

M.B.G.S. 1922-1969

It appears that the School began its physical career in the first years of the century, at about the same time as the present writer was leaping about in his rompers, little conscious of what the School was to mean to him. It was then a primary school, possibly reminiscent of the one attended by Mr. Polly in his formative years, "when he was set sums that he did not understand and that nobody made him understand"; and it was built in the style or architecture favoured by the Surrey County Council of the day—a hall surrounded by classrooms (now rooms 2 to 8) on three sides, the present cloakroom, and possibly the Black upper-storey Hole (half of which was the Headmaster's room) which now serves as a Staff Room. One can imagine the Headmaster of the time frantically ringing the turret-bell to summon the School round him while he expanded on some important matter of policy. There seemed no other reason for such a central forum.

In historical terms, in 1922, came the great change to a Grammar School, with the probable addition then of the present Craft Room for use as a Science Laboratory to befit its newly acquired status. The beginnings must have been small, for there were Headmaster and five members of Staff only, for about seventy boys. It is on fairly dependable record that one of the Staff, a naturalised Frenchman, acted as School Captain for the first year. He must have benefited from the experience, because he became Deputy Headmaster in the 1940's. (There is also a story, perhaps not so dependable, that the British Intelligence Corps refused to accept his services during the First World War, because his French was not good enough.)

During the whole of the 1920's the School had a one-form entry each year (shades of the last few years!), which must have restricted numbers

to well under 200, as Sixth Forms were almost negligible in those days. It was not until the end of the decade, with a new Headmaster, that a two-form entry was established. (Had the School been larger in numbers it would have been moved to the Girls' Grammar School buildings in Cranmer Road when they were put up in the early 1930's; and probably the higgledy-piggledy collection of buildings that it is now would have been inhabited by girls.) This new Headmaster, who was always having ideas, called his First Forms J.S.C. and J.S.D. (Lower School C and D) and his Second Forms J.S.A. and J.S.B., could think of nothing original to call his Third and Fourth Forms, and called his Fifth Forms U.S.A. and U.S.B., the latter (United States, Britain) being the first recorded take-over by a North American organisation. With a new Headmaster came a new caretaker, Mr. Perry, a legendary figure who, with his equally legendary wife, retired only three years ago.

By 1933 the expansion of the School required the building of proper laboratories (Rooms 9, 10 and 11), of two classrooms (13 and 14) and a Headmaster's room (the present Secretary's office). In 1937 the Library block was built, to add a Library and to replace the Gymnasium (for which the Small Hall had been used), the Art Room (formerly Room 7) and the Geography Room, which was previously in an erection irreverently referred to as the Tin Tabernacle; as this erection was also used as a dining-hall and kitchen, it was doubtful whether it was the worship of Geography or School dinners that gave it its vaguely religious name.

That, for some years, was necessarily the end of additions. The suburbs of London were far too concerned, with the coming of the blitz, to keep more or less intact what they had already got. Large shelters, where the nets now are, protected the School by day and the local population by night, and a land-mine behind the School in September, 1940, raised the roofs and made the School buildings virtually unusable. The majority of the boys and a number of girls from the Girls' Grammar School were evacuated to Weston-super-Mare until July, 1942, when the enemy was misguided enough to burn down with incendiaries half of the host School. As evacuations went, it was a successful evacuation, but that was the end of it and back the School came. It had two consequences—it convinced many who experienced it that there was a lot to be said for mixed education, and it brought women teachers into the School for the first time, a good thing in its way.

After the war the 1944 Education Act, which the government, with incurable optimism, had passed during the thick of it, came into operation. It meant, among other things, that entry to a State-maintained Grammar School like ours was to be through the eleven-plus examination only; the lesser breeds without the Act, whose parents had previously paid part of the cost, had no longer any loophole by which to get in. For some time it was a matter for debate whether this made the School a better or a worse place to live in. The School got back to its normal size of about 400; Rooms 17 and 18 (the latter as a Music Room) arrived about 1950 as temporary accommodation—they are naturally still temporising. There were occasional years when three First Forms were admitted in one year. But perhaps the greatest change was in the size of the Sixth Forms; whereas before the war there were generally less than ten in all three Sixth Forms together, the 1950's saw seventy or eighty sixth-formers and the 1960's up to one hundred. The successful Grammar School boy was raising his sights from the Banks and the Executive Civil Service to the Universities, old and new—hence the large Sixth Forms. (There were those who said, cynically, that some boys stayed on in the Sixth Form because it was an easy option compared with the wide world of business and industry. There are still those who say so, cynically.)

Bit by bit new classrooms enclosed the Cricket Nets area. The Canteen was built to replace the Small Hall as a dining-room. The very good acoustics of the Small Hall had meant that the champing of jaws combined with the cultured yet lively conversation of the jawers persuaded many members of Staff that dinner-duty was a fate worse than death.

In 1965 the London Borough of Merton was born, Surrey washed its hands of us, Comprehensive education was in the air and the days of Mitcham Boys' Grammar School were numbered. It is a pity—there are those of us who think it had its place. Perhaps, upon consideration, its place was twofold. Firstly, it did its best with the weaker brethren—many boys, who in a larger school would go to the wall, contrived to get their three or four G.C.E. passes; only just, perhaps, but they got them. And secondly, while all other games had their ups and downs, School Rugby flourished from its beginnings in the early 1930's right to the end, when the School had its best season for many years. Numbers of players to choose from were always small compared with other schools; for years the School pitches, sited in a gravel pit built basically with a mixture of discarded furniture and old buses, were cursed by standing water or by the rising of objects from the inferno below, but the Rugby, played now on pitches as playable as any in the area, remained constantly and remarkably good. And one of our best Rugby Captains contrived to get an Oxford University Blue—at Soccer.

There are, of course, many other aspects of the School that remain unmentioned. These are the views of merely one member of Staff who has, regrettably perhaps, liked the place and who hopes to remember it with affection for some time to come.

W.P.J.P.