

My Narrative History of Kirkdale

By Amaryllis Elphick.

Section1.

Introduction

My grandfather Geoffrey, my father Oliver and my mother Anne were members of the Progressive League (PL) for many years before I was born and before Kirkdale School was founded. The Powleslands were also members as were Rex and Jaquetta Benjamin. As a result I don't remember a time when I did not know the Powleslands or the Benjamins.

Although not members of the PL I also don't remember getting to know the Lyles, Jo and David, Cate and Mary. One day I did not know them, the next day (sometime in 1963/4) I did.

In the early 1960s my family stayed with the Powleslands at their home in Gillingham in Kent when that year's Progressive League's annual Summer Conference was located nearby. In these early days the Elphick's also camped with the Powleslands and others (though not the Lyles). The most memorable of these camps was at Royston in 1963.

I remember visiting the Powleslands with Oliver in the autumn shortly after they moved to 186 Kirkdale in 1964 and before the school opened. I remember going round the whole building with Susie and when it was time to go, when the light was fading and the air temperature was going down, John drove us to Crystal Palace station and waited with us on the platform till the train came in.

Sometime in 1964 I started to show symptoms of what soon became a severe chronic disease, ulcerative colitis. After one term in the local primary school it became obvious that my needs as dictated by my disease could not be met in that environment.

My next memory of Kirkdale was walking round the school on a warm bright day with Anne and Susie and the discussion between the three of us was whether I would like to go to the school.

Shortly after this visit I joined the school. I was the sixth child enrolled on the register after Stephen, Cate, Mary, Mark B, and Mark R.

Making the right decision for me

Ulcerative colitis made me very ill. I suffered permanent uncontrolled diarrhoea, rectal bleeding, anaemia and continuous abdominal pain which left me with no appetite. Anne did not want to send me to a special school as that would make my disease central to my life and turn me into a invalid (in –valid). Her observations of me strongly suggested to her that I regarded my symptoms as annoying distractions to my life and were not something I dwelled upon. Anne recalls that she had complete trust in Susie so was not concerned about my needs being met at Kirkdale but that still left two big problems, finding the money for the fees and burdening her sick child with long journeys to and from school each day. The first of these was just manageable, but the second is something that worries her even now. ‘I just hope I did make the right decision. I’m still not sure...’

Commuting

This section might seem irrelevant to the story of Kirkdale School, especially to those who lived in the school building or more locally to the school than my family. For me though, the daily commute was part of my school day and took up some 2 ½ hours of my day, every school day, for 7 years. Whether I travelled alone or with companions, I was always accompanied by the ever worsening symptoms of ulcerative colitis. On my worst ever ‘normal’ day during this phase of my life I soiled 9 different pairs of trousers. Those changes of clothes only marked the occasions I did not make it to a toilet in time. I did not get a lot of my own work done that day.

The journey to school

This involved a 15 minute walk to Clapham Junction Station. A 25 minute train ride (head codes 06 and 36) to Crystal Palace Railway Station; a long climb up the stairs a walk over the footbridge and a long decent down the stairs on the other side of the station; a 5-7 minute train ride to Sydenham Railway Station past Crystal Palace Park where the dinosaurs could be spotted when the trees were bare during the winter months. From Sydenham station it was a 10 minute walk to the school.

The journey home

This differed from the morning in that return to Crystal Palace Station was via the 122 or 108b bus to the Crystal Palace Bus Garage followed by a walk down Anerly Hill to the station. A hill so steep that the double-decker buses that parked on it had special wheel stops made of cast concrete with iron rods as a handles. These were placed in front of the tyres and only removed by the driver just prior to departure.

Taking the bus

When strike action, snow or derailment meant the trains were not running the outward and return journeys had to be made by bus. This involved a 15 minute walk to Clapham Junction followed by a long journey on the 49, (later the 249) bus to Crystal Palace, and then the 108b to Cobb's corner or the 122 to Kirkdale. An alternative was to take the 37 to Clapham Common from a stop 5 minutes from home, then the 137 to Crystal Palace and finally the 122 or 108b

Journey variations

At different times over the years how I made my journey to and from school varied.

Initially I was accompanied on the train by Anne to Crystal Palace where I was picked up by John Powlesland or Alex in John's old Bedford van and driven to school.

As the Lyles were living at South Kensington at the time an arrangement was made that as their train from Victoria pulled in at Clapham Junction Jo would wave a headscarf out of the window and Oliver or Anne would put me on the train in the same carriage. This tended to be a bit of a high adrenaline moment when Oliver was parent-in-charge as he would deploy a pushchair (normally used to convey my younger sister Peronel) to zoom me up the platform while Jo opened the train door.

