

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number eight

*'Headmasters have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never yet been invested.'* (Winston Churchill, *'My Life'* 1930) But Churchill had reckoned without caretakers! Caretakers have the school keys, know how to turn off the boiler, and keep the premises litter-free. That is actually more power than any Head has dreamed of!

## Taking Care

*Everyone appreciates that getting the appointments of teachers, senior teachers, business managers right is a key factor in running a school smoothly and successfully?*

*It is not often that a school caretaker gets a major billing in documentaries or novels about schools. But just as important as the teaching staff is the appointment of the school caretaker, aka the Premises Manager or the Site Manager or the Safety and Security Manager, multiple roles all wrapped in one person leading his/her dedicated team of knowledgeable, skilful colleagues.... often paid as skivvies.. It is noticeable these days that many large schools have trained and experienced premises managers, but it was not always the case.*

Our first caretaker was a 50 year old ex Chief Petty Officer from the Royal Navy. Our man, Tom, had been caretaker for some years at a local primary school so he already knew some of the pitfalls of the job. He worked hard to keep the premises clean and well maintained as far as the budget would allow. My senior colleagues and myself shared his drive for high standards, but his methods were often, shall we say, esoteric. Some might say – eccentric. He had a naval man's penchant for *'good, ship-shape order'* which sometimes expressed itself in extraordinary ways.

His approach to maintaining order in the school car park and access roads was to nail up on a BT telegraph pole at the edge of the car park a myriad of signs, all pointing towards on-coming drivers and pedestrians as they entered the premises through the front gates.

At the very top was a large **'NO ENTRY'**. Quite what this imposing prohibition notice was designed to prohibit was not clear since the cars and pedestrians were already 50 metres onto the school site before being confronted by it, and there was no apparent **'Entry'** beyond the telegraph pole to be barred from. But, since I had told him (perhaps in an excess of delegation fever) that he was **'in charge'** of notices, I could hardly take down his very first one. Myself and my deputy decided that no apparent harm could ensue, so let's just leave it. So we did.

Within days a veritable cornucopia of messages joined the first one. Each one was painted in alternating red and black on a piece of white board and then affixed neatly under each other, starting with

'SPEED LIMIT 5 mph ONLY'. This appeared on the Tuesday, with the remainder appearing each morning from Wednesday to Friday.

'One Way ONLY'  
DRIVE WITH CARE  
'DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS'  
'WALK on the LEFT'  
'VISITORS REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO RECEPTION'  
'HAVE YOUR IDENTIFICATION READY'  
'TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED'  
NO DOG WALKING ALLOWED'  
'DELIVERIES AT THE REAR',  
and finally

'DANGER. BEWARE STUDENTS'!

Each of these was clear and informative, but pinned one above the other on the telegraph pole at the side of the school car park constituted a bewildering experience for any visitor. After another week and following growing staff and governor scepticism I resolved to intervene. Tom's persuasive method was, as you would expect from a Chief, direct, no-nonsense, uncontroversial.

'My job is to advise you on how to keep the premises safe.' He asserted. 'This is how you do it. Informing people coming onto the site what is expected of them will ensure that any claims of negligence will not succeed.'

He went on to explain gently to a sceptic, me, that the alternative to putting them all together in one place was quite clearly preferable to having them dotted willy-nilly round the car park – causing confusion. I gave in. Some arguments are better lost than won at a cost!

They stayed, and did their job.... until one day one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMIs) arrived at my door with tears welling in his eyes. I was not sure whether they were tears of hysterical laughter or despair.

'*What on earth is the matter,*' I said. He took a little time to compose himself before he replied.

*'I was trying to read all those b..... notices....I had only got to the third.... the one that says Drive Carefully.....when I ran into the telegraph pole!'*

He wiped away another tear. *'My new BMW's radiator has caved in.'*

It took all his sense of fair-play and my tortuous explanation – trying to remember what Tom had explained so ingenuously to me - to persuade him to go through his ritual survey of the English Department. I was never again able to look a BMW in the radiator without pangs of guilt.

And so the signs, and the pole, had to go. Tom was not happy, but he saw my point.

But that was not the only one of Tom's 'little schemes'. He had loads more. The following tale will illustrate the clash of cultures... school and ship.

In the first month after our opening Tom was infuriated by boys, and occasionally girls, removing toilet-door knobs, or fastening the toilet doors from the inside and then climbing out, so that no-one could get in - or loosening toilet seats (all of which, I might say, were ridiculously fragile – but cheap, so that pupils using them slid off in mid-stream, as it were.

One day I caught Tom with his saw and screwdriver about to saw a metre off the top and bottom of all the toilet doors and partitions, leaving just a small central section to provide for modesty. Heads and legs would be clearly visible. I went pale with anxiety. What on earth was he playing at?!

His argument was that this is apparently what toilets were like aboard his navy ships. It enabled petty officers to look down a line of toilets and ensure there was nothing untoward going on. *'That's why they are called 'heads' on board ships.'* he said authoritatively. *'You can see immediately if there is any hanky-panky.'* (It is not true, by the way. Ships' toilets were called 'heads' because they were placed at the 'head' or bow of the ship.) But I did not care whether it was true or not. I could see large headlines in the local newspaper looming – not complimentary.

*'No!' I cried. 'Don't do it! This isn't the Royal Navy, Tom, and we will have parents round here complaining before the day is out!'*

It was a close call!

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