

# Memories



14 September 2001

## Memories of Ashburton

“The Ashburton air raid siren was a primitive mobile affair, driven round the streets on a car. I always hoped that WGB would sleep through the warning and that we would not have to go to the wine racks in the cellar. Some years later when I saw the results of the destruction in Plymouth, I realised how lucky we had been in Ashburton.”

“One of my memories is of the splendid day when the whole school went by train to Totnes and then down the Dart on a paddle steamer. Another is of WGB's report on my efforts to learn Latin: “at first he decided that he could not be bothered to learn this subject, but having been forcibly persuaded otherwise he is making good progress.””

“My memories are almost entirely happy. The kindness of Mr and Mrs Butler. Days out and picnics on Dartmoor where we were taken by WGB in his Buick (was it BER 1?). A day in my last term when WGB took me fishing on the Dart. The score was 1-0 to him! A visit to Newton Abbot when he bought me a leaving present, a book on birds which I still use and value. Perhaps my most exciting memory was standing outside after supper one evening watching an air raid on Plymouth. We were soon ushered inside! Twenty miles apart we were still considered to be in the firing line. A cricket match against a nearby prep school (Dragon?) informed us that their captain was a very good bat. He was! His name was Hubert Doggatt.”

“On the downside I found much of the time boring - at least there were few distractions from work. Eric Gibbins was a great teacher - we shared American experiences. Long walks in the winter (I had chilblains) with views of Ashburton in the hollow beneath us.

Humming-bird hawk moths on the valerian in the summer. And "mowing" the cricket pitch with scissors before the Great Match!"

"I remember a small school that combined a happy atmosphere with a total absence of bullying, superb teaching of a very high standard and a community totally untouched by the world war in progress. The happy atmosphere and the superb teaching had their source in Mr Butler himself and in Eric Gibbins. To these two I owed my Winchester scholarship, which meant so much to my father. He had made extensive enquiries about preparatory schools and brought his family back from Canada despite German submarines just in time for me to get the teaching I needed."

"The wild open life, marauding and hiding across the moors, of Hosken's Pine Martins, of hot summers'-days-on-end and on the sun terrace above the pool, of large green grasshoppers stealing loganberries with us in the kitchen garden, much stronger the smell of cider apples dropped, or rotting on the old garage floor, or in the cellars' apple racks, slept on in the air raids."

"It was a kind of Utopia; a school hidden away from the horrors of war, small enough to be a family, led by teachers of the highest calibre - WGB, Eric Gibbins and Shirley Heslop. Memories? The sleepy town, the swimming pool, the moors, the parish church, the railway. Learning carpentry from Bradford. The haunted library at the top of the stairs. WGB sucking his pipe and knocking out the ash on the soles of his shoes. Mrs Butler, the patient mother to us all. The Den, where we had prayers each morning and so many hours of fun."

"The first few nights at the Golden Lion spent in the cellars with the sound of the bombing of Exeter overhead. A bad introduction. The scent of beer, flowers and furniture polish in the Headmaster's study. A day off to pick gooseberries and then the blackcurrants. Hot sunny afternoons by the swimming pool.

"It's a lovely day, sir". "Yes, let us all have the day off".

The walk to Buckland Beacon, and the Ten Commandments. Glucose and water, Mrs Butler's cure for every ailment. Reading Edgar Allan Poe on a windy winter's afternoon on the top floor, being rather frightened to go down the stairs afterwards. Tea with Mr and Mrs Vibert. Going for walks with George Tusa, and the visit by the Tusa family and their pickled mushrooms, and pamphlets about Czechoslovakia. His sister with the marvellous name(?). The Rev Mr Needham invigilating at exams, and the Sunday morning walk to church and the magnificent stained glass windows. Playing Aunt Agatha in a one-act play produced by Mr Gibbins; my first line was "hark at the children enjoying themselves. Doesn't it make one long to be young again?" Ah yes."

