Old Swinford Hospital

Years 1943-1949

It has been suggested that I write something of my days at Old Swinford Hospital and although I am somewhat reluctant to do that, I suppose it can do no harm.

I think it might be better initially to give some idea of the general layout of the school back in the 1940's, rather than tell any personal stories

The first thing to say is, Old Swinford Hospital is what we called it. We were not allowed to say 'OSH' and would be told off by Spud if we did.

I have been looking on Google Earth at the layout of the grounds of the school and I cannot believe the buildings that have gone up since my day.

What has happened to the Upper Close, the Congo, Pet's field, the Allotments, to name but four such areas.

On street level, Prospect House looks nothing like I remember.

Back then there were only two main buildings, the Old Block and the New Block.

The Great Hall an attachment at the side of the New Block. This block contained the Gymnasium, the Locker Room and most of the Dormitories. As well as Master's private rooms. There was also the Headmasters Study and a Master's Common Room. Also a small surgery for minor illnesses.

The Headmaster's House was a separate building nearer to the old Sanitorium building in Heath Lane. In my day the Sanitorium was never used as such and any sick boys were moved to a special room in the New Block but later still to Prospect House.

At the back of the Old Block was the Kitchen and Domestic area, also the Swimming Bath. It also held the Tuck Shop.

Inside the Old Block was the Dining Hall, the School Office and the Sewing Room where ladies repaired our clothes and right at the top was the Art Room. Later on a dormitory was opened.

The drive, lined by elm trees, lead from the main road right up to the point central to the two buildings, the North and South corridors.

Behind those buildings was the Barn Block but in front of the barn block was also a toilet building.

A far as I can see the Top Field is all on the same level now but then it was at slightly different levels. Facing from the school, the left side was the Cricket and Athletics field whereas the right side was the Football pitch.

Between the Barn Block and Top field was the Upper Close where boys generally had a kick about or played games. It was used by the Americans in the war to play Baseball.

More of that later.

Front Field was used for Rugby, though later a field off Love Lane called Big Moor was taken over for that purpose.

Round the perimeter of those top fields ran the Circular Road, where during the Autumn months we had to run a circuit each evening. This was to sort out the best runners for the Cross Country team.

Along the top side of the Cricket pitch stood four huge Elm trees and between the two top fields right in the middle was a Scots Pine, known to us as the Fir Bob.

On the edge of the Cricket pitch close to the Sanitorium was a wooden pavilion.

There were four houses in the school

Foley, Foster, Dudley and Lyttelton. Each house had its own colour.

Foley white, Foster red, Dudley Blue, Lyttelton yellow.

Every boy was given a number. Mine was 79.

In assembly each house occupied its own area and in the Locker room each house had its own set of lockers where we kept our satchels, plimsolls and anything else that might not get pinched. It was quite common to return for your plimsolls to find that the laces had vanished.

I recall that there were six dormitories numbered 1-6. Dorm 1 was the seniors one, where older boys slept and Dorm 2 was for the youngest. As you grew older you progressed through each dormitory until you became a senior.

There were bathrooms on the floors with dormitories, I think possibly three baths in each

In Dorm 1 we had crystal sets so that we could listen to the radio, only two programmes, the BBC Home Service and The Light Programme. Later on, great joy, Radio Luxemburg arrived. Don't forget this was long before TV. The only radio that existed in the whole school was in the Barn Block where lots of boys gathered each evening to listen to Dick Barton, Special Agent. I can still hum the Signature tune. When the programme finished, we all hurried to the Great Hall where we had to do Prep. No getting out of it. It was Homework the hard way.

The Dining Hall in the Old Block was set out in Houses. Each house had three tables; each table had eight boys. There was also a table where Masters ate.

The food was poor to say the least because of rationing and sometimes the best lunchtime meal was a couple of slices of bread covered in gravy, rather than what had been served.

The slices themselves were always knows as 'breads' and when I was hungry, I could eat eight breads at tea time. The loaves were long and square and were sliced by a lovely lady with a lethal hand machine. I remember she cut herself badly with it one day. I think her name was Mrs Simpkins?

There was a big cupboard in the dining hall that would be unlocked at tea time and if your mother had brought you a cake, or a pot of jam, you could retrieve it from the cupboard. I was lucky in that my mother lived quite close but some boys were not so lucky so rarely had anything in store.