For a short while I was brought home by Victor. Victor had a car and according to Oliver 'was employed by the school to move bricks'. The car journeys home with Victor were great fun for me. The south circular road was almost empty at that time of day and we cruised along, alone together, enjoying the freedom of the road. The car's indicators were operated by a knob on the dashboard with a 'snout' that pointed left, centre or right according to how it was turned. Fairly early on it became my job to turn the indicator knob when we were about to make a turn. In due course though I was promoted to driver and would sit on Victor's knee, steer and turn the indicators as necessary while he operated the clutch, gears and brakes.

Section 2

Early days

During my first term I spent many happy hours in the sunshine, mostly naked, playing with others. There was a 2 person sit-in toy when if you both pumped the handles the seats rotated round a central axis. I remember being sprayed with cold water from a hose held by Jo as Cate and I pumped the handles and span round laughing (and no doubt screeching). Those early days were taken up very largely with physical activity of one sort or another. There was lots of outdoor play variously involving climbing about in the rhododendron bushes, messing about with sand and water, running about the grounds and 'enacting' things. Indoors there was dancing. Khachaturian's Sabre dance was a favourite for this. There was also music and movement in the Big Room lead by Jo with or without a BBC radio broadcast.

A lot of time was taken up listening to stories that were read to us from a wide variety of different books. At some point a convention was adopted such that each day we were read a short story from 12.00 -12.30, the slot before lunchtime, and between 3.00 and 3.30, in the slot before 'going home time', we were read a longer book in daily episodes. Such books included *The Hobbit*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Princess and Curdie*, *The Sliver Sword*, *The Wheel on the School*, *Moomintrol*, *Charlotte's Webb* and *The Children's Crusade*. Some of the books were quite scary but all fired our imaginations and gave us material for 'enactments', projects debates and games.

How the Bees and Wasps were formed and named.

Within a year of starting Kirkdale School had grown. The number of children on the register had increased and the age range of pupils had spread. Susie felt it was time the school sub-divided into two broad age groups and she brought this up at a school meeting.

For me this event is significant for two reasons. Firstly it is the first school meeting per se that I have any clear memory of. It was held in the Powlesland's sitting room and the decision as to who should chair the meeting got a bit mixed up with a struggle between some of the boys as to who should be allowed the honour of sitting on the height-adjustable writing / coffee table. In the end the chair was chosen and he sat on the table of honour. Those whose presence I remember include

Brodie, Julian M. Mark B. Susie P. Jacquetta B. and Melissa B. who was at that time the crawling stage of her life. Cate was also there and I would imagine Jo, Mary and Stephen P too. There may also have been others present but I don't recall.

The second reason why I remember this meeting was and is because that was where the Bees and Wasps were born.

At that time the insects, bees and wasps, were commonly encountered during the school day. Bees visited the flowers in the rockery to the front of the house and wasps swarmed round the pear tree when the fruit was in season. Some of the boys were obsessed with these creatures and spent a lot of time stirring them up and trying to kill them.

At the meeting Susie explained that she felt the school should sub-divide, gave her reasons and then suggested the groups be named something like 'the butterflies and the moths'. I don't remember any debate about the splitting of the school into two groups, but there was a lengthy debate on the names we should choose. Although some people were in favour of these somewhat genteel names, a significant (or significantly loud and dominant) number of those present loudly rejected them.

By the end of the meeting the Bees and Wasps had been named. Shortly afterwards new name lists were written out for each group and I became a Wasp.

School meetings

From the outset school meetings were key parts of the school week. Over time, as the school grew and the age range extended, the frequency and purpose of meetings evolved. Initially there was one weekly school meeting. Very early on a meeting book was introduced. This was an old roughly A4 sized notebook with a yellowish cover and rounded corners that was donated by John Powlesland. During the week people could enter 'cases' into the meeting book. This formed an agenda for the weekly meeting. Cases were taken in turn, discussed and for the most part were amicably resolved.

Sometimes the outcome of a case would be the introduction of a new school rule. For example the rule that 'No one is allowed to bash down the Crash Bang Wallop' was introduced when a case was brought against Julian M for doing so. On other occasions, where it was ruled that one person had wronged another, a forfeit might be required. The idea of introducing fines was discussed but school life did not run

on a monetary exchange basis. It was felt that any such system would be unfair both to those who had and those who did not have money, would be unworkable and that it was outside the remit of the school meeting to introduce legislation which depended on an individual's life outside school. As an alternative it was decided that the meeting could rule that a person could be required to give his or her pudding to the person they had offended. This could be for one or more days depending on the details of the case. This worked very well in the early days. Debating the grievance helped the parties to move forward. People were willing to comply with these rulings and more often than not the giving of the pudding by the offender and/or when it came to it, the 'letting off' of giving the pudding by the offended, strengthened relationships between those concerned.

Information meetings.

In due course a second weekly meeting was introduced. This was limited to half an hour and was largely a forum in which Susie, and sometimes other staff, gave out information including details of upcoming activities e.g. school camps and trips. At these meetings information was given out on any upcoming work on the house and grounds that would affect school life. For example when the front lawn was to be reseeded and that the lawn would become a no-go area till the new grass had become established.