"The matron's boyfriend who got out of Dunkirk, ipse dixit, and used to dive from the top board. I thought her quite attractive in a young Celia Johnson kind of way. The sandwiches with the thinnest smear of raspberry jam after running up and down Saddle Tor (was it?). Seeing the headline "180 Nazi Planes Shot Down" about September 14th and not believing it then really, but hoping it was true. Did we really hear misleading Church bells ring falsely signalling invasion? I think not. Feeling terribly cheated of life itself when not allowed to return by mistaken parents. Never really forgave them, but I am very grateful for the education they afforded me."

"My few terms at St Faith's were primarily the result of the Luftwaffe's blitzes on Plymouth and moving from a large co-educational grammar school to so small an establishment with such a wide age range was something of a contrast. Both headmasters were outstanding in different ways but it was certainly unexpected to find WGB so accessible and approachable. He was a wise counsellor and a great encourager. I thought him remarkable for his breadth of ability, as teacher, preacher, and sportsman. He always ensured that every pupil new to the school rapidly became a competent swimmer and was great

at getting the best out of everyone on the sports field. He once offered me, on the unexpected fall of a second successive wicket, half a crown if a third one fell: a hat trick it was and he was, of course, true to his word. Scout activities seemed to occupy much non-academic time, but the most significant outdoor activity I can recall was a hike from Ashburton across Holne, Dean, Brent, and Ugborough Moors to my home at Moorgate Wrangaton in company with Stuart McKim, and John and Alister Childs. This was an almighty exertion, not to mention something of a navigational achievement.”

“My wife and I made a nostalgic return to the Golden Lion Hotel about five years ago. At that time it was a real dump; however one aspect had not changed and that was the head master's study. It really brought back memories for me as I spent so much time standing outside for some misdemeanour or other! The tors and Dartmeet in WGB's American car. WGB trying to learn fly-fishing in the pool. Sanderson on the merits and outright superiority of Newcastle United. Maurice always looking for a hearse to take his cap off to. The annual destruction of the peonies with cricket bats. "Come to sunny Devon, it rains six days out of seven, and travel by Devon General". The interesting feature is in realising how much of what one picked up in those sunny days have stayed with one ever since.”

“Those crocodile walks through the deep Devon lanes, then car-free. I remember one in particular, to Buckland-in-the-Moor and thence to the top of Buckland Beacon, where the ten commandments are carved on granite slabs the size of dinner-tables; and where Mr Butler, ready to tease a know-all, would not satisfactorily answer my question as to whether these were the originals handed down to Moses.”

“Once the memory started moving so much comes back, but little of such moment. Here are a few:

The tors and Dartmeet in WGB's American car.

WGB trying to learn fly-fishing in the pool.

Salmon caught by your Dad I believe.

Sanderson on the merits and outright superiority of Newcastle United.

Maurice always looking for a hearse to take his cap off to.

The annual destruction of the peonies with cricket bats.

"Come to sunny Devon, it rains six days out of seven, and travel by Devon General".

The interesting feature is in realising how much of what one picked up in those sunny days have stayed with one ever since."

## In 1935 I started at St Faith's School

This was a private preparatory school in Trumpington Road, Cambridge about three quarters of a mile from my home at Fen House at the far end of Chaucer Road. In those days the school comprised of one detached building on the corner of Trumpington Road and Newton Road. There were some eighty boys in the school. It was called St Faith's School after the daughter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century founder of the school, a Mr Goodchild, who was called Faith although I have seen it written that it was his wife that it was named after.

After four years there on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939 war started. From then until the spring of 1940 it was what was called the 'phoney war'. The change in my life style was minimal except one always carried a gas mask slung round the neck with a cord and there was the odd air raid warning but only the very occasional bomb. (In one raid a single bomb was dropped and this killed a cow). And, of course, there was the ubiquitous blackout and no Guy Fawkes Night which had been such a feature of school life. (See my father's cin ). And no streetlights and masked headlights on all vehicles.

In 1938 my father had become Chairman of the Governors of the school when the proprietor and headmaster, W G Butler, sold out to The Leys School where my father was already a governor. No doubt Mr Butler intended to retire, but then war came and he became headmaster of that part of the school that went down to Ashburton. When he did retire after the war he became a Clerk in Holy Orders in the Church of England. By this time he was a widower.

