THE ELMS

INTRODUCTION –WHY ME?

1. You may be wondering (and I am too) why some old Duffer of seventy-something-appalling years old, writing down his memories of his time at the Elms is of the slightest interest to any of you. Perhaps it is because if I don't, the story (if there is one) will be lost forever. You may also see how much has changed and how much hasn't. You may also see how much fun we had in that carefully controlled, carefree atmosphere and what lessons I learnt which I have used to this day and also to suggest what you may wish to take away with you from your time at The Elms.
2. Perhaps it is best that I don't tell you about the end-of-term 'rags' of one dorm raiding another each armed with knotted towels and pillows, or our attempts to dam the stream by the racecourse until discovered and shooed away by a Master or races to climb to the tallest trees and down again in record times (- not many fell off). My thoughts on the merits of the Masters and Mistresses are purely personal and not unduly libellous. The result of what we were given was a tremendous step up in life and so here goes.

WHY THE ELMS

3. Backdrop. We are talking about the years 1954 – 1959. WW2 was a huge milestone in the recent past, in which all Grown Ups had been thoroughly involved. The Korean War was just over. The Malayan Emergency was still rumbling on. All 18-year olds were being called up for 2 years of National Service. The country was effectively broke and heavily in debt to the USA and rationing (- 1 egg a week for civilians in 1945, tinned meat and dried egg powder (Ugh!) being transported across from Canada) only came to an end (sugar was the last, which of course included sweets) in January 1954.
4. 'Baby Boomer'. The Baby Boom, 1945-1950(+), (of which I was one) was a 'natural' result of millions of men returning from WW2[1]. My father was a career soldier, finishing WW2 in Egypt. Mother joined from UK and I was born. On our arrival in UK in depths of the terrible winter of 1947, we lived in Malvern Wells and then in an old farm, The Bush, around the back of Old Colwall. My father knew one of the Masters at The Elms (Mr Judge) and my name was put down to go when I was 8 ie September 1954.
5. Father's Postings. As luck would have it, my father was posted to London during the Coronation years, and then to York. Thus at the age of 7 my third school was a tiny, single room place in the back of Pocklington, East Riding of Yorkshire. By December 1953 it was plainly obvious that I had outgrown the place and was being a thorough pain to everybody. In consequence my time at The Elms was brought forward to 19th January 1954.

UNIFORM

6. The minimalist school uniform was a grey cap, two grey suits of 2 jackets and 3 short trousers, 3 white shirts, 3 long woollen socks (to just below the knee) with a red ring in the turn-down portion (held up by elastic garters which were marvellous for flicking at your friends), 2 pairs of outside shoes and one pair into elastic-sided slippers. Games equipment was similarly limited to a white shirt, red knitted jersey (both of which the wind seemed to whistle through without interruption) a pair of leather (and leather-studded) lace-up football/rugby/cricket boots and a pair of plimsolls. With assorted towels, pyjamas, socks etc and one's own (non-uniform!) blanket, the lot were carefully packed in a steel trunk with completed clothes list. Any personal possessions were in a little locked tuck box, both bits of

[1] It is interesting that pre-war the UK birth rate was falling to below subsistence level. To encourage bigger families the Beveridge Report introduced allowances for families with 2(+) children. In fact, the birth rate started to climb from 1942 onwards.

luggage were suitably painted with our initials, whilst the shoes and boots had the individual number (mine was '15') nailed under the instep.

