

Richard Ivory: memories of life as a pupil at St Helen's School, 1939-1945

First day at school

I remember quite clearly standing on a table, marked out as for shove-ha'penny with squares etched into it, looking out of the window crying my eyes out as Mum walked away and Miss Warren trying to comfort me – without much success! That was my introduction to the Infants at St Helen's School. That would have been in 1939 when I was five years old. Apparently, as my sister says, after lunch on that first day I told my mother that I'd been to school so I didn't have to go back again. More crying!

Miss Warren and Miss Young

Miss Warren was always 'made up', as I recall, with lipstick and presumably powder and rouge as her cheeks were always on the pink side. She seemed to be a reasonably gentle lady, unlike Miss Young into whose class I moved the next year. Miss Young was a large lady who brooked no nonsense, giving the ruler either across the knuckles or on the backside for misdemeanours; she was especially hard on 'cheek'. Many times I have seen clouds of dust coming from boys' trousers and bruised knuckles for much more innocent comments. For some reason I seemed to get off quite lightly, perhaps because I could read well, or most probably because I was too scared to be naughty, knowing that if my 'crime' got back to Dad I'd be in more trouble. Even worse it could have got back to Miss Robins! [*Miss Robins was Richard's father's employer*]

Miss Collins and Miss Crawley

After Miss Young it was Miss Collins in Standard 1. This was down the corridor, which had benches down the sides and served as our air-raid shelter during a raid. The room itself seemed very gloomy, the only thing I can clearly remember about this class was having to put our head on our arms on the desk in the afternoon for a rest. This room had a door leading to Miss Crawley's room, Std 2.

Milk from Bury Farm

Std 2 was the room at the end of the Junior School over which was the school bell. This was rung before school, at the end of playtime and after dinnertime. It was a privilege to be allowed to do this. We also had milk monitors, they collected the milk from outside where it had been left by the milkman, Throssell & Parkins who operated from Bury Farm, and then delivered it to the various classrooms, collected the empty crates and stacked them, again, outside. To drink the milk you pushed a straw into the centre of the cardboard cap. This was an actual piece of wheat/oat/ barley straw cut to about 7 or 8ins long. Quite often the whole cap got pushed in, resulting in getting milk all over oneself and the desk, especially when, as sometimes happened, two caps had been put on one bottle.

We used to collect the milk bottle tops, lean them against the wall and flick others at them. Whoever knocked down the one leaning against the wall 'won' all those that had missed. (Later at St Albans we did the same with fag cards, the cards that we collected from some

cigarette packets). It was quite a coup to get a cap that had not been used. This is why boys tried to get to be a milk monitor.

Sometimes the milkman would drop unused caps, and very rarely caps could be found on the floor of the horse-drawn milk delivery cart. In the winter, when the cows had been fed on silage the milk tasted horribly of the smell of silage — if that makes sense! The milk bottles contained one-third of a pint, a funny amount really. I expect a quarter of a pint was too little and half a pint too much.

In Miss Crawley's class we learnt to sew as well as the three Rs, I made Mum a ration book holder out of some quite open-weave material which was a yellowish colour and embroidered a zig-zag pattern on it, as well as sewing on the poppers. Other people made shopping bags. I sat next to a boy called Leonard Hunt from Marford. We also used to be given pieces of material to pull apart to make bundles of soft threads that were presumably used as stuffing for something for the war effort.

Our playground at Bury Farm

The playground for the junior school was the road to Bury Farm and when it was dry enough, through the gateway up to Ash Grove. This had a small hill which we chased one another up and down in the summer and in the winter used for sledges. If conditions were right you could get nearly down to the Church Room opposite the Junior School entrance. This obviously made the road very icy so it wasn't encouraged.

The Church Room was where school dinners were served, also where the mums met for Mothers' Union meetings. I had to go in there sometimes after school to wait for her and had to help by passing round tea, something that I didn't enjoy, "Hasn't Richard grown, he looks sweet in his cassock and surplice...". Yuck! (I was in the church choir).

