Memories of my time at Old Swinford Hospital

1915-1921

By Clifford A Owen

Mr Owen, born 5 May 1907, visited the school in Lent term 2007, aged 99, and spent the afternoon with Mr Jones, mainly in Founders Garden. Mr Jones presented him with school cufflinks to mark his visit and he left us with a handwritten account of his days at Old Swinford Hospital. As far as we know, at that time, he was the oldest living Old Foleyan. On his 100th birthday, he was presented with an Old Foleyan tie by Mr Maurice Evans, President of the Old Foleyans Association, on behalf of the school. Sadly he passed away on 30 October 2009 and was buried wearing his treasured tie.

In the Beginning

My story begins when I was 8 years old and my mother had been persuaded to let me go to Old Swinford Hospital, where I went in Dec. 1915. My father had died from cancer at the age of 47 and had been a self employed shoe repairer. Consequently he was not entitled to any state benefit. The only income mother was getting was 7 shillings each from the army and a small wage from my 17 year old brother. My mother was left with 3 boys, one daughter who was 11 years old and the youngest was I. Therefore mother had to go out to work as a cleaner in a local cinema. I never know how she managed. Two of my brothers were on active service in France. They came to the funeral straight from the action in their fighting equipment complete with rifles. On their return to the front they left me with scabies.

I had not been at school very long when the scabies on me took over. Being so contagious they put me in a small room at the top of the old school to keep me away from the other boys. I was only allowed out when the other boys were at lessons. After having a daily bath in a tar oil for several weeks, the problem was cleared and I resumed normal lessons. At this time there were 4 classes. I started in class three.

Why I mentioned my family problems was to try and give you an insight into the conditions that existed in 1916. The war was in full swing, the Germans were sinking our supply ships. Everything was in short supply. Our troops were suffering great losses, a great depression existed throughout the country. I am writing this from memory. Because of the food deliveries that were upset by the German blockade, we had no potatoes for a short spell, so as a substitute boiled rice was used, which did not look very appetizing, but as we were always hungry the boys did it justice.

My early days at the school are rather hazy. One of my first memories was fire escape drill in the corner of one of the upstairs rooms, one window had been taken out and replaced with a cubicle in which a movable seat was fitted. As one sat on the seat, the operator would instruct each boy to fold arms tightly before lifting a lever which sent the boy (in a prone position) hurtling down a long shute; which was open ended and held at the bottom to prevent any accidents.

When the war finished in November 1918, we celebrated it by a massive bonfire, fireworks and lashings of lovely coffee and biscuits. What a treat! we were allowed to stay up late, the first time ever. I was eleven years old.

The School

The Headmaster at the Blue Coat School was a Mr W J Maybury, a most wonderful man and so very understanding and kindly, very severe on any wrong doers. He was supported by 5 teachers and the school catered for 160 boys with ages from 7-14 years. On reaching 14 years old the boys had to leave on the next general holiday. As it was wartime the school was maintained by a limited number of personnel. There were five masters who were not fit for war service (besides Mr W J Maybury, Headmaster) and one odd job man, who used to render the fat down to make various kinds of dripping which was consumed by the boys and which was sometimes difficult to spread. We had a Prussian carpenter named Isdepslèc who taught the boys their trade, woodwork. There were two spinster ladies who mended socks and minor repairs etc, they were so kind to me when I had the scabies. Their kindness was greatly appreciated.

There were four classes, and boys were assessed on ability and general schooling. I was first rate with masters very strict and always striving for perfection.

Dormitories

There were 6 dormitories, with 3 on each of 2 floors with a bathroom and toilets on each landing. The bath was a large square one made in wood and lined by either zinc or lead and 3 or 4 boys could bathe at a time with a master in attendance always; the place used to get really steamed up. The bath was on a raised dais and boys had difficulty climbing in. We each had our own numbered towel. Everything we had was numbered even to each sock and it was rare that anything was stolen.

As it was war time, we were forced to wash in cold water stripped to the waist, winter and summer, morning 6.00am and evening 7.30pm, under the watchful eye of the master an experience that stood me in good stead in later years.

To prevent us from leaving our dormitories at night, several jerries were dotted about under different beds. Always one vessel would be placed in the middle of the room, in case one couldn't find one and sometimes a trickster would tie string to the handle and pull it away whilst in use with dire results!