JOURNEYS TO/FROM SCHOOL

7. Mother drove me down from the East Riding for that first term. It was a beast of a journey, 4- 5 hours driving, in our old Vauxhall – no heating and a primitive roof hatch that once opened leaked for weeks. The route was diagonally across the country through exotic places like Ashby de la Zouche (- no motorways then). A good average speed in those days was 30 mph. It was thus in the gathering gloom that this poor old car wheezed its way up the Malvern Hills, through The Wyche and down into Colwall. The reception by the Headmaster and his wife, and the depositing of my paraphernalia and me was necessarily short and there I was, at the great age of 7 ½, for next 8 weeks.
8. End of Term and Subsequent. As the end of Term approached the great, well-oiled machine and the increasing smile on the face of the Headmaster, swung into action. Every boy was asked where he was going (ie Orpington, via London or Worcester or Leeds or wherever), sons of military or diplomats were told get travel warrant from their parents (- for reduced fares), until the great day came when the Headmaster produced great lists (in beautiful 'copper plate' hand-writing, I must add) showing each boy's train from Colwall station or collection time by parents (- for these latter group never before 10am). The luggage, less over-night bag, was packed by Matron and her staff of one or two girls (- "Find Wilson Minor and get him to find his games' socks" etc). A large lorry about 3 – 4 days before the end of term would arrive and the luggage was loaded and dispatched[2]. On the day itself groups of boys would be dug out of bed at some un- godly hour starting from 6.30am, fed early breakfasts, loaded into the school bus and ferried to the station. The London train was at 8.18am. The Leeds/Bradford/York lot left at 8.48am (- we were almost mildly miffed that we could not boast that we were the earliest). Often the train to London was a "Special" that picked up the London-bound boys from Colwall (2) and Malvern (6, if I remember correctly). In my case, going to York, I followed the crowd (about 10 of us) for the first time[3]. My journey took about 4 ½ hours. Change at Droitwich (- next train to Birmingham New Street). Change at Birmingham for the train, "The Devonian", to York. At Sheffield the Leeds/Bradford lot changed for their connection and I was on my own for this last leg. This last bit was initially quite exciting as the train passed beside all the steel works; great towering coke furnaces, spewing out red-hot coke into waiting rail wagons and then glimpses through missing corrugated panels in the blast furnaces buildings, where Dante-like men were silhouetted by the light of molten metal being poured into moulds, accompanied by showers of sparks everywhere. On my own for the remainder of the journey I could marvel at the twisted spire of the church in Chesterfield or at Tamworth High Level where another train passed perpendicularly underneath me. Arrival at York was always an excitement (1.28pm) to be met by Mother and ferried home to Pocklington.
9. Return Journey. The re-launch back to school involved the same scurrying around for clothes and particularly the elastic garters that always seemed to go missing, had to be re-made and re-named with 'Cash's' embroidered name tapes (PLA again). With an overnight bag and a little money, I was dispatched from York station, possibly to meet up with the Leeds/Bradford lot at Sheffield. We were always recognisable as we were in school uniform, with cap. Change at Birmingham for Worcester. Change at Worcester for Malvern, which normally involved a wait of an hour. Get off at Malvern and drag ourselves and bag up to the Bus Stop right at the top. Bus over The Wyche down to Colwall station and then the final dragging of self and bag to the school.

[2] Passenger Luggage in Advance (or PLA) enabled travellers who had already bought their train tickets to get their big luggage sent on ahead.

[3] We qualified for two reserved compartments, reducing to one as our numbers dwindled over time. or two

10. Summer Term and Speech Day. Speech Day at the end of the Summer Term was an excuse for parents to come and collect their offspring and any associated clutter they had accumulated. Leavers could say 'Farewell' or somesuch to the Masters and the parents could have a few words with the Headmaster. This meant that the tribes of children being dispatched by train the next day was much reduced to half a dozen or so. I suppose it is amazing to us now that single children were so launched into the hands of British Rail perfectly safely and without any qualms by anybody. None of this "Unaccompanied Minor" bit!

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

11. Now all you will have gone through this initial bit yourselves: the rules, the layout of the place, timings, what to do. All of these had to be learnt almost immediately. To me as one of only two boys (the other was Parker) who arrived in January, it was humbling and a little scary that the others seemed to float around in an easy familiarity. As one in the lowest forms (4b?) I discovered quickly that I was quickly shooed out of any of the other form rooms by these bigger and not necessarily wiser boys[4]. That January evening was now night and the oldest part of the house (- Headmaster's Study, Form Rooms 4a and 4b etc) was exceptionally gloomy. The route to the Dining Room was up a set of narrow steps (- more of this later), left across a small pantry and into a room filled with refectory tables and benches. I can't remember much about that but there was a lonely tear shed that night in bed.
12. "Bullying". If I can divert for a moment onto "Bullying". I think there is a fine line between gentle chafing one another and outright bullying. Physical abuse is a completely different and an unacceptable animal. That first evening I had a mild altercation with some of the bigger boys (perhaps only a year older than me) on those stairs to the Dining Room. They heard me say the word "Crash" in a manner or accent that amused them. The asked me to say it again, and then again, and again. By about the sixth time I made it plain that I was not amused and was in danger of getting physical, even though they were bigger and on a higher step. ("Never fight uphill," my Father would have said!) Nevertheless, they backed off in a friendly manner. That was the last I heard of that!
13. "Bullying" Part 2. A couple of years later I came across of couple of taller, older boys (- let's call them "Batman" and "Robin") who were bullies. This was a bit of a nuisance but liveable with. On one occasion whilst this was going on, I was taken out for a once-termly visit by Mother to have tea in a Malvern hotel when she fell into conversation with the Mother of "Batman" or "Robin", I forget which. This mother was worried that her son was probably not bright enough to get into a Public School. I knew for a fact that neither of these two bullies was any good at sport and now they were revealed as being not good academically as well. In fact, they had nothing to commend themselves. Of course, they may have been late developers (- more of this later), but did not matter at that moment. I can hardly call this my "Tom Brown's Schooldays" moment but being able to stand up to them with this unspoken superior knowledge showed me what little insignificant boys they were. Bullies are known to be cowards. An early threat of giving them a bop on the nose, metaphorically or actually, is normally the answer. We learnt that with Herr Hitler and there are many examples of this since. The current "cyber bullying" strikes me as being just an even more cowardly version of bullying. "Say that to my face", would probably be the answer this form of abuse and have the same effect!