Bee, Wasp and Hornet meetings.

At some stage separate group meetings were introduced. These allowed for discussion within peer / teaching groups on any topic concerning that group. Sometimes a group would then list a case in the school meeting book.

One particularly memorable case was brought by the Bees though Jo L who was their group teacher and spokesperson. The Bees objected to bigger children running full tilt round the school and through their outdoor play area taking in the length of the paddling pool as part of their route. The Bees were repeatedly frightened by the speed of passage and all the splashing caused by bigger children as they ran.

While there was empathy with and sympathy expressed towards the Bees, the older children pointed out that it was not the 'Bees' Paddling Pool' but the 'School Paddling Pool' as there was no other. The older children said if they were to leave the Bees in peace it followed that the older children needed a paddling pool of their own. Driven

by the relentless determination of the older children a second paddling pool was eventually built.

How 'Monsters' was invented.

Each week we had a session called 'drama'. This was held in the Big Room and was normally lead by Susie. These were important group activities and differed from our normal imaginative play in that there was an adult leader who gave instructions. Susie bought a large cymbal which she used to signal the start and end of sections of the class and for signalling changes in tension, volume, pace etc of our acting. There were a number of memorable outputs from our drama sessions including a very complicated comedy based on the moon landings and a play based on the story of the book *The Silver Sword* both of which I shall return to later. One of the earliest and most long-lived outputs was what in effect, became 'The School Game'; 'Monsters'.

One week our drama session was lead by Alex, a young man who lodged with the Powleslands and who helped out in the school. At different times Alex lived in the house (in R1) and then in a caravan on the site later occupied by the tripod.

Alex had been to see the film of 'The Day of the Triffids' and during our drama session he started to tell us the story of the film. In retelling the story he began acting out a tentacled triffid, grabbing out towards us. We started to run away and he started to give chase. It was not long before we had run out of the Big Room and out of the building screaming and shouting with Alex chasing us. I was quickly caught by the Monster in the little hedged grove that ran from the footpath round to the Bees. I was picked up from behind, had my ears roared in, and was replaced on the ground as the Monster ran on after my bigger faster colleagues, arms wide apart and roaring and snarling as he went.

From then on, any young male who worked in or even merely visited the school was made to play 'Monsters' until he reached his point of exhaustion.

The gym

For quite a long period of time we went once a week as a group to the Ladywell gym. The gym was run by Mrs Prestige who (unbeknownst to me at the time) was a highly experienced gymnastics coach.¹

Getting to the gym required taking a bus which often stopped for a few minutes en-route at a place Buki dubbed 'The Busman's Pissing Place'. On the occasions when we stopped, by looking out of the windows of the bus on the right hand side the driver could be seen leaving the bus, crossing the road and entering the public convenience.

In the early days we were accompanied by an adult, but in later years we often travelled alone.

The gym was housed in a red brick building that had a lot of circular and semi-globe shaped indentations adorning it in an apparently random pattern. I wondered out loud how these came to be formed and in response one of my group took an old 1d (one penny) coin out and gouged it into a brick. As the coin was worked into the wall, red brick dust spilled out and in a matter of seconds a circular indentation appeared in the brick. So that answered that.

The changing rooms were big, cold and empty but we only spent a few seconds in there before running into the gym for our session. There were held in a large gymnasium which was said to have a swimming pool under its flooring. There were asymmetric bars, parallel bars, beams, wall bars, ropes and rings as well as a large floor area, thick and thin mats and a vaulting horse and springboard.

At the time of our regular visits to Ladywell gym all that I wore for sessions was a pair of boys swimming trunks. I had my long hair cut short when I was around seven years old (I had wanted a crew cut but my mother felt that was a step too far). So for much of the time the impression I gave our gym instructors was that of a very small and thus probably very young child of indeterminable sex.

Those who know me well will know that the gym is one of my favourite environments and that gym work in any form is something I absolutely love. My lack of mass and height did make it difficult for me to vault. The springboard did not give when I jumped on it so the instructor would pat me under the bum as I jumped up and I flew

¹ <http://www.ladywellgym.com/About%20us/History.htm>

up and over the horse with the air whizzing past me before landing lightly on the other side.

After a time it became a custom for Mrs Prestige to call me out part way through each weekly session, take me over to a piece of equipment and instruct me. There was never any conversation. I was never asked if I wanted to do something or not. It was just assumed that I would do as directed.

My 1:1 sessions with Mrs Prestige included the asymmetric bars, the beam, the rings and the parallel bars. I fell off everything but got up and tried again, and again and again. She never lost patience but never let me off if I failed and fell. She just signalled I should try again which I was more than willing to do.

