry I haven't written this letter very well because I am writing in bed. Here we are knitting for the refugees. Sorry I haven't written much.

Letter 50

6th March 1960

Yesterday a boy engraved on the plaster along the corridor a swastika. If M.Y. sees it there will be trouble.

Letter 53

15th May 1960

When is my cork coming? I have got some caterpillars now. Nearly all the bug hunters have got tetrachloride for their killing bottle.

I received a letter from Michael on Thursday or Friday. I cannot recall the date at present. Parents Day is on June 26th when we will act the play, but on the day before or the day before that. There will be a first performance of the play. So far I'm the Messala and the 4th Citizen. We miss quite a few periods for the play. We miss nearly all of maths. We have missed an English, Latin and French; nearly all my worst subjects.

Could you send me some tins as well as the cork please.

My eyes are going worse. I have to strain my eyes to see the blackboard and I'm right at the front. It can't be that I'm not wearing them because I wear all the time except to go to bed. It must be I get too close to my work and when I'm reading.

Letter 54

22nd May 1960

M.Y. is going to write to you about my eyes. Mrs Maltby said that he is going to tell you to get an appointment for when I come home, because the specialist here is full up until September. So it would be better for me if I had them done in the hols.

In the dictionary that M.Y. has got for 3a there are names at the back and for Robin it says it means Famous and Percival means courteous. Maybe one day I will be famous, you never know.

What did you think of the summit¹⁷⁷. It didn't last long did it? Please can I have permission to get a new pen? The one's I write with are not mine. I can't find it anywhere. My diary which was lost last term, M.Y. gave to me a few days ago. That reminds me. I arrived here with all my luggage so you don't need to worry. I was thinking that you might have been wondering if I have lost anything because I didn't tell you I had brought all my things safely to school.

Yesterday there was a match. We lost by 5 runs. It was against Elstree

One day the week before last we had a half-hol but most people were working though. For we were building a concrete layer for cricket. It was hard work as well.¹⁷⁸

(...)

I Geogo, boys are doing lectures. We had 3 on Friday. The best one was on cheese and it was funny as well.

On Thursday, Wickham¹⁷⁹ and I put up the curtains on the stage. This is for the play. This is so you can enter without any (one) seeing you through the door. It is a very good method. There isn't anything I can write about now.

Letter 56

5th June 1960

Sorry I couldn't get one of those pens, but I got an Osmiroid. I tried to get a nib with a sharp point, but M.Y. likes Italic nibs; so they were the only ones in stock. It is a red pen. I like it very much.

Mumps has broken out in the School but it's all right for me because I've had it.

Letter 57

12th June 1960

¹⁷⁷ Summit between President Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev in Paris. It ended early because of the U2 incident.

¹⁷⁸ I imagine this was for a practice net with a concrete floor.

¹⁷⁹ Nicholas Wickham left Kingswood in 1965. He first went to London to study dentistry then Cambridge to study medicine. He later emigrated to Australia where he became a clinical haematologist.

Counting this letter there will only be 7 more letters from P.C. to you, most likely for ever. It is hard to think that soon I shall be at K.S.

Letter 60:

10th July 1960

Badgers are the favourites to win this year, for they have 5 boys out of the first eleven.

I shall be opening the batting and maybe the bowling. If I do not open the bowling I shall be first change.

I am now a regular opener in games. I doubt if there will be any more matches as the mumps has hit us badly. Only 2 more letters from P.C. now.

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