

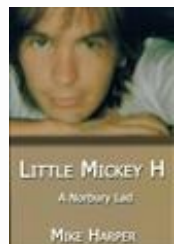


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LITTLE MICKEY H - A Norbury Lad

Mike Harper



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HAVE YOU SEEN THE WRITING ON THE WALL? (Part 3)

Third Year – 3.3 (Sep 1978 – Jul 1979)

In this year, we each took up a further language in addition to French. The choice was between German, Latin and Russian. Most of us were trampled underfoot in the stampede to adopt German as our first choice. I'm not sure what criteria were employed to dish out the option (I guess one or two boys may have had German relations), but I got lumbered with Russian, which I was initially disappointed with as both Steve and Nick had been able to study German at school.

English was divided into two parts, English Language and English Literature. Additionally, where previously our Science tuition had been rolled into one, it was now split between the three disciplines, Biology, Physics and Chemistry. These extra subjects were included to maximise our choice of GCE 'O' Level options which we would select towards the end of the year. Additionally, for Third Years and upwards the school day was extended by a further lesson, which meant that we now finished for the day at 3.45pm.

The Third Year teacher roll call was as follows:

Mr Goodall	Form Master
Miss Griffiths	English Language
Mr Bonello	English Literature
Mr Mulloy	Maths
Mr Cassidy	RE
Brother Gerard	French
Mr Battson	Russian
Mr Giejgo	Geography
Mr Duskin	History
Miss Darby	Biology
Mr Dorr	Chemistry

Mr Merrett Physics
Miss Dredge/Mr Scott Art
Mr Thomas Music
Mr Durkan Design & Tech
PE

Quite a change in personnel from the Second Year with a considerable influx of lady teachers, only Messrs Giejgo and Thomas surviving. Clearly in my first term under these new teachers and perhaps a tougher regime, I did not impress many of them. However, the second half of the Third Year was to be quite a different story.

I don't really remember Mr Goodall, my Form Teacher, at all, other than that he was one of the technical drawing/woodworking/metalworking teachers. I have a vague idea that he had a beard and greying hair and possibly occasionally wore his grey woodworking coat at registration, but I really am not sure. Our form room was the right-handed of the two Technical Drawing rooms. I guess as he didn't actually take us for any other lesson and probably just took the register and buggered off, he made less of an impression on me than Mr Wilshire and Mr Kesteven had had.

With English splitting into its language and literature components, Marjorie Griffiths, a middle aged school ma'am type with wavy greying hair and glasses, took on us inky-fingered Third Formers. There was certainly no messing with her though, she had a firm but fair manner and quickly gained our full attention and respect. Her comments accompanying her award of a 'B' for the Christmas term read, "Michael works keenly. He should check on how to set out speech correctly. Generally good progress". I'm pretty sure Miss Griffiths gave us an end of year exam and from memory, believe I scored 88% but inexplicably there is no document of this result in the final report for the year.

Louis Bonello provided the literature element to our tuition. A small, smiling, balding man with a thick accent and a Middle Eastern visage, though I have a sneaking recollection that he was Portuguese. His infectious jollity pervaded his teaching and his obvious enjoyment of stories such as Gogol's "The Government Inspector" (surely Russian literature rather than English?) made the subject all the more interesting to learn. His Christmas term comments ran, "Working very well + making sound progress" and as Miss Griffiths had, marked me with a 'B'. His end of year comments again underlining a 'B' grade and this time an exam result of 63% read, "Michael worked very well during the year and gave a good account of himself at the exam".

Maths on the other hand, while naturally my best subject, seemed to attract a low score in the Christmas exam of just 56%. Unfortunately, the details of why I did not score higher are lost in the mists of time. However, Mr Mulloy, a tall and curly dark haired man with glasses seemed to think I had done okay marking my term's work with a 'C+' and noting "A satisfactory term's work by Michael. Good."

Mr Mulloy was well known for having something of a physical streak, something we had not seen

in class until one morning after PE. I sat at my desk with my back to the window, facing his desk on the raised dais in front of the blackboard. I believe I was talking to my neighbour when I should have been listening to Mr M. Taking this as an affront to his authority and wishing to make an example of me, he strode over to my desk, grabbed me by the hair and proceeded to rhythmically bang my head firmly on the desk whilst intoning “When – I – say – listen – I – mean – listen. – Do – you – un-der-stand?” Suitably chastised and dazed, I replied in the affirmative and never made the same mistake again. But I resolved that I would emerge from this battle of wills, victorious!

When the end of year exam results surfaced, I recall Mr Mulloy announcing to the class as he dished out the marked papers that James Desa had scored the highest mark of 93%. I was disappointed as the remaining papers were distributed, yet mysteriously my paper failed to materialise. Mr Mulloy said that he would investigate. True to his word, at the next lesson, and to my great pleasure, he announced solemnly, “Class. We have a new high. Well done Michael. 96%”. Inside, I was ecstatic though I remained outwardly calm. To be affirmed as best in the top class at Maths, above such cerebral talents as James Desa, David Camp, Anthony Gillham and Anthony Huggett was a real feather in the cap. Mr M marked me with an ‘A-’ for my term’s work and his comment was simply, “Excellent”.

Zut alors! Brother Gerard, the tuck shop proprietor, took us for French. Large, curly fair haired with glasses, with his ostensibly jolly bluff demeanour, Brother Gerard would get excitingly apoplectic at times as students exasperated him. His exclamatory outbursts punctuated his dissatisfaction with our grammatical Gallic buffoonery. While never my best subject, he was kind enough to give me a ‘B’ for my Christmas term’s efforts, adding, “Not always consistent in his work but nevertheless doing quite well and making satisfactory progress. He is inclined to be talkative and distracted.”

As with English Language, there was no French report at the end of the year, and as my exam mark is totally forgotten to me, I guess it was (literally) nothing to write home about.

My first experience of Russian teacher Arnold Battson had been a stern rebuke to the collective Second Year class ascending noisily to the music room situated above the Russian room, which itself was sandwiched between the gym and the assembly hall. He was a very slight, balding man aged about fifty, with a pointed nose and glasses. Several of my Form mates were also in the Russian class, Shane Gallagher, Alan Gravett, Andy Hayes, Sean Healy and Andrew Howes, along with others such as Dave Pritchard and a Spanish lad, Fernando Bugarolas, known to everyone as Fred Bogroll.

I enjoyed learning Russian, finding it easier than French and quickly getting to grips with the Cyrillic language which was almost like a secret code and was helpful also in identifying letters in Greek, when later holidaying in Greece. Our text book was called “ОЧЕНЬ ПРИЯТНО”, pronounced “Ochen Priyatno”, meaning “Very pleased to meet you”, and followed the adventures of Arkady Popovich Petrov and his innocent pursuit of a beautiful and friendly tour guide called Svetlana Denisova. Sadly, for Arkady, it turns out at the end of the book that she is already seeing someone else.

For my first term’s efforts at Russian, Mr Battson awarded me an ‘A’ grade, remarking, “Michael has very definite linguistic flair – he shows a keen interest and has excellent command of all the

ground covered so far. He will obviously require a faster pace than the majority of the group and therefore is shortly to be given additional work and tuition". Whilst I was pleased with his comments and appreciated the sentiment, I wasn't overly keen on his idea of extra work and tuition. However, top of the class at the end of the year with 92% in the exam and an 'A' grade for the summer term were the worthwhile product of the extra work and tuition, attracting the accompanying comment, "As the exam result shows, Michael is mastering the elements of the subject with apparent ease. I am very pleased with his progress."