Sometime after I had left Kirkdale my mother related a moment of serendipity that occurred when, for one week only she was the group's accompanying adult. We arrived at the gym and went off to change. She entered the gym on her own and stood at the back of the hall watching us come in and begin our session. In due course Mrs Prestige emerged, stood next to her and they watched us together for a few moments. At some point Mrs Prestige then half turned to my mother and said, 'You see that little one over there (indicating she meant me) she's just as good as all the others you know. Don't be fooled by her size. She's not afraid of anything!' My mother's heart nearly exploded with pride and joy! She never let on to Mrs P that she was my mother.

Dangerous games 1.

Levers, fulcrums and forces.

[f= force; m= mass; g = gravity]

One of the games we played involved a large planed sawn log and a long, wide plank of wood. This was in a period prior to the building of the Hornet's Hut as the log ended up supporting the concrete foundations of the Hut. The plank was placed over the log (fulcrum) so that one end tipped down to the ground.

One person stood slightly to one side on this down end (forming the 'load' / 'resistance') while a second person ran up behind and past them, leapt in the air and came down as heavily as possible ('effort' / 'down force') thus catapulting the person at the down end into the air ('lift'/'motion').

As (due to another force, gravity) the person at the down end did not go up very far the game was modified so that two people ran up and past them and then jumped down hard on the plank (increasing 'effort/' down force')

This was then increased again to three 'jumpers', and a lot of work was put into the timing of the jump as it had to be performed simultaneously by all 'jumpers' in order to create a maximum down force.

It was discovered that I added hardly any force when I was a 'jumper' (as $f=mg$ and my m was very small), so we decided that another person should take my go at that end.

When it was my go to be catapulted though, a number of the others, (Quentin, Buki, Cate, Suzy E and possibly Mark B too), were the potential 'jumpers'. When they jumped I was catapulted way above the heads of my three 'jumpers'. As I went up I saw the ground receding below me and to one side, I whizzed up past the foliage of the nearby trees. At the top of my 'arc' my body stopped moving completely and I looked down at the upturned faces, mouths wide, eyes fixed on me...then I began to fall. I spread my arms and legs and stretched out my hands and landed horizontally slap bang on the board taking the force on the palms of my hands and on my toes. All was silent for a moment, my palms stung a bit and then I heard the familiar phrase of my childhood 'Are you alright Amaryllis!'

It was an impressive moment for all concerned. Those on the ground had seen me shoot up past them and had wondered when I'd stop receding from them, and then they'd seen me start to fall back and wondered what would happen next.

Quite a lot of excited discussion followed my return to earth as we picked apart how I had come to travel so much further than the others. It was concluded that my lack of body mass had been in my favour in helping me avoid serious injury and there was a certain degree of relief that I was ok. A little envy was expressed by some since the very thing that made all the others good 'jumpers' and me a useless one was also the thing that gave me the greatest flight time and distance, and of course thrill-opportunity.

Science with Oliver (father)

Kirkdale inherited a certain amount of assorted stuff from its legal de-facto forbearer the New Sherwood School². Amongst this stuff was a box of chemicals and some laboratory equipment. This all sat in the garage at the top of the drive for some time before Oliver took on the task of sorting through the chemicals and disposing of them appropriately during one of many weekend working parties.

I followed Oliver to the garage and looked on as he got on with the task. He explained to me as he worked that a lot of the stuff could be safely thrown in the dustbin, which he did, or diluted and flushed down an outside drain, which he also did, but one jar he came across he felt required particular attention. He went off to the kitchen and found a battered old serving spoon and a jug which he filled with water. He went back to the garage and collected the chemical jar and headed over to the rear of the back garden. He dug several holes about 6 inches deep and about 18 inches apart. Into each hole he placed a small nugget of the chemical and then he loosely re-filled every hole with earth. Finally he watered each hole in turn, standing back for a few minutes after each watering to observe.

While going through this process Oliver explained to me that the chemical was sodium and though it was very old and was coated with a layer of oxidation it might still react when coming into contact with water. He was looking at each watered hole to see if there was any sign of such a reaction. Only one hole showed any activity which took the form of a gentle fizzing bubbling at the surface that lasted a minute or two before ceasing. This was my first lesson in the properties of group 1 elements and made me eager to see non oxidised sodium dunked in water. Something I had to wait for until I took O level chemistry many years later.

(One other artefact inherited from New Sherwood School was a large desktop device for embossing paper. On occasion we played with this, inserting blank pieces of paper, pressing down hard on the lever and producing sheets with 1d / 2p sized embossed circles saying 'New Sherwood School').

In the autumn term of the same year (1966) Oliver started a weekly after school science club which I attended together with Cate, Quentin, Mark B (and possibly others). During this time we did a lot of work with boards, batteries, bulbs, wires sprung switches and crocodile clips.

