

Blundell's : a memoir by David Fielding (F.H. 1948-54)

I was twelve when the far from fearsome J. S. Carter, then Headmaster of Blundell's, put me at my ease in the interview. My father, waiting outside, had taken advantage of the Isle of Wight County Council's offer of free places at various public schools to children of the less well off, which the income from his modest smallholding certainly justified.

I was enjoying my first year at Sandown Grammar school when he took me to the mainland to meet the travelling circus of headmasters. In the event I was now meeting the second, and after the friendly preliminaries I remember his question well.

" And how would you say in French 'I am cold' ?"

With less than two terms French I could not remember the word for 'cold' so I came out with:

"Je n'ai pas chaud."

He raised his eyebrows, smiled, and interviewed my father. Later we learned I had a place at Blundell's.

So I came to Francis House, under the benevolent and wise stewardship of A.R.B. (Bundy, or Bendi as his sister used to call him) Thomas. I had sat no examination, had very meagre French and no Latin.

I managed three out of a hundred in that first Latin lesson test of "How much Latin do you know?" All the other marks were way over fifty and I remember wondering how the chap who got ninety seven could ever be so brainy. I shed a few tears and knew I had a struggle on my hands. Sympathetic teaching and a stroke or two of luck in the exam saw me passing that strange but very useful paper of the O & C board "Latin taken Early for Responsons" which later had to be scrutinised severely as sufficient for Oxbridge entry. It passed the test.

I had arrived at Blundell's nearly a year younger than most of my intake. I was wearing shorts and sporting a satchel, while the ex-prep school boys were in longs with brief cases. I had not played rugby and was pinged by a loud blast in my first game for throwing the ball forward, American style. The game was stopped while the rules were made very plain. I grew to like the game and eventually became part of a fine 1953-4 team which included the very talented Hein, White, Street and Granger, led by the equally talented Shepherd, while I packed down as open side flanker behind a great pack. I managed to break my nose on the bony frame of the Sherborne fly-half (always a needle match; I think we lost by two points that year at home), and concluded my rugby career at Blundell's with my one and only try, against Cranleigh at The Old Deer Park. Julian Street had made a lovely break from the base of the scrum and sensing my try-less season, fed me a sweet pass five yards from the try line. I knew then what it's like to crash over and ground that ball. But the game was played in a thick fog for the first fifteen minutes so nobody saw it! Somehow the Daily Telegraph sports reporter did and his headline says it all " Blundell's had better backs: Cranleigh defence torn open". One of those who did the tearing was that supremely fast wing, David Dando, a sort of schoolboy cross between Jason Robinson and Jonah Lomu. If we were trailing the trick was to get it to David; he would head for the try line like a bat out of hell, usually with White or Shepherd trying to keep up at his shoulder. That back line gave master-classes in interpassing. Now, when I watch the great internationals of the day, I do have some idea of the players' comments when they talk about support from the stands; there was nothing quite like the roars from the touchline on Big Field to get the adrenalin moving and urge the last effort out of a bruised frame.

Graham Parker and "Jonah" Jones coached us. I don't remember much in the way of tactical advice or skills being passed down. Jonah's advice was to hack it forward and follow up furiously; advice which was not too misplaced in the muddy conditions of the West country. Graham used to say "I'll show you how to do it!" (as when he dropped a goal from the half-way line), but never did... Occasionally Ted Crowe was summoned to instill a bit of youthful know-how, but wasn't given much room under Graham, who once asked him to demonstrate how to hack the opposition out of the ruck. His very reluctant demonstration caught the eye of the headmaster and Ted told me much later that he had received a severe reprimand.

Despite the shorts and the satchel and a primary school education (and a good one it was too), I remember no jeers and certainly no bullying. Yes, we were fags, but again I remember not a single instance of unfair demands or treatment. I quickly made friends (does anybody know where John Harding Goodrich has hidden himself in America?), enjoyed the lower school class work, improved my French and enjoyed it hugely under the enthusiastic and skilled teaching of "Mad" McElwee, passed the 'O' levels and enjoyed life in Francis House.

But the sixth form was the joy. We only had to take two 'A' levels, and I eventually plumped for English and Geography. The former was taught by the inspired duet of S. H.(Tim) Burton who made Shakespeare come alive

and whose Lit. Club meetings at his house in Tiverton were an intellectual and gastronomic treat, and Peter "Boomer" Brooke-Smith who somehow managed to make John Stuart Mill a favourite read. Their classes were the pleasure of the week and it is no accident that a love of the language and its literature remains with me to this day.

Being still a year younger than my contemporaries, the even greater luxury of a third year in the sixth beckoned and I was treated to an academic freedom well outside the 'A' level curriculum. Tim Burton let me loose in the school library to discover the 18th century novelists (the greatest of whom I like to think might have been my ancestor), and I enjoyed writing reviews for him in the style of 18th century prose. Just for a bit of contrast he also set me researching the Romantic Poets!