LESSONS AND EXAMS

14. Seating in class was a straight meritocracy. The most recently arrived (me) had a desk at the bottom ie the front. The remainder of the class were in the order in which they came in the

[4] The strict, boy-imposed, hierarchy was that you could not enter a more senior form but a senior form could enter all those below them.

last term's exams: the top at the back, the bottom next to me. As boys left at the top of the school, generally in batches at the end of the Summer Term, boys moved up to fill the top slots, again in the exam results' order. Thus, one year you night have a chum on your left, he having better exam results, and next year he could be on your right having performed worse.

15. This competition didn't end there. Every week a bit of boy's work the boys was marked out of 100, subject by subject. At the end of the week the marks were collated and entered on a board in each classroom, annotated with the week's form position. There it was for everyone to see and much friendly mutual chafing ensued!
16. Exams. Exams were held at the end of every Winter and Summer Term. To aid Invigilation the big folding doors between Forms 1 & 2 were slid back and Form 3 squeezed into the available space. Forms 4 were allowed to compete in pencil whilst the higher forms battled away in ink. This ink was doled out by the Headmaster at morning break time into the old-fashioned inkwells presented to him by the owner's boy. Unless a boy had qualified at home for a Christmas/Birthday present of a fountain pen the remainder were armed with a "School Scratcher" of a positive Dickensian knibbed affair – very useful for digging into your next-door neighbour in class.
17. Lessons. You had to pay attention and not fool about when the Master's back was turned. A few Masters had a most unerring back-hand aim with the solid board rubber or were adept at asking a laggard to give the answer to a question relating to an item just taught.

MASTERS AND MISTRESSES

18. Mistresses. (Yes. We were allowed to, and did, call them that then.) In the 4th Forms we were taught by two spinsters who lived in the village, Miss Gosden and Miss Beauchamp. Miss Gosden was the taller of the two, full of figure, glasses and a sharpish temper. Miss Beauchamp was a little shorter and sparer. Between them they taught us English, Mathematics, Geography (mainly of the British Isles)[5] and the beginnings of Latin. (Those of you who have seen the film "Young Winston" will remember the trouble, painful to his posterior, he got into at his first school over "Mensa= A Table", and What on Earth did "O Table" mean? It seems that little had changed from 1870s to the 1950s!)
19. Masters. Most had gone through WW2 in some form or other. They had seen Life and Death. Some still had the scars to show for it. All were characters in their own right. Naturally we bloodthirsty schoolboys were fascinated by any war-story we could squeeze out of them. Particularly revealing are the obituaries of the Headmaster, Mr Michael ("Micky" or "Mike") Singleton, and Mr ("Pa") Judge (attached). "Pa" Judge was so called because his sons were at the school with us. Perhaps a snapshot of a couple of these may help:

    a. Headmaster, Michael ("Mike") Singleton. He had taken over the school from his father ("Ping") after returning from WW2. He seemed particularly fierce to us (- aren't ALL Headmasters fierce?). It did not help that he had picked up a piece of shrapnel, which he blamed on the Artillery and which was embedded still somewhere in his back. This continued to give him pain, which he attempted to dowse by smoking a pipe. Some days it was particularly irksome and this seemed to coincide with his wearing a plus-four suit of heavy tweed. We all knew to take considerable care when this form of dress appeared and our Latin primers were studied with intense concentration. Boys in the 1st (ie top) Form occasionally suffered from "First Form-itis", where Prep was not quite as assiduous as to be expected. An unlucky boy who was found wanting in this manner could expect a considerable tongue lashing, sometimes taking up the whole of the lesson. "Mike"

