

Memories of Woolverstone: a questionnaire completed for the IHS

Early Days

How old were you when you came to Woolverstone? Why was Woolverstone the choice of schooling for you? **I was 11; it was recommended by my primary school Headmistress at Brunswick Park School, and my parents thought it would be a good alternative to Camberwell.**

What were your first impressions of the site and the school? **It was very exciting - posh in the best sense – an amazing setting – a huge contrast to Camberwell backstreets and bombsites – the masters in gowns reminded me of my beloved Billy Bunter stories – boarding was anyway a huge new experience – we were soon immersed in rugby, which was also totally new – there were many new friends from London and military bases worldwide. It was “awesome” (though we didn’t use THAT word in those days!).**

Lessons

Memorable subjects/ teachers/ lessons and why... **I hugely enjoyed ALL my lessons; physics and biology in smart new labs were amazing; French and Latin were totally new. There were obviously high and demanding standards and dedicated and interesting teachers. The wall plaques showing boys who had gone to Oxbridge impressed me; it was obviously a SERIOUS place. I wasn’t good enough at maths to study physics at “A” level, but that was my favourite subject even though I was better at languages. We did SO many practical experiments with electricity, gases, pulleys and weights; it was just great. Woodwork I also enjoyed immensely. We learned most of the skills, including how to make a dovetail corner! What I learned in those lessons under Ben Turner (a WWII fighter pilot no less) was of IMMENSE use to me in later life! One really CAN impress a girl by putting up shelves that don’t fall down!**

AWESOME also were many of those masters involved in artistic productions, especially [Leslie Johnstone, Merlin Channon, Patrick Hutton and above all the long-serving Barry Salmon](#). Their input and effect was beyond profound.

Behaviour – comments on examples of good and bad! **There was still corporal punishment allowed, including slipping by senior boy monitors and prefects, for example if one spoke after lights out. In my era behaviour was generally very good in and out of class, and bullying in my experience minimal, but others may have had a different experience.**

How well did your education set you up for life after school? **WHS taught boys to be tough, independent and resourceful. Quite apart from the excellent academic standards it also provided a huge number of extra-curricular activities including in arts and music, so that boys could develop their particular skills and interests. Sporting standards were very high and SAILING was a big bonus for those interested. Musical and dramatic productions were extraordinary, often in collaboration with Ipswich schools. (<https://www.whs-archives.net/MaD/index.htm>)**

Sport

What were sport lessons like? Which sports did you play? Were you in any teams? Please comment on any memorable fixtures -successes and defeats etc. **Rugby was KING at WHS, overseen by a tough Welsh master, Glyn Evans. Only Colchester G.S. and Wymondham College (both much bigger and longer-established) could realistically hope to beat our teams – though others did occasionally! I was in rugby and cricket teams throughout my years there, including in the 1st XV & XI, which one felt to be a great honour. My most memorable defeat personally was in the 1964 final of the Ipswich Sevens v Ipswich School no less. I was about to score the winning try in the last minute when I tripped over a divot with no opposing player near me. We lost by a few points** (<https://www.whs-archives.net/sport/rugger/mem/5.htm>)

Memorable teachers and players: [Glyn ‘Taffy’ Evans](https://www.whs-archives.net/sport/cricket/dickmayes.htm) was master i/c of rugby, a formidable taskmaster ... MANY other masters took charge of teams, notably Derek Thornbery, Bryan Middlebrook and several others. Bill Coutts, Alan Suffling, Brian Workman and a number of other boys played for Suffolk, Eastern Counties and in Coutts’ case England sides. Dickie Mayes, a former professional cricketer, tended the cricket grounds AND coached us – for many years. (<https://www.whs-archives.net/sport/cricket/dickmayes.htm>). Brian Workman was one of the many exceptional boys in the first decade (especially in cricket), and many others followed, a lot after I had left. England cricketer Graham Barlow was perhaps the most successful sportsman the school produced. (<https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/boys/gb/def.htm>)

Extra-Curricular & Travel

Do you remember any school trips in particular? I never went on any school trips myself (my parents were usually pretty hard up), but many other boys did. (<https://www.whs-archives.net/travel/def.htm>)

