

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number 21

*This is the second instalment of Marcus Brampton's quest for a Headship.*

### Getting Ahead

Having applied for all the headship vacancies in the Friday Times Educational Supplement – bar the enigmatic plea for candidates by the Inner London Education Authority - Marcus Brampton was a bit more reticent to apply for the following Friday's batch. But then he noticed a short advertisement that was a stark contrast to the London docklands..... a call from a county shire he had ever visited – except at speed down the M1. He read it carefully.

#### VACANCY FOR THE HEADSHIP OF A NEW COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL.

*The County Council is looking for a Head Teacher at a new co-educational comprehensive school currently being constructed on the edge of Market Upabit. It will serve a rural catchment area of some 400 square kilometres, bounded by Much Knowing in the north, Lower Sodbury in the south, Stilby in the west and the edge of Fenborough City in the east.*

*It will be served by ten village primary schools.*

*Further details form the County Education Offices.*

Marcus considered that even though he had never taught in a comprehensive school, nor taught girls, nor taught outside a city, there was no harm in requesting the 'further details'.

So he did, and a week later received a very thin envelope containing one piece of A4 paper, with writing only on one side. It said:

#### VACANCY FOR THE HEADSHIP OF A NEW COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL.

*The County Council is looking for a Head Teacher at a new co-educational comprehensive school currently being constructed on the edge of Market Upabit. It will serve a rural catchment area of some 400 square kilometres, bounded by Much Knowing in the north, Lower Sodbury in the south, Stilby in the west and the edge of Fenborough City in the east.*

*It will be served by ten village primary schools.*

*Application by letter (no forms) to the county education officer, marked Market Upabit Headship Application.*

That was it! The same details!

A school and leadership post defined only by geography! Certainly worth a punt, thought Marcus. If nothing else, it would indicate whether his qualifications and experience would get him as far as an interview. But should he tell Ros, his wife, what he was doing? Yes, of course he must. Even though he knew that she would sigh once again sigh and mutter 'vaulting ambition'. She always had! But he also knew that she would be enthusiastic if he was, and supportive if he deserved it. He would

deserve it. He had thrown himself into every post he had taken. This was now the ultimate. So, apply he did.

Two weeks later another thin envelope dropped on the mat.... An invitation...to attend an interview.... at 2.00pm in three days time.... in the town council offices. No prior view of the new buildings...no preliminary briefing by an Education Officer...seemed to Marcus for all the world like a stitch-up.... Someone already groomed for the job. 'A rum one, certainly,' agreed wife, Ros. 'But go for it. Any interview has got to be good experience.'

On the appointed day at 2.00pm in the Market Upabit council offices, Marcus's suspicions were confirmed. Six candidates were herded into what was no more than a windowless walk-in cupboard and taking charge, regaling the group with information about the new school and his part in an advisory capacity was.... the local secondary school head.....one of the candidates.

No sign of an education official, no pack of details about the new school, no site plan.... Not even a welcoming cuppa. Had all the hallmarks of the opening chapter of a Len Deighton spy novel.

Marcus described later to his wife – and any friends who had not heard it before – what transpired.

As I sat there, gasping for a beverage, and someone to shut off the local man's constant chatter, I gradually began to warm to the idea of a new school in a new and wholly untried system being defined so far in purely geographical terms. It might just be that the new Head would be left to get on with the job and would be judged by the outcome. I decided there and then that I was going to make a determined shot at getting the job. I would pull no punches; I would set out my stall in all the glory I could muster.

It was no good trying to disguise the fact that I had never lived in the countryside, never taught girls, never taught in a secondary modern school, and had never taught the CSE examination. But I reckoned I knew how to teach, how to help others to teach, how to support colleagues, how to inspire youngsters and how to build up a good reputation. I will give them two barrels of things to think about. That'll make them take notice....I thought.

But it did not turn out like that....at all. This plan of attack had to be radically altered on the hoof, as soon as the first shot was fired. Like Trafalgar, Waterloo, the Somme and the Normandy Landings... so now Market Upabit.

As the local man droned on I surveyed the other four opponents. We were all men – two current Heads, a Deputy Head from inside the county, and three of us current heads of departments in selective schools. Only the local man knew anything more about the school than I did, so everything to play for.