[5] "Miss! Why are there 3 River Avons?" Result: stony silence and disapproving looks.

was not without great care, dedication, sportsmanship and humour. He came back from the Headmaster's Conference with a fund of schoolboy jokes which he trotted out in the lighter moments. Boys of the same name were suffixed, in descending order, as "Max", "Ma", "Mi" and "Min". At one time this system was due to fall down over an expected rush of Evans' to the school; we already had 3. He mused over one Sunday lunch table how to overcome this conundrum by suggesting new a new prefix and a new suffix to provide names such as "'Evans Above" and "Good 'Evans".

b. Mr Cooke. He was another war veteran and a "Gunner" or Artilleryman. His "scar" was very visible he having been wounded in the head in North Africa. He was a great cricketer, as was Mike Singleton. He taught Maths in a forthright, but endearing and effective manner. I have particularly vivid memories of his battle to explain the abstruse concept of "Minus times Minus equals Plus, and Minus times Plus equals Minus". After he had regaled us about adjusting artillery fire by ordering Left and Right corrections, without any noticeable in our increase of understanding, he played out this little scenario on the blackboard. "A father wanted to teach his sons how to drive. He modified his car to give each son a gear-stick with one forward and one reverse gear. He loaded himself and all his sons into the car. All put their gear-sticks into forward and off they set, eldest boy driving. (Pause whilst he drew a picture of the car moving left to right.) Unfortunately he saw a large bump in the way far too late, the father pulled his gearstick back into reverse but they still went over it, causing the spare wheel to fly off. (Pause for a picture of the car nose-diving over the far side of the hump and the spare wheel somewhere up in the air.) The car, with father's gear in reverse, flew back over the bump, causing the bonnet to fly off. (Pause for a car to be rubbed out and re-positioned on the home side of the bump and the car looking sorry for itself.) The eldest boy being the driver saw his father's gearstick in reverse and so he pulled his back. Forward over the bump went the car losing a front door in the process. (Pause for diagram adjustment.) The next son saw that his father and elder brother had their gearstick in reverse and so he pulled his stick back as well ….." At this point the collective penny had dropped for the whole class. It is a tribute to the man that I remember this lesson even to this day.

c. Mr Cooke (Part 2). As a bachelor he lived in a little room at the end of the sanatorium wing and dined with the Headmaster and his wife every evening. His evening entertainment afterwards must have been very limited and he was obviously a great reader. On good days in the Summer he was wont to "steal" several English Classes and take the forms out into the sun onto the playing fields. There, sat down enraptured, we listened as he read to us short stories from the excellent monthly "Blackwood" magazine (long since gone, I am afraid) or such epic poems "Zorab and Rustum" and "Grey's Elergy".

d. "Pa" Judge. He had been in the "Inns of Court" reconnaissance regiment in WW2. I think that is where my Father, also of 49th Infantry Division, met him after DD Day whilst "Pa" Judge was recceing forward for good bridging sites for my Father. "Pa Judge" was a very fit rugby player, even though he did have a squint in one eye, which was a bit disconcerting. He was a fluent French speaker which he combined to teach us English and English literature.

e. Mr Harland. He was the quietest of them all, a thoroughly nice man and sometimes ragged by us horrid little urchins. He was part of the ground crew in the RAF, possibly on a fighter station. His fund of war-stories was thus somewhat limited (ie how be belted up ball and tracer rounds for the machine guns, which did not stand him in good stead with us. He had the dubious pleasure in trying to teach us English, History, Music and Singing. I think we really only took him seriously in our last couple of years.

f. Mr Ross. He was a young, late arrival to us. He had probably missed all the conflicts for some reason. He was memorable to me for two reasons. The first was that he possessed a 3-wheeler car that could seat 2 people, one behind the other and a little engine in the rear. Access was via a roof that hinged up and over on one side. The resembled, and was known universally as, a "Messerschmitt". The second and more serious reason was because he caught Poliomyelitis (or "Polio" as we know it now.) He survived but he had difficulty walking for a long while afterwards. The Polio pandemic was raging through youngsters across the World. Luckily none of us caught it, but games were off and we had to rest in the afternoons. The Salk vaccines came along and we were duly lined up to have our jabs.

g. "Johnny" Singleton. "Johnny" Singleton was the Headmaster's brother. He appeared somewhat latterly in my stay at The Elms, having just retired from the Army. I didn't really know much about him at the time, he being rather fierce, military, officer-like and a Tartar when conducting our bi-weekly break-time calisthenics.