One notable comprehension exercise I enjoyed during this year involved the poem "The Bronze Horseman" by Alexander Pushkin. Having some small designs on writing poetry and music myself at the time, I thought the translation of this piece (a partially true story) was exceptional and beautiful to read. Here is the first verse of the poem as translated by Oliver Elton:

THE BRONZE HORSEMAN by Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin

There, by the billows desolate,
He stood, with mighty thoughts elate,
And gazed, but in the distance only
A sorry skiff on the broad spate
Of Neva drifted seaward, lonely.
The moss-grown miry bank with rare
Hovels were dotted here and there
Where wretched Finns for shelter crowded;
The murmuring woodlands had no share
Of sunshine, all in mist beshrouded.

And thus He mused: "From here, indeed
Shall we strike terror in the Swede?
And here a city by our labor
Founded, shall gall our haughty neighbor;
"Here cut" - so Nature gives command -
Your window through on Europe; stand
Firm-footed by the sea, unchanging!
Ay, ships of every flag shall come
By waters they had never swum,
And we shall revel, freely ranging."

A century - and that city young,
Gem of the Northern world, amazing,
From gloomy wood and swamp upspring,
Had risen, in pride and splendor blazing.
Where once, by that low-lying shore,
In waters never known before
The Finnish fisherman, sole creature,
And left forlorn by stepdame Nature,

Cast ragged nets, - today, along
Those shores, astir with life and motion,
Vast shapely palaces in throng
And towers are seen: from every ocean,
From the world's end, the ships come fast,
To reach the loaded quays at last.
The Neva now is clad in granite
With many a bridge to overspan it;
The islands lie beneath a screen
Of gardens deep in dusky green.
To that young capital is drooping
The crest of Moscow on the ground,
Adowager in purple, stooping
Before an empress newly crowned.

I love thee; city of Peter's creation;
I love thy harmonies austere,
And Neva's sovran waters breaking
Along her banks of granite sheer;
Thy tracery iron gates; thy sparkling,
Yet moonless, meditative gloom
And thy transparent twilight darkling;
And when I write within my room
Or, lampless, read, - then, sunk in slumber,
The empty thoroughfares, past number,
Are piled, stand clear upon the night;
The Admiralty spire is bright;
Nor may the darkness mount, to smother
The golden cloudland of the light,
For soon one dawn succeeds another
With barely half-an-hour of night.
I love thy ruthless winter, lowering
With bitter frost and windless air;
The sledges along Neva scouring;
Girls' cheeks - no roses so bright and fair!
The flash and noise of balls, the chatter;
The bachelor's hour of feasting, too;
The cups that foam and hiss and spatter,
The punch that in the bowl burns blue.
I love the warlike animation
On playing-fields of Mars; to see
The troops of foot and horse in station,
And their superb monotony;
Their ordered, undulating muster;

Flags, tattered on the glorious day;
Those brazen helmets in their luster
Shot through and riddled in the fray.
I love thee, city of soldiers, blowing
Smoke from thy forts: thy booming gun;
- A Northern empress is bestowing
Upon the royal house a son!
Or when, another battle won,
Proud Russia holds her celebration;

Or when the Neva breaking free
Her dark blue ice bears out to sea
And scents the spring, in exultation.

Now, city of Peter, stand thou fast,
Foursquare, like Russia, vaunt thy splendor!
The very element shall surrender
And make her peace with thee at last.
Their ancient bondage and their rancorous
The Finnish waves shall bury deep
Now vex with idle spite that cankers
Our Peter's everlasting sleep!

There was a dreadful time, we keep
Still freshly on our memories painted;
And you, my friends, shall be acquainted
By me, with all that history:
Agrievous record it will be.

* * * * *

Second Year history lessons with Brother James had been both educational and enjoyable. Now in the Third Year under Peter Duskin, a compact, smartly besuited, greying man in perhaps his late forties, they became doubly so. Mr Duskin's lessons in a room beneath the assembly hall, as well as teaching us about the Tudors and the Stuarts and events such as the Gunpowder Plot, was interspersed, while perched on the edge of his desk, with his own interesting expositions on life in general and how the present day mirrors history. He would frequently refer to articles in The Times newspaper. History quickly became the subject that I enjoyed the most through Mr D's insights, and marking me 'A/B' for the Christmas term, he pointed out that, "Michael's work is not notably tidy but it is of good quality. He is a boy of great intelligence who understands most things very easily & writes fluently as well". I always felt that that last sentence summed up my Third Year at school. I had a great memory, did understand things very easily, and relied on it a great deal to carry me through to exam success. However the clouds on the horizon were to darken.....

Mr Duskin was pleased by my end of year efforts as well, marking my summer term's work with a 'B++' and the exam at 70%, noting, "Michael is one of the brightest boys in his year. I expect good work from him & I am not usually disappointed. His exam, as the mark shows, was up to standard. I think he would benefit from a course of reading during the holidays & I shall be making recommendations". Don't they get it? Holidays are for leisure, not for extra school work! Luckily, Mr Duskin must have forgotten – Phew! - as he never did make any reading recommendations, though as it turned out, perhaps it would have been better for my 'O' Level result to have read up some more on the subject. Joking aside, I wished I had realised that reading is so key to education and the more one does, the more educated one is likely to become. Sadly, at the time, I could not see that.

A notable addendum to Mr Duskin's History lessons was that we were allowed to watch on television the news of the May 1979 Conservative General Election victory. This historic event, being Margaret Thatcher's election as the first female British Prime Minister, served as the advent

to eighteen years of Tory rule. As children, election time to us had meant little more than red Labour Party, blue Conservative Party and the rarer orange/yellow Liberal Party posters in household windows. A helpful supplement though was Dad's collection of "Giles" annuals containing cartoons culled from the Daily Express bringing to life for us some of the politicians of the time. These sketches in which there was always so much detail to see, would while away many a wet or snowy morning indoors, wrapped in thick jumpers in the cold non-central-heated air, as well as subtly drip-feeding a basic understanding of current affairs into our subconscious.

Because I liked red more than blue, I had originally pronounced myself a Labour supporter, and liked the down-to-earth Harold Wilson (Dad had met Mr Wilson once, being tasked with opening the door to him at his offices at The Treasury) more than the bignosed Edward Heath. So I was duly perturbed when Mrs T turned the country blue in 1979. My parents had settled for a middle of the road Liberal stance which must have been sorely affected by the homosexual revelations surrounding leader Jeremy Thorpe. Indeed, my initial dislike of Mrs T and the Tory party was completely turned around when on my eighteenth birthday in 1982, I received a letter from Humphrey Malins, Conservative MP for Croydon North West welcoming me to the world of politics and hoping I would vote Tory in the future. Neither Labour nor Liberal bothered to welcome me, so coupled with a growing admiration for Mrs Thatcher's policies (to the extent that one Christmas many years later, I would ask for a copy of her autobiography "The Path To Power"), from that point I became a Tory supporter and have been so ever since.

Mr Giejgo's twitch and caterpillar moustache continued to entertain us throughout our Third Year Geography class, and having awarded me a B+ for the Xmas term's work, Mr G metronomically noted "A very satisfactory term's work. He has achieved a pleasing standard in this subject". More of the same for the summer term and exam which earned 67% to go with the term's 'B' grade, and the following insight, "A high standard of work has been maintained throughout the year. Overall a very satisfactory year in this subject."

Miss Darby, our Biology teacher taught us in a small upstairs room in the Science block. Slim, with shoulder-length ginger hair and wearing glasses (astonishing isn't it how many teachers seem to wear glasses – must be all that screwing up their eyes trying to decipher poor handwriting) and a white coat, she looked a little bit like a hospital doctor, but had a strong, icemaiden-like quality required to keep control of a class of thirty two boys brimming over with testosterone. Around the room, glass cabinets housed specimens of biological phenomena and the usual classroom experiments e.g. the body of a frog with its skin pinned back so that the viewer could inspect the internal organs.