² See 'Kirkdale School Limited'

Cate and I worked together over a number of sessions and in due course we built a pair of Morse code sender/receivers. The signals between our two boards were sent by making short ('dit') and long ('dah') taps on a sprung switch designed for the purpose. The message travelled via wires to the other board and a bulb lit up with a corresponding short ('dit') or long ('dah') flash. Cate and I made the connecting wires of significant length, some 6ft / 2m or so to allow us to send and receive signals out of sight of each other's boards.

Included in the equipment Oliver provided were a number of small cards giving the Morse code alphabet. Cate and I taped one of these to each of our boards before heading outside into the dark winter night. We positioned ourselves so we were round a corner of the building from one another, out of each other's sight but within shouting distance. We then each had a go at sending and receiving messages.

After a while we went indoors again and back to the room in which we had been working. On our arrival Oliver asked cheerfully 'Did it work?'. There was a short pause and then in a matter of fact tone of voice Cate said 'Yes..it worked...but we'd forgotten, Amaryllis hasn't learned how to read yet'. To which Oliver burst out laughing! I learned to read very shortly after this episode.

Section 3

The Arrival of Anne-Marie

Anne-Marie came to live with us while the Lyles were still living in Kensington. Her in-school roles included teaching French and music but she also took on the job of travelling to and from school with me every day. Not long after this arrangement was made the Lyles moved to Camberwell leaving me and Anne-Marie as the only travellers to school by the Crystal Palace route.

When I first met Anne-Marie I did not like what I saw or heard. Anne introduced me saying first 'This is the lady who will be taking you to school each day'. What I saw was indeed 'a lady'. She was formally and neatly attired, had a handbag over her arm and seemed to me to be altogether alien, strange and someone to be suspicious of.

I don't remember any transition phase, but Anne-Marie became one of the best things that ever happened to me in my childhood. As to the suspicious alien strangeness, she later pointed out that she was in her interview suit when we had met. A costume I never saw again. I imagine as well as disliking the signals given off by her attire I had picked up on her being in 'interview mode' which is, after all, a phoney state of being.

Travelling to school and back with Anne-Marie was different. Suddenly the journey involved periods of frantic rushing to which I had not previously been accustomed. For me, running for trains at Crystal Palace station was neigh on impossible. I was very small; the steps were wide and the stair cases steep and broad. Going up the steps foot over foot was manageable, going down felt safe only if I moved both feet onto each step before stepping down one foot after another onto the next one. Using this technique my progress was painfully slow. One day as we were rushing for the train home Anne-Marie asked me if I couldn't go foot over foot. I explained I was scared as I might fall, so she held my hand as I got the hang of the new movement. It wasn't many days before I had mastered this new technique and no longer even needed my hand held.

Another new element to the journey to school came in the person of Jack. Jack was a local dad with a large family who were often all spilling out of their house heading for their schools just as Anne-Marie and I passed on our way to the station. We

generally got about three quarters of the way to Clapham Junction before Jack shot by shouting a cheery greeting as he headed for his own train. Some mornings, if time allowed, as he caught up with us Jack would lift me up and carry me seated on his fore-arm. Jack's smart black wool overcoat was of far higher quality than the one my father wore and, unlike my father's coat which I could grip on to, the stiffness of the fabric made it impossible for my small hands to gain any purchase. Jack was being kind and I appreciated being carried but I did find travelling downhill at speed toward the station in this somewhat precarious manner to be slightly unnerving. Years later, Jack and his family were devastated by the loss of many members of their extended family in the 1978 mass suicide by members of the People's Temple Christian Church in Guyana. This tragedy left over 900 people dead including 276 children³.

Anne-Marie's French tuition consisted primarily of reading Hergé's Tintin book 'Objectif Lune' (known in English as 'Destination Moon'). We learned useful French phrases such as 'Allo. Allo. Ici la Terre', 'Zut alor' and 'Laboratoire central qui fabrique de l'uranium'. Following the lead of the drunk and jolly Captain Haddock we sang 'Au clair de la terre' along with him as he beheld the earth from the moon.

Anne-Marie's other main role was to lead our music making. She collected together a variety of instruments and she also experimented with ways to make chime bars. Anne-Marie came up with various experimental designs. I remember some that she made of small flat metal bars placed across an empty tin can that had been opened open at both ends. Placing a piece of felt between the bar and the can was also tried. This created a different, more muffled sound.

Obtaining the metal bars Anne-Marie experimented with was an adventure in itself. Normally after our train arrived at platform 14 we turned to the left and walked to the steps that took us up to the raised walkway that connected the platforms. We would exit the station through the booking hall onto the station approach and then walk up the hill towards home. On occasion we would encounter the Stationmaster's son on his pedal tractor. He was about the same size as me and I was captivated by him and at the same time envious of him because he had a tractor and miles of walkway to drive it up and down. During one of our brief chats he told me he lived behind a green door that stood to one side of the booking hall. I once invited him to my

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/november/18/newsid_2540000/2540209.stm

birthday party, walking to the station with a written invitation which I posted through the letterbox in the green door. I was quite upset that he did not come!