As we had to be in bed every night for 8pm, it was difficult to get to sleep in the summer so we used to erect 3 jerries on top of each other they would be for the wickets, a slipper for a bat and invariably my socks for a ball. One night, the ball (my socks) were hit straight through the window and our dormitory was on the second floor. It meant that I had to creep downstairs to retrieve them. Sadly, a master caught me just as he was going for his supper, he told me off and told me to wait by his desk. It was getting dark so I went to my bed and heard no more about it.

Chores

As there were no people employed to do the maintenance throughout the school most of the older boys were designated to do the necessary jobs to keep the place tidy. Therefore, a roster was made every week and installed in a prominent position for all to see and every boy had an allotted task. Every morning on rising, all the boys washed in cold water, then they all folded their bedclothes neatly away. The various boys allotted the tasks would sweep up the different dormitories, six in all for 150 boys. Another gang would clean up the washbowls, some were made to empty the vessels (jerries) and each group was responsible for its own dormitory. Some boys cleaned up the stairs.

On Fridays a special effort was made when the duck boards were lifted and floor swilled down. Every morning a team would be on duty in the cook house, putting two pieces of bread on each plate which would be laid out on the tables, also a lump of margarine or dripping from various meats would be placed on the bread. A building was set aside for the kitchen activities. One team would wash up the dirty plates etc, it was quite an experience to watch them perform their duties so methodically and quick. In this building the boys would prepare the potatoes in a drum with a handle at the side. Inside the drum would be some very rough parts which would knock off the skins and clean them ready for cooking.

Assembly

Every morning the school assembled for prayers. The Headmaster would address us all with the previous day's events in the newspapers and on one occasion he announced the introduction of the success of the telephone, I am open to correction on this.

Punishments

Each day any boy who had incurred the wrath of a master would be exposed from the stage. Any boy who had the misfortune to wet his bed would be made to parade his wet sheets before hanging them out to dry. Any boy who had ring worm would be made to wear a brown coloured head covering which was quite common in those days.

The discipline in and out of class rooms was extremely strict, it being a punishable offence when keeping hands in pockets etc. One punishment was making the boys take out weeds from between cobble stones in the bottom court. Another punishment was writing lines, very irksome on a hot sunny afternoon.

Visits

We were only allowed visitors once a month, that was always on a Saturday. Some of the boys' visitors would bring them jars of jam or potted meat which was so very acceptable and it was so amusing to watch the neighbours of the recipients cadging, the luxuries never lasted long. My sister used to come to see me every month and was my only visitor, my mum could not afford the train fare. One week my elder brother came, he was 15 years old. He acquired a bike which had punctures in both wheels so he stuffed the tyres with straw and came on that, he only came once.

Uniform

The uniform consisted of a heavy blue serge frocktail coat, reaching below the knees. Long full length corduroy trousers, a stiff starched collar with black tie, thick dark grey socks and very strong lace up boots. The shirts were of a thick grey material and very hairy. The main consideration being that at all times one was very warm, especially during the warmer weather or when one played games or fought and wrestled. The head was protected by a hat with a tassel on the top.

Our uniform was checked quite regularly and sometimes some were issued with new corduroy trousers which gave off a very offensive smell so when visiting church every Sunday, it fairly stunk and we were not very popular. The whole outfit was a source of humour to the outside world which we were only allowed to visit under supervision every Sunday marching to church and back or a Sunday afternoon walk round the by lanes of Stourbridge; one lane being Love Lane. These outside walks were very enjoyable although we were made to walk in a very orderly fashion and no horse play was allowed. Outings generally took place on Sunday afternoons, we used to be glad to get back to our tea, having worked up a good appetite.

Food

Lord Foley had given some very important instructions as to the feeding and diet of the boys and these instructions were duly executed until the German submarine menace seriously interfered with food imports in Britain in 1916. The ordinary people in Britain never really understood how serious the U Boat was until after the war had ended. Things got rather difficult with makeshift meals which the inmates couldn't understand until the submarines were brought under some kind of control later on in the war.

Potatoes were in very short supply so we were given boiled rice as a vegetable with whatever meat was available and being white never looked very attractive on the place but with plenty of salt and pepper certainly helped to overcome the ever present pangs of hunger. Sunday dinner was usually very good with fairly ample portions of meat, generally beef, and potatoes, cabbage etc with maybe rice pudding to follow.