We could have a visitor, with permission, usually on a Sunday afternoon, so that rarity was always a treat. Mother would sometimes bring me a comic or something nice to put in the cupboard.

It might be worth mentioning the system for being admitted to the school.

Thomas Foley's idea of '60 Poore Boyes' still applied to a certain extent and many of us only had one parent, or were from poor families. My father had died when I was only five and mother lived on 10 shillings (50p) a week widow's pension.

Also, the area from which boys came was limited to the immediate surroundings of the school and Worcestershire.

Much later an intake of lads was admitted from London. They also came from poorer backgrounds but were in fact much more street wise than us and had a reputation for picking up things that didn't belong to them. They got nicknames like Filcher Furness and Light Fingered Lesaux. I hasten to add at this point that Alan Furness was a really nice lad and I have tried for years to discover what happened to him, without success. If anyone should know of his whereabouts. or even if he is still alive, I would love to know. I think his full name was Robert Alan Furness.

I look at today's pictures and marvel at the number of teachers.

Mr Stone, our head, never actually taught in class. He did take assembly and appeared at official functions. I never knew him cane anyone though I believe he had in the past.

We had of course Mr Bartlett (Spud), other names that came and went during my time were, Wilkinson (Wingy), Childs (Charlie), Chalk (Wizzo), Purgavie (Purgie), Cropley, Walker (Paddy), Waller (Daddy), Shaw (Ivo) and for a short time there was a Miss Hughes.

We did not have a Matron but over my time we had three different nurses. Their names were Mason, Ryan and Mitchell. I still have a clothes brush given to me by Nurse Ryan. All caring ladies, each in their own way.

Down the front drive at the Lodge lived Mr and Mrs Skelding. Mr Skelding was Porter and Mr Stone's Chauffeur.

Mr Stone had a very old car that had been known to lose a wheel on one occasion whilst driving along, it ran off down the road in front of the car.

The registration number of the car was YY8477. We needed to know that, because if 'out of bounds' one needed to keep an eye open for it.

Yes, boys did go out of bounds but if caught were caned. Smoking was another offence. There was always a group of boys who persisted in smoking and they were persistently caned

Caning could be quite brutal, though not publicly that had once been the norm.

I once saw a boy who had been caned very severely. His buttocks were covered in black, raised, bleeding welts.

Thankfully I only ever had the hand but with further offences could graduate to slipper, rounders bat and finally cricket bat. Of course, some teachers did only use a cane.

Sadly, or otherwise, we did not have any foreign language teachers. I think the reason being that they had all been called up in the war.

Today boys do not wear school caps but then it was all part of the uniform. I still have my cap.

Our uniforms were supplied by the school and an optional rule was introduced at one point where parents were asked if they could pay for them. As I say, this was optional and as in my case my mother could not have afforded to pay for the uniform. She still got sent an 'optional' bill each term that made her upset but no way could she have paid it.

At one time the caps had been slightly different. Prefects had a yellow band on their caps, Sub Prefects a light blue band. All others plain.

I became a Sub Prefect but I never had a banded cap as the idea had been dropped.

At the rear of the old block stood the Tuck Shop, where we could order a small ration of sweets once a week.

Close by was the Scullery where we had a rota for washing up the dishes and cutlery. It was a horrible place with large teak sinks. There was no washing up liquid, simply hot water and if you went in first thing in a morning the slimy sinks would be crawling with huge slugs.

A filthy greasy place and I always stuck my fork through my jumper at the table, to make sure there was nothing adhering to the prongs.

The rota for washing up came around about once a month. Also, your turn for being Server in the dining Hall. That job involved going to the hall prior to meal time and laying the tables for your house.

One exciting job to get was called 'Team Teas'. When an opposing school visited to play a sports match, a special tea was set out for the teams at the end. If you got the job of setting it out, you also got to eat some of the cakes as well. Unheard of as far as normal meals were concerned.

Another job that I got was Messenger. The idea of that was to go round all the masters and ask if they required anything to be taken, of fetched, to or from town.

As we weren't normally allowed out of bounds this was a great opportunity to see a bit more of the shops. There was a Messenger Bicycle, that made it very convenient to slip home when doing Messenger. I remember on one occasion meeting YY8477 coming along the road but nothing was ever said.

Otherwise, if for some special reason you had to go out of the school you had to obtain a signed Exeat.

