

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 46

End of the Track

This little episode brings the 'Rural Deprivation' trilogy to an enigmatic close

Jimmy Delafield did not resent school. He simply did not like going there. Market Upabit was fifteen miles away and the school bus had to wander through at least ten villages taking over an hour from the Finelade area to the school. And even more frustrating, he sighed, was that school and the school journey took out ten hours of each weekday from his beloved time on the family farm.

Jimmy was a born farmer. At age 15 he was a master of lambing, milking, sowing, hewing and mowing, not to mention reaping.... And above all tractor driving, manoeuvring his all-time favourite tractor, Goldfinger – so-called because of its potential for evil malpractice.

Father Delafield was perfectly happy with son's predilection (though he wouldn't call it that)....it's what Jimmy wants to do, mother, that's all there is to it,' when Mrs. Delafield enquired after homework missed and time spent away from books.

'He's a farmer....and that's the long and short of it.'

Mum was of the mind that reckoned a good education was never wasted....'...not even for a farmer,' she sniffed. 'I prefer to be an educated farmer's wife, than a thick one....and don't you say otherwise, Horace Delafield.' Farmer Delafield was not going to argue with that.

So Jimmy's head was forced back into his books as often as Mrs. Delafield could find him... not an easy task on a 400 acre farm dotted with woods and copses....and on the edge of Rockingham forest which straddled Market Upabit's catchment area.

Jimmy was pretty well resigned to enduring school for another year when he reached 15, but that did not stop him joining other lads from the village in conspiring to get up at 5.00 one winter's morning after a heavy snowstorm to pack the snow into a two metre high barrier across the only lane into the village, to prevent the school bus getting through. It only lasted a day, because ironically Jimmy's dad ordered Jimmy to drive the tractor with the scoop attached to clear the road. Mr. Delafield supervised the removal; Jimmy performed the task. It may have been a sort of punishment. But Jimmy revelled in the work....and dad knew he did.

Those days of school respite were few, of course. Jimmy and the twenty or so kids from the Welland valley villages carried on with their daily pilgrimages to Market Upabit. The coach provided for them by the county council contractor, 'Bills Buses', was old. But not only old it was cold, dirty and driven by a succession of dubious drivers. But it was cheap and managed to pick up and drop off the far-flung fraternity of Finelade children in reasonable time. And so the council had resisted all attempts by the school and Parents Association to change the contractor.

The happy band of Fineladers were not bothered one way or the other, of course. A bus was a bus....and if it took them home it was good enough for them. And it did....until one early March day.

Duly at 4.00pm a thousand youngsters poured out of Market Upabit School, seven hundred of them making for the convoy of buses lined up in the bus park. Jimmy's 'Bills Buses' coach, one of the two coaches owned by the firm, was not there, and did not arrive until half an hour after the rest had gone, and Mr. Brampton, the Head, had made fruitless calls to Bills Buses office.

Just as Marcus Brampton was about to inform the county council that he was going to ring a rival company, Bill's Buses bus spluttered into the school, appearing out of a blue haze of exhaust fumes.

Nearly all the pupils had said 'hi' to the driver as they climbed aboard.

Jimmy went a step further. 'Where's Freddy, then?'

Freddy was known to them. He was a 'regular' driver and normally scheduled for lucrative old folk's outings, and the fishing parties that were the staple income for the firm. But Freddy had brought them to school that morning, so where was he?

'He's not well,' growled their new driver.

'Oh, drunk again, you mean,' replied Jimmy with his no-nonsense jocularly.

'Don't be funny with me....Sit down. We're going.' The unfamiliar driver's speech was odd and his actions clumsy. He pushed Jimmy away and took off – far too fast for Jimmy's liking.

Jimmy sat down with Paula, the only sixth former on the bus.

'Not good, Paula....I reckon our driver is either ill or drunk.

Paula sniffed. 'I expect he and Freddy have been taking another of them fishing groups, left them at the canal and spent the afternoon in a pub.'

'Jimmy contemplated this, then stood up holding the seat in front as the bus swayed along the road out of town. He pulled himself down to the front, and leaned over the driver's shoulder.

'Excuse me.... Do you know which route to take?'

