

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number Three

In 1961 I went to Croydon to teach English, in the days when you were not obliged to have teaching qualification. For my first month I was totally overwhelmed by the number of rapidly changing activities that a teacher had to cope with. I was exhausted. I remember a colleague in the English department telling me of how it had got to him the year previously when he began at the school. I had forgotten his tale till I found it scribbled on one of my bits of note-paper this week. It is short, not sweet – but rather hilarious! He assured me it was true.....hmmm?

Taking the Strain

Newly qualified teachers in the first few weeks of their first ever job can be as stressed out as any other new employee. Certainly I was. My first month teaching in a south London secondary school went by in a whirl of unaccustomed activity – teaching thirty out of thirty five lessons per week, learning the names of the three hundred pupils I was teaching, as well as getting to know my colleagues and understand the school's rituals and routines, preparing lessons each night and weekends, marking piles of books each night and weekends, taking rugby practice after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, running the chess club on Wednesday, and then refereeing the Under 14 inter-school rugby matches on Saturday afternoon. I can honestly say that for the first month of my professional career I did not know whether I was coming or going.

Nothing gets up a teacher's nose more than hearing co-workers sniff disparagingly about teachers only being part-time 9 till 4 workers. If only....

Anyway, on the third Saturday of my first term I had just settled down to an evening of marking another pile of essays....having, of course, returned in a high state of excitement barely thirty minutes previously from the afternoon's under 14s rucker match against local rivals St Swithun's....when I suddenly felt myself going hot and cold. I shot up bolt upright. There was something I had forgotten! I could not immediately think what it was. Then it dawned on me. It was now 6.45 and at 7.30 I was due to be at my headmaster's and his wife's welcoming dinner for new staff at their home, which was at least half an hour's journey across the city.

How could I be so stupid?! Well, one reason was that I did not at that time have the benefit of a highly efficient diarist wife. I also consoled myself that it was after all school affairs that had absorbed my time and thoughts. Surely that would count in my favour?! But, nevertheless, I had to get there double quick, excuse or no excuse. First impressions are everything. It was in my own interests to show how on the ball I was.

I bounced into my charcoal grey suit....my only suit, my old school tie....my only tie, and my brown suede shoes...my only shoes at the time. I was out of my flat and on my way within ten minutes.

Thus it was that I was knocking on the Head's front door barely fifteen minutes late. I had run to the underground, leapt down the down-escalator two at a time, and up the up-escalator two at a time; then run from the station and crossed the road...just...on the yellow light. Thus, arriving at the Head's door I was a trifle out of breath. But, after composing my somewhat agitated features and running my fingers through my hair, I sized up the door.

The house was in darkness. No matter. Time was of the essence. I searched for the doorbell, found it, and gave a long imperious ring. Nothing happened at first. Still darkness. And then...blessed relief, the front porch light came on. The front door opened. There stood my head teacher -- the Head, the Beak, the Boss, ...but in a black T shirt... with a white logo that read, I noted, 'NO NEARER TO GOD THAN ME'. I took in the baggy brown trousers, as well....and old carpet slippers, and the Sherlock Holmes-type pipe hanging from his lips, which he removed as he peered at me.

I looked him up and down and then stared him straight in the eyes; he stared back at me. Neither of us spoke. Then he nonchalantly crossed one leg over the other and leant on the door jamb, waving the pipe at me.

'Yes, Thomas, and what can I do for you at this hour on a Saturday?'

I knew then for certain, what I had half worked out already.

'O Lor', Headmaster...it seems as though I have come on the wrong evening.... It's next Saturday, isn't it?'

He did not reply immediately.

'No, Thomas,' said The Almighty slowly... 'It was last Saturday....and you were there.
