

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number 20

### Moving On

*In order to carry out the role of a head teacher you first of all have to get a headship. Traditionally this was achieved by researching likely posts in the Times Educational Supplement (TES) job adverts pages – the back pages. More recently the preferred method, and certainly the cheaper one, seems to be the on-line route - for making applications, providing references, and being selected for interview, before being interviewed, and selected – or not.*

*Along this well-trodden path to getting the job many variations of process and practice have intervened. Some employers use psychometric tests, person descriptions, two-day intensive on-the-job surveys, in-tray exercises and much else. Often it was none of those!*

Marcus Brampton after five years as a deputy concluded one day that now was decision-time; he either had to resign himself to remaining as a deputy in his comfortable suburban grammar school for his final twenty years in the profession or take the plunge into headship.

His dithering was curtailed by a brief call from his head at break asking him to take on the head's lunchtime role of stalking the school premises as he, the head, had an urgent appointment, which Marcus knew well was a code for a Rotary lunch. It convinced Marcus that it was time to be the giver of bad news instead of constantly being the receiver of it. Now was the time to put his foot in the water in a time-honoured fashion by researching vacancies in the TES, to suss out what sort of posts were on the market. So off he marched to the staffroom to peruse the job market.

There were hundreds of them. It was the time when the post-war baby boom had reached secondary school level, when new comprehensive schools were springing up everywhere, when there were not enough senior staff to fill the headship posts.

There were vacancies in independent schools, state schools, city schools, town schools, suburban schools, rural all-through schools, international schools in the UK and abroad. The choice was perplexing. He mused over the advice he had received from friends who had moved into headship. 'Go for a school similar to the ones you had served in. That's the way to keep your sanity.' Sound advice perhaps, but unrealistic. The grammar schools he had served in, and the secondary modern schools that accompanied them, were on their way out. A plethora of 'comps' were on their way.

He decided that the sensible approach was to send for the details of every single one of the posts being advertised.

And onto the doormat fell envelope after envelope of lengthy prose and bulky 'additional material'. As he ripped open each envelope he became aware of an 'awful symmetry'. Every single Local Education Authority, every Trust, every governing body, was looking for 'A person of exceptional ability; proven success at previous schools; outstanding leadership qualities; a person who can demonstrate an exemplary contribution to the school and wider community.'

'Wow!' thought Marcus in astonishment. 'Where are all these paragons? I can't say I have met many with that load of qualities. What about the ordinary bloke like me? Done a good job in the classroom, knows the ropes in the school corridors, and can smell a charlatan at twenty paces? Is there no place for the likes of me?'

He shared his depression with his wife. 'Don't be silly.' said Ros. 'It's just unthinking bureaucrats following the trend. They've seen what others have been saying and haven't bothered to actually think. If you are serious about getting a headship then just apply for the whole lot! That way you will find out which kind of employer likes what you say. Just set out your stall and go with it!'

You could not argue with that and so he ploughed on, discarding none, but adding a large question mark on top of one or two. He reached the stage when he felt he could actually recite the contents to himself without actually reading the contents. Then he picked up what was the thinnest envelope of the lot up to that point.... a brown envelope, with a single piece of folded A4 paper, marked 'from the Inner London Education Authority' - ILEA no less, the biggest education authority in Europe - hundreds of schools, dozens of separate divisions - revered by many for its investment in the arts, sport and minority groups.... and reviled by many for its waste of money on the arts, sport and minority groups. It was ripe for the chop by Mrs. Thatcher before long.

Marcus ripped the envelope open and read on. His eyes widened as he read; his mouth gaped. Now here was something different! The single sheet had either been written by a divisional education officer near to retirement with a sudden urge for honesty.... or an officer demonstrating the effects of being severely overworked and constantly overlooked.

### HEAD TEACHER VACANCY IN INNER LONDON

A Head Teacher is sought for this all boys 11-16 comprehensive school of 1,500 boys close to the River Thames.

*The school is a senior Boys Comprehensive School in the Docklands area of Inner London.*

*The school is housed in two buildings about a mile apart. The first three years occupy the Waterloo Road premises near the underground station. The older boys use the Marigold Lane building overlooking the docks.. This building belies its outward appearance by being quite well equipped for some of its purposes.*

*Staff teach in both buildings. The Head has an office in both and receives a car allowance. Two bicycles are available at no charge for staff use.*

*The Local Authority expects to be spending a substantial, but as yet unknown, amount on modernising the buildings, eventually. Meanwhile, the Education Committee has agreed to the provision of a third bicycle from next academic year.*

*Most of the boys come from the largely working-class area around the docks, where parental expectations and pupil achievement have been traditionally low. On the other hand, there is a strong work ethic (paid work, that is) which often conflicts with the legal requirement to attend school. The school has always recognised this and has developed a wide-ranging work experience programme which, perhaps uniquely, runs throughout the year. It is strongly supported and welcomed by the staff.*

*It would be true to say that most of the pupils in this ten form entry school are in the lower ability range, but the school does enjoy a local reputation for sound work in metal and wood.*

*The school believes in strong self-discipline and is working hard to learn how to do this. Some headway is being made with the staff, but more needs to be done with the pupils. Therefore, the current Head has relied on traditional discipline techniques – where possible. Detention has been found not to succeed as often as one may wish, owing to the fact that most pupils in the last two years are usually excused from detention for after-school employment reasons. Fixed term and indefinite exclusion by the school is patchy as many of the pupils have excluded themselves. However, exclusion remains a favoured technique for ensuring the desired environment for meaningful learning.... by those who remain.*

*Corporal punishment is reserved for petty crimes such as theft and extortion, which are notably on the decrease at the moment since the long-term offenders have now been excluded.*

*There are good entries for the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) and the best candidates manage annually to get graded at some level or other. There has been a recent upturn in school-based and school-marked Mode 3 course-based CSE examinations in Parentcraft Studies, Navigation Studies, Sewage Studies, and Crime Prevention Studies. All Mode 3 teacher-marked courses are called 'Studies'. There is a gratifying take-up in all of them. Good results are anticipated in the future. But the courses tend to come and go, along with the staff.*

*The school takes pride in having won the borough Crime Prevention Quiz for the past five years. The pupils' detailed knowledge and expertise have astounded the organisers.*

*During recent years the school has suffered from the difficulties arising from a low-ability intake, constant changes in staff and the pressures resulting from widespread and prolonged staff absence through ill-health. The fact that some progress has been made is due to the vigorous efforts of the present head teacher and a small nucleus of loyal devoted staff.*

*The new head will need to be a man of courage, tenacity, resilience, determination, patience, stamina and firm discipline, if he is to get the staff to work as a team – or in some cases, to work at all.*

*He will have the task of carrying men, and, in the case of the school secretary, woman, who have served faithfully but who are now limited by physical and mental debility, through no fault of their own.*

*The vacancy occurs because of the early retirement of the present head who has served the school to the best of his ability.*

'Goodness me!' Marcus murmured to himself. He did not apply for the post. A Headship would have to wait another day.

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