One day when we arrived back at Clapham Junction station after school, instead of following our usual route Anne-Marie and I we went down the steps from the platform and into the connecting underpass. We walked all the way along past platforms 12, 11,10,9 etc, right past platform 1 and out of the rear lower entrance to the station. We turned left and walked past a number of railway arches until we came to one that was noisy, hot and in which showers of sparks could be seen intermittently. It was the railway forge. We went in and a man came over to talk to Anne-Marie .I couldn't really hear the conversation over the noise made by the other people working away behind him, but he gave her some silvery coloured wire and we left. A few days later we returned and the man Anne-Marie had spoken to before came over. He smiled at me in a friendly way and approached with a handful of steel bars and more wire in his hands. He handed the bars to Ann-Marie and gave me the wire. As he did so he said to me, 'You must not suck the wire or put it in your mouth as it is poisonous!' As I had done such a thing, albeit only once and very briefly with the wire he had already given us, for a few days thereafter I kept thinking 'Oh no! I'm going to die!' Luckily for me I did not die and the fears I had soon subsided.

Another rare but occasionally repeated source of excitement for both Anne-Marie and me as we stood on platform 15 waiting for the train to Crystal Palace was the arrival of a steam engine drawn goods train. This came in on platform 17 and halted for some time so we were always able to get a good look at and smell of it. This was around 1967. The recent revival movement aside, the last steam train to run on UK mainline railways did so in August 1968 so we witnessed one of the very last steam drawn services to run in the UK.

Section 4

Early days, early plays

During a period when Trevor was one of the main teachers at Kirkdale, the school was given about half a dozen large cardboard cylinders. This was around 1968 - 1969 shortly after Neil Innes and the Bonzo Dog Do Da Band had released the song 'I'm an urban spaceman'. It was the period of build up to the first moon landing which took place in July 1969 and two years before the Apollo 14 mission when

astronaut Alan Shepard smuggled a golf club and golf balls aboard in his spacesuit and used them to play golf on the moon.

The cylinders had been used to transport some form of dry goods and were large enough for a child to get inside. We each took possession of a cylinder into which we cut armholes and a slit to see out of and then decorated. Over a period of time our play developed into a sketch which was set on the moon.

Trevor wore a cylinder over his head and a sign on his chest saying 'I'm the urban spaceman'. The rest of us, wearing our cylinders all walked about with a mechanical gait, putting with makeshift golf clubs and chanting in robotic voices 'Will you have a game of golf...yes...no...yes...no'. Sadly, I cannot recall the story line, script or the punch line of this performance, but I remember all the activity and fun as well as the struggle I had to get back out of my cylinder when we had finished.

Sandpits

When Kirkdale opened the school had only one sandpit. This was almost square in shape. The deep sand that it held was contained by cement walls on three sides and the fourth side was provided by the brick wall of the building. On the other side of this wall lay the Wasp library. This became known as the Wasp sandpit once a second one had been built near the Bees' paddling pool.

The sandpit was used extensively for building, burying one another and jumping into. We brought water over to make the sand wet and workable so that we could form structures. We also used water to make streams through the sand and to wash away the buildings we had made earlier. Unfortunately it was soon discovered that the water we used in the sandpit was seeping its way through the wall and making the inside wall of the Wasp library, and the sofa that abutted it, very wet. This problem was brought to our attention by Susie at school meeting, and with some sadness it was agreed that water could no longer be used in that sandpit.

One member of the school, Julian L (Now David R), began to use the sandpit to build elaborate sand sculptures in a style informed by architecture from the ancient worlds of Greece, Rome and Egypt. Julian built multiple small sand staircases up and down outside sand buildings constructed with pitched roofs. He scooped out the sand from the bases of sand pyramids and sand temples to form vaults and aisles and he fashioned pathways across the sand that lead to the entrances of the buildings.

When other children came along and started to use the sandpit, jumping in carelessly and without first looking, Julian's sculptures were damaged. Although initially there had been no intention to be destructive, things quickly escalated as Julian tried to defend his work and others took exception to an apparent 'land grab'. There were tears, a lot of shouting and arguing and a lot of deliberate attempts made to destroy what remained to the sculptures.

The matter was brought up at the next school meeting and the debate was very emotional. Julian was affronted that his work had been destroyed. Some of those who had been responsible for inadvertently damaging the sand sculptures learned that Julian had spent several days building them and had not yet finished at the time they had been destroyed. There were those who were sympathetic to Julian's distress and frustration but, as a matter of principle, opposed the idea that one person be allowed to take possession of the sandpit to the exclusion of others. In the end a new school rule was agreed. This was that anyone wanting to build and keep sand sculptures in the sandpit could expect to be allowed to do so for one school week without fear of their work being destroyed. The sandpit would then revert to general use from the start of the next school week.