All we knew about the forthcoming interview was what we learned from a brief visit from the clerk, who popped into our dungeon, delivered his message and slid out again. We would each have no more than 20 minutes of interview;; each panellist could ask one question and we would be given the chance to ask questions at the end – so long as they did not exceed a further ten minutes.

We had all forgotten to ask how many panellists there were, and those who had been interviewed were housed in a different cupboard – well away from those of us yet to be done.

So, when my turn came after a couple of hours of tea-less waiting (the fourth interviewee) I found myself seated on a chair in the fourth side of a hollow square. I looked around. Before me lay an assortment of county councillors, interim governors, a senior education office and a clerk – about fourteen in all – the most striking of all being a small, energetic lady wearing an army greatcoat and a very black eye-patch. She turned out to be one of the local gentry and the designated Vice Chair of the new school's governing body.

The Chair, who was the County Council leader, Doris Cowan, introduced them all one by one, but I could not take in any names nor reasons for being there. I simply nodded at each one....with what I hoped was a knowing look of someone with a total grip on the situation....which was not how I actually felt.

And so it came to pass. Each panellist did indeed ask one question, in varying degrees of innocuousness and irrelevance. I could see my plan to dazzle them with pedagogic brilliance was fast disappearing. The senior education officer was not invited to contribute so there was no-one to ask a searching educational or management question (i.e. the ones I had banked on) And no-one else had ever been employed in a school.... Not that that deterred them. They all knew about schools, of course; after all they had all been to at least one as children!

*'Will you cane girls for breaking rules, eh?'* asked a red-faced farmer, seeming to relish his question and the vision it conjured up. When I curtly answered that I could foresee no possible occasion on which that kind of punishment would be appropriate, he leaned forward and quickly got in with a supplementary.

*'I suppose that means you are one of those who object to thrashing boys who don't do as they are told.....'*

He got no further. Doris the Chair had spotted the farmer's own transgression. *'Sorry Councillor Jerk. Only one question.'*

*'Aren't you going to cane Councillor Jerk for breaking the rules, Chair?'* A young bearded man in a check shirt enquired with a smile.

I placed him as a representative from the nearby steel town. The Chair had some difficulty in keeping a face. *'Please do not waste time Councillor Allshaw. Next question.'* She turned to a pale-faced young man in an ill-fitting grey suit. *'Your turn Mr. Skillithorn.'* Skillithorn seemed surprised that questions had got to him so quickly.

*'Er....er....won't you find it difficult to get to school on time living....I note, about 50 miles away?'*

At this, Doris the Chair lady exploded and shouted, *'Don't be silly. He won't be commuting!....Ask another one..'* But the abashed Mr. Skillithorn was too shaken. *'No more questions, Chair.'*

A local Lord then asked about my National Service in the army, followed by a local businessman with a son at the nearby independent school who wondered how I would get anyone to teach physics at a comprehensive school. And a wise-looking man who turned out to be the putative Chair of the governors of the new school asked me to describe my role as the head of a large department in a large school. No problem with those enquiries. A piece of cake. That disposed of the right flank of panel members.

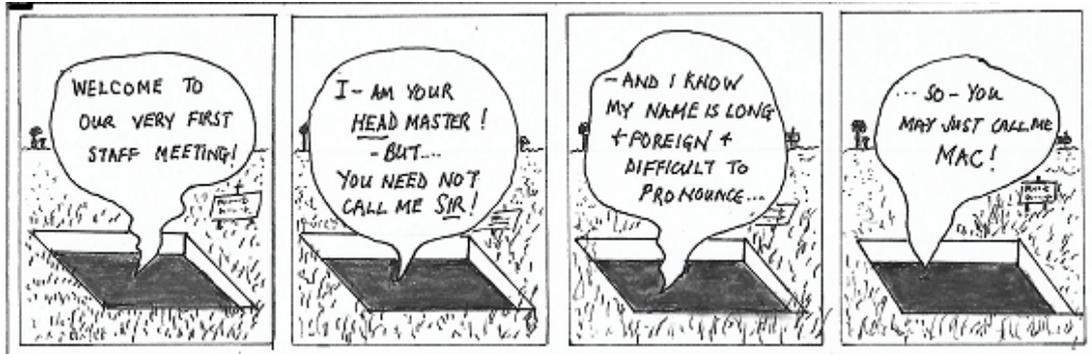
Doris turned to panellists on her left now. The Honourable Jezebel Forteque leaned forward and peered at me with her good eye.

