

ALDWICKBURY THEN AND NOW

I am sitting sweaty-palmed on one of those hard-backed chairs in an Aldwickbury morning assembly. We have belted out "Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise" to the sound of our brand new chapel organ. Only the nervous shuffling of seats now breaks the silence as the Headmaster - not Mr Hales, but Mr Chidell - opens his big book of numbers. Then, as 180 boys wait with bated breath to hear their name, he starts reading aloud.

It is 1970. Astronauts have just landed on the moon. Elvis Presley is number 1 in the charts. Our older brothers are hippies with long hair and flared jeans. British soldiers are tied down in Northern Ireland. England have agonizingly lost to Brazil in the World Cup semi-final.

And in the Hall at Aldwickbury, it is a Wednesday morning and the solemn ritual of "Fortnightly Orders" is about to begin.

Fortnightly Orders ... the phrase makes me tense up even now, 37 years after I passed Common Entrance and left Aldwickbury for St.Albans School. Every name in the class was read out, pupils ranked from top to bottom. "Form Four: first Phear, second Simpson, third Eames ..". and so on. Strain, never one to trouble the silverware in any field, usually appeared safely in mid-table. But there were no special favours for the guys at the bottom. Please, I sometimes prayed, spare me from the bottom of the class.

Fortnightly orders were a typical feature of the Aldwickbury of four decades ago. It was a less sophisticated, less politically correct and a much less regulated place than the school of today. But, looking back, it was a gem of a prep school, driven by the enormous personality and charisma of its leader and founder, Brian Chidell. He had been a World War 2 tank driver, was potty about Gilbert and Sullivan operas and delivered great sermons on education in the annual magazine. He believed passionately in the all-round and not just academic education of boys - a good legacy that I still see in Aldwickbury today.

This term my youngest son Peter leaves Aldwickbury for Bedford School. When we swing out of that arboreal driveway for the last time, it will be the end of a 48 year association with the school. My brother Christopher joined in 1963 and left for Bedford. That first association lasted until I left in 1974. We then had a 24-year "pause" before my oldest son Anthony came to the school in 1998. It has been particularly satisfying that he has returned as a Gapper this last year, before we all disappear into the sunset.

What is it like having come back as a parent to the prep school of my childhood? Not nearly as strange as I might have imagined. The geography of course is all wrong. I recently sat on that sumptuous sofa in Mr Hales' study, with the gorgeous view across the playing fields. Forty years ago it was the Maths room which doubled up as the Boarders' TV den, where we watched "Top of the Pops" before our 8:30pm bedtime. What is now the staff room was our Latin Room. Our eccentric Latin Master, Mr Thomas, had been a

Regimental Sergeant Major under Captain Chidell in his army days. Mr Thomas taught verbs military style. On a sunny day he would lead a platoon of boys on to the terrace, marching in time as we recited "Amo Amas Amat".

The classroom blocks were pre-fab "terrapins" where the occasional explosive rantings of a teacher in the next door class would make the walls shake and produce fits of giggles.

And what of the Hall back in those distant days of the 1970s? Well in that very same spot, strange to relate, was the Hall. It is one of the few parts of the school that has hardly changed. Those uncomfortable linked-up hardwood chairs are still there; even more ruthlessly unforgiving on the adult backside than on the nine-year old in shorts.

There were plays on that same stage - not modern child-friendly ensemble pieces like today, but full blown productions of HMS Pinafore, the Mikado, and Pirates of Penzance. They were tough to learn but wonderful in performance. The casting was not so democratic - if you could sing and act you generally got vast amounts of lines, including all the obscure Victorian witticisms.

If you couldn't sing and act, you stood in the chorus line and belted out those stirring Sullivan melodies. I could sing and act a bit. In 1971, aged 10, I was the Fairy Queen in Iolanthe. My family has never let me live it down. In recent years I have been hugely proud to watch both my sons taking parts on that same stage.

So many things have changed - it is hard to imagine that where boys now go for learning support used to be the school staff room. Somehow the entire teaching team managed to fit inside. The air at break time reeked of cigarette smoke, and red and green lights outside the door signalled whether boys could knock or wait outside.

There were plus points and minus points. Three stars made a plus. Three crosses a minus. If Fortnightly Orders hadn't gone so well on a Wednesday, things might get better (or worse) on a Thursday when Mr Chidell started the ritual all over again - this time reading through each boy's plus and minus points of the previous two weeks.

There were more feared punishments too. In escalating order: the slipper; the hairbrush; and the dreaded cane. In reality I think they were actually used once in a blue moon; in our imaginations more frequently.

So much has changed, but much also has stayed the same. I like this mixture of tradition and change. On one ordinary day in 2001 Aldwickbury feels like a completely different world, as it should, from the one I knew as a child. Just occasionally, something takes me back - the smell of wax on wood paneling, the words of a hymn in Chapel service, a stroll down the Beech Walk, the glimpse of a pack of boys playing football on a summer evening on the terrace.

Lessons from these rambling reminiscences? There are none of great importance. The oddest thing is how you never forget the big things that happen to you as a child. Why is

it that those triumphs and humiliations when you are 10 or 12, stay with you so long? I played cricket through much of my adult life and can hardly remember a single innings. Yet I can still remember every stroke of my 35 for the 2nd XI against Beechwood in 1974. It was a glorious summer day. The tea trolley was arriving and a young baby, the offspring of two of the young married teachers, was snoozing in a pram. His name - and I hope he won't mind my mentioning it - was Robin Gilyead.

So the moral of the story is perhaps this - let's not forget just how important these Aldwickbury years are in the life of our boys and to their futures. The experiences, good and bad, may be remembered for many, many years to come.

If you want proof of that, here is a test. Ask me to remember the i tunes password I changed on my computer only last week. I've forgotten it already. Then ask me my personal position in every single "Fortnightly Orders" during my first year at Aldwickbury in 1968. I will get it right every time.