DISEASES

20. Yes, we had the lot, normally one type every year, starting January. The first boy would come back from Home with Mumps, or Flu, or German Measles or that beast called Measles or any other popular bug at the time. This last one could kill or do permanent damage: in my case it was to my sight; I contracted in the second wave and by the Autumn I was wearing glasses. This annual repetitive set of outbreaks did no good to the Spring Term Rugby or the continuity of lessons. The filling of the sanatorium (4 beds, I think) to overflowing meant that the main Dormitories had to be changed in to sick-bays, with all the necessary movement of boys and bedding from Dorm to Dorm. I can remember that on my first going down with Measles I (and all the others in our new sick-bay) was fed onion soup. All the others, who were part recovering by then said "Ugh! It's awful!" I found it delicious. Only later did I begin to agree with fellows. It just went to show that the body knows what it needs and reacts accordingly.

SNOW

21. Yes, we had snow, lots of it and for a long time. I missed the very bad winter of 1947 when the roads became impassable. The boys were detailed off to deliver food to Colwall villagers on their sledges. In January and February whilst I was around we had good sparkling snow. Sport consisted of taking our sledges, and the few that belonged to the School, over the Racecourse and up onto the first hill. The field was sufficiently steep for good runs, even with a suitable bump in the middle that caught the unwary. Competitions were improvised as to the fastest sledge (- one boy (Caddick) had built his own and he won every time) or how many boys could be crammed onto one sledge (- that always ended in disaster).

DORMITORIES

22. The Dorms were named (and probably still are) Big, North, East. Big South and Little South (- these last two were normally for the younger boys on the Headmaster's side of the building). Each iron bed was based on a matrix of chain, sprung to the edges (- very vulnerable to boys racing round and round the dorm without touching the floor), topped with a thin un-sprung mattress. Each boy had 3 blankets, a pillow and their own sheets, pillow cases and blanket. The warmest combination was one folded blanket below the sheets and two above. Warmth was at a premium as the dorms were unheated. The North, in particular, was particularly cold in winter, it having two outside walls with metal windows. One poor lad (Thompson Ma) had his bed in the North East corner, two outside walls and

steel window down the length of the bed. One morning he woke up with a snow-drift on his pillow around his nose. The basins along the West wall regularly froze up.

23. In the heat of Summer we were not allowed rest on the bed, but inventive tying the personal blanket to the metal base and head of the frame produced a very effective 'tent' arrangement. The personal rugs were ideal as magic carpets sliding down the (highly polished) stairs outside The North; we never di master the art of navigating the mezzanine corner to get a full run.

BATHS

24. Each Dorm had a bath 3 times a week. Where these were I cannot remember, except for one in an alcove off the passageway to the Headmaster's Bedrooms. For after games the changing room beside the gym had a single rectangular stone basin, initially with cold water and latterly with a warm water tap for the whole school to get the mud off the knees.

HEATING

25. As you can gather heating was rudimentary. There was a good lad called Walter who stoked a coke boiler somewhere to the back of the building. The classrooms were heated (- large, black, cast-iron radiators that gave off a little warmth.) There was no insulation in the roof and all the downstairs had single-glazed sash windows.

WALTER'S BOOT HOLE

26. Walter had the dubious pleasure of looking after all our outdoor 'posh' shoes that only came out on Sundays or when we were being taken out somewhere. His "Boot Hole" was a converted horse's tack room, out of bounds to us inquisitive little mites, except when we collected and deposited our shoes. Every Sunday morning these shoes looked sparkling clean and were often returned in the most horrible wet, muddy disgusting state. If they were particularly bad the message got back to the Headmaster who expressed his displeasure (- horrible to behold) to the offending child.