'Got it on a bit of paper 'ere.' The driver reached for a piece of paper on the dashboard in front of him. It was blank.

'Was 'ere a minute ago...' He looked down on the floor and the bus swerved towards a ditch.

'Look out,' cried Jimmy grasping the back of the driver's seat.

Looking down seemed to make the driver dizzy. He lifted his head and Jimmy could see the man's eyes roll.

'You're drunk, mate.' He whispered into the man's ear. 'You'd better stop.'

'Don't you start accusing me....Get away from 'ere....go on....or I will report you for interfering with the driver... go on, get back there.'

'Jimmy stared at him and then rejoined Paula. 'I'll keep an eye on him, Paula. You keep an eye on the kids. They've stopped chattering. I think they are cottoning on...'

The coach moved into the Market Upabit hinterland, dropping students off regularly until there was just a handful left.

It was at that moment that the bus started to sway from side to side.

Jimmy motioned to Paula to come forward and join him on the front passenger seat, behind the driver.

'This is dangerous, Paula.....what do you reckon...?'

'I'll tell him to stop or I'll report him...shall I?'

Leave it just a minute, Paula. We are coming into Greythorn. Some of the kids get off here.....oops, what the heck's going on....?'

The bus was picking up speed instead of slowing down.

'Heh....this is a stop,' shouted Paul.

The driver jabbed down on the brake, shooting all the passengers forward....fast. One small Year 7 eleven year old banged her mouth on the back of the seat in front, let out a yell and started to cry. The driver swung round in his seat. 'Stop that! You are not hurt.....get off those who have to....now'. The driver was rocking back and forward. His speech got more slurred and eventually no-one knew what he was saying.

The Greythorn group alighted as fast as they could. Paula stood by the driver's cubby-hole.

'Look, mister,....you are....'

She got no further. The driver banged the separating door to and put his foot on the accelerator. The bus shot down the lane in what was now a rapidly darkening gloom.

Paula turned to Jimmy.

'He's going to kill us at this rate!....'

Jimmy helped Paula back into her seat. The rest of the bus had gone quiet. There were no a dozen young 11 to 13 year olds left besides Paula and Jimmy. The little girl with the bruised mouth was still whimpering.

'I'll go and sit with Priscilla, Jimmy. You keep an eye on Jacky boy up front. Surely he can tell its dark and these lanes have Z bends?'

The bus was now swaying through the dark forest, miles from the nearest village or farm. Jimmy had been staring at the driver as the light faded and thought he looked even more groggy.

As Paula stumbled her way to the rear, Jimmy decided he had to confront the driver again. He got up but was then thrown onto his back as the coach hit a bollard on a bend. The coach juddered to a stop...as though the brake and clutch had not been used.

Jimmy picked himself up and found the driver slumped over the wheel. He shouted to Paula.

'Paula, come quick....' Paula joined him and they stared down at the driver lying unconscious with his head on the steering wheel. They looked at each other.

'What do you reckon, Paula?'

'Drunk as a lord. He isn't going any further...!' She looked through the window. 'And neither are we... We are in the middle of the forest. There are no houses for miles, Jimmy....what are we going to do?'

Jimmy thought hard. 'We have two choices, I think. We can sit here and hope a car comes along....or our parents get worried and come looking for us.....or....I drive the bus to the next village, Bullstone.'

'You can't do that Jimmy. You don't have a licence and you are only fifteen...'

'Nearly sixteen....' Protested Jimmy. 'But driving the bus is easy. When you have driven as many tractors as me, a bus is a piece of cake..'

And then the situation started to dawn on the young pupils at the back. They moved forward. The bus was now almost dark, just the barest of interior lighting. Outside was pitch black. Dolly Close began to cry. Duane Goddard was not sympathetic, 'Oh shut, our Dolly....stop crying...'. This made Dolly cry more, and louder. She could contain herself no longer and let out a terrifying scream...'Aaaaarh I want my mummy and daddy.....Paula.....I'm scared.....'

Paula put her arm around her and sat with her. She made her mind up.

'Right, . This is what we are going to do.....the driver has fallen ill....We can't just stay here. I have authorised Jimmy to drive the bus to Bullstone. We can get help there....'