I do wonder what prompts lady teachers to choose to work in an all-boys school. It's a tough environment, and while the majority of us were undoubtedly well-behaved and respectful, there must always be a less desirable element too (male teachers as well as unruly pupils?). I don't doubt that girls' schools have their challenges too, but being one of only a few women in such a male-oriented establishment, particularly one that is run by a religious group like the Brothers De La Salle must be doubly difficult. Being one of a few even half-attractive women in an all-boys school earns an enormous amount of attention from one's charges. It has to be said that while none of Miss Darby, Miss Dredge, and later Miss Jermyn and Mrs Tunncliffe were God's gift to look at, they were all fairly young, quite presentable and therefore better than nothing, and to a greater or lesser extent, lusted after by a thousand testosterone-fuelled boys.

Anyway, Miss Darby was less generous with her comments at Christmas than I have been with my description of her, “Michael wastes too much time talking. This obviously hinders his progress”, coupled with a term grade of ‘C’. However, even Miss Darby’s frostiness had thawed a little by the end of the year marking my summer term’s work with a ‘B’ and my exam with 60%, adding, “Good + mostly good work throughout the year”.

Mr Dorr’s chemistry class in the Science lab next to the History room, was a dour affair. Suffering a charisma-bypass, white-coated, bespectacled and ginger-haired Mr Dorr looked every inch the lab technician. His classes were a grim trudge through the wonders of chemistry, with too much written work and not enough practical. However, the practical lessons when they did surface brightened things considerably. Literally so when burning ultrabright magnesium. At Christmas, marking my work with a ‘B’, Mr Dorr noted that, “Michael has shown interest in class but he should make sure that he hands in his written work on time”.

Whilst I was good at the subject, I found the subject too boring to sustain my interest and chose not to take it forward as an ‘O’ level option. Like Paul Weller breaking up his successful band The Jam after hitting number one in the charts rather than letting the band lose its edge and die away after a series of decreasingly successful hits, I quit chemistry while I was ahead. Indeed, I came top of the class in the end of year exam scoring 80%, and earning a ‘B’ grade for the term’s work with Mr Dorr echoing the fact in his simple message of congratulation, “1st in the exam. Well done Michael”.

I found physics more entertaining than chemistry. Maybe it was simply that Mr Merrett had more personality. Built like a rugby player, and probably in his late-thirties with fair hair that was starting to thin, his classes were held in the ground floor room at the furthest end of the Science block, at the edge of the school grounds. I found I had a natural affinity for understanding physics, it was all pretty logical stuff combined with learning certain laws. Without doubt, the practical experiment with the most impact in my view was the demonstration of the Van de Graaff generator, effectively a hollow metal ball atop a small belt-driven electricity generator which simulated how an electrical charge was attracted to earth. Those of us with the finest hair, including me, were allowed to stand on a ceramic based stool with our hands on top of the dome as the charge was generated. This literally had our hair standing on end. Grade ‘B-’ at Christmas and the words to accompany ran as follows, “Michael has produced some very good work this term. However, he does not always give of his best. With more consistency he is capable of considerable success in this subject”.

I think Mr Merrett was both surprised and pleased when as for chemistry, I finished top of the class in the end of year exam, this time with a score of 89%. Marking the term’s work with the grade ‘A/B’, he commented, “Michael has worked quietly + conscientiously throughout the year. This very good exam result (best in the class) shows a very good understanding of the subject. Well done!”. I think Mr Merrett was probably the only one of my teachers ever to use the word “quietly” in one of my reports (compare with Mr Cassidy’s comments which follow). Having enjoyed the subject a great deal, it was enough to prompt me to select it as one of my ‘O’ Level options.

Our new Religious Education teacher was an Irishman called Mr Cassidy. With a thick accent, thick glasses and a prominent cleft chin below his mop of straight brown hair (which made him look rather like Dick Van Dyke’s giant marionette in the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang), I quickly found his opinions and demeanour irritating. While prompting us for our own views on religious issues, if one

had an alternative view on religion to his own, he quickly rubbished one's comments. As I was going through something of a backlash against the ideas of going to church and religion in general, I had a lot to say on the subject, none of which appealed to Mr Cassidy. One supposition that I proffered centred on the possibility that everyone and everything else including all of the perceived history of the world could simply have been created by one's brilliant imagination, and that nothing was in fact real – one was effectively one's own God, making up an imaginary existence in one's mind for personal amusement. Maybe crazy I know, but Mr Cassidy would not even entertain any possibility that was not inside his own belief system.

As a kid, I had thought of God in the traditional way that kids do, as some sort of huge white-robed apparition with a long white beard floating far above the world, but positioned so that he could see everyone and record their wrongdoings in a large journal for later referral. Rockets to the moon had shown that there was no such apparition, but maybe His existence could have been similar to The Wizard Of Oz, that is, God could be a man like you and me (or indeed, any other tangible or intangible being) hiding behind a curtain while giving the impression of a powerful being. Even if science had diminished the likelihood that there was a God watching over us and that the creation of the universe could be explained by a Big Bang, who or what was there before the Big Bang? Thinking about what existed before the universe did, where all the matter that makes up the universe came from, where matter ends and what is beyond, simply becomes in today's vernacular, a huge headf*ck that though cogitated upon for centuries by scientists and science fiction writers alike, we tiny little beings may never solve.

Because Mr Cassidy could not answer my questions satisfactorily, any faith that I had had continued to drain away to be replaced by a more scientific view on the likely creation of the universe. As the scales fell from my eyes, I could see the futility of wars based on religion or simply believing in something different to one's neighbours as in Mr Cassidy's own country, in the Middle East or in India/Pakistan, could lead to pointless conflict. I am fully of the opinion that if there is a God, he has some masterplan that involves killing off droves of society every so often through war, famine, drought and disease and that man's efforts to live longer through medical improvements are slowly winning that battle. Religious wars stirred up by more and more fanatical advocates simply redress the balance. The increase in our planet's population has been exponential in the speed that it has increased from 1 billion to 6.5 billion – approximately 208 years from 1798 to 2006. Considering that the population has doubled in just the last 46 years, consider just how quickly the population might cover the inhabitable land on this planet. The worrying thing from a western perspective i.e. First and Second World, is that while the birth rate has slowed considerably, many Third World developing countries are still producing children like it is going out of fashion. Who is controlling this? The impression is that nothing (apart from perhaps, diseases such as AIDS) and no one is controlling it at the moment, and it is only through education and contraception that the world's population will eventually be controlled. Until that happens, I believe that sooner or later there will be a global shift in religious opinion, maybe to the detriment of western culture – some might say it has already started.

Mr Cassidy, for all his antagonism towards me, marked me with a 'B-' and an exam mark of 55% for the Xmas term, commenting, "Michael had a slow start but now is doing very good work". However, our differences of opinion surfaced in his end of year report, stating that, "Michael could have done better. He is lazy and talks far too much", and marking my exam with a poor 45%.

Mr Cassidy's classroom next to the school chapel is also recalled as the location where some of us were given our BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guérin) vaccinations, protecting us against tuberculosis. Initially, we were each pronged in the forearm by a six-pin device. If the scar from this disappeared over the course of a week of two, we were required to have the full injection, leaving those of us who had it with an indelible scar on our upper arm.

Mr Thomas' music class was supplemented by Roger Cleverdon, a chorister, pianist and musical director whose biggest claim to fame possibly, was appearing as one of the mounties in Monty Python's "I'm A Lumberjack" sketch. Whilst Howard Thomas behaved more like an exasperated conductor marking me with a 'C' and saying, "A rather disorganised term as regards work" (Mr Thomas never gave us any work to do!), Mr Cleverdon's perspective on music was a little more laid back.