In 1940 the school split. About one third of the school was evacuated to The Golden Lion Hotel in Ashburton. They were all boarders there unless dayboys attended later. And it was there, quite by chance, that I found there was a very charming side to Mr Butler's character.

Mr Butler was a disciplinarian of the first order and many boys were terrified of him. He was known throughout Cambridge as a disciplinarian extraordinary. I was not the only boy that was frightened of him. He was always dressed immaculately in a grey suit. And his car was an American gun metal Buick. He walked around the school always with his pipe lit and phlegm stretching from one lip to another. His conversation with the younger boys was always short and to the point. His subject was classics and after the first year boys were *subjected* to his Latin classes. Classes were normally forty minutes long with a five-minute break between classes but his classes were always double classes with no break. And it was serious teaching throughout these periods with constant tests to make sure that you had done your homework. This generally consisted of learning by rote irregular Latin verbs. I used to wake early in the morning and try to learn them. It was terrible: it drove me to tears. No allowance was made for people like myself who have never been able to learn by rote. Hamlet's soliloquy 'To be or not to be ...' was the only piece that I ever learnt by heart and that was because Hamlet was the play I did for School Certificate. At least Shakespeare's words had continuity which is the last thing that irregular Latin verbs had. (I still have my school copy of Hamlet!).

To the top year at the school Mr Butler taught Greek in double periods with the same discipline as Latin. My brothers, John and Oliver, did Greek. But by good fortune when the school was split because of the war Greek was dropped. Almost certainly the only time in my life that I have had cause to thank Hitler. Years later I talked to a retired man who had been proprietor and headmaster of The Dragon School in Oxford. The conversation turned to St Faith's and he asked me who was headmaster when I was there. I told him it was Walter Gasking Butler and he immediately replied, "Ah, the finest classical prep school headmaster of his day."



Maybe he was, but I could still have done without him. I never passed a single examination in Latin.

I recall two occasions of Mr Butler's discipline.

Except for Wednesdays and Saturdays morning school finished at midday and this was followed by an hour on the playing field except that after the school had merged with The Leys then on one of these days we would swim in The Leys' swimming baths which I loved. On Wednesdays (with sport in the afternoon) and Saturdays (with a match in the afternoon) school finished at 12.30. From 12.30 to 1 o'clock boarders and boys staying for lunch at school played in the schoolroom. Oliver, my brother, was Head of School and a prefect and on this day he was on duty and would not start to walk home until 1 o'clock. So I stayed on in the schoolroom so I could walk home with him. But then Mr Butler came to the room and saw me. "Why are you here?" he demanded so I told him. He was having none of it and told me to go home at once about five minutes before Oliver would be walking home. I left the school and waited at the top of Newton Road until Oliver came out of school. But while I was waiting Mr Butler, driving his Buick, came out of the school (by an entrance that is now closed to vehicular traffic) into Newton Road and up to Trumpington Road where I was waiting for Oliver. By the Grace of God I saw him before he saw me. I was standing by a very thick telegraph pole that is, I believe, still there to this day and as Mr Butler turned right into the main road I was able to hide behind this pole and move round it as his car moved. To this day this incident remains typical of his authoritarian rule and something that dogged me throughout my school life. If today somebody told me this I would tell them in no uncertain terms to take a running jump! I walked home with Oliver.

On Friday afternoons somebody used to give a lecture in the school hall about something either interesting or not interesting. On the occasion I have in mind it was clearly not interesting and it appeared to Mr Butler

that I was fidgeting. I was at the end of a row and he was able to appear beside me and gripping me hard on the deltoid muscle in the upper arm so it hurt to the maximum he led me off to where he was sitting at the back. He forced me to crouch on the floor beside him for the rest of the lecture. But at the end when I came to stand my legs were so cramped I couldn't stand up. But nobody dared to help me and I had to hobble until the cramp disappeared.