CHURCH, CHAPEL AND SUNDAYS

27. Chapel. Some God-Fearing and good intentioned soul a 'long time ago' (as far as we knew) had given the school a lot of money on the understanding that boys would go to Chapel twice a day, ie morning and evening, and to Church on Sunday. The Chapel was a corrugated iron arrangement adjacent and underneath The North Dorm. We all squeezed in for a quick prayer in the morning, before breakfast, and in the evening after 2nd Prep (- the younger children in Forms 4a and 4b only had one Prep and went to bed without a second dose of religion). If we sang a hymn or psalm (- probably only at Sunday Evensong), Miss Gosden would play the organ and a selected senior boy sitting to one side would manfully pump up the bellows at the appropriate moment. If he forgot or went to sleep or stopped pumping too early, the organ gave out a series of mournful death moans before the boy was clipped back into action; a closed glass' case proved to be a very effective weapon for this.
28. Church. The Sunday routine of morning of half-an-hour later arising, chapel, breakfast and letter-writing was followed by our traipsing to Walter's Boot Hole for our shoes, by inspection outside in our smart suits and pulled up socks by the Headmaster's wife ("Ma Mike") or Matron. The whole school assembled outside the front entrance, facing the gate, in the order in which we were to sit in Church, oldest boys at the front. We have a reserved set of pews, 4 seats wide, in the left nave of the Old Colwall Church. The Headmaster solemnly checked us all off and went down the rows, giving each one of us a single old Penny for the Collection. These we squirrelled away in some pocket on pain of losing it *en*

route. At the appropriate time, probably about 10.15am, we set off in a long crocodile, out of the main gate, right over the railway bridge, first left out of the Town. In Winter we had our caps on; in Summer we had straw boaters. If we knew anyone on the way we were to raise our caps or boaters in salute. There were a pair of old ladies who always drove down to Church from somewhere the Malvern Hills in an ancient and tiny Austin 7, past us lot. They absolutely loved the progressive wave of raised caps or boaters as they passed. The Church Service was a full Morning Prayer with Te Deum, Magnificat and Sermon. Every now and again the Headmaster from the back row would patrol down our pews to ensure that we were paying attention and not too many Dinky toys were in evidence.

29. Family Visits. After Church parents would collect their lucky offspring and any others being invited out. The rest would straggle back to School. In the Summer we were sometimes allowed to walk back through the fields parallel to the road: a great excitement. Meanwhile the long- suffering parents had taken their ravenous hoard to the nearest café, hotel or local friends to feed them, take them for a walk and deliver them back in time for Evensong. Visits and being taken out were very valuable and rationed: not in the first 3 weeks after the start of term or within the last 3 before the end. Each boy was only allowed a maximum of 3 such visits in a term. This may seem harsh today but it did take some of the pressure off parents and was fairer on those whose parent(s) lived abroad or a long way off.
30. Sunday Walks. Sunday lunch was often cold meats (- a thin slice of Spam, pork pie and bully beef), boiled potatoes and a green, followed by a steamed pudding and custard. Then there would be a rush of senior boys, sometimes taking an intermediate aged child with them, to get outdoor shoes on again and disappear at speed into the countryside. We had to tell the Headmaster where we were going: The British Camp, The Worcestershire Beacon, The Wyche, or if there was particular length of time, The Monument or Eastnor Castle. It was almost a competition to be the one to get furthest in the time available. The younger boys would be corralled about 2pm by a Master who was responsible that week for setting the Junior Walk route, stopping points and any other instructions. This lot would then stream off along the roads and tracks, every now and again calling out warnings such as “Car Coming!”. Established routes included “The Short Round” (- down to the Church again, turn left and up “The Haunted Lane”, turn left again and back home) or “The Long Round” (- to the Church and beyond to Hope End (- in an empty and abandoned looking state, and supposedly the home at one time of the poet Robert Browning and family), left and left again to the top end of “The Haunted Lane” and home), or “The Worcestershire Beacon” or “The British Camp”.

MANNERS

31. One of the worst reputations we could acquire was “Bad Manners”. In consequence it was essential after having been taken out by other boy’s parents to have that Thank You letter in the post that night or the next day at the latest.

EVENING AND EXTRA MURAL ACTIVITIES

32. Evenings and Extra Mural Activities. “The Devil finds work for idle hands” must have rung true for us. Our spare time after breakfast, after lunch and after supper/before prep were un-tutored times. All types of activities flourished: chess, making balsa wood models and aeroplanes, billiards for the top form, kick-abouts in the Gym, one lad (Robinson Mi) was a fisherman and tied flies, or playing Conkers in the autumn. The school library was well stocked and I remember having read all the Sherlock Holmes stories in one go. In the Summer (an, if we lucky, in fine weather in late in the Spring Term) we were allowed outside, permitting roistering games like “Kick The Can” and “Brave British Bulldog”. A rough cricket “Rag Game” involved one batsman being bowled at sequentially by all who could and the rest standing around to catch. The basic rule was that formal defensive shots were a

source of instant dismissal and 'slogging' each delivery was required (- very early practice and a very early pre-cursor to the current '20-20'game. The Elms as Trend Setters!)

