

TELLING TALES

OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and

friends

Number Seven

This tale continues my investigation into the nature of the adhocery management skill of headteachers. It is an entirely true story....I promise you.

The Burning Question

At the new Market Upabit comprehensive school there was continuous building for years, as the school grew. Phase 2 of the building programme was scheduled to be completed during the summer holidays at the end of the second year, when the first of the large comprehensive intakes would be arriving from the feeder schools. It was an important moment in the school's history. Governors, head and staff had been planning the great advance for months.

Head Teacher Marcus Brampton was all geared up to take over the new science laboratories and Sports Hall on the last day of August. 'And we would have done,' said Marcus, 'but fate was against us.'

On the Thursday before the end of the holidays he went with his uncle to watch a Test Match at Lords, They arrived home after midnight and Marcus's head had hardly touched the pillow when the 'phone rang. It was the school caretaker, Tom, who lived in the bungalow on the school site.

There was no messing! 'Sorry to bother you, Headmaster, but can you see a red glow in the sky from your window?'

I looked out of the window. Our house was barely 100 yards from the school.

'Yes I can.'

'Well, that's your school burning down!'

I do not know if there is any official guidance on the correct headteacherly response to such information. What Marcus did was curse profusely, don some clothes over his pyjamas, fling on an anorak and race up to the school.' I don't think my wife even woke up, I was off so fast. Certainly, neither my uncle o son did,' he said later to his chair of governors.

Marcus described what happened.

'I got to the scene double quick. The roof of the gym was well alight, and because it was a school just about every fire engine in the county, the next county and the nearby city was already there.

The Chief Fire Officer in charge made himself known to me in the glare of the floodlights. He strode off through the lit area into the gloom and I hurried after him. I was determined to accompany him as he went round checking which engines were actually there.

'Where are you from?' he asked the first crew.

'Market Upabit Volunteers,' replied number one.

We hurried to number two.

'And you?,' to the second.

'Much Knowing Volunteers.'

'And where are you from?' To the third.

'Fenborough,' said a voice in the dark..

Then on to the fourth, whose face turned out not to be black with soot, but an Asian face, peering up from the end of a nozzle, which was firing machine-gun-like jets into the flames.

'Where are you from, mate?' said the Chief.

'Eh? Can't hear! What did you say?' yelled a yellow-clad voice.

The Chief cupped his hands and yelled back.

'Where do you come from?'

'Rawalpindi,' came the speedy answer.

'Bloomin' heck!, You got here fast.'

The Chief was one of those who had an instant answer to anything. You must have met them! Maybe you are one.

You will be glad to know....the fire was soon under control. It turned out that a workman had been using a gas cylinder used on the roof to heat the bitumen, and knocked off work with the nozzle still burning ever so slightly. After a few hours it burned a hole in the roof material and the whole lot caught fire.

It was November before the school opened its Sports Hall and laboratories, but it got a bit of extra history as well. And it has all come to light (as it were) via my scraps of notes.

And so ended another piece of 'ad hockery' which fills a Head's life.
