

July 2004

3 High school

In September 1945 I started at West Leeds High School at the age of 9. Looking back, I can see that this was when I started mixing with others who were not from a working-class background. Some in my form had attended the Preparatory School which was then attached to West Leeds for fee-paying pupils. Others came from Upper Armley, from semi-detached houses with gardens. However, many were from back-to-back houses also. I remember a master holding up to ridicule a boy who had asked, 'Sir, can uz tek uz books 'ome?', a sentence which at one time would have seemed perfectly alright to me.

I enjoyed the challenge of learning, especially the sciences. It was a challenge, though. One term I achieved 98% in Chemistry, but another boy managed 99%. The next term I had 97% - but he got 98%.

I didn't do so well in other subjects. Geography and History were my worst. My final mark in History, the term before I dropped it, was 31%.

Singing in the choir was always enjoyable, as were the Art Club and the Science Club. I was useless at all sports. If there were trials for a race, I inevitably came in last. At rugby, it was discovered that I had turned blue with cold, and I was sent to run round the pitch. It doesn't seem as if I always did what was expected. I can remember being in detention at least once, though at this distance I forget what the crime was. There certainly were times when I had lines to write out.

In the third form my desk was near to the window, and to a large crack in the floor. When I pulled my hanky out one day, the door key fell into this crack, beyond reach. The Physics master tied two bar magnets together to increase the strength, and lowered them in on a string. The only outcome was that one magnet fell in too. Below the crack was the headmaster's study, and in particular, his personal toilet. We had to open up the ceiling to get the key out. The head was not pleased, but at least the Physics master got his magnet back.

The Physics master had a rayon tie, I remember. Thinking it needed a clean, he left it in a beaker of acetone overnight. In the morning all he had was a purplish solution.

When I was in the fifth form I fell under the influence of a sixth-former who payed great attention to Nietzsche. I never read anything by Nietzsche myself, and I do not know whether the sixth-former was true to him. The ideas which I took on board were that there was no God, and that those with ability had to get ahead even if it meant trampling on others.

As you might imagine, it was not long before I found myself in conflict at home. One particular evening I expressed myself too forcibly with Dad. He ordered me to leave the house. I went on the tram to the Reference Library in the centre of Leeds, and when it closed I took a tram to the school. I could not make an entrance, so I spent the night uncomfortable and cold, sitting on one of the toilets and dozing when I could. I surprised the caretaker at a very early hour, who recommended that I phone my mother at her work. That evening I went home, and when Dad arrived I apologised to him. He indicated that perhaps the faults were not all on one side.

My headmaster was quite firm. Some men, he said, could not take their drink. I could not take my studies. He recommended that I bought my mother a box of chocolates (which I did) and that I change my ideas.

From that time on I sought to play more part in the ordinary activities around me. I joined the Army Cadets, and when I was able, switched to the Air Cadets. I passed the exams which guaranteed that I could spend my National Service in the RAF. I went to several army and RAF camps. At one of the latter I had my first and last experience of flying a plane. It was a Tiger Moth, an ancient biplane. The pilot was sitting behind me. When he asked whether I would like to have a try, and I said I would, his answer was, 'You are in control.' With no prior training, I certainly made the horizon skip around before the pilot took over again and told me to be gentle with the stick.

In the sixth form I had a part time job as lab assistant. I had to dilute reagents to fill up the bottles on the benches, and to clean benches and vessels. One flask gave me trouble. I tried cleaning it with aqua regia, then with perchloric acid, but all to no avail. The dirt remained. Then I discovered that a bottle brush could shift it easily enough.

There were instructions as to how much to dilute, say, concentrated sulphuric acid to produce the 5N concentration required for the bottles on the bench. Early on I had to dilute ammonia. Unwisely, I used a whole winchester bottle of 880 ammonia, planning to dilute it with many winchesters of water. The fumes were so strong that I could not make it to the door, and had to escape out of a window.

About this time I made many mathematical models. The Art department were happy to supply cardboard. Some models I made with plaster of Paris. One day I was in the sixth form room, which was also the sixth form chemistry lab. The plaster bag was empty, so for fun I blew it up and burst it. At the sound of the report the chemistry master shot in from his room, and seeing my white face (due to the plaster dust), exclaimed, 'Colin! What's happened?'

At the end of the fifth form everyone around me was taking their O-levels. I could not, as I was only 14 and the required age was 16. I dropped several subjects, and went into the sixth form. There I specialised on Maths, Physics and Chemistry, working towards A-level. At the end of my first year in the sixth, I still could not

take any O-level exams as I was only 15. The head of English, Oswald Harland, suggested that I also take A-level English. I was astonished, but he had confidence in me. When I could not attend one of his classes because of a timetable clash, he wrote for me the notes he was dictating to the rest of the class.

At the end of the second year in the sixth form I was at last able to take exams. Besides some O-levels (I forget which), I took Maths and English at A-level and Physics and Chemistry at both A-level and S-level (scholarship). One day, I remember, I had three three-hour exams. At the end of the afternoon I had to be kept separate from those who had taken an exam that day, so that I could take the same exam that evening. I passed them in all subjects and was awarded a State Scholarship, which meant that if I went on to University I would be sure of a grant.

My headmaster had been at King's College, Cambridge, and he wanted me and another boy to try for that. He personally attended to grooming us, and recommended walking briskly throughout the lunch hour and reading the Manchester Guardian for general knowledge. In December 1952 we went up to King's for the week of the entrance exams. On the basis of this I was awarded a Minor Scholarship.

I was to read for the Natural Sciences Tripos, which required three experimental subjects. Physics and Chemistry would obviously be two of these. I was recommended by the Tutor in King's to read Physiology as well. In order to prepare for this, from January 1953 I spent time in the girls' side of West Leeds to learn Biology (which the boys were never taught). I took and gained an O-level in this in the summer.

I had changed my ideas with regard to whether there was a God. There were some things which science could not explain, such as the love which could exist between people. So I thought that God existed, but I knew very little about him. The summer before going up to Cambridge I saw several films, among which were 'Call me Madam' and 'Hans Christian Anderson'. I liked a happy ending, so I supposed that God did also. If I tried to pray, it was as if there was a stone wall between me and God.