Story times in the Wasps

The Wasp library contained an old, large red settee which was an object integral to life as a Wasp. When it was story time we ran from wherever we were, abandoning whatever we were doing, through the outer and inner rooms used by the Wasp, into the library and to the sofa. There was some competition between us for the prime seating positions so as we ran some of us would be shouting out: 'Bagsy sitting on Susie's Knee'; 'Well bagsy sitting next to Susie then..'; 'Bagsy sitting next to her on the other side..'. Susie would sit in the middle with one of us on her knee. Squished up next to her on either side would be another one of us and who was in turn squished in by another child seated on next to the arm. One person sat on top of each arm and Greg O took up position across the back of the sofa, lying on his side with his arm bent at the elbow to prop up his head. For Susie who was so tightly packed in by children she could barely move, it must have been a very hot (and at times fairly steamy and smelly) routine. For me it was a precious experience; being with my group in a state of group calm, stillness and total absorption, just listening.

One of the books I remember being read when on this sofa was 'The Wheel on the School' by Meindert De Jong, a book about encouraging storks to resume nesting in the village. Susie used this book as the basis for a Wasp project which included building a model Dutch village with houses made out of matchboxes and reading around the land and sea management of the Netherlands including looking into dykes and windmills. We also discovered the significance of the story of the little boy who saved his village by keeping his finger in the dyke till help arrived.

House party

Going back to the earlier days of the School, at a time when the Benjamin family lived in the upper part of the school building and when I was being driven home by Victor, the Powleslands held a weekend house party. This was in effect a mini - camp. There was a campfire in the back garden to the left of the house which we sat round for a sing song. We played a simplified version of the Night Game (simplified in that there was only one 'home' tree to the right of the back garden) and we slept in sleeping bags on the floor of what eventually became the school office. After breakfast it was suggested we went out somewhere and were asked where we would like to go. 'To the bat caves!' came a reply; and as there was general agreement and no objections to this as a destination we all piled into John's old Bedford van and off we set.

'The bat caves' had no bats nor caves. It was in fact the site of a disused railway tunnel that once served Upper Sydenham and Crystal Palace High Level Stations⁴. Once we had arrived at an access point we wiggled through a broken fence and scrambled down the bank towards the mouth of the 'cave'. The line had been closed since 1954 and the area leading to the surroundings of the tunnel was very overgrown with Japanese knotweed, rhododendrons, sycamore trees, brambles and other vegetation all of which added to the sense of adventure.

Once inside the tunnel we whooped and listened for the echo of our voices. We dived into the manholes that lined the walls just in time to escape imaginary trains. Cate and I imagined and re-enacted scenes from E Nesbitt's 'The Railway Children'

⁴ The details of British railway lines and the South London lines in particular are of great interest to me personally. Suffice it to say that at one time Crystal Palace had two stations. The one that now exists and the High Level one that exited onto Crystal Palace Parade. Sydenham which has three stations now: Sydenham, Lower Sydenham and Sydenham Hill once had four including Upper Sydenham. There was also a station at Lordship Lane and one called Honor Oak, not to be confused with the current station Honor Oak Park.

and in particular where the boy acting as the hare in the hare and hounds chase is seen running into the tunnel but he then fails to emerge at the other end. This anomaly prompts investigation and then his rescue by the children who find him injured on the track in imminent danger of being run over by a train.

Either on this occasion or during a subsequent visit some of our number lit a small fire in the track bed outside the lower end of the tunnel. We watched as instead of going upwards the smoke was drawn sideways into the tunnel. Soon the air inside of the tunnel was misty with smoke and the far end began to take on an orange glow. We found the smoke became less and less dense the further up the tunnel as we walked away from the fire. We could not actually see any smoke leaving the tunnel at the top end, and the orange glow was not visible from that position though it could still be seen clearly from the bottom end of the tunnel. Even after the fire was extinguished the smoke lingered in the tunnel, and though barely noticeable around our heads when we were inside it was still visible from the end where the fire had been when we left the area. All of this inspired us to look into the 'chimney effect'.⁵

The Night Game

My first memory of playing 'The Night Game' dates back to this house-party. The lives were beer bottle tops. I got caught pretty swiftly and lost my first life early on after which I spent most of the Game back at my 'home' as a defender.

'The Night Game' was a Kirkdale Camps institution. Played on the penultimate night of the camp, the object was to get from 'home' to inside the perimeter of the opponents 'home' without being seen and caught by the defending players. Each successful run earned a 'life'. The side with the most 'lives' by the end of the game was the winner.

⁵ The chimney effect: At the far end of the tunnel air would have been continuously emerging and displacing the warm air round the tunnel mouth. Air was being continuously drawn in at the lower end of the tunnel to replace the air leaving at the top end. This became cooler and denser as it moved into and through the tunnel. The orange glow would probably have been caused by sunlight reflecting off the smoke particles and would have been more visible at the bottom end with the dark of the tunnel providing contrast. The smoke from our fire had revealed to us the previously invisible air movements caused by the presence of the tunnel.