It was a school rule that whenever one was out and about in public places in Cambridge one had to wear the school cap. And, of course, if one met Mr Butler or one of the masters in the street one had to touch the peak of one's cap.

If there was another side to Mr Butler I saw nothing of it with one exception. It was in 1938 when Monopoly had become all the craze and my father received an invitation from Mr Butler to come and join a Monopoly playing party. My father was amazed. As soon as he had opened the envelope I knew at once it was not my father's scene. My father declined the invitation.

Extraordinarily I can still remember many of the masters at St Faith's. There was Mr Madge who taught French. He was one of the older masters. Sometimes in his class he used to send me to stand outside the door. The trouble was that it was the first class after morning break. Every morning at this hour Mr Butler would walk from his study at the front of the house to the kitchen with his empty coffee cup in his hand his route took him past the door where I was standing. Fortunately one could hear his footsteps and I would nip off to the loo. (In those days the loos were the most disgusting I have ever known. They were in the dark and the electric light bulb was always broken). Mr Butler never did catch me. Mr Madge used to eat at the Masters' table with the school and he used to take a mouthful of food and chew it thirty-eight times. The boys used to count the chews. I wonder if he ever wondered why the boys were looking

at him! The best story about Mr Madge was that he was an air raid warden at his home in Hills Road. He was a bachelor who lived alone, but the air raid siren failed to wake him. So he had an arrangement with his neighbours that proved effective for waking him, not that Cambridge had all that number of air raids. Mr Madge tied the end of a piece of string round his big toe and the string led out of the window and across to his neighbour's house. And when the siren went they would pull the string and wake him.

Then there was Mr Michael and Mr Bailey and Mr Hull and Mr Hyde Parker all of whom I remember and some appear on my father's ciné film (now video) and some still black and white photos which I took and have still retained from those days over sixty years ago. I have always wondered ever since whether Mr Hyde Parker was one of *the* Hyde Parkers!

Two tragedies took place in my days at St Faith's.

There was a boy called Gaskell at school who attended school in a wheel chair. I heard that he was upstairs at home in his wheel chair at the head of the stairs and fell down them. He did not survive the fall.

Another boy called Wallace who lived in a large house at the top of Latham Road died from a poisoned tooth. He was an only child and stood to inherit a fortune from his father who was a ships breaker.

### June 1940 until September 1940

I was at school early one morning in early June 1940 when the headmaster came into the class and called out my name from the front of the class. "Wyatt, when you go home at lunch time you are to take every item of your personal possessions with you and make sure you leave nothing behind". He gave no explanation and I walked home absolutely mystified. I had been going to the school every day for five years. The routine never

varied. Walk to school in the morning and walk home at lunchtime. After lunch walk back to school and walk home at the end of school. On Wednesday afternoons, which were devoted to sport, my father allowed us to ride our bicycles to school. There was school on Saturday mornings and in the afternoons the school had matches but as I was never a good enough sportsman I was never in a team and I was free.

What was it all about this memorable morning in early June 1940?

When I got home my father told me that my mother and he were going to drive me up the very next day to North Wales to join a group of Cambridge mothers and children already there. My world fell apart. The Germans had overrun France and so about two weeks after my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday I was sent to join a private group of friends and their mothers to stay at Bwlchtocyn, near Abersoch, in North Wales.

Years later I was told that the Town Council in a closed session had been told that if the Germans had invaded, then the line of the Gog and Magog Hills (part of the East Anglian Heights) outside Cambridge would be the front line. I suppose my father was given this information in confidence as I am very certain that he was no longer one of the two University members on the Council. (University members on local councils were abolished by Ted Heath when he was Prime Minister).

And so it was that I joined the Durrants, the Hens, and the Pendelburys in North Wales. All of them the wives of middle class professionals or University people and their children. I think it was Mrs Hen who lost her husband in the war in Crete. And so while the Battle of Britain was being fought in the skies over southeast England I enjoyed a lovely hot summer in the Lleyn peninsular. I have no recollection of ever thinking that we might lose the war. Come the start of the Autumn Term in September 1940 my parents came up to Abersoch and drove me down to Ashburton.