Before meals we would all line up in our houses before being sent in turns to wash our hands. Then we filed into the Dining Hall passing along the North and South corridors.

One incident that has stuck in my mind while we were lining up happened one evening before tea. Lots of boys carried a pocket knife and the lad next to me had taken his out of his pocket and was brandishing it about. Suddenly without any warning he stepped forward and stabbed the lad in front of him in the back.

I don't think that he intended any harm whatever to the other boy but simply being over enthusiastic.

Seeing what had happened, a prefect behind us dashed forward and literally ripped the shirt up the lads back. There was a trickle of blood running down his spine.

Fortunately, it wasn't a deep wound and the lad was only shaken. However the boy would had done it, when he saw the blood, promptly fainted.

Afterwards there was an immediate restriction on boys having knives.

The Americans

Sometime during 1944 Prospect House was taken over by American GI's. First white, then black.
Of course it was quite exciting for us young lads and we soon got to know quite a few of them. We spent hours cadging gum and other treats, that were unavailable to us with rationing.
Many of us set up collecting discarded cigarette packets Old Gold, Camel, Lucky Strike, brands that we had never even heard of.
The Americans used the Upper Close to play baseball, or I think it may have been soft ball?
Very soon lads could be heard running round the school shouting things like, "OK pitch to me there Johnnie Boy" and " Everybody Walks"
The one phrase that is common now but then was completely new to us was,
"OK! Let's Go".
Funny really how these small things amused us and it was all new.
They all went off on manoeuvres, I believe in Wales. When they returned their vehicles were filthy and emblazed with slogans. I remember one read, " No Gum Chum but we got Chocolate"

I recall a rhyme someone wrote.

It was a dark and stormy night
The sentry stood at ease

A voice came round the corner
“Got any Gum Chum Please”

One day the ‘Yanks’ vanished.

Many months later, one solitary American appeared. He had come back apparently to collect something that he must have hidden somewhere (I suspect it may have been to see some girl?) Anyway of course we all crowded round him to ask how they had all got on and he told us that they had all been killed on the beach. He was the only survivor.

I have visited Omaha beach in recent years and can understand how the slaughter came about.

I have tried to discover who those Americans were, perhaps with a view to contacting descendants. Lots of them were posted in the area and Prospect House was only one of many. Nothing has ever come to light to indicate who the regiments were. I suppose all part of D Day secrecy?

On May 8, 1945 Germany unconditionally surrendered its military forces to the Allies.

At assembly that morning Mr Stone announced to our joy and amazement that the war in Europe was over.
We were to have the rest of the week off and given sweets and raisins to eat as a treat. Both items strictly rationed.

The cadets were told to throw a salute of thunder flashes, I believe about 100. These were thrown down onto front field and really did make a huge noise.
He told us that they had managed to obtain a supply of fireworks from Wilders the manufacturer. The smallest amount that they could buy was £25 worth. That may sound trivial today but was an enormous number of BIG fireworks. some of which were mortars and had to have metal containers set in the ground to fire them from.

On the following days small boys were seen to be dragging large amounts of wood from all over the grounds to an enormous pile on the football pitch. Several small but old wooden buildings mysteriously vanished in the process.

On the Saturday we had a huge celebration.
You need to appreciate that during the war years bonfires had not been permitted.
This was an occasion that I will never forget.
The bonfire was lit, it seemed huge and the fireworks started, together with dozens more thunder flashes.
There were so many fireworks that they could not all be fired on the one night and another celebration was held the following weekend, without the bonfire.

I seem to remember that the bonfire embers continued to burn for several days.

Oh happy day, yet one that I sincerely hope will never need to be celebrated again.

The gymnasium back then was not exactly Olympic standard, in fact it was positively primitive.
However, we still managed to vault over horses, climb ropes and box in a ring that had to be assembled.
We were particularly good in the boxing ring and always won the Scout Boxing that was held in Stourbridge.

Then, surprisingly, a trapeze and rings appeared and we all had to have a go at being pushed on the trapeze by Mr Purgavie, who was the Gym Master.
I hated it and quite frankly was terrified but we ALL had to be pushed.
Then one boy, Derek Holmes, fell off and broke both arms.
Wonder if Derek "Pongo" Holmes is still around?
Needless to say, the compulsory pushing ceased.

You may notice that I haven't mentioned much about sports, simply because I was one of those boys who hated them. The only thing that I was reasonable at was Cross Country running and I was in the school team.
Nevertheless due to the small number of boys in the school we were forced to play all the sports in the interhouse matches.