My last year of Design & Tech was overseen by Mr Durkan who tasked us with making a table lamp over the course of the term. This had the pungent and acrid memory of the smell of glacial acetic acid, which was used to glue together the coloured plastic discs that formed the base of the lamp. I'm not sure that we ever actually finished the project. However, in the summer report Mr Durkan awarded me an 80% mark and a 'B' grade for my work and remarked, "Excellent work. Michael has put a lot of hard work into this term. Well done". Small reward perhaps for nearly choking to death.

Finally, our art class was finally taken on by Miss Dredge, the First Former's dream, who was never really pretty in the conventional sense, but continued to be held in some esteem by the Second Year and even us Third Years. A 'B' grade at Christmas was supplemented by the words, "Michael has worked with interest this term with some good results". Mr Scott oversaw the second half of the school year, providing the 'B' grade and commenting "Michael has worked well and produced good work this term" in the end of year report.

The unmemorable Mr Goodall's Christmas comments summarised thus, "A promising start, but, more effort with BIOLOGY please next term". Not quite sure why Biology was capitalised, maybe he was concerned that I wouldn't have been able to read his writing. His end of year comments were more glowing – "A pleasing report with some excellent results – well done. Keep up the effort over the next two years + 'O' level success should come your way". Too right it was a pleasing report mate – I came top in four subjects!

Year Master Mr Murphy underwrote these comments with his own, "An excellent set of examination results. This augurs well for the future. I am rather distracted at the comment on his R.E. report – this rather spoils the overall effect."

Another high spot of my year came in the final cross country run of the Summer term. The Third Year course was similar to the First and Second Year course, but rather than turning left from Green Lane onto Gibson's Hill, we had to run all of the way to the end of Green Lane to the point where it meets Parchmore Road, turning left into Northwood Road. This took us past Ingram School, one of the roughest in the borough, to the bottom of Spa Hill, one of the steepest hills in the borough. At the top of the hill, a left turn onto Beulah Hill would eventually take one past the top of Gibsons Hill and back to the school. Taking place on Wednesday afternoons, early runs during the year saw times of 31m20s (27th September), 33m00s (18th October), 31m16s (15th

November), 35m40s (6th December).

With a slightly depleted field as Mark Halfacre, the second best runner in the class, was absent, and with Alan Gravett, the fastest runner in our year, asked to start four minutes behind everyone else, I felt that there was a clear chance to do well. My good friend Andy Fraser and I swiftly settled into a reasonable rhythm some way behind Shane Gallagher and Adrian Hoar (neither of whom had previously been recognised as particularly good runners) who themselves had set off very quickly. This state of affairs remained the same all of the way down Streatham Common and along the A23. By the time we reached Green Lane, Andy and I were both running comfortably, and though we passed the flagging Adrian, were making little progress in catching Shane. It was only as we turned into Northwood Road that we could see that Shane who was still some way ahead of us, slowing fast. Maintaining our consistent pace, we speedily made up the ground and overtook Shane before reaching Spa Hill. Running up Spa Hill was next to impossible, but we did our best to keep at least some sort of pace together and were relieved to reach the top and breathe more easily. Not long after reaching the top, Alan sailed past making it look all too easy as Andy and I trudged on. After regaining our former pace, we soon came in sight of the school gates. Just before turning off the road into the grounds, I sprinted ahead of Andy and though he tried hard to stay with me, my burst of speed was enough to finish in second place in a time of 28 minutes and 14 seconds, easily my best time over the course. Whilst there were no prizes awarded, this mighty effort became for a long time, one of my favourite daydreams or last thoughts as I went to bed, particularly how we had caught Adrian and then Shane, and then the final race to the finish.

The music scene continued to interest us all, as New Wave consolidated its hold on the nation's children. The Jam had brought with them a revival in Mod fashions, many followers opting to ride motor scooters (Vespas) and wear long green jackets called parkas, emulating the original Mod revolution in the mid-1960s. Several members of the class including Andy Hayes and Sean Healy proclaimed themselves as big fans. I could see their point, The Jam were certainly one of the best bands of their time. Heavy rock music made a considerable impact on the scene too as bands like Motorhead and AC/DC sledgehammered their way into our teenage consciousnesses, their fashion comprising largely of denim clothes. Many times would I scribble the Motorhead and AC/DC logos across the cover of my exercise books. A third group of lads had seen the re-emergence of soul, ska and reggae as alternatives and would wear their white socks and loafers as their badge of allegiance.

One social foray saw Sean, Chris Hudson, Dominic Holmes and I attend Pat Friel's birthday party in late January, which involved a trip to Sutton cinema to see "Jaws II".

I also spent a fair amount of time in the company of Tony Nuttman, who was in some of Sean's classes, and who would occasionally accompany us on the walk home from school. Tony and I became quite good friends for a while, and he would invite me back to his house on Fairview Road to look at some of his model tanks and planes. I recall that his parents had split up and he lived with his Dad, who had taken up with a woman who had two teenage daughters. One of them was certainly very good looking with shiny shoulder-length dark hair and dark eyes, Tony fancied her too, and I had to envy him for being forced to live in close proximity to such a good looking girl that he wasn't related to.

However, his surname, Nuttman, was in some ways quite fitting. Tony possessed an air gun

which he would use to shoot tin cans and the like in his back yard, and occasionally he would let me have a turn too. One day though, “just for a laugh”, he decided to shoot me too, and did so, the little pellet pinging into my arse cheek with such force, I screamed in pain and developed after a few days, an impressive bruise. Tony obviously found this all very funny and took aim again. I shot off inside his house very, very quickly, and he proceeded to chase me through the house and up the stairs. In my opinion, he had gone a bit too far and didn’t show any sign of stopping. I barricaded myself in his room for a while, though being quite well built for his age, he soon managed to push the door open. He was just about to shoot me again, when his “sister” came up the stairs having just arrived home, ending the “game”. With such excellent timing, she literally saved my arse that day.

* * * * *

In summary, this was perhaps my most successful year at school. Following an ignominious Christmas term report, I suddenly rediscovered my true form, clearly revised properly for exams and deservedly finished top of the class in four subjects: Maths, Russian, Physics and Chemistry and must have come near to the top in English. Unfortunately, this was also the peak of my performance, which slipped dangerously as ‘O’ Levels approached. Believing over the next few years that I could do it all again on memory alone without properly appreciating that it was necessary to go the extra mile through proper study, reading and revision, the cracks would soon begin to show in those subjects, such as Geography and History which required that extra effort.

Fourth Year – 4.3 (Sep 1979 – Jul 1980)

At the end of the Third Year, we had each selected our option subjects which we would take through to ‘O’ Level. There were three mandatory subjects to be taken forward – Mathematics, English Language and Religious Education. Although I had excelled at Chemistry and Physics, finishing top of the class in both subjects at the end of the previous year, I had no special desire to be a scientist. Keeping open my options to become an airline pilot, for which ‘A’ Levels in both Maths and Physics were required, I took Physics forward as one of my options.

I had also excelled at Russian and saw progression with this as another dead cert for an ‘O’ Level. English Literature and History were both very interesting so I kept these on, and Geography and French snuck in under the wire as I enjoyed them more than Biology, Design & Tech and Art. In retrospect, I should have kept on with Music as since leaving school, I have proved to have a love for listening to a wide variety of music and playing guitar and more limitedly, piano. However, music teacher Howard Thomas was frankly a bit of an arse and had dented my enthusiasm for gaining a more formal education in the subject.

Selecting our options saw our original forms splinter even further. Not only were we split into

three or four different tiers for Maths and French, but our options drove us all in different directions too.