Miss Beaumont's class and Standard 3

I can't remember whether we had inkwells in Miss Crawley's or whether that was in Std 3. This was Miss Beaumont's class. She was an evacuee from London and by comparison with the rest of the staff seemed quite young. Behind the teacher's desk in this room was a sliding door that led to Miss Young's room. Woe betide anyone taking advantage of any temporary absence of Miss Beaumont. The door would be slid back and the epitome of wrath itself would emerge, ruler or cane in hand! This door is mentioned in the 'Day book' when some boys were kept in for unruly behaviour. Could this have been my Dad? It was dated March 5th 1914, so he would have been there then at the right age!

On the door itself was a big map of the world with the Empire in pink. Very impressive. We followed the progress of the war here with coloured pins, as well as using it for normal geography.

At the back of the room was a great big cast iron stove with a high guard around it, it burnt coke, which was kept in a bunker outside the door to Miss Crawley's, at the school entrance. We had to fill up the hods now and then and riddle the bottom of the stove to prevent clinkers forming. This caused great amusement when it happened. The handy man had to come in to break it up otherwise the stove would either go out or burn so fiercely that the body of it would glow red. If it was wet the teachers hung our wet coats on the guard to dry.

Potato picking

At school, we were allowed time off to help with the potato harvest, if you could prove that you had got a job to go to. I helped in the fields up to Gustard Wood common, these were part of the Delaport farm. You were each given a station of perhaps 20 yards, the potato digger would turn out the potatoes you then had to pick them up and put them in bags or tubs before the machine returned. I found it very hard work and was always still finishing one lot when the next was ready. A lot of the women from the Folly helped as well and they were much quicker than me so would often give me a helping hand. When people asked why you weren't at school, the usual reply was "Spud ocking", I'm sure there should have been an 'h' in there somewhere! The fact that children were off potato picking was also recorded in the school day books.

Senior school, Miss Sykes, Miss Sloe and Mr Housden

After Miss Beaumont's we went up to the senior school, which was up on the Wick and was quite modern compared with the juniors and infants. The teacher we had here was Miss Sykes (not too sure of the spelling). The boys did woodwork while the girls did cookery. I remember I made a dibber which it took me all term to do. I don't think Dad ever used it though. He made his own out of old fork handles which were much more durable! The older boys in Miss Sloe's class also did gardening, growing vegetables, which were used in the school dinners. Johnny Housden [the headmaster] also took the top class sometimes.

The room in which we did carpentry was also the room where we were inspected for head lice by the nurse and also where the school dentist set up his drill. This was a treadle affair and brought fear to us all. I can remember sitting in the chair frightened to death that he would find something wrong. I was lucky, he didn't!

Johnny Housden was a pretty stern-faced individual with a Hitler type moustache. He lived at Ayot St Lawrence and drove to school in (I think) a black Ford Prefect, registration DAR 383. It paid to be wary of that number. I was riding my bike across the bridge by the Bull one Saturday morning, all nonchalant like, no hands, on my way to the village for something when I saw it go past. On Monday morning I was hauled up in front of the school as a prime example of the danger on the roads caused by riding bicycles "without due care and attention". I was absolutely flabbergasted. Everyone rode no-handed, and there weren't that many cars about anyway 'cos petrol was only available for special needs. Johnny Housden also ran the village cadets' football team.

The lady in charge of school dinners was Mrs Thornton. When she took over is also recorded in the 'Day book', 16 March 1942. She and her husband Sid were great friends of Mum and Dad and we saw quite a lot of each other. They met when Annie and Sid came to the village with the Rev. Baird-Smith and his wife in 1921. Sid was the butler and Annie the cook.

I left the village school in 1945 and really lost touch with a lot of my primary school friends and colleagues. I had to get used to school six days a week, homework at weekends and still church on Sundays.