33. Trees. Another source of fair-weather entertainment was climbing trees, either racing to the top and down again or taking a book and finding a comfortable perch in which to read. Hence "Cod's Seat" at the top of an oak to the right of the old pavilion ("Cod" was the nickname of a senior boy called Kennedy). To my knowledge not many boys fell off and injured themselves.
34. Skills. Skills to be learnt by the senior boys included Carpentry (for which there was high demand and limited availability), Rifle Shooting (- "Pa" Judge set up a rudimentary 25-yard range against a brick wall on the Racecourse and we were coached on target shooting using a WW2 army .303, sleaved down to take a .22 cartridge. I think that most shots were safe and hit the target somewhere), and Music (- Miss Gosden battled away with piano and violin lessons. One poor lad (Mitchell) had been born with no hand and only a club of a fist; he played the French Horn by holding the instrument with that fist down the trumpet end.)
35. Fives Courts and Caterpillars. In the summer the disused Fives Courts became a menagerie and zoo. The most popular sport was collecting caterpillars from the hedgerows: hairy red/brown striped ones (- that gave a nasty rash if handled but also a favourite to be smuggled in a matchbox into Sunday Church) or vivid smooth green ones, all of which had to fed a steady supply of fresh leaves and nettles.

GAMES

36. Games were keenly fought. Teams were changed around to give everyone a chance to shine. In the Senior game this was also to find the best combination to play the other schools in the area. The Elms was only 70-strong and felt at a numerical disadvantage against the larger schools such as The Downs, at the other end of Colwall, or Wells House, on the other side of the Hill in Malvern Wells. Being in the 1st XI for Cricket was always a great honour, the best bit being the team teas – soft bread rolls with lashings of butter and strawberry jam, for instance. I think our teas were the best! We were all required to watch our 1st XI at Home Matches and proved a bit boring for some of the boys. There tended to a gentle drift of boys back to the school house to go to the Loo, never to return. That is until the Headmaster did a sweep and banished all back onto the boundary again.
37. Exercise. Every morning, after Chapel and before breakfast, we were extracted to outside and spread out on the car park for a short stretching and breathing exercise session, a few Headmaster notices, presentation of sports colours etc. Twice a week half the school at a time lined up, in open order in true military fashion, facing the Headmaster's front garden. One of the Masters would then put us through our calisthenics- Knees Bend, Burpees, Chest Expansions and the such. Often there would be relay races across or around the edge of the playing field. Teams were selected by nominated boys as team captains. Of course, they knew who were the fastest and those who the sluggards (ie me). The captains chose in turn the fastest (obviously) down until they reached me. This method balanced the teams out and even the sluggards were encouraged to the hilt by the rest of the team when it was their turn to run. It meant the sluggards had to try their best to give their team a chance. I was nearly always at the back, except when came the exotic moment when I was about 10 or 11, I was racing against another (Logan-Jack) and I was able to hold my own. The years of trying my best had come off. The "Tortoise" was beginning to become a "Hare". It was a lesson I have taken with me ever since: "Keep Trying Your Hardest".
38. Competition. You have probably gathered that "Competition was All". The forming of Elite groups to the detriment of others did not happen through the self-selecting of competing teams of mixed abilities. Two sluggards racing against one another could just give 'their' team the edge to allow their faster "Whippet" mates to carry the team to victory. In class success was patently obvious to see, every week and after exams twice a year.