My Fourth Year teachers were:

Mr Delaney Form Master

P T English Literature

Mr Cunningham Maths

Fr Maxwell RE

Brother Gerard French

Mr Battson Russian

Mr Delaney Geography

Mr Kinsey History

Mr Murtagh Physics

PE

Mr Delaney, our balding, ape-faced Geography teacher, filled in the Form Master's report both at Easter and at the end of the year. His Easter comments read, "Quite a complimentary report although Michael can certainly achieve more, as some comments would indicate. He must concentrate on improving on his weaknesses and perhaps revise more thoroughly for his next exams."

The mysterious P.T. returned to take us for English Literature. I had thought Mr Kelleher had taken us for an English class at some point so I assume it to be him. For the Easter report, he marked me with a 'B' for the term's work and just 46% for the exam. His comments were, "Only a satisfactory result – his comprehension paper was especially poor. Attention to detail and specific case to answer the question asked is needed. With effort he can improve." The mystery continues as P.T. also marked my Summer Term report, this time with a C+ grade and a 45½% exam result, commenting, "A skin-of-the-teeth pass. Much more effort required as well as the development of a suitable attitude towards the subject. He is too off-hand and casual. His literature answer displayed a lack of revision and, as well as the comprehension work, an inability to understand the point of certain questions. Care and attention to detail is essential." I feel duly chastened.

And C Cunningham who took Maths is a bit of a mystery too. I get the feeling that he/she may have been either male or female but don't quote me on that. A 'B+' and a 68% exam mark at

Easter prompted these words: "A pleasing result for Michael after Producing [sic] some good work throughout the year. He has the ability to gain a high grade in the 'O' Level exam this summer. He will achieve this by maintaining a consistent effort in the next four months". Indeed, I had excelled in the previous year at Maths and along with some other boys, had been selected to take the Maths 'O' Level one year early, at the end of the Fourth Year. The Summer Term report lavished further mathematical plaudits my way, Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms Cunningham having marked the term with an A grade and an exam mark of 78%, remarking thus: "Michael is a capable student who has worked hard to cover 2 years work in one year. He has gained a high grade in the summer exam and I expect him to gain a similar result in the 'O' Level." Indeed, mid-August brought the result of my Maths 'O' Level, an extremely pleasing A grade which probably marked the peak of my success in the subject.

Miraculously, I seemed to have won over Father Maxwell as well. The school's resident priest who would preside over any school religious services was another Irishman with firm views. Not perhaps as immovable as Mr Cassidy had been the previous year, at least Fr Maxwell would listen to my comments without totally trashing them whether he disagreed with them or not, and perhaps appreciated that I did have an opinion. His Easter grade of 'A-' and 70% exam mark and comments seem a little surprising now, "Michael is an excellent student. His homework is always thoughtful and well-presented, and his contributions in class helpful."

However, it wasn't to last. The guilt was beginning to fade as the scales fell from Father Maxwell's yellow-cheesy-flecked eyes (which he told us in one class was an indicator of cancer). Marking me lower with a term grade of B and a 57% exam mark, he saw through the veneer with his remarks, "Michael's work is of uneven quality. In general his homework is excellent; but he seems to find difficulty in answering questions without getting tied up in a mass of irrelevant detail. More clearly thought out answers are needed."

Mr Murtagh, another whose visage is lost in the mists of time was also complimentary at Easter about my efforts at Physics, noting, "Michael has worked very well this year. He is keen and takes care with his homework. I am particularly impressed by his ability to solve problems. The exam was, by his standards, a bad one – a more sensible revision programme is needed next time." This was accompanied by a lowly 54% for the exam and a lovely 'A' grade for the term's work. By the Summer report, I had seemed to have quelled any concerns Mr Murtagh may have had, though he only awarded me with a 'B' grade while my exam result was higher at 57%. He commented, "I am satisfied with Michael's progress. He has a good understanding – I expect to see him in the top group next year."

At some point during the year, our regular French teacher Brother Gerard was temporarily replaced by Miss Laurence, brown haired bowlhead haircut, prim, thin, thin-lipped and nervous looking, in fact quite the opposite to Brother Gerard's literally enormous presence. I seem to recall that Bro Gerard had to go into hospital for a time. Miss Laurence really did have trouble controlling the class and on one memorable occasion, as the noise in the class rose to a towering crescendo, ran from the classroom in tears. Brother Wilfred, who didn't wear the seemingly obligatory black cassock and white dovetailed collar that adorned the rest of his Brotherhood, and had been teaching in the next room, stormed into our classroom, came to a majestic halt by the teacher's desk, stared angrily round the room and drawing himself up to his full height, thundered a single word, "ROTTERS!" (which we thought hilarious!). He must have seen something in my innocent but

inwardly-sniggering face as he made a beeline for my desk and baring his teeth menacingly, told me to stop smirking. Miss Laurence eventually reappeared and struggled through the rest of the lesson but was soon on her way. Not before completing my Easter term report though, which read, "With a more determined attitude to work, I feel that Michael could improve on these results. At the moment his work suffers from inconsistent effort and he is not fulfilling his potential. Greater participation in class would be appreciated as well as beneficial to himself." With a 'C' grade and a 54% exam mark, I thought that this was about par for the course for French but resolved to try harder for the rest of the year.

This chivalry shown by Brother Wilfred to Miss Laurence underlined what a jolly good sort he was. During lunchtimes, he was frequently in the playground trying to join in a game of football somewhere and show his silky skills. I recall if he wanted the ball passed to him, he would call out, "With You! With You!" but boys being boys we wondered why he couldn't buzz off and amuse himself elsewhere. I guess he must have had a hankering to be accepted by us boys or maybe he just liked playing football in an environment where being twenty years older than us, he would easily shine.

Some measure of normality had returned to the French class during the Summer term with the return of Brother Gerard, though I did not excel at the exam scoring a paltry 38%. He remarked, "Michael is working satisfactorily and though this result is somewhat low I have confidence in his ability to work hard and do well."

Mr Battson came up trumps once again with an A grade for the Easter Term's work and an exam mark of 72%, commenting, "An excellent result: Michael continues to fulfil his early promise. He is capable of taking on some additional work from now on and I want him to devote a set amount of time to this each week." I do believe that after this point, I was given extra exercises to do in addition to the usual classroom fare, which if I remember correctly I dealt with well enough. However, the Summer report had a wispy dark cloud flitting across it. Marking the term's work with an 'A/B' and the exam with 62%, Arnie warned, "Michael's exam result is good in view of the difficulty of the paper but somewhat less than his best. I am sure he will guard against complacency now and work to attain the high grade his talent deserves."

Our new History teacher, an occasionally moustachioed Welshman called Gareth Kinsey, was built like a brick ~~shithouse~~ outhouse and doubled as the school's Rugby Coach, clearly having the frame for it. His lessons focussed on the English parliaments of the late nineteenth century led by Prime Ministers Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone; Keir Hardie and the rise of the Labour Party; and the Irish question from the 1801 Act Of Union through to the early 1920s. Although he gave me a B+ for the Easter Term's work and 54% for the exam, his remarks expressed some concern about this result, "Although Michael's work during the year has been of a good standard, I am rather disappointed by his examination results. He wrote two weak essays – omitting much important material. He is capable of, and should get higher grades in future". Perhaps his comment about my two weak essays was deserved particularly as I had noted somewhat childishly in one of them that Gladstone had "driven the Act through Parliament (in a red transit van)". This comment was read out in class to great mirth from my fellow students, followed by a meaty biff over the bonce with my exercise book and an example made of me to the whole class.

The Summer report was even worse, earning just 26% at the exam and a C+ grade for the term.

