

# SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORY

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## Memories of the Boys' British School, Saffron Walden 1937-1964

by W.E. Foster

Reprinted from: *Saffron Walden History* No. 25 Spring 1984

'A man's world' – or so it seemed to me when I joined the staff of B.B.S. in 1937. The school was approximately 160 boys, aged 7 – 14 years, and divided into four classes, Mr Elsdon, headmaster, two male members of staff – Mr. Dewing and Mr. Scottford – and myself. But from the very beginning my woman's point of view was always respected, and there was no doubt that 'I hold my own'.

It had always been the custom for a woman teacher to take charge of the entrants – 30 or so seven year olds. They came mainly from two schools, South Road and Museum Street. Many of these boys were the sons of 'old boys', so there was always a genuine family interest.

The cricket season was still on when I took over on October 1st and I almost prayed 'Please let me hit the first ball', and when later I was told that 'You can kick a football good, Miss', the first hurdle was over.

These small boys took their school life quite seriously but on certain occasions needed to be 'mothered', especially for the many cuts, bumps and bruises that came along, and the first aid became part of my life. 'My Mum will be cross' was often the remark when hair had to be cut away to find an injury. There was always a good liaison with the General Hospital, and when a more serious injury occurred, a message to the matron and a boy could receive almost immediate attention.

A good supply of safety pins was an essential; boys of all ages would appear at my door, clutching trousers and braces – 'Please, Miss, I've lost all my buttons!' Extra cuts and grazes during the sledging season. Many boys would bring their own sledge, but the larger school one was a great success, particularly when staff members climbed abroad. Almost a Cresta run from Ashdon Road corner across the Common to the Slade.

In 1938 came echoes of war with the issue of gas masks. Those cardboard boxes! During the class, kept under the desk, eventually often used to hold all the treasures small boys collect, and where better to keep one's lunch.

On Friday afternoon, before games period, it was 'tidying-up' – clean desks and neat surroundings for all – an essential part of training. It's amazing what collects in a small boy's desk within a week, but it was inspection all round and general disposal of rubbish. This all helped towards care of books and equipment. Boys would bring along their own dusters for polishing, and then, with some polish from the school cleaner, it released a lot of energy on a wet afternoon.

Then, of course, came 1939 and its many problems – evacuees, part-time schooling, canteen meals, use of shelters, fathers away in the Forces. But the 7 year old could take it in his stride, and many of my adult friends contributed their sweet coupons so that small rewards could be enjoyed and appreciated. No oranges or bananas, but then the country child still had his apples and carrots.

Several of the smaller village schools had closed and boys transferred to B.B.S. The great occasion when those living in Wenden rushed in: 'Miss, Miss, we've been bombed!'. They came from Audley End on the small branch line, and a lone plane diving out of the clouds had machine gunned the train. Heroes all!

I had already become involved with the School National Savings Scheme, and during the war years the group showed excellent results, often involving members of the family and the little blue savings books came along regularly with the dinner money on Monday morning. 'Old Boys' now often speak of this and how they saved enough for their first bicycle.

During the war years our school roll had increased – evacuees and many boys coming in from the nearby Debden R.A.F. Station. I now had a class of 40 plus, and so it remained. At times the old school was nearly bursting at the seams.

So to 1945, with fathers returning from the Forces. Many had been abroad for several years and hardly knew their sons – the small boy of seven had been 'man of the house' and his nose was put out of joint, so mother and I tried to sort matters out, usually with success.

Only a teacher knows what a headache navy blue raincoats and Wellington boots can be. What does one do when on a Friday afternoon one is left with three left boots? Names inside and then the use of spring clothes pegs solved many problems. Of course, the Slade stream at the lower end of the Common was a great attraction to the 7 year-old. A new raincoat brought to me plastered with mud: 'Please, Miss, my Mum won't half be wild'. My reply 'Do you think I'm pleased!', but we usually managed some cleaning up.

The school year had its three terms – Christmas, Spring, Summer. In September the entrants arrived from Infant Departments, obviously proud to be part of a boys' school. I could feel them summing me up and for the first weeks wondering what 'she' would or would not accept. But quickly we learnt each other's characters and settled in happily. The highlight was the Xmas Pudding Project (reading, writing, geography, history, songs, rhymes, etc. all involved). With the co-operation of mother it was possible to make, cook and then eat at the Pudding Party. Staff members all joined in the stirring and wishing. What fun on the occasion when the spoon slipped from Mr Elsdon's hand and both he and I were spattered with the raw mixture! The

classroom decorations were greatly admired by mums, dads and older brothers and sisters who popped in.

The Spring Term brought the usual spate of coughs and colds, etc. and so into Summer, when the more out-of-door activities called. A simple Town History Project was much enjoyed, and imaginary battles fought in the Battle Ditches and around the Castle with Ancient Britons, Romans, Saxons and Normans.

'Did Cromwell really put his horses in the Church?'

'Does the lion on Audley End Gate really drink at the river when the clock strikes midnight?'

'My Dad says when is the next history story 'cause he wants me to hear it and tell him.'

The end of Summer Term was celebrated with a visit to London Zoo, and with the aid of a group of mothers not once was a small boy mislaid or lost.

But throughout all this was the encouragement to work and a simple award scheme (a gold star was a great achievement), combined with daily supervision of Books etc., kept these boys on their toes. All that was needed was their best, whatever their intelligence.

'I don't think you'll like this, Miss' or perhaps 'P'raps I'd better do this again' was their own verdict very often.

As the years sped away, more boys were cycling to school and the Safety Scheme came into being. Bicycles were regularly examined and it was a proud moment when a police officer came to encourage and present certificates.

In 1937 classroom furniture consisted of somewhat heavy dual desks with sloping lids and not easily moved. These were eventually replaced by a lighter type, and later, chairs and tables. So much easier to manhandle, and gave the class the opportunity to work in groups when necessary.

The school had no staffroom (I doubt if there would have been much spare time to use it) and so my classroom was always the gathering point of morning and afternoon break and many the problems that were solved during these informal moments. At least once or twice a year students would come in from the local Training College for a 3 – 4 week session. In addition to their youthful enthusiasm they were always appreciative of experienced advice and suggestions.

'She isn't a real teacher like you, Miss, is she?'

The school day always began with a morning assembly and it became customary for the second hymn to be a birthday choice of either pupils or staff. What was the favourite for the 7 year olds? Well, it was obvious that if you couldn't read all the verses there had to be a chorus, and what better choice than 'Onward Christian

Soldiers'? A proud moment too when a 7 year old informed me he could manage a bible reading and many did.

In 1950 came the County High School and we lost our senior boys. A sad thought in some ways as they had been a great asset to the younger classes, with caring, helpful advice and supervision of their conduct and behaviour.

Also in 1950 several members of staff (some had been with us for many years) transferred to the new school.

In 1964, when I retired, it was with the realisation that at least 1,000 boys had 'passed through' my hands. Twenty-seven happy years of co-operation with boys, staff and parents in a school that had a heart.

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