Having said that, I did do something completely astonishing and unique in the VIth form: I was recommended by my teachers for – and was awarded – an ILEA “Traveling Scholarship”, whereby boys would spend three weeks in four different places in France during the post Lower VIth summer holidays. This was the first time I had ever been abroad and remains one of the most astonishing and unforgettable experiences of my life. It is recorded here: <https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/60/def.htm#ts>

What are your memories of clubs and societies you were in? [There were an astonishing number of clubs and societies over the four decades](https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/gen/10.htm): something to cater for all interests and skills. I was preoccupied with academic work and sport, so did not take part in many club activities. I did play clarinet in the school orchestra and in the 6th form in a little jazz band which performed at school concerts (<https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/gen/10.htm>). I also took part in several memorable “Musical Weekends” where we practised works in an orchestra including girls from IHS and Northgate G.S. The girls were all much better than me (I played about one note in every three!), but it was still a lot of fun.

What were your friendship groups like? Who were your friends with, are you still in touch? My nature made it hard for me to develop close and lasting friendships at school, but funnily enough I have developed such friendships with old schoolfriends I reconnected with many years later. I was a loner; shy and somewhat uncommunicative despite my high sporting profile. I was friendly towards and with many boys, but not deeply so. I shared a two-bed dormitory with [the great Cedric Delves](https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/gen/10.htm) (later to become Commander of the S.A.S.) for two terms! We got on fine, but never stayed in touch after schooldays.

Extra Extra-Curricular (those things that perhaps weren’t meant to happen but did)

Illicit outings and activities: Not sure whether I am ashamed to say it but I personally was never involved in anything illicit! SOME boys often smoked in some clandestine place, usually behind (or INSIDE) bushes down Orwell Side, or wandered along the riverbank to Pin Mill.

Rule-breaking in general: There was obviously some, but not by me! Boys might get slipped by a prefect for minor crimes (talking after lights out was not uncommon!), caned by the Headmaster or even expelled in rare cases. In general WHS in my era was not a lawless place AT ALL!

At the end of term there were often pranks carried out, mostly by 6th formers who were leaving! These included leaving a master’s car on the cricket square, or [a raid on Orwell House by Junior boys](https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/gen/10.htm)! Nothing too damaging and mostly treated with resigned acceptance by staff as I recall.

What did you do in your spare time? What with lessons, homework, sport and music there wasn’t a lot of spare time. Weekdays were impossibly busy with class, sport and homework. On Saturday afternoons I was always playing in a rugby or cricket match. On Sundays, we wandered the grounds (especially Orwell Side); played casual games there (including the dreaded soccer – frowned upon by Rugby Supremo Glyn Evans). In the 6th form we were allowed to go to Ipswich on Sundays, but had to be back for dinner around 18:00. I have beautiful memories of meeting an IHS girl in Christchurch Park once. We also went to the bowling alley sometimes. At other times I did a lot of reading and lounging about chatting!

Accommodation

Describe life in the boarding houses, routines and special occasions. **We were well looked after. Inspection was Sunday morning, and we had to make sure our beds were correctly made! The facilities were rudimentary but perfectly adequate. Most memorable were the Christmas parties, where we played silly games in the dining-room. I also remember very clearly Dick Woollett (in his first stint at the school in the early 60s) inviting some of us in Halls - where he was Assistant Housemaster - to his little flat in the first-floor corridor between Halls and Johnstons to watch the BBC series “The Great War”. That was the ONLY time we could ever watch TV in those days, and seeing those images of the WWI trenches for the first time made a deep impression on me.**

Memories of boarding staff? **Michael Shakeshaft was my Housemaster in 58-59, ably assisted by Marjorie Ager whom he later married. They were the best. Michael was a true old-fashioned “To serve them all my days” teacher, and I count myself lucky to have known him and his wife. My later house staff included Taffy Evans, Dick Woollett and Bryan Middlebrook, all unforgettable characters who left an indelible mark.**

What were school dinners like? **We were all fit and healthy for years on end – which is the most important thing to say about the food. It was pretty varied and wholesome as I recall. I seem to remember porridge almost every morning (unexciting but healthy) and fair amounts of stodgy sponge pudding or semolina for dessert. We were allowed to keep our own peanut butter and/or marmite in a cupboard in the dining-hall, and that was popular. At break we always had a free little bottle of milk. I NEVER had cause to complain about any aspect of our food! (<https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/gen/15.htm>)**

PS: We sat 8 to a table with a monitor in charge and he always said a quick GRACE before we started.