This and the low French result were the first times in all my secondary school results that I had scored below the pass mark of 45%, though I had come close with Third Year RE. And I'm sorry to say, it wouldn't be the last. Mr Kinsey's comments read, "I am extremely disappointed by this result. I have been worried for some time by Michael's lack of sympathy for this subject – he seems to be building up a mental block against really trying to do well. He has the ability to do well if only he would use it." On the contrary, I really enjoyed History. My real problem as previously mentioned, apart from nineteenth century politics not exactly being a page-turner, was that I was so used to getting by on my memory alone, I didn't think I needed to put in the extra study effort required to excel in the higher years – there were more interesting things to do with my free time. It's certainly a pitfall I will be teaching my own children to avoid.

Tony Delaney's Geography class was interesting enough, but as with History I did not apply myself enough. Although I earned a B grade and an exam mark of 58%, the crown was starting to slip, echoed by Mr D noting that, "Michael's results this year have generally been good although he can still improve. Written explanations could be more detailed in order to show his understanding of the material." A marginal improvement in the summer term saw my grade leap from B to B+ and my exam mark from 58% to 59%. At least I was consistent. However, the trend of tenuously worried comments continued, "Quite a good result but Michael should not be satisfied. His answers could quite easily have been improved on with a little more knowledge + thought. His approach to work tends to be a little inconsistent and his form marks have slipped of late. I expect him to do well in the 'O' Level but he will have to work much harder."

In retrospect, what might have helped me would have been the old system of working for one's position in the class based on a regular poll of test results and essay marks. If I could have seen that my lapsed efforts were causing me to slip down the class, it might have incensed my competitive nature and I might have increased my efforts to climb back up to the top of the class. It's all very well to say that now, but nothing else worked. My Fourth Year 'O' Level success at Maths gave me a boost at the end of the year and perhaps a false sense of security. It probably disguised from me the fact that I wasn't trying hard enough in other subjects, or made me believe that there was still plenty of time to bring everything else back on track, but some of these marks were certainly suffering a little. Also, I think somewhere along the line, I was imbued with the sense that what I was doing was enough to get by rather than striving for excellence at the expense of my free time out of school.

Mr Delaney rounded off the end of year report with his comments, "Although Michael's results are generally good there are one or two disturbing comments. I hope he will take note and aim at more consistency in the coming year. With more care and study I would expect him to achieve a good set of 'O' Level results. As ever he is a pleasant and reliable member of the class."

I do recall discussing my stunted progress with Mr Delaney, who was supportive but firm in his conviction that I needed to knuckle down and devote more time to proper study. It must be difficult sometimes to be a teacher and have to say some hard things in reports. I do not know how concerned any of my other teachers really were. They all seemed to agree that I was capable and should be doing better, but I remember little of what effort some of them made to try and help. Do the pleasures of marking someone whose work is consistently excellent make up for those whose work is merely average or downright terrible? Of a class of thirty two pupils, to have to write poor reports for perhaps a third of them must on occasions be unsatisfying. To have to inject a positive

spin on the pupil's outlook no matter how gloomy their prospects must occasionally test their own literary skills. Or is it the feeling that they are doing something to really help those less privileged in the brain department that drives them on? I expect it takes all sorts and different teachers are driven by different motivations. Do teachers look forward to filling out maybe a hundred end-of-term reports or do they look on it as a seemingly endless grind, something that gets in the way of the important job of actually doing the teaching?

I had felt the weight of the burden of success over the years through being blessed with a good memory, being good at my studies and being asked countless times by other less fortunate to help them with their homework. Now I was starting to rebel, looking forward to the end of my school years so that I could get out to work and earn some money. I guess I still expected to follow Liz and Steve along the 'A' Level path, but baulked at the idea of a further four years at university. With a few free periods each week, we were expected to make the most of these by researching and studying in perhaps the library, though I seem to remember more about reading back copies of Punch, school yearbooks and books about sporting achievements than making any consistent effort at study or revision. My good memory was clearly no longer enough for Geography and History which both required more application, and the cracks were beginning to show in my language studies.

However, we were all growing up and my studies weren't helped by my first taste of discotheques albeit on a small scale. Dominic Holmes had invited Sean, Chris Hudson, Andy Fraser, Pat Friel and me amongst one or two others in the class to go along to a disco that his local church, St Gertrudes between Sanderstead and South Croydon, was holding. Flaming 'eck! For a church disco, there were tons of teenagers there and the hall was pretty packed, but as we were only fourteen or so, and many of the other children there were older and more confident, I felt a little out of my depth. While there were plenty of pretty girls to look at, they were either already hanging around with some lad or other, or sitting or standing around in their own groups. Pat struck lucky with a girl called Marie, while Sean and Andy got off with Louise Dillon and Simone Lazar respectively, both of these last two being in my sister Gill's class at school. Being a fairly shy lad myself, I didn't feel confident enough to butt in on a pretty lass, attempt to make conversation in a very noisy room and ask her if she would like to dance with me. It would be another few years before I developed anywhere near that level of confidence.

Even though Sean and Louise, Andy and Simone, and I (gooseberry) all went to the cinema together to see Robert Redford's "The Electric Horseman", it appeared, according to Gill, that Louise was fairly keen on me. Louise and I skirted around each other for the next three months or so, swapping letters and meeting a few times, but though she hit the top of favourites chart, we just never got it together.

Fifth Year – 5.3 (Sep 1980 – Jul 1981)

And suddenly, we were Fifth Formers, the year that would allegedly go some considerable way towards deciding one's future. I realised this and after a shaky start resolved to work hard for the Christmas mock 'O' Levels, redoubling my efforts after a less-than-satisfying showing. My choice of

subjects to be taken at 'O' Level having already been settled during the Third Year and with a Maths 'O' Level under my belt, there was little change in the teaching personnel for the coming year.

My Fifth Year teachers were:

Mr Delaney Form Master

P T English Literature

Miss Tunnicliffe Additional Maths

Fr Maxwell RE

Brother Gerard French

Mr Battson Russian

Mr Delaney Geography

Mr Kinsey History

Mr Kelly Physics

Mr Radowicz Careers

PE

With our top floor Form room and a small Fifth Form Common Room to boast of (which basically consisted of half a dozen cushioned chairs and a fuzball table), plus the freedom at last to walk along the mazey multiple-doored Sixth Form corridor, we felt like we had finally arrived. Additionally we were allowed off the school premises at lunchtime if granted an exeat by Mr Wilshire, our new Year Master. Principally this meant that we could walk the hundred yards or so to Crown Point, buy a chip butty from the baker, or eat a cheap limited-nutrition lunch at the café on the opposite corner.

One significant addition to our timetable was a weekly period in which the Polish Mr Z Radowicz would discuss different career options, and provide literature and contact details to anyone who was interested. By and large, I knew what I thought I wanted to do, and indeed, Sean and I even visited the local RAF careers office at the bottom of Pollards Hill South to determine what was required to join up. However, the qualifications required were a little beyond Sean's scope at the time, and he lost interest. And I suppose I kind of did too. It would have been fun to pursue a career flying aeroplanes, but was I really interested in doing the required Maths or Physics degree? I was already tired of education and though I might have secured the requisite number of 'O' and 'A' Levels, my commitment to going any further waned somewhat.