Unlike the majority of my peers I never really enjoyed playing the night game on camps. My fear of disorientation and of being endangered by getting lost in the woods put me off playing. The major problem I had was a lack of stamina. Night Game courses were usually set out by the oldest kids and youngest staff. The courses were quite long and very challenging and those laying out the courses made sure that the routes were full of hurdles, muddy ditches and other obstacles. Whenever I joined I got left behind easily and quickly and would find myself all alone in the dark woods while the voices of others moved further and further away from me.

Hideouts

Hideouts came into being some time after the school opened. One day we arrived to discover a number of wooden packing crates in the back garden. These varied in shape and size from smaller squarish boxes that could hold one child to large rectangular boxes that could hold five or six children at once. We played in, round and on the boxes for a while, arranging and re-arranging them round the garden. We made catwalks between boxes using planks. We used the boxes for games of 'feet off the ground', and as barriers to hide behind when playing 'sneak up' games (latterly 'kick the can'). Some of the crates had rope handles making them easy to carry but the majority were moved round the back garden by rolling. The rolling method turned out to be the most efficient way of moving crates but there was an art to it. The process involved getting a crate up on to one of its corners, turning it towards the desired destination then rolling it onto whichever of its other corners was nearest to that place. In this way the smaller boxes could be 'walked' across the garden quite swiftly and easily by one person. The larger crates could be moved in the same way though generally two or more people were involved in order to prevent the boxes falling in the wrong direction during the moving process.

The building of the first hideout

One day somebody said 'Let's build a hideout!' When this was and who this was I don't recall, but I do remember wondering what a 'hideout' was. Whoever it was they then took the lead in the design and construction of the hideout and before long a large number of packing crates had been bought together to form a single structure with an entrance, a passageway and a number of chambers. This first structure was the precursor model that inspired myriad other hideouts built of numerous different

combinations of crates by numerous different combinations of children over many years.

Hideouts, politics and policy.

Fairly shortly after the hideout concept was introduced a small number of people took possession of the majority of the crates but excluded others from the building process and from using the hideout once built. They also indicated an intention to keep possession for the foreseeable future. Arguments broke out around hideout ownership, how long one group could expect to keep possession of a hideout and its crates and how and when others might get a turn to use the crates to build their own hideouts.

A case was brought up at a school meeting and there was a lengthy discussion around the need to share the crates more fairly and at the need to allow ambitious multi crate builds. The legislative outcome of the meeting was the introduction of a rule that said no hideout could stand for more than two weeks. At the end of that time it could be bashed down and the crates used by other people. Conversely, it was ruled that within that two week time frame, no one could bash down a hideout except its owners.

The primary non legislative outcome was the start of 'hideout gangs'. There was no formal numerical ratio that said a gang of x people could have y crates, but it was generally understood that there might be two or three gangs with hideouts in existence at any given time and that boxes should be shared accordingly. Smaller gangs often negotiated with one another over boxes or formed up into larger joint gangs thus legitimately making use of more of the crates in building a joint hideout.

Some years after hideouts and hideout gangs had become a norm of school life a hideout related incident occurred resulting in a case being brought up at a school meeting. Person A had been seen attempting to bash down a hideout that did not belong to him. This angered the hideout gang who owned it. There had been arguments at the scene and it was agreed a case against person A should be brought up at the weekly school meeting. When the case was called the very aggrieved members of the hideout gang explained what had happened. Person A, who was very angry, did not deny the accusation but claimed he didn't care what the rules were and that he could do as he liked. More people chipped in on the side of the hideout gang and against person A for not respecting the need to adhere to the

existing rules. The debate became more and more heated and person A became more and more angry and upset. Finally person A burst into tears angrily shouting that it wasn't fair; that he didn't have a hideout; that he wasn't in a gang and that nobody wanted him in their gang. The meeting immediately became more sympathetic towards him and after a short discussion he was invited to join the hideout gang who had brought the case against him and it was agreed that together they would rebuild the hideout.

The hideout space

Hideouts needed space. Space was needed for the boxes to be moved safely without risk of damage to buildings or other structures such as sandpits and paddling pools and without risk of damaging trees and shrubs. Space was needed for the boxes to be moved without encroaching on other children at play. Space was needed for the hideouts to stand without being disturbed for two weeks. In view of these factors, very early on in the school's history an area of the back garden was designated 'the hideout space' and was reserved purely for hideout activities. The constant moving of boxes by 'walking' them on their corners, dragging or rolling them from place to place together with our footfall when building and using our hideouts meant that we quickly wore away the scant grass that had been there. As a result the ground making up 'the hideout space' was always wet, muddy and slippery in winter and hard and dusty in summer.