After lights-out... **Pretty uneventful, except for the end of term. Here is the most memorable incident! <https://www.whs-archives.net/comp/50/50.htm#raid>. Frankly, one didn't dare get out of bed after lights-out (or even talk) for fear of a slipping from one of the monitors who in my first two years in the Orangerie of the main hall had a curtained-off little area in one corner.**

Retrospective Feelings

How do you look back upon your time at Woolverstone? **It was life-changing – as of course are most teenage experiences, but so shatteringly different to what we had known or WOULD have known at a day-school in Camberwell that the difference it made to my life and its future course were immeasurable and the memories deep and lasting, including of many wonderful teachers. That magnificent and historic hall and associated buildings overlooking the river Orwell were my home for 6 years, and every time I return it feels like going home.**

Would you change anything about your experiences there?

I lacked self-confidence (despite my relative success in academia and sport) and regret not thinking clearly enough about a number of things, in particular applying for university. My teachers helped me apply for an Oxford Place to read French – my best subject. But in truth – though good at French language - I wasn't much interested in French poetry, and this did not go down well when I told them that at my interview in Merton College. I would dearly love to have studied PPE there, but at the time was in complete ignorance that such a thing existed! My teachers were very kind (especially Dick Woollett at the time), but my naivety and ignorance triumphed. I eventually got to study French anyway at UKC, which did have a considerable element of history and philosophy – though my perpetual poetry weakness prevented me from getting an otherwise assured 2:1!

One other regret. There was no sex education AT ALL during my time there. I don't mean the biological aspects, but the psychological ones: What is “a relationship? How should one behave? What should one expect? What is it normal to expect and to do? What is it right to do? How does one deal with “feelings”? There is a case for leaving all this vague for kids to find out, but ultimately not a convincing one – and many parents (certainly in my case) NEVER broach the subject at all. It is a difficult area to deal with for teachers, but we should not avoid difficulty. Above all, one was not taught to be open, honest and clear about one's feelings. Expressing these can be hard for a shy teenager, but not doing so can lead to confusion, misunderstanding – and even a lifetime of regret. ([Do watch “Anne with an ‘e’”!!](#))

Any other thoughts you're willing to share

In the stunning setting of WHS I met truly exceptional teachers and boys, many of whom went on to successful sporting, academic or artistic careers – or in Cedric Delves' case military ones as Head of the S.A.S.! The focus on – and achievement of – quality in so many areas through love, duty, dedication and hard work was breathtaking. I have taught in 8 very different kinds of school in five countries on three continents, but never experienced anything remotely like WHS. The school was a daring and massively successful experiment in the immediate post-war period of enthusiasm and energy, but it could not survive in the financial and political circumstances of the 1980s. I was astonishingly fortunate to find myself there during its beautiful but butterfly window of life. It left me with very deep and lasting memories - not all totally happy in personal terms, but that's life!

One last thought: WHS taught me that a single individual can make a truly galactic difference to a young person's life. I became a teacher of French thanks to taking Malcolm 'Stretch' Poole as my role-model (<http://www.whs-archives.net/comp/staff/marp/def.htm>).

The most famous example of this at WHS is that of Ian McEwan and his 6th form English teacher, Neil Clayton. According to Derek Thornbery (his previous English teacher) Ian showed no particularly extraordinary talent in his early WHS years, but was inspired by Neil Clayton's lessons later on to become the world-famous author we all know. Would he have achieved this without Neil? Impossible to say, but the latter was perhaps the catalyst needed. (<https://www.whs-archives.net/post/fobs/McEwan.htm>)

Thank you to IHS staff and pupils. WHS Old Boys are proud of your continuing achievements – and thank you, too for looking after our old home!

Chris Snuggs – Berners/Halls 58-65