'Jimmy can't drive, Paula!....He'll kill us all....' This from Year 9 Fenella.....I'm getting off and walking home....'

'Don't be daft, Fennie,' It's more dangerous walking then Jimmy driving...he'll drive very slowly....and I promise that if we meet another vehicle, we'll stop and get help...O.K?' Fenella accepted the compromise. The remainder sat down, but in a bunch at the front.

'Let's get this bloke out of the seat and onto the front seat, shall we?' Jimmy was warming to the task.

Jimmy settled himself in the driver's seat and set off. He felt entirely comfortable. Just like his beloved tractor.

'Jimmy....I live up Field Lane over there,' said Fenella after a mile or two. 'Can you drop me off here?'

'How far up there?'

'It's less than a mile, Jimmy.'

'Then, I am definitely not dropping you off. I am going to take you up to the cross-roads. You will only have a few yards to walk then....and you can get your mum and dad to ring my mum and dad and tell 'em what's happened....the number is in the phone book...'

Paula looked aghast....'But shouldn't we just stop, Jimmy....and ring for help?'

'Paula, by the time we have walked up there with Fennie and her dad has rung for help I can drop most of you at your houses....and stop mass parental panic...'

And that is precisely what Jimmy Delafield did. It took him less than half an hour to deposit it all of them safely in their villages or farms. The last was Paula, and Jimmy agreed to park there, let Paula and parents arrange for medical help and to inform Bills Buses....'

'You were great, Jimmy, said Paula and her parents when all that had been done and Mr Delafield had arrived to pick him up. 'Troubles over then?' said Mr. Delafield in his usual cheerful and optimistic way.

Well, they were....in a way....but not for Marcus Brampton and Market Upabit School.

Marcus got the story first from Jimmy as soon as he got to the school. Father Delafield and son were already there. The saga was spelled out.

'You probably know the police warned Jimmy that they would be back.... when they picked the coach up yesterday evening.'

Marcus hadn't but he nodded and Mr. Delafield continued.

'Jimmy may have done wrong....technically, headmaster....but he did right by a lot of children...remember that....probably done the school's reputation a lot of good, too.'

'Look, I can tell you I am very proud of Jimmy...and will support him to the hilt if too many questions are asked....We have to accept that Jimmy acted illegally....but everything went well and all the children are safe. That is the long and short of it. Leave it with me, Mr. Delafield....and Jimmy off you go to registration.... and well done.'

When Jimmy and Mr. Delafield had left Marcus sat for moment ruminating, and then picked up the phone to the main Eastborough Police Station.

'Brampton, Headmaster Market Upabit School here....can I speak to someone involved in the Bills Buses incident yesterday...'

'Ah, Headmaster...I was just going to telephone you.....to tell you Superintendent Yallop is on his way to see you.'

'What....the Superintendent?..... Eustace Yallop?....Goodness....OK....Thanks....I'll speak to him shortly.'

As soon as Marcus put the phone down the door to his office opened and there stood the school receptionist. She was about to announce visitor when an immaculately uniformed Eustace Yallop stepped out from behind her, just like Doctor Who appearing out of the Tardis.

Superintendent Yallop was not one to dilly dally. 'I haven't much time, Mr. Brampton. I just need the briefest of chats with you.'

'Right, take seat.....' but the Super already had.

'Now, we both know enough of the detail of young Jimmy's activities to get straight down to it. The prosecution of the coach company and driver is all in hand and has nothing to do with you. It will take its course....what we need to discuss is the matter of young Jimmy.'

'Yes,' said Marcus anxious to get in with a quick bit of support. 'What a splendid job he did, didn't he?' That should deflect any immediate criticism, thought Marcus.

'Don't try the soft-soaping, Headmaster.... I haven't got time.' Marcus felt chastised. The Superintendent rushed on.

'Don't say anything more...just listen to what I have to say.... I have a decision to make...you have a problem to overcome.' At the last point Superintendent Yallop jabbed a finger towards Marcus.

Marcus sat up. 'I've got a problem..? Why is that?... I know enough about the law to know that what goes on during coach-rides home is not my problem.....the people responsible are the county council, the bus company and the parents, I understand.'

