

Ruthin School

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Established 1284

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An Old Ruthinian's Reminiscence

Ruthin School is a singularly peculiar phenomenon. It is a world that cannot be compared to anything else, a microcosm that has its own rules and standards, with a life of its own that has survived seemingly unscathed through wars, political upheaval and social change. Pupils who have been taught here remember their teachers, their friends and their experiences, and many continue that relationship even after they leave, supporting the Old Ruthinian Association, usually known as the Old Boys, which now of course includes girls, and has done so since the school became co-educational in the early 1990s.

When I became a day pupil in 1971, though, it was just a boys' school. To many of you here today, Goodman means the building for 6th form boarders in the centre of town, but for me, it was my day pupil house throughout my time at the school. I was really proud that I belonged to a house that was named after the Dean of Westminster who refounded the school in 1574. Mr Hill, whose portrait hangs in Big School, was my headmaster, and he particularly loved rugby, oceanography and the occasional tippie of Amontillado sherry.

What many of you might not know is that Mr. Hewer was still teaching here then. He was here when I took my scholarship exam. At the end of the school day, he said, "Are there any questions you'd like to ask?" My hand went up. "Yes, sir. When do we go home?" Already, you could see my priorities.

Whilst Mr Hewer carefully and patiently guided me through French A Level exams, Mr Cloke inspired me to go on to read History in Bangor University. He was also in charge of the CCF, the Combined Cadet Force, and in the summer holidays of 1975, I joined the ranks who had signed up to visit Sennybridge Training Camp in South Wales. We found ourselves in pairs, yomping down a mountain in full camouflage gear, armed with a rifle and a compass. My water bottle had run out, so I drank directly from a nearby stream. We had been warned not to drink the local water because of the impurities, but I was so thirsty, I ignored it. I was up all night being sick. The following morning, I was carted off to Abergavenny Hospital where they decided erroneously to remove my appendix. That salutary lesson taught me that perhaps it was important to follow the rules. Someone who did follow them to the letter, however, was Mr Cloke who, in full military uniform, saluted my family when they visited me at my sickbed.

Your teachers encourage you today to take advantage of the wide variety of activities on offer. Many Old Boys particularly remember being part of a team in their time at Ruthin School. Nowadays, pupils bravely volunteer to show off their skills in the annual event that is Ruthin School's Got Talent, which was brilliant this year, but back when I was a pupil, we performed in Shakespearean plays directed by our Head of English Mr Kenyon-Thompson. In 1976, he put on Henry V, and I volunteered as a soldier. Easy, I thought, I don't have to learn any lines, just stand there and look vaguely butch. Only I didn't realize that I had to do some heavy lifting. Mr Thompson had carefully provided several large wooden logs that would keep the French at bay and win the battle of Agincourt. Rather important, then. But when it came to set the last of them up, everyone else was busy offstage, so I was the only one left to set the logs in place. I've never had muscles like Arnold Schwarzenegger, so I struggled to drag them on. As I marched off having placed the last log, I heard a terrific crash, and found that it had rolled off its perch and knocked all the other logs flying. I had completely destroyed the set. Everyone in the wings had to rescue the situation from the carnage on stage and completely rearrange the battleground. Mr Thompson was NOT best pleased.

Nowadays, we are used to everything being instantly accessible online. Ruthin School has kept up with the times, and you can easily find out what the pupils have been up to in regular newsletters. Before the age of the internet, however, we were used to having news of the school compiled in biannual issues of the Ruthinian magazine. One classic occasion was captured in a 1977 report of a trip organised by the editor Mr. Thompson. He had arranged to take a group of pupils to the summit of Mount Ararat in Turkey where Noah's Ark was supposed to have landed after the Flood. He even trained for the event by carrying bricks in a rucksack in between lessons. We weren't surprised. When it came to the actual trip, the party travelled hundreds of miles in the school minibus, only to be turned back at the foot of the mountain by armed soldiers because of political unrest in the area. Mr. Thompson even had his camera taken from him at gunpoint. To recoup his losses, we all reckoned he should have sold t-shirts with "I've been turned back from Mount Ararat" printed on them.

Apart from the work, the greatest learning curve in school is socialising with a much larger group of people, all of whom act differently and have their own likes and dislikes. Nothing changes, and it's exactly the same today. We all have our coping strategies to deal with personality clashes. When I was in school, I had a major personality clash with one particular pupil. Like Draco Malfoy in Harry Potter, he somehow managed to find and torment me whenever I was on my own. He knew I wouldn't say boo to a goose. The situation came to a head at the end of a school day in December. I was kicking a rugby ball over the posts on the back field when Malfoy sought me out and threatened to destroy me. Fortunately, my big friend Hagrid magically appeared and told me to go and get changed, and in the meantime, he would sit on Malfoy. So whilst he was sitting on him, I ran as fast as I could through the gap in the hedge and changed quickly in the pavilion on the front field. Forget the tie, forget the shower, I kept thinking, there's no time, just throw everything into the kit bag. By this point, it was totally dark. I was just about to leave when I heard the ominous sound of footsteps running outside. Like a western saloon, the doors flew wide open, and there stood the frightening figure of Malfoy! "Your friend nearly flattened me!" he screamed. "Now I'm going to kill you!" "Not the glasses!" I whimpered piteously, and raised my hands to protect my face as he drew near, and I waited for the inevitable beating of the century. But nothing happened.... Seconds passed.... Slowly, I lowered my hands, and there, on the floor, Malfoy lay in a heap, crying. I realized I must have accidentally struck him in the nose when I lifted my hands. Like a paper tiger, he had folded in front of my eyes, and he never bullied me again. But despite how he had treated me, I still remember asking him while he was writhing on the floor, "Are you all right?"

Which, oddly I know, was my way of thinking that we need to be inclusive and respect others, with all their different personalities, religions and nationalities, and try to understand what motivates them. And I think that is why, despite all the changes that have occurred in Ruthin School over the years, it still retains the feeling of a family unit, with its close ties and a sense of belonging in an atmosphere of encouragement. We are all part of this special family. That's why I'm here. Thank you.

J P Hamer
9th May 2015