Fairly early on in the school year, I recall a careers evening being held in the school hall, where

representatives from different occupations would explain to any boy interested, how to make a start in that line of work. Having admired the loveliness of the fair Joanne Lea (who was in the year above Gill at Coloma) at church and on the one or two occasions that she graced the church youth club with her gorgeousness, I was very interested in meeting her dad who came along to the careers evening representing journalism. While quite interested in the idea of pursuing a career in journalism, meeting her father who seemed a likeable man, would spur me on to ask Joanne out on a date. Plucking up the courage one autumn evening, I made my way to the phone box at the corner of Windermere Road, far enough off the beaten track for no one to recognise or overhear me. Nervously picking up and replacing the receiver several times, dialling part of Joanne's number and then replacing the receiver several times occupied me for fifteen minutes or so. Finally summoning that last vestige of mental fortitude before anyone else turned up wanting to use the 'phone, I completed the number and allowed the phone to ring as my heart thudded against my ribcage in double time. Mr Lea answered the phone and I asked to speak to Joanne. After a few moments, she came to the phone, her voice as warm and smooth as melted chocolate. Belying my shaking nerves, I managed to keep my voice roughly steady as I told her who was calling and asked her whether she would like to go and see the film "The Elephant Man" at the cinema with me. Her response, "I'm sorry, but I don't know who you are", shot me down in flames and after mumbling some sort of apology for having troubled her, I ended the call. No matter how largely she had figured in my eyes, she hadn't even noticed me and didn't know who I was. Further ridicule would come my way the next time I went to the youth club. Rat-faced Tom Jupp, who was better acquainted with Joanne than I was, had heard all about our phone conversation and not having previously known how much I had fancied her, delighted in reminding me of my embarrassment.

During the first few weeks of December, we took our mock 'O' Level exams, a last chance to gauge our abilities and where final improvements could be made before the real thing the following summer. I particularly recall 9th December 1980 as being the morning that we found out that John Lennon, one of The Beatles – perhaps at the time, the most famous pop band in the world (even though they had disbanded ten years earlier) – had been shot and killed in New York City. In the clear, bright but cold air on the way to school for that afternoon's mock exam, I bought an evening paper that told us all about it. We were all in shock though that didn't stop us enjoying the television broadcasts of each of The Beatles films ("A Hard Day's Night", "Help!", "Magical Mystery Tour", "Yellow Submarine" and "Let It Be") over the next few nights.

I have only one school report covering my Fifth Form work, dated Jan '81. This would have followed our mock exams taken around Christmastime. Maybe there never was another report for the year as by the time Easter came around, our 'O' Levels were all but upon us and whatever any report might have said would probably had little effect on the outcome.

The mysterious PT marked my English papers at the mock exams. Though I passed both Literature (47%) and Language (58%), PT cast an ominous shadow with their words, "While both sections of the exam were passed, there needs to be much improvement. His attitude is frivolous at times. Attention to detail is needed as is care with expression. Revision of texts is also essential". Thankfully by the time the 'O' Level came around, I seemed to have turned things around somewhat, earning a B in both exams.

Having passed the Mathematics 'O' Level at the end of the Fourth Year, I had the opportunity to take Additional Maths as an extra 'O' Level. Miss Tunnicliffe noted in her January remarks that,

“Michael seems to have lost some of his confidence which is not justifiable as this good result shows. He should take things seriously and refrain from flippancy in his answers. I am sure he can do well in the Summer but there is some way to go yet.” I wouldn’t say that I had found the Additional Maths course difficult but I was certainly happier dealing with numbers than with equations and calculus. Frankly I couldn’t see how I would use them in the future, even if I did manage to become an airline pilot. 56% in the mock exam and a B mark for the Christmas term, set the benchmark and by summer, I was happy to settle for a C to gain another ‘O’ Level.

My History studies were by now in a truly sorry state. I guess it didn’t help that I had no empathy with the subject matter, which coupled with my poor attempts at study, failed to lift my efforts out of the doldrums. It is such a shame because I do now take a great interest in many aspects of history. Mr Kinsey’s January remarks read, “While there has been some improvement since the last exams, this is still a rather disappointing result. Michael must avoid the temptation to adopt a flippant style in exam essays and he should revise more carefully before June. I expect him to pass”. My term grade was B- and I scored 35% in the mock exam. Unsurprisingly I guess, I also failed the ‘O’ Level managing only a D for dismal.

Geography fared little better at the mock exam, earning me only 39% for my efforts, though Mr Delaney thought my term’s work deserved a C+. A bell must have been tolling in the background as he inscribed these words on my report sheet, “A poor result, well below Michael’s abilities. It is a shame that he is finding school difficult at present because his performance at ‘O’ Level will certainly suffer unless he can get down to consistent & sensible study”. Well, saints be praised, Mr D must have been dancing with delight when he learned that I had, in football parlance, stuck one in the onion bag, securing not just a lucky C, but a shiny silver B at ‘O’ Level.

The converse was true with RE. Father Maxwell begrudgingly marked my exam paper with 72% though could only offer a C for my term’s work. His scathing comments predicted all too wisely, “Michael seems to think that ability will ensure success at ‘O’ Level. This attitude is unlikely to help him attain the grade of which he is capable”. And he was right. Another D for downright dreadful at the end of the year.

Russian’s Mr Battson was as encouraging as ever in his January comments, marking my exam with 63% and awarding a B++ for the term’s work. His comments read, “This is an excellent result – especially in view of the intensive nature of the course and lack of practice in exam technique. Michael now seems likely to fulfil his original promise and a grade A in June is definitely within his grasp”. Unfortunately, I didn’t quite manage to cut the mustard as keenly as Arnie had hoped and secured only a B at ‘O’ Level time.

Physics master Mr Kelly, who had something of the look of Third Year Chemistry teacher Mr Dorr about him (funnily enough, I never did see them in the same place at the same time), gave me a B- for my term’s work and I scored 58% in the exam, earning the comment, “Pleasing progress. He should do well given careful preparation.” While I don’t recall much careful preparation, I guess I must have put in enough study as I managed to pass the ‘O’ Level with a mark of C.

French. Hmmm. It had been touch and go in the fourth year, having scored only a poor 38% in the summer exam. I didn’t do too much better with the mock exam, raising my mark just a paltry 5 points to score 43%. Brother Gerard awarded my term’s efforts a D remarking that, “Michael needs

to set his sights a little higher if he is to perform better in June. More concentration in class and his homeworks should give him a C in June.” Pleasingly, he was spot on and I scraped home with the predicted C. A moral victory after which I was more than happy to close my French primer forever.

Mr Delaney as Form Master set the scene clearly in his final January comments, “The word frivolous or flippant crops up far too regularly in this report. Michael’s whole approach is liable to cost him dear in the summer. I do detect a recent improvement. It must be maintained if Michael is to achieve a good set of results in the summer”. Fortunately I did manage to raise my game before the summer, perhaps helped by the fact that I was asked to give up my paper round in February 1981, and so in mid-August, learned with a sigh of some relief and surprise, that I had passed a further seven ‘O’ Levels, which along with my Fourth Year Maths result brought the final tally to eight out of ten.

Here is a summary of those ‘O’ Level results;

- Mathematics A Pass (1980)
- English Language B Pass
- English Literature B Pass
- Geography B Pass
- Russian B Pass
- Additional Maths C Pass
- French C Pass
- Physics C Pass
- History D Fail
- RE D Fail

Sometime towards the latter part of the school year, a second strange incident with paedophilic overtones occurred. As with the Vernon Quaintance incident, this has never been mentioned to anyone else. UNTIL NOW!!!

Mr Wilshire, who had been our friendly and humorous Form Master in the First Year, and appeared to be widely respected throughout the school, had by now been appointed as Fifth Form Year Master. His Year Master’s office in what was frankly the most prime position at the top of the main building, not overlooked, but overlooking the playground from three floors up, was tacked onto the back corner of the Fifth Form Common Room. Mr Wilshire would frequently pass through during break time or lunch time with a cheery greeting.