## St Faith's School at The Golden Lion Hotel, Ashburton, South Devon

I stayed here for just two terms until the spring of 1941. In the Autumn Term we bathed every morning before breakfast in the unheated swimming pool at the foot of the garden until the end of the Christmas Term. We were supposed to wash our feet in a footbath but it was frozen solid by the end of the term. I wrote 'bathe' but in truth we positioned ourselves at the side of the bath and dived in so we surfaced at the foot of the steps. It was a condition made by the master that we had to dive or jump in. The master was a D B Friend and I remember him as one of the nicest people. Probably about 28 years old. I think his father was the doctor at Christ's Hospital. The head boy at Ashburton was a boy called Howard.

We had the usual lessons with the exception of Greek. It was at Ashburton that I got my stamp collections seriously under way. It exists with my son, Henry, to this day. Sid Gross (Senior Tutor at Christ's) and Mr Nicols (Fellow) and my maternal uncle, Colin Kingham (with business interest in the USA) were the main suppliers of my foreign stamps. I continued collecting when I was at The Leys. My mother sent me some little envelopes for putting stamps in. What she did not realise was that they reeked of peppermint creams!

During my first term at Ashburton my mother wrote to me that next term I was to have long trousers. This was tremendously exciting. Come the holidays I was so excited about this sea change that I didn't dare mention it. So I started the Spring Term still in shorts and I wrote home about it and how very sad I was. I must have written an appealing letter because my mother somehow bought some long trousers and sent them to me. I wore them at once and never returned to shorts except when on holiday on the Norfolk Broads or caravanning with my family.

Mr Butler's discipline was as vigorous as ever down at Ashburton. And he took prayers morning and evening except Sunday mornings when we went in crocodile formation to the local church.

But then came an event which was to shake me. As I have written I joined the Ashburton branch of the school in September 1940. Come the Christmas holidays I would expect to travel back to Cambridge in the school coach but it was to be otherwise. About three days after the end of term my family was going to the Lorna Doone Farm in North Devon for Christmas so my father wrote to Mr Butler asking whether I could stay with them until my mother and father came and picked me up. (No doubt my father saw the trip as an excuse for visiting the school). The Butlers agreed. But I was terrified because I was terrified of Mr Butler.

But come the departure of the coach with the other boys I was suddenly invited into the Butler's drawing room. Mr Butler drove me onto Dartmoor with their golden retriever and we went for walks and I was often allowed to climb tors whilst he waited at the foot. Wherever he went during those few days Mr Butler invited me to come with him and he chatted away to me and I to him. We went to look at a famous clapper bridge at Postbridge which had been in position for centuries. I fed with the Butlers and they both of them chatted to me as though I was a normal boy! I remember the door of the drawing room was held closed on a push knob and with a draught would blow open. I trained their dog to get up and push it shut. The few nights that I stayed with them were a revelation I will never forget. I slept alone in the large dormitory. If it is possible I am still amazed at this transformation in Mr Butler, heretofore a sinister ogre! And a sinister ogre again when the new term started.

After Christmas at the Lorna Doone Farm, Malmsmead, we went back to Cambridge and I went down to Ashburton with the school coach in January. The snow and ice came early that year and I remember the coach pulling up at a road junction and the whole bus pivoted on its front

wheels through 90°. I was sitting in the very back and it was an exciting experience. Because of the weather it was doubtful if we would make the journey that night but in the event we arrived very late at night.

I wonder where the coach driver spent the night. One didn't ask such intrusive questions in those days.

My own feeling about my education, albeit with hindsight, is that I was educated for life in an age that no longer existed after World War II. I hope today's children are being educated not for today but for the age that will exist when they are middle aged.

Finally, I will *shew* you something. I was taught to spell at St Faith's. And that is the way I spell *shew* to this day. And it was also the way Dickens spelt (or should it be *spelled*?) it and what was good enough for Dickens is good enough for me. It puts us in the same league.