Monday, more often than not, we had bread and cheese followed by a kind of bread pudding with the crust baked very hard and plenty of currants and raisons in the mixture. In passing most of the boys learnt the deaf alphabet so if a boy wished to swap his hard bread pudding for his friend's cheese, he would make the necessary signs, then the respective food would be passed out of sight hand to hand to the recipient. Some days the pudding crust would be so hard the boys would pocket it to have at their leisure. We had great fun making one another understand until a vigilant master caught us then we would get our ears tweaked to the amusement of the other boys. Silence was always maintained during all meal times, I myself had more punishment for laughing at others than ever I did for real misbehavior.

After dressing and chores it was time to go on parade, ready to be marched to the dining hall for breakfast. The marching was done in twos, so that on entering the dining room they could file each side of the table. The two slices of bread would be on each plate with generally dripping to be spread. The boys preferred pork dripping as it was easy to spread but great difficulty was had trying to cope with mutton and sometimes beef dripping. The general practice was to cut the dripping into small pieces and try and balance it on the bread with fatal results at times. We each had to file in turn with our mugs to collect the cocoa which at times was very thick and usually lots of gritty sediment.

Dinner every day was our main meal and the boys were always ready for it but being wartime it was never enough and duty master would remind us to masticate every mouthful 20 times and when I have dinners with my family and grandchildren they never forget to remind me. Before leaving the dining hall the master would check our plates and should any of us leave any fat he would make us eat it. Henceforth, the boys overcame that problem by putting the offensive fat in their pockets and sling it to the pigs in a close-by field.

Tea was always 2 fairly thick pieces of bread, with a square of margarine. We used to have great difficulty in getting the marg to go the full distance but being so hungry, dry bread was quite satisfying. The tea was always drinkable. At times we were allowed to queue for extra dry bread, which was laid out in half slices, we never seemed to have enough to eat.

Every Christmas, each pupil was given a medium sized Christmas cake to take home.

Free Time

The boys spent most of their spare time walking round and round the rather large playground in the one corner of which was a very old fashioned giant swing which consisted of a large telegraph like pole, about 12 feet high, with an axle fastened on the top and two ropes reaching nearly to the ground. The sport was to hang on to the ropes and propel oneself into the air in a circular fashion hitting the ground hard with the feet and springing in a clockwise directions; quite an exciting exercise, giving strength to ankles and wrists. I feel sure that this voluntary exercise has been of great help to me as I was able to play football flat out without ever being exhausted, I also did a fair amount of cross country running with little after effects.

At one end of the playground was a very high wall which separated the school from an orchard owned by a Mr Godfrey. A wide path by the wall had a slope and during any icy weather, the boys would throw water down the slope so that the next day they would have a readymade icy surface for sliding along. Great fun was had by all.

Sport

As the school was so short staffed, there being a war on, and the resident teachers were not quite as fit as they would have liked, normal sporting activities were neglected. We did have a football team when we played the local grammar schools. I am reluctant to write this episode which I have never told anyone about but I am trying to give you an insight to the conditions during and after the war when hunger was ever present. Food was very scarce and the parents of the boys playing robbed their own family sandwiches, cakes etc to provide the refreshments for us when we played away. On this occasion we were playing Kidderminster Grammar who had put on a good display. As we lined up and prayers were being said one boy trying to be clever pinched a cake off the plate, other boys not wishing to miss out followed suit. Our master was not pleased and made them put the stolen cakes back. I was ashamed.

The End

At the end of every term, several boys would complete their allotted time, never to be seen again and a strange feeling would prevail when one realized that having developed a friendship after living together for several years, it had come to an end. Strangely, after serving four and half years in the RAF in a mobile servicing unit many years later, the same thing happened again.

Once the war ended, life became very humdrum as we did the same every day, a practice passed down through the ages. After the war had ended and the troops were de-mobbed, many ex-service men visited the school and would tell of their experiences. The boys would be very interested as some of their stories needed to be censored, as they were so rude.

On the dark winter nights, we would all entertain each other in the classrooms, with plenty of games, chess, draughts, cards, ludo, a truly good variety. Strangely two of my best mates from Kidderminster were fond of chess and we made such progress other boys used to find it interesting to watch us.

In our final year, my friend named Jack Hunt beat me in the final to win a chess set. After we left school I bought the set off him which was lucky for me as in 1928 I got a job in Germany where the Germans played chess in the pub where I used to visit. They were so pleased to play me. It helped me to pass my time with some very good friends.

I am writing this at the age of 99 years.