I remember that I scored a goal once in a football game, by accident.
Lyttelton v Foster.
A high ball came down and hit me on the head. It bounced right back over the goalkeeper into the back of the net.
Then again I hit 13 runs in one cricket match, the highest score in my house on that day.
Rugby, Huh! I just hated rugby, yet the school team was very good even then.
(I know they have done very well this year.)

Nicknames! Haven't mentioned them. Most boys answered to their Surname, very few Christian names were even known. However, nicknames abounded.
I was 'Maggot' Allen. Don't ask me why. Maybe I because I was always poking into things?
Someone called it me one day and it stuck.

Someone had the bright idea of producing a monthly magazine, it was called,
"The Bombshell"

Magazine? Simple! Set up on PC, obtain news, print. As I am doing right now.
SORRY! PC's and Printers hadn't been invented Everything back then was from scratch.

I believe a master may have had a typewriter but otherwise it all had to be done by hand.
Even to the point of a large boy sitting on top of a press to produce lino cut pictures. I think there must have been some means of copying because quite a few were produced.
Somewhere I have a copy but I'm not certain where?

Camping

Every July the whole school would set off by steam train to Market Drayton in Shropshire.

From there we were transported to Goldstone Wharf on the Shropshire Union Canal. It is close to the village of Cheswardine.

The first time I went it was extremely basic. A huge pile of straw was tipped into a field and we were given paillasses to fill with the straw to sleep on. Being new to the game, I only pushed a small amount of straw into mine, so spent the whole fortnight more or less lying on the hard ground. We actually slept in Bell tents, feet to the pole.

I got wiser of course and afterwards when we went, I stuffed my paillasse full.

The school owned two narrow boats, or barges as we called them. They were named The Lion and The Banker. A few boys slept on those, probably seniors.

We also had a rowing boat that was great fun. I fell in the canal, fully clothed, twice during my years. We also swam in the canal, that would certainly not be encouraged today, especially as the latrines had to be emptied into it periodically.

Working barges, both horse drawn and powered, went past all the time and it was the duty of a couple of boys to keep a book and to shout to the bargees to ask them where they were going and what they were carrying.

You can imagine, that the answers they got were not always polite.

Actually, we had great times there and had our annual Sea Scout inspection with a visit from a high-ranking Naval officer (pictures to follow).

The local farmer who owned the fields would allow us to play in the farm buildings and I remember eating cow cake up in a hayloft.

It was also harvesting time and us boys used to go to the field that was being cut with an old-fashioned binder and gather up the sheaves of corn and arrange them in ‘stooks’

The binder went round the field in circles and so the uncut area in the centre got smaller and smaller.

That was when the rabbits started to come out.

One man stood with a gun but it was never fired.

Out of one field 15 rabbits ran out over the period and only one escaped.

Us bloodthirsty boys encircled the field and ran them all down and clubbed them to death. The farmer was grateful, it would have been impossible to have shot them all.

Sounds gruesome now telling it but it was quite exciting.

On the Sunday at the middle of the fortnight we all marched to Cheswardine Church. It was quite small and only had a few local lads in the choir.

It seemed to be a big event in the village and people all turned out to see our arrival, lining the sides of the road.

When the hymns were sung our school completely drowned out the choir.

I remember that the last time that I went to the camp, the arrangements and layout had been changed. One large tent held a table covered with loaves of bread. Another close by had been piled with cans of food, simply tipped on the ground, I doubt if anyone had counted them..

Do I need to tell you that boys are always hungry. As seniors, on the way back to our tent in an evening a boy would sneak into one tent and grab a loaf. Then someone else would raid the food tent and pinch either a tin of corned beef, or tins of sardines. It was great having a midnight feast. No one ever found out and I may be revealing this for the first time.