*'How will you set about breakin' in new teachers, eh?'* I learned later that she spoke mainly in horsey language, but at that moment I really did not know what on earth she was getting at. I decided she would not appreciate my asking her to explain, so I launched forth into an explanation of what I would expect of staff appointed to this 'prestigious', novel school. It seemed to satisfy her. She nodded and leaned back.

The questions moved swiftly on. One councillor did have the temerity to enquire what I thought leadership consisted of. I never got the chance to answer because once again Doris the Chair took charge. *'We haven't got time for philosophical discussions about leadership. It's this committee's job to determine which candidate has demonstrated leadership qualities, not what he thinks it is.'*

That was a pity. I would have liked to have explained my notion of leadership and perhaps to have illustrated it by telling the story of Noah, who was both manager and leader. Noah, so the story goes, showed good management skills by getting all the animals onto the Ark in good order, and then, demonstrated excellent leadership qualities in making sure that the elephants did not get to know what the rabbits were up to! The first was a simple but skilful bit of sorting and arranging i.e. management, while the second required Vision and powers of Deception as well as Planning.... all of

which are classic leadership qualities.... as set out in Machiavelli's perceptive, and scandalous, exploration of leadership, 'Il Principe' ('The Prince'). I thought it was a rather good illustration.



Actually, I probably would not have told this tale! But in any case that question was swept aside, and so we moved on. I did, however, contrive to expand on each question and to turn it to what I wanted to talk about, thus setting out my meagre stall in the most glowing way I could.

By the time the last question got to tail-end Charlie over on my right all his potential questions had been covered. He pushed his piece of paper to one side, looked at me quizzically and said rather apologetically, 'Are you healthy?'

Before I had stopped gaping like an out-of-water fish the Honourable Jezebel lifted her eye patch and boomed, 'He looks healthy to me!'

There was nothing left to say. I did not feel like following this with pseudo-philosophical questions, so I simply thanked them for their courtesy and left. I did not feel I had done enough to get the job, but perhaps nothing to throw it away, either. It is probably how all candidates feel at that point.

Eventually we all gathered in our new cell and sat somewhat silently till close on 6 o'clock....fortified.... at last.... by one cup of tea and one biscuit. Never had these humble items felt so welcome. Then the door to our cell opened and the clerk looked around dramatically – like a TV baking competition chairman announcing a winner.

'Mr. Brampton, please come with me.' And so the young whippersnapper from outside the county had done it. I remember feeling some sympathy for the five others who had shared the condemned cell with me for four hours, especially the local head, but it did not last long. There were other things on my mind.

I knew that it looked as though I was about to be offered the job, and that the head of the secondary school would be very disappointed and the local deputy head, too, but in the event both were perfect gentlemen and never expressed any resentment to me. But I appreciated that it must have been hard for them to see the post go to a young whippersnapper from outside the county.

'Well, Mr Brampton. The committee has decided to formally recommend you to the Education Authority for appointment as Head of the new Market Upabit school. Will you accept our offer?'

'Yes, maam, I will,' I replied. '....but where is it?'

'Where is it?' repeated an incredulous Doris. 'Here....in Market Upabit....where do you think?'

I cleared my throat. This did not seem a very auspicious start. *'Yes, of course, maam. But we have not seen the site...and it would be a bit odd to accept a job at a place one had never seen....not even a plan of it... don't you think?'*

*'Right,'* announced the eminently practical Chair. *'Go now with the Education Officer. This lot will stay here with me till you return and then we will sign and seal it.'*

And so the Education Officer whisked me up to the new school site.... allowed me a quick survey of the various holes and piles of bricks, and whisked me back again. The committee was just downing a final glass of town council British sherry when we arrived.

*'Well, does the size of the hole appeal to you, young man?'* she enquired.

*'It suits me very well,'* I replied.

*'Then it's yours.'* And she thrust out a hand. The deal was made.

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