One afternoon, he had asked me to drop by his room after school to discuss my progress. As intimated above, my early promise at school had been somewhat eroded in the Fourth Form by a lack of study, and while I felt that I had recovered some of the lost ground, it was evident that for ‘O’ Level success, further application was required. During whatever motivational speech he gave, it became clear that he felt that I had lost some of my confidence in my abilities. He suggested that a great test of confidence would be for him to leave the room while I took off my school uniform and on his return, sit there for a short while naked, to prove that I could do anything. As with Vernon Quaintance five years earlier, the way the suggestion was couched made it appear an acceptable

thing to do at the time. He left the room for a few minutes and rising to the gauntlet thrown down, I did as he suggested, but sat myself in such a way that he could not get a view of either my knob or my arsehole. On his return, he sat down at his desk and did not ogle my body at all, but purposefully looked me straight in the eye as he continued to talk for a few minutes, before leaving the room again, allowing me to put my clothes back on. The meeting continued for a while longer, during which time two other Fifth Formers knocked on the door requesting something from him. After they went away, Sir commented that it had been a good job that they had not turned up five minutes earlier. And indeed, when I left Mr Wilshire's office that afternoon, the two boys were sitting in the Common Room, so it appears that I had a very lucky escape that the situation could not be misconstrued by them.

After the event and for some time afterwards, I was in two minds about what had happened. On the one hand, I had passed the challenge and indeed over the coming months, my work improved as bolstered and re-motivated by what Mr Wilshire had said, I put in a much greater effort as my 'O' Level exams approached. On the other hand, there is clearly something not right about a grown man asking a minor to remove his clothes, even if he did couch it as a challenge to my self-confidence. Although his eye contact with my own made it clear that he was not looking at my body, I suspect that he must have got some cheap thrill from the event. Was it from sheer carnal lust for young boy flesh, or simply through the exercising of his power in being able to get young boys to remove their clothes on the pretext of a confidence building challenge?

I don't know. He never tried it on with me nor even hinted again that anything had ever happened. Whatever his motivations, it worked and my performance improved. However, he was playing a risky game. What made it feel much less kosher was later hearing that on a school skiing trip, allegedly as a joke, he had jumped into bed with a student for a few seconds!! If any complaint had been made on either of these occasions, he would have been in serious trouble with both the school and the police.

Given how the law has tightened around paedophiles or 'kiddy-fiddlers' as they are colloquially known, men such as Vernon Quaintance and Chris Wilshire who put themselves in such risky positions must be running scared that one day they may be caught and damned for eternity. But knowing the risks, particularly in Wilshire's case with an unlocked door between safety and discovery, many paedos commit offences again and again. Is it the element of risk that provides that extra frisson of excitement over which they can furiously masturbate after the event?

The final questions with Chris Wilshire are, as with Vernon, how many other boys did he try this risky trick on and how many other adults are there in authority that use their position in this way, but never get caught? Did he decide to take this risky action having heard about my slipping standards and effort from other teachers? Did he discuss with anyone telling them that he would euphemistically, 'have a word'? I can't imagine that I was the only boy that this happened to, and in a school of 192 boys in each year – perhaps 1000 boys in total, he would have been able to cherry-pick those amongst us who he thought would not blab.

The bottom line (a term that would have been enough to have had classmate Andy Fraser sniggering) is that I don't hold Chris Wilshire in the same contempt as I held Vernon, possibly because the event did me some good. Examwise, things could have gone a lot worse at 'O' Level time if he hadn't given me that little push. However, it is more than a little worrying that this kind of

thing can go on and the whistle may never be blown. Again, I hope that my own children will never be put in such a position.

Chapters

< 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22
23 24 25 > [report abuse](#)

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ml66uk wrote 11 hours ago



You may be interested in the recent article in the Croydon Advertiser headlined "Croydon circumcision campaigner caught with child porn videos".

"THE head of a pro-circumcision group who used to run a children's computer club was caught with a hoard of child porn.

Vernon Quaintance, from Upper Norwood, has avoided a jail term – despite having three video cassettes with nine-hours' worth of clips showing boys as young as 11 engaging in sex acts.

Vernon Quaintance is the head of the Gilgal Society, a group dedicated to promoting male circumcision"

"Quaintance, who the court was told had been celibate for his entire life, admitted three counts of possession of indecent photographs of a child.

The retired telephone engineer was handed a 40-week jail term, suspended for two years, ordered to complete a sexual offenders rehabilitation course, and told to pay £300 costs."

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Norbury Girl wrote 349 days ago



I have lived in Norbury for a long time, went to St Joseph's Primary School and still go to St. Barts Church in Ellison Road. I roared with laughter at some of the things you said about people that I still know and how true they are!

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elorraine wrote 695 days ago



Well written, loved it. Good luck with it. E.Lorraine Royal Blood Chronicles book one

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Burgio wrote 725 days ago



LITTLE MICKEY

This is an interesting coming of age story – interesting because the narrator is much older than in the average coming of age story. And because it's so detailed it reveals much more than usual about the narrator and his family. It's courageous to write this type of story because it holds back no family secrets. Those reveals, tho, are also what makes it a good read. I'm adding this to my shelf. Burgio (Grain of Salt).

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Melcom wrote 725 days ago



A truly humorous read. And it's all true, great stuff.

Happily shelved
Melxx
Impeding Justice

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Harpic wrote 726 days ago



Thanks for your comments Missy, very much appreciated:~) Mike

“ I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the right speed. I got involved quickly and stayed involved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy
Mark of Eternity ”

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carlashmore wrote 726 days ago



You know, if nothing else you have left this for your descendants. It is a sharp, well written, humorous and moving book that is highly involving. And you've lived it all. I felt there were a few too many semi-colons in Chapter 2, but that aside it is a wonderful book.

Carl
The Time Hunters

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missyfleming_22 wrote 727 days ago



I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the right speed. I got involved quickly and stayed involved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy
Mark of Eternity

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soutexmex wrote 727 days ago



Mike: Actually, I can go with both pitches. With the long pitch, I would break it down into smaller paragraphs so it reads faster. End it with one succinct question. Perfecting your pitches is how you climb in ranking to gather more exposure and comments to better your novel. The writing is good so I am SHELIVING you.

Though I have been a very active member for over a year, I can still use your comments on my book when you get the chance. Every little bit helps. Cheers!

JC
The Obergemau Key

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SusieGulick wrote 727 days ago



Dear Mike, I love that you shared your story - especially your singles & tapes names - I'm 70 (memoir named below) & still have all of my singles, 45, LPs & tapes since I was in high school in the 50s. :) I can hardly wait until you write volume two of your story. :) Before I began to read your book, I was prepared by your recap/pitch that was before your story which was very well done. Your story is good because you create interest by having short paragraphs & lots of dialogue, which makes me want to keep reading to find out what's going to happen next. I'm commenting/backing your book to help it advance. Could you please return the favor by taking a moment to comment/back my TWO books, "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not" & the unedited version? "Tell Me True Love Stories," which tells at the end my illness now/6th abusive marriage." Thanks, Susie :)

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lynn clayton wrote 728 days ago



Forget aliens and fantasy, this is my sort of book. The more parochial, the better. When autobiography is well-written it can't be beaten for fascination and truth. My only complaint is about the size of the text. Three cheers for promising to give us your thoughts without apology - any writer who's afraid to shouldn't write. Backed. Lynn

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AJB wrote 730 days ago



I've enjoyed reading your autobiography, Mike. I grew up at roughly the same time and a lot of your memories have brought back vivid ones of my own - particularly the music and TV references!

Your writing is smooth and easy to read and I like your honest, open style (although your experience with Mr Wilshire was somewhat disturbing!!).

Perhaps your experiences won't have a huge commercial appeal, but as a piece of family and social history, this is a fascinating read.

Amanda

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1