After ending my camping episode I remembered another thing that happened there.
I obtained a dog.
Sadly, one boy, Bill Lester, lost his parents during his time at school.
Mr Stone adopted him. Although he joined the Royal Navy he did return to school on leave.
On one leave he saw a puppy for sale in a shop window and feeling sorry for it, went in and bought it. He could not take it back to sea, so it was left at school.
It came with us to camp and got frequently thrown into the canal to make it swim.
I took a liking to this dog, which was absolutely nondescript, described by one boy as a cross between a hedgehog and a bag of nails.
I plucked up my courage and with furtive steps approached Mr Stone and asked if I could have him.
I quite imagine now that Mr Stone was probably relieved to get rid of him.
Anyway, parents came by coach to visit us at camp and Mother took him home.
Mother named him 'Ration', as he was our ration of dog.
He was a most faithful animal, could catch a rabbit or a rat, would fight any size dog and had offspring all over the area. Not by request either.
He lived to be 14 and is buried in my garden.
He never did learn to swim.

Religion of course played a big part in our lives and assembly was held both morning and evening in the Great Hall.

On Sundays we wore our best clothes, that meant blazers and colour banded socks. We walked by houses to St Mary’s Church in Oldswinford. We took up one side of the upstairs gallery, I believe it is now dismantled.

All religion was Christian, Church of England.

When I was 14 I was confirmed there by the Bishop of Worcester, together with several others. I still remember part of his sermon that referred to the ship on the reverse side of a halfpenny.

He would have had no idea that these coins would vanish from our currency.

It seems however that even though the ship is no more, I haven't forgotten.

Entertainment sometimes was provided and on a few Saturday evenings a gentleman named Mr Foster would come with his projector and screen and show silent films.

I still love Charlie Chaplin in "Easy Street".

Once a Walt Disney film was showing in town called "Song of the South" It's about Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox.

Before it arrived, Uncle Remus came to the school. A tall impressive elderly black man with a white beard. He sang the theme song, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and we were very impressed and boys were singing it for weeks after. I believe now it had racist undertones but 'that' word was unknown.

We did get to go to see the film.

Later on in my school life we were allowed to visit the cinema in town on occasional evenings, accompanied by a master. I remember going to see "Mrs Miniver" which was quite famous at the time.

The school had a number of clubs and societies, though to be fair I think many of them were even prior to my days and had died out. I know a previous Matron whose name (I think) was Miss Needham had one called WHS (Society of Willing Helpers).

I joined The First Aid Society where we were taught by Nurse about bandaging and the names of bones. At least I know where my Femur is.

Some boys were interested in music and were taught Piano and the Recorder. I had a go at the latter but never really learned to read music.

One lad was a very keen Radio enthusiast and with the help of a teacher (who most boys hated) built a valve set, which was quite an achievement. Yes, there were some teachers who were hated.

One strange hobby was catching mice. The dormitories were overrun with the things and a scheme was set up to encourage boys to trap them.

For every mouse killed there was a reward of an Optimist Bar. An Optimist Bar is a small bar of chocolate that came from America during the war.

We all procured (from wherever) 'Little Nipper' Mouse traps. We would lie awake at night listening for the sharp snap of a trap. Then there would be cries of "Got one", followed by a triumphant march next morning to collect our reward

The school had allotments where boys could grow vegetables. Some allotments were really good with excellent crops but mine was always weeds.

There was also Pet's Field which was at the back of the Headmasters House. There boys could keep a pet. Things like Rabbits or Guinea Pigs and even Mice. Somebody even had a Gosling that would follow us around like a dog. It was a lovely gentle creature that nibbled

our buttons but it grew and a teacher took it home just before Christmas, it was never seen again? Always felt sad about that.

My choice was Racing Pigeons and together with several others we built a suitable loft (Shed). We didn't race them but they were that type of pigeon, compared with Tumblers, Rollers and many others.

We used to let them out to fly round and they would return to be fed.

Sometimes one would land on the school buildings and not come back, even on top of the Clock Tower. We used to throw potatoes right up there to try to make them fly.

Eric White, my friend, was an excellent thrower but one day he chipped a bone in his elbow by throwing too hard.

There were four of us who kept pigeons Eric always known as 'Horace' White, Colin 'Tich' Breakwell, and Richard 'Ellie' Akers. Only Eric and I are still alive.

As a parting memory, an expression that has stuck in my mind, that was used to anyone who was a bit awkward at doing something.

