

PILTON VOLUNTARY PRIMARY SCHOOL (1945 – 1951) – an account by John Norman

From my home at 61 Littabourne where I was born, I remember well attending the school which was the old building alongside Pilton Church and now owned and used by the Pilton Arts Group. It was built at a cost of £365 in 1840, the same year as the first 'penny black' postage stamp was issued. This date can be seen on the stone block on the front face of the building.

I assume I started there in 1945 at the age of 5 and remained until I was 11. I do remember, however, my parents taking me away from there for some reason and sending me to the bluecoats school for boys in North Walk – it could only have been for a term or so, because I soon came back to Pilton where I belonged!

Arthur F. Stacey (nicknamed 'Flipper') was the Headmaster when I began. He lived at Churchill House, 35 Pilton Street and was also a member of Pilton Church choir. He was succeeded by Claude Dix who I was to know together with his wife Marjorie for many years afterwards and who was always such a great source of encouragement in every way. School in those days was like belonging to a great big family as we all lived nearby and most of the teachers also lived in Pilton and were, therefore, much valued and respected members of the community.

I can remember in the first year we would sleep on little beds for a short while each day – that was in the downstairs class of Miss Ethel Daisy Millward who lived at 31 King Edward Street. Other teachers were Miss Norman (no relation) who lodged with the Turner family at Prospect Cottage, 76 The Rock; Miss Edith Hill, whose parents kept the Butcher's shop at 109 Pilton Street and also a member of the church choir for more than 50 years; Miss Beatrice Lilian Turner from 38 Coronation Street and Mr Ken Rogers who came to the school later on from Nottingham.

Mr Rogers was very keen on football and he would organise our school team. I remember playing on a couple of occasions against the Bluecoat School, North Walk team on the Barnstaple A.A.C. Ground at Pottington. Their boys always seemed to be much bigger than us and would thrash us by a double figure score; it was as much as we could do to get out of our own half of the pitch.

Our school 'pitch' was in the rectangle formed by the present Northfield Lane, Mannings Way, Lynbro Road and Northfield Cottage (the estate now there was not built until the 1960's). Very often the ball would run away down the steep slope at Mannings Pit and understandably, nobody seemed too keen to want to retrieve it. Nevertheless great fun and on reflection I suppose this could have been what lit the flame in me to really enjoy sport and which was to give me so much pleasure and enjoyment right up to the present time.

Mr Rogers also started the school recorder group. I still have one, not the original descant recorder, and still play it on occasions now – to me the sound of it in the church (when no one is around) is very pleasing – I think!

Maypole dancing was very popular, and Miss Hill would be our teacher for this. We boys and girls performed various Maypole dances on the tennis court area at Bradiford House, usually at church fetes, by kind permission of Miss Betty Dennis. There would be three separate dances 1) The Barber's pole (quite an easy one), 2) The Spider's Web (a little

more difficult) and 3) The Plait (which was far more complicated for us at that age and extremely difficult to untangle if anyone made a mistake, which usually happened). I also recall doing Maypole dancing on the Castle Green at North Walk on a day when the grass was damp – more time was spent on the ground rather than on feet! Still it was all great fun and good to be part of a team which I was to appreciate in later years as important in anyone's education and upbringing. I feel in all things we all perform at different levels, our talents vary considerably, but it is most important we all give of the best of our abilities as members of the society in which we live.

Like any other school, we obviously had our standard lessons, arithmetic, English, spelling and art. I think the same teacher for each year would take us for all the various subjects. The methods used were very basic, but effective. For example, maths tables were learned 'parrot fashioned' - $1 \times 7 = 7$, $2 \times 7 = 14$, $3 \times 7 = 21$, etc. No calculators or computers then!

I also recall nature walks in the Northfield Lane area looking for wild flowers, birds' nests and so on. In those days there were no houses at all in Northfield Lane and it was very narrow all the way from Bellaire to Maer Top.

One of the school traditions was that on Ascension Day we would all attend a morning service in the church and have the rest of the day off.

We would have a small bottle of milk each day consumed through a straw and I also remember receiving orange juice, cod liver oil and malt, all of which I still enjoy very much today.

