

VARNDEAN LIFE IN 1970's

When I first arrived here in 1971, there were about 600 students, all girls, aged from 11 to 18 because it was a selective grammar school. There was a four form entry for Years 7 - 11 (then I - V) and 2 forms each for Lower & Upper Sixth (now 12 & 13) Everyone could fit in the hall!

The building was little changed from the original. There had been a few enlargements, such as the canteen. New construction had consisted of the Science labs off the back corridor and the stand-alone (so you hoped for a dry & calm day if over there) Scola block (roughly where the library is now).

One major difference was that teachers went to students (although they were labelled 'pupils' then), not vice versa, except for practical and scientific subjects. Consequently, there was far less movement around the corridors between lessons. Most form rooms have since been enlarged by joining two together. Classroom D7 is now about the only almost 'original' left. At the front there was a wooden dias, on which was placed the teacher's desk, complete with lid and storage space for the form teacher's equipment, chalk and board rubbers. On either side was to be found a cupboard and there was, of course, a blackboard on the wall. Students had their own individual desks to store exercise & text books. These would also have an ink well, dating back to days before the biro. There was usually a seating plan and it was not unknown for rooms to have vases of flowers.

At each extremity of the front school corridors, on both floors, were the cloakrooms. Toilets and washbasins were at the very end. Each cloakroom had rows of numbered pegs for coats with an open wire cage underneath for shoes. The day before the autumn term began, it was the form tutor's job to allocate pegs for the year.

Lessons were slightly shorter than today - roughly half an hour. As the teacher entered, students stood up in silence to greet her - and it was invariably 'her'. Two men joined the school at the same time as I did -

Mr Scott and Mr Chapman as Heads of Maths and Latin respectively, though there had been a smattering of part-timers before. If another teacher had cause to enter during the lesson, students were expected to stand up again.

This formality extended to the Staff Room, where each teacher had a place at one of the refectory tables. The trick was to prevent your piles of books from spilling over onto your next-door neighbour's space. There were also lockers & shelves around the room, staff size being small enough to have one each. Outside the staff room, on the other side of the corridor, were rows of open cupboards, one for each teacher, where students brought the class's set of homework books.

Student responsibilities were decided on the first day of each term. These ranged from monitors for subject books, flowers, stationery e.g. collecting rough books (used for all subjects to prevent doing such work in 'neat' or 'best' books) and blotting paper, to form officials. Each form had a Form Captain, Vice-Form Captain and 3 Committee members. These were chosen by nomination and then a 'secret' ballot. However, proposals had to be brought to a Staff meeting at the end of the 1st day, where nominees were discussed. It was not a rubber-stamping process - a popular, but naughty girl could be turned down! At the next assembly, the chosen Captains & Vice-Captains filed on to the stage to be presented with their badges by the Head.

Monday was dinner money day - form tutors collected the cash for the week and issued meal tickets. Then it had to be counted and sent to the office, which is where the Head's staff work now. Days always started with assembly in the hall. Forms processed in to a classical music record, except on Wednesdays, when the School First Orchestra played, which made life a bit more of a crush! Mrs Harding, Head of Music, who, incidentally, has a bus named after her, played the grand piano, situated below the stage on the left. Sometimes, the Senior or Junior Choirs performed. Then the Head, in a gown, processed in with the school officials and often the Deputy Head. The format was usually the same - hymn; reading; prayer and notices. For the hymns, everyone had a blue hymn book, kept in their desk and, yes, they did

lose them sometimes! The readings were usually from books and one or two became very familiar. At the end, students who had been absent, brought their excuse letters up to the Head.

The other very formal occasion was Speech Day, held every year in the autumn. When I first arrived, the venue was The Dome. Everyone went down in the morning for rehearsals, had the afternoon off and then returned for the evening. As most staff had a degree, gowns had to be worn. The Speech Day programme actually listed qualifications along with the University the person had attended. There were always performances from the Choirs and Orchestras. Also, a guest speaker was invited to give a speech and present the prizes. I notice my first Speech Day would have been listening to John Wilson, Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind (now Sightsavers).

Support staff did not exist as we know them today, although there were technicians for Science and practical subjects. The secretarial staff consisted of the Head's Secretary and her assistant. When I arrived, this meant the formidable Miss Wrigley. Also, there was a caretaker, who had a much less complex job than that of our current site manager.

Pastoral issues were usually dealt with by the Head. The school was small enough for her to know everyone. Most teachers only met parents at Parents' Evenings.

Report time, twice a year, could be nerve-wracking for form teachers. Reports were a single A4 sheet, printed on one side only. Once named, the whole set was then passed round to subject teachers to enter a grade, exam percentage (if appropriate) and add a comment e.g. 'Very good'; 'Could do better' - there was no space for advice on how to move forward. Woe betide the teacher (especially if one of the last) who made a mistake. As all writing was in ink, that poor soul had to trail round all those who had already written in it to get it redone. The form tutor then entered other details such as absences, lates and, believe it or not, the pupil's overall exam percentage and position

within the form. After that, the report had to be checked for any mistakes. The form tutor's comments were written in 'rough' i.e. not on the actual document, before being sent to Miss Clarke. She went through each report with a fine-tooth comb. No matter how carefully one had checked, she always managed to find more errors! Then came the summons to her room. One waited outside at the appropriate time and kept an eye on the light box fixed to the door jamb - red meant 'engaged', so you slunk away; otherwise, you knocked - amber was 'wait' and green was 'enter'. She weighed your comments carefully to make sure you had encompassed everything and made changes where appropriate. If all was fine, she signed the report and your only remaining job was to write in the comment carefully (you didn't want to send a fresh copy back to be resigned!). Where she wanted corrections made, the document was unsigned and had to be sent back so she could check it had been corrected!

I suppose the main difference we would note today would be the lack of technology. Obviously no computers - paper registers and blackboards ruled. A lesson highlight could be a film or slides, shown on a projector, which was really exciting! Also forget reprographics - think banda machines. These consisted of a cylinder to which you attached a 'master' you had typed or written. A handle was then turned (manually) producing bluey/purple copies. The ink got everywhere!! I knew one Head of Department who was notorious for printing off the second half of an exam paper whilst the students were taking the first part.

I've often been asked whether things were better then, not that it is really comparing like with like. Staff are equally dedicated and students still work hard. Possibly student experience is now more rounded and they have a greater say in matters, which has got to be for the best!