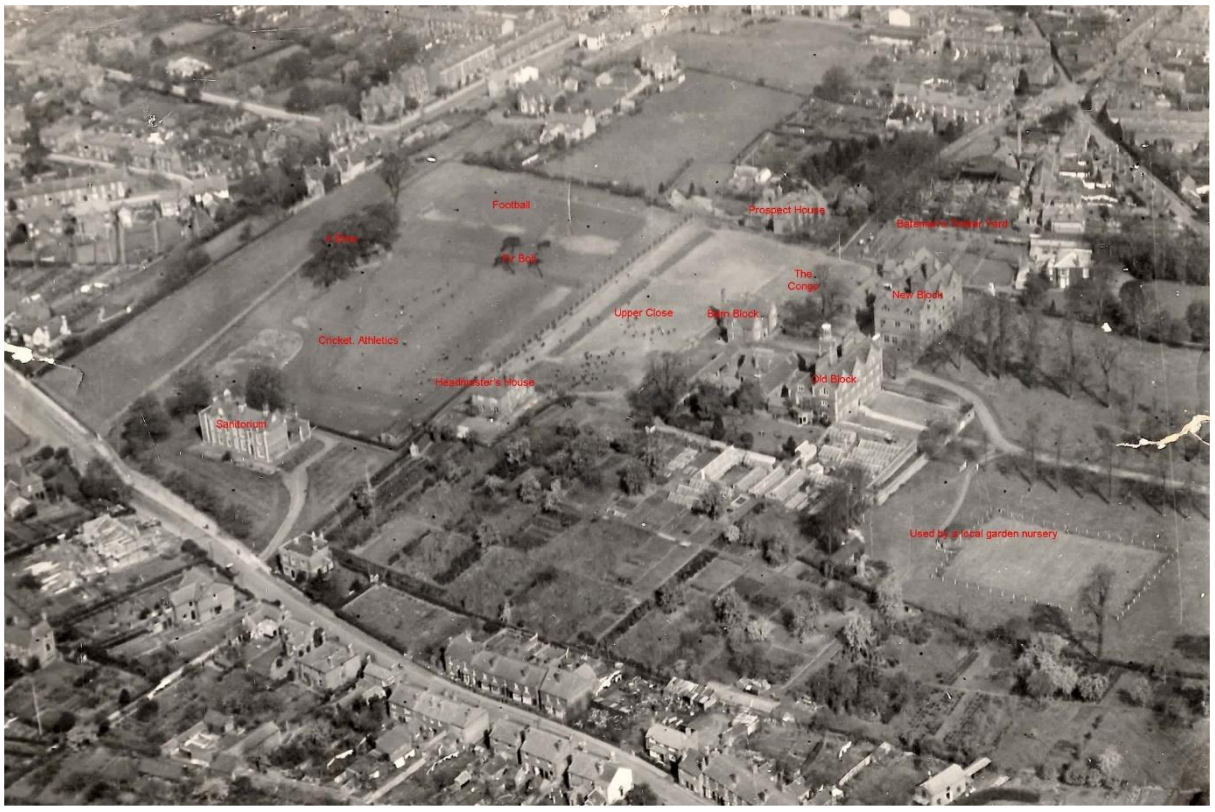
"You're like a Cow with a Gun"

At that point I think I will end my ramblings.

It is eighty years since I first went to Oldswinford Hospital. I was terribly home sick; I hated it and ran away eleven times in my first term. The last month of which I spent in Isolation Hospital with Scarlet Fever.

The following term I tried to 'escape' again but was caught, halfway down the stairs in my pyjamas, by 'Spud'.

I never tried again.