To encourage us to save from an early age, we were issued with national savings books. We would buy one stamp for 6 pence (old money) usually weekly, one page containing 10 stamps.

These were the days of the cane and I remember a certain boy (who will remain nameless but who I still see about now) who received a few lashes on hands and bottom on more than one occasion, presumably for misbehaving badly! How times have changed!

I remember going on two school outings, one to Paignton Zoo which also included a boat trip on the River Dart and another to visit the aquarium on Plymouth Hoe.

The school nativity play at Christmas was always a highlight in the school calendar. This would be held in the Church Rooms. The hall would be absolutely packed with proud parents. I was for two years one of the three kings – Balthazar – and would sing solo the verse "*Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume*". (*Michael Jackson who lived at Scott's Moor, Bradiford, and Robert Norman of 48 The Rock, were the other two soloists*) Tremendous occasions, lovely memories, always think back to those days when we sing that same carol each Christmas.

Sometimes we would fetch items, usually 'Robin Starch' for making cold water paste from the little family shop at 82 Pilton Street, next up from the Church Hall and run by Mrs Huxtable (REF.E.078). We would also obtain vegetables from the Lovering family who lived at 87 Pilton Street, opposite the Chichester Arms.

We would also collect old clothes, rags and newspapers which were taken to Pearce's Dept (known as Jack Bolt's) in Loverings Court, Boutport Street for recycling and we were given money in exchange for school funds.

Dent Allcroft's Glove Factory, now Pilton Cabinet Works, next to the school, was always a place of great activity with over 100 people employed there making high quality leather gloves.

The boys' toilets were down some steep steps off the playground, now blocked off, and owned and used as a back yard for Bull House. The girls' toilet was at the top of the staircase near the church.

These were the days of 11+ exams. I sat one in the little meeting room of the Pilton Church Hall and the other at the Old Ashleigh Road Girls Secondary Modern School. Pilton School must have been good for me as I passed to go the Barnstaple Boys Grammar School in 1951, the first of any of my family ever to do so.

On leaving the school in July 1951, many of the teachers kindly wrote verses in my autograph book which I still have and treasure today. This is what they wrote:

Who hath no faith to man to God hath none
(C.E.Dix, Headmaster)

*Little deeds of kindness, little deeds of love,
helps to make earth happy, like Heaven above*
(Mr K.H. Rogers)

*When you work, work hard
when you play, play hard
but when you work, don't play at all*
(Miss B.I. Turner)

*Learn to know as you jog along, the value of a smile
A glint of sunshine on your face is always well worth while
it speaks a message of its own, to strangers and to friends
so wear a smile and pass it on, twill pay you in the end*
(Miss E.L.M. Hill)

*Three things to love: courage, gentleness and affection,
Three things to admire: intellect, dignity and gracefulness,
Three things to delight in: beauty, frankness and freedom,
Three things to cultivate: good looks, good friends and good manners,
Three things to govern: temper, tongue and conduct.*
(Miss P.A. Hooper)

A school reunion was held in the Church Rooms on 20th June 1998 at which about 30 pupils of my era attended. Some had travelled long distances to be with us and it was truly a memorable occasion. Many, many memories were exchanged and it was great that Marjorie Dix, wife of our previous Headmaster was able to come along and be with us. I call in at the school on occasions now and even after all those years; the happy memories still come flooding back.

Arthur Stacey died 19th March 1953 aged 61 and is buried at Pilton Churchyard (REF: D.112) Claude Dix, at that time lived at 120 Pilton Street. He left to become the first Headmaster at the new Forches Estate Primary School in Barnstaple, built in the mid 1950s. He eventually returned to live at Byron Close in Littabourne but passed away on 14/03/93, aged 76. Claude Dix Close in Yeo Vale is named in his memory. Ken Rogers also moved to the Forches School. Edith Hill passed away 21/05/79, aged 71. Her ashes are interred at Pilton in the grave of her parents (REF: B.008). Beatrice Turner died on 26/12/79, aged 72.

The school closed in December 1968 and amalgamated with the Bluecoat Boys' School in Abbey Road which opened there on Tuesday 07/01/69. Mr R.W. (Bill) Forward was the last Headmaster at the Old School and first at the new one.