'That's not the problem.....you are not under any legal pressure..... but nevertheless your job is on the line....don't you realise that?'

Marcus stared hard at the Super. Was he being serious? 'What on earth do you mean?'

The Superintendent finally took his cap off and put it on the desk in front of Marcus. He leaned back and tapped his fingers together. 'A bit of a showman,' thought Marcus.

Yallop conyined. He suddenly leaned forward. 'I take it you are intent on backing young Jimmy to the hilt.....a bit of a hero.....Custer riding in with the 7th Cavalry and all that.... did nothing seriously wrong.....kids all delivered home safely, eh?'

He was right. Marcus felt a little bit of discomfort creeping up him, but he stayed silent.

'You're a big supporter of the upholding of he law, aren't you, Mr. Brampton? Very voluble on the subject if my memory serves me right. Isn't that so?'

'What are you getting at, Superintendent?'

'Last year you were all for throwing the legal book at gamekeeper Maltravers and his Lordship, weren't you.....criticised the police....me....for taking a soft approach?'

'Well, it did seem to me to be a clear case of gross negligence.....shooting nine kids.....don't you think?'

'It's a point of view, Mr. Brampton.....and so I take it that in the interests of consistency you will now be calling for young Jimmy to be prosecuted for his blatant breaking of the law and reckless behaviour in risking injury....even death.....to nine young children. Isn't that so?'

Marcus could see which way the wind was blowing.....but not what to do about it..

'There are some clear differences, Superintendent.....'

'Oh, there always are differences, headmaster..... but the simple fact is..... that you were scathing about our softly-softly approach towards blatant law-breaking, which happened to be MY decision and which I took all the flack for..... as I say, you were scathing about it even though Maltravers and His Lordship were wetting their pants over itand even though my approach produced a larger amount of compensation for young Elsie than she could ever have imagined.'

He paused and scrutinised Marcus's discomfort. 'So, I assume you will support to the hilt our prosecution of this new malefactor....new breaker of our precious laws, eh?'

'I'm afraid I have given my word to Mr. Delafield hat I would support Jimmy to the full.....'

'Ah, so double standards are OK, are they Headmaster.....your governors.....and th general public will be delighted about that. Won't they? I see trouble ahead. A lot of bad publicity for the school.....oh dear.'

'There will be trouble if I criticise young Jimmy as well.'

Yallop leaned even closer to Marcus.

'Then, as I say, Headmaster, you've got a problem.... a big problem.'

Marcus felt uncomfortably sweaty. He wriggled in his chair but said nothing. Then to his astonishment he saw a huge smile break over the Superintendent's face.

'I can't keep it up any longer, Marcus.....can I call you Marcus?.....well, never mind, I will call you Marcus..... because you and I are going to join in a little legitimate conspiracy.....'

'We are?'

'Yes, it is quite simple..... you will simply keep quiet.....very quiet.... no pompous, self-righteous comments about my way of working..... you will make no comments at all.... You will hide behind the accused's prime line of defence....'No comment.....it is in the hands of the police, so I cannot possibly comment'.... that's all you have to do..... and as for me.... Jimmy will be given a 'right talking to' as befits a wayward 15 year old....the press will be told that they cannot publish a 15 year old's name.... and the locals can laud and praise him as much and as long as they like.... You look good.....school looks good.....Do I make myself clear?'

'As clear as your sergeant was when he saw me after the shooting incident....'

'Yes, indeed....but you did not take any notice, did you?.... But if you don't this time.... then all sorts of information might find its way to the local rags..... not something either of us would like, eh, headmaster?'

The Superintendent thrust out a hand. 'Let's shake....and I'll be off.' Marcus felt he had no alternative.

It must have been a week later that Jimmy brought him a note to from father Delafield.

It simply said, 'Brilliant Mr. Brampton. The police called on us and had a word with Jimmy and me and his mum, they explained the law and warned him not to do it again. No further action they said, so I said a big thank you, but the sergeant said don't thank us, I should thank the headmaster. So Jimmy will pass on our thanks, and Mrs. Delafield says I must tell you what a good headmaster you are, very clever.'