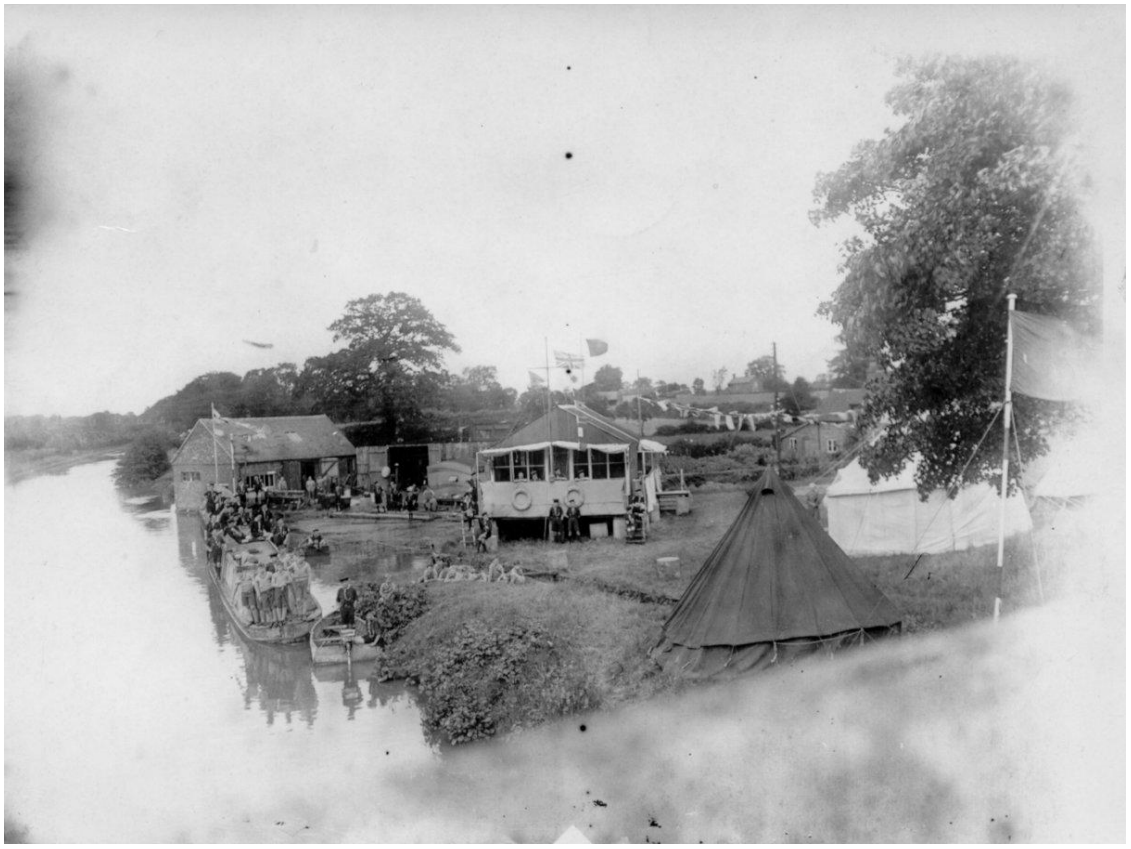


View of Oldswinford Hospital 1930's



Pushing the Roller on the Cricket Pitch

I am shortest in right hand group

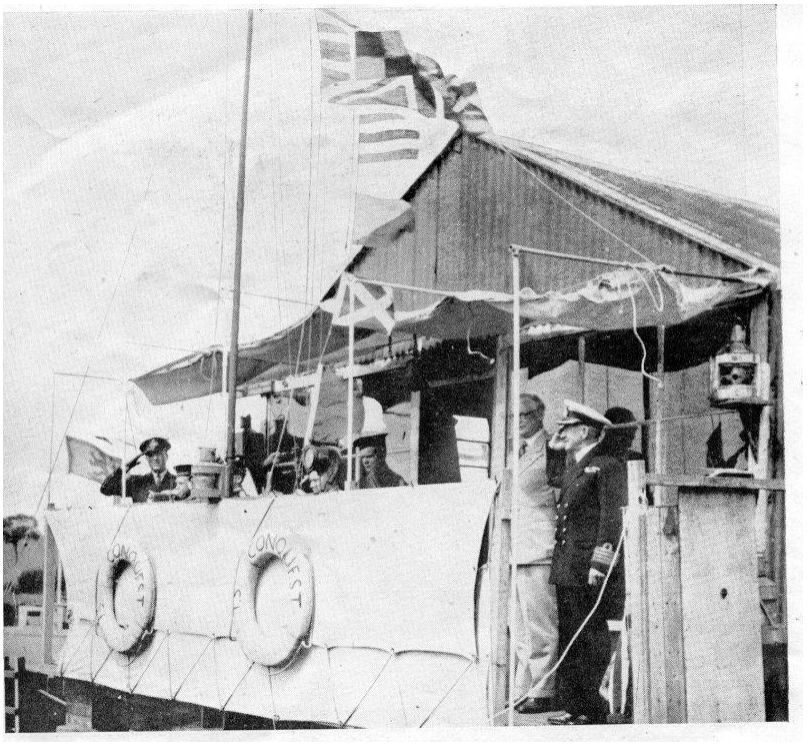


Goldstone Wharf



Commander Rossiter Inspecting the troop. Officer in peak cap Mr Roy Purgavie, Nearest boy left, John Sevenoaks. Boy in rear John Blight. Boys being inspected

L-R, Pete Rice, Charlie Hannis, Leslie Blight, James Blight Derek Bastable, Richardson



I believe that was Lord Cobham in the suit.