Reggie Gibb taught us geography and his later tutorials were impeccable, and a pleasant foretaste of life at Oxford as he set us some demanding essay titles from scholarship papers which demanded careful argument from evidence. One knew that if one was offered sherry before reading one's essay one had arrived in the higher echelon, even if the reading was punctuated by that characteristic light cough of his with the tactful correction.

And I took on other academic pursuits and somehow passed Additional Maths. This achievement astonishes me to this day. I remember understanding calculus at the time and being able to differentiate, but don't ask me to do it now! And looming in the future if Oxbridge beckoned was a fiendish French translation paper. I went to Old House for tutorials with Mad Mac; a delightful teacher and a very pleasant man who was a fount of knowledge on all things French.

I was being handed more responsibility now, not all of which I treated as conscientiously as I should have done. One instance springs to mind. Somehow I had got to know the Head Girl of Tiverton Grammar School, and when the hour had gone back in the winter term I was sometimes able to get out of school and meet her for a very pleasurable and fairly innocent half an hour. On my way to one of these meetings I was met once by one of the younger masters who asked me what I was doing out of school. "Don't worry sir", I replied, "Prefects' patrol to check for AWOLS!" I received the equivalent reply of "Carry on Sergeant!" Leave out of school was very restricted, so tea with Sheila and her parents at their house in the middle of Tiverton was a really pleasant way of shrugging off the institutional life, however free on campus it may have been.

Another Head was on tour during my later sixth form career and visited Blundell's; the Revd. J. N. D. Kelly, Principal of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. I was encouraged to enter for the Hall's Open Scholarship in Geography and later spent four days there sitting more examinations which included three General Papers and that three hour French translation paper.

That is another interview I will not forget; facing a table of formidable looking dons clad in gowns and an unsmiling Principal, (no he did not throw me a rugby ball to catch: "you are in!", or drop: "go and find another College."). The questions were friendly but searching. I made the mistake of admitting to Reggie Alton, Senior Fellow in English, that I enjoyed Keats.

"Ah, Mr. Fielding! So you will be able to finish off his sonnet which has the lines
'Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes.....'

After I had stumbled through those superb closing lines (however geographically incorrect they are matters not), Reggie turned to Rowley Gullick and said, "Well Rowley at least some of your geographers are literate!"

Blundell's holds many more memories: there was the Queen Mother's visit for the Music Festival in 1953 and the following year Blundell's celebrated its 350th anniversary for which Tom Holden and I had to hold the Archbishop of Canterbury's train looking suitably angelic while processing through the streets of Tiverton to the parish church followed by a clutch of gowned teachers. Working with Tom as his number two was a lot of fun; he was a very conscientious and responsible Senior Prefect, leading by example. We got to know many of the staff very well and received some very pleasant hospitality at the hands of the Bursar, Colin Beale, who became a good friend. Then there was the Prefects' Dance, for which the girls were bussed in from way up the Exe valley and not too closely chaperoned, thank goodness.

Bicycling round the Devon countryside with the Photographic Society armed with my new "Ensign" camera was a weekly delight in summer. Bickleigh chapel was very photogenic, as was Knightshayes, and we roamed far afield. I had many wonderful moments in Francis House and got to know Bundy really well; a friendship which continued into my late adulthood and his late marriage to Liddy. I played a bit of chess and though I never got far in the West of England chess tournament, Bundy's analysis of my games in it always showed where I could have won but threw the opportunity away! I don't know who that upset more, Bundy or his pupil! But I still play a bit. And Matron's sitting room, often patronised by the younger masters, was always a haven for banter and relaxation.

Acting in school and house plays was very enjoyable, but I was disappointed to see that my grimace as Laertes mourns Ophelia in the school play had been misinterpreted by the local press reporter as a very misplaced grin. I was never a musician and was quickly turned down for the choir, but "Jazz" Hall's congregational practices were good for airing the lungs and always enlivened by his frustrated outbursts. I was eventually recruited into the bass chorus for a memorable performance of "The Messiah" in Exeter cathedral. I still sing along in the chorus when it crops up on the radio at Christmas.

And, of course, The Russell! I have to confess I rather enjoyed splashing about in all that mud. I actually managed to come in at 13th in my last year, and it stood me in good stead later in National Service when our platoon won the Cross Country and gained an extra day's leave.

I am very certain these memories are not seen through rose-tinted spectacles and I could have selected many more in the same vein. I do know that I was fortunate to go to Blundell's and I also know that some men of my generation had unhappy public school experiences elsewhere. Certainly when I read "Summoned by Bells" I am glad I did not go to Marlborough in an earlier time. And while it is naive to assume no bullying ever happens at any schools, I clearly arrived at Francis House at a time when it was under first class leadership by Bundy who knew his boys and appointed good prefects.

Blundell's was a happy school then and it is good to see it remains so today.