Rainbird, Cartwright, Bird, Saunders, Akers, Vaughan, Hannis

Stallwood, Blight J, Hart, Blight L, Baldwin, Bastable, Riley, Troman, Harris

Richardson, Pugh, Sanders, Sevenoaks, Blight J, Farrington, Evans, White

Mr S. Childs in Centre

Breakwell, David, Hartland, Rice, Perkin, Orford, Holmes, Wargent, Howard

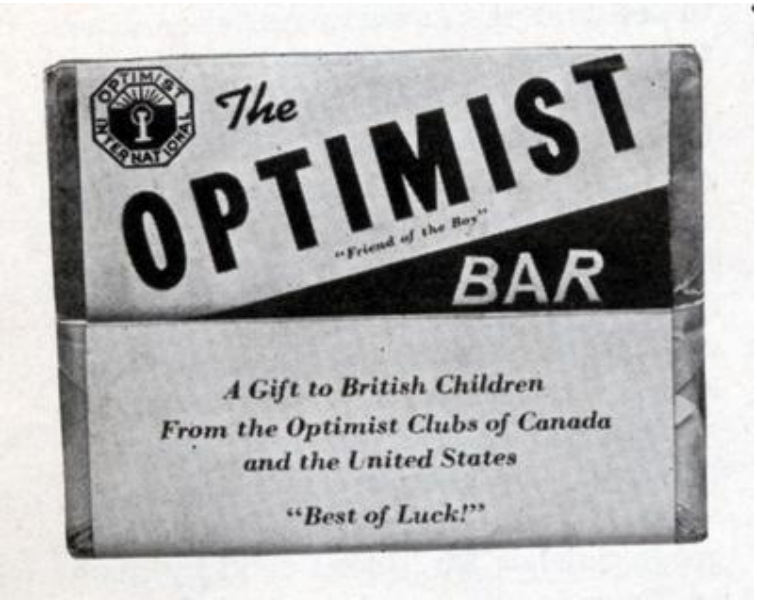
Stait, Richards, Taphouse, Rowlands, Stanley, Munn, ME, Breakwell, Fereday





My Satchel





Reward for catching a mouse

Notes from Facebook and emails

Robert's Facebook address is www.facebook.com/robert.allen.1044186, although the posts are on the site www.facebook.com/groups/2211481472

Had another couple of memories.

A sport that was introduced later in my years was Shinty.

It is like hockey but the rules are different and also the sticks are more like an upturned walking stick.

Today I believe it is mainly played in Scotland.

Another thing that we did was to make wooden throwing arrows.

A piece of string is wound round the arrow in a certain way and the arrow thrown, the string giving it extra leverage. It will travel a considerable distance almost as far as if shot from a bow. I'm not sure that I could remember how to do it now and I certainly couldn't throw at my age. I don't know how we dicovered how to do it and I have never ever seen it done by anyone since.

I had met Maurice Evans some years ago at a social function. He left the school the term before I started. His number was 79. I started in the following September 1943 and I was given the same number, 79. You might guess that it was an interesting conversation that we had.

You ask if I have any magazines from Oldswinford Hospital. Apart from a, (much scribbled on), names of boys in the school, during my time and a couple of Foleyans, not much else. However somewhere in the house is a least one copy of a little magazine that was printed in the school called, "The Bombshell". Very simply produced but contained various stories boys might have written, or events that might have happened. Even poems and funny rhymes. Exactly where it, (even they), are I am not sure.

I have older connections with the school. My Great Grand Uncle attended around 1830. I have his Indenture when he was apprenticed on leaving.

Much nearer, an Uncle about 1900. My Grandfather worked as Tailor and Porter for a time and also an Aunt as Seemstress.

Grandad talked about the Scout Jamboree held at the school, also the barge going to Sharpness with boys. There was at one time a very old movie at school, showing him on board.

Old Swinford Hospital Alumni
Robert Allen · 11h ·

The School was always known locally as The Bluecoat School. Of course there was a reason for that, it was the uniform that used to be worn.
Below is a picture of my Uncle, Leonard Clive Brooks. He attended somewhere between 1905 to 1910. The Headmaster then was Mr Maybury.
His number was 117 that can just be made out on his arm.