39. Swimming. The open-air pool was astride the stream, adjacent to the Race Course. The pool was filled 3 times each Summer Term, from the pipe taking water to the Malvern Water Bottling Plant in Colwall. (This was a deal completed by "Ping" before WW2 with the company who wanted to lay their pipes through the school grounds. We know that our current Queen takes bottles of Malvern Water with her wherever she goes! (We were swimming by Royal Permission, perhaps?) The changing facility was an open single-sided lean-to along one side of the pool, where we could hang clothes and towels etc. At the start of the year the water was crystal clear and a temperature generally considered "freezing" at 69°F which got darker and darker with all the added chlorine to a "balmy" 73°F, before being drained out again and re-filled: three fills in a term. Bathing trunks were hung out to dry on a metal fence at the other end of the Junior Field. Bathing trunks were flung/floated from the pool gate across the fields in the minimum possible throws. Boxer shorts were best for this because they could float through the air. "Budgey Smugglers" were no good as they tended to open out and act like drogues. Beginners were corralled in the shallow end until deemed competent to try swimming a complete length unaided. Then they were released to the deep end and diving boards (– more competition!). I can only remember one boy (Jagger) who struggled during this test. He had to be fished out after 3 strokes and going down twice. That did not seem to do him much harm as he went on to row for Leander Club at Henley a decade later. Whatley had the most extraordinary diving action on the spring-board: a full speed sprint down the board, a Concorde-shaped take-off, before a final flick-up straightening of the legs just before entry into the water.
40. Boxing. Mr Cooke introduced us to the gentle art of the Maquis of Queensbury Rules. "Straight Left", "Right Block and Counter", "Hitting Above the Belt" etc. The feeling of bop on the nose and the smell of damp, raw leather is still with me, but stood me in good stead when I came up against the future Army Heavyweight Boxing Champion in a bout in my first year at Cheltenham (- I lost, but only just!)
41. Riding. We had a stable with 4 or 5 ponies, run by Mr Cooke. I was taken off Rugby for two years and learnt the rudiments of riding. My mount was a fat grey called Joker. He seemed adept at getting rid of me from time to time, probably as I had fed him snowballs to eat. His best trick was to break into a canter downhill, find he was going too fast and suddenly turn right; I continued on in a gentle half-parabola. Going down a particularly steep hill, carefully, he found his front hooves were slipping away from him and he dug his hind legs into the mud. He did the equine version of the Yoga "Downward Dog" movement. I passed non-too gracefully over his head to a large puddle still clamped firmly in my saddle and taking the girth, stirrups and bridle with me. One of ponies was a cussed little Shetland Pony. It, poor thing, got Tetanus or Lock-Jaw and died. Of course, the whole school had to be lined up again for a course of Tetanus injections and committed to "off games" for another month.

FOOD, TUCK AND TREATS

42. Food, Tuck and Treats. At meals each table normally had a loaf of bread, which one boy had to cut up. It was a badge of honour to cut the slices equally, slim and as straight as possible. Choice of which slice was "Crust or Crum". We had margarine (not butter) and school jam. Each boy at the beginning of term was allowed to bring 3 pots of their own jam, which were confiscated immediately and name-labelled. One was released at a time, after request to "Ma Mike". Cakes were similar rationed to Birthdays etc. Tuck was similar rationed. Twice a week we could 'buy' 6d worth of sweets from the school 'shop' (- just trays of the stuff laid out on the pantry table). Just before going to bed we were given a half-slice of toast to tide us over until morning with something like fish paste or sardine or 'dripping' (- for those who have never heard of this, it was the fat that dripped from the roast, scrapped from the pan and spread onto the toast. It sounds horrid but it was useful fuel to carry us over to breakfast next morning.)

FILM NIGHTS

43. On 3 or 4 occasions during the dark months the gym was turned into a Cinema. The old 16mm projector would be set out and we would be shown a 'short' and probably a 'blood-curdling epic' (- which today 6-year olds would find beneath them). The film invariably broke or fell apart sometime during the performance. The Headmaster, as operator, would laboriously re-thread the previously flapping end through the machine again. Film Night timings clashed exactly with Detention for the naughty boys: an incentive to be very good in the previous week![6]

LETTERS HOME

44. Letters to and from Home were a vital life-line[7]. I have mentioned the Sunday morning routine of writing to one(s) Home. These really did not carry much news except things like Snodgrass Minor had fallen over and gashed his knee, but they were a source of comfort to the parents who could probably read between the lines. Before we prepared ourselves for Church the Headmaster would do the rounds of all the Forms and we had to hold up our script. He did a cursory scan to make sure that there was a sensible amount and the writing was tidy[8]. I think my letters contained phrases like, "Can you send me some old cotton reels, some elastic bands and some wax .." etc (In case you are confused by this, as they certainly were, this was to make a "tank". The elastic band went through the middle of the cotton reel, secured at one end with a drawing pin. The other end was passed through a transverse slice of a standard candle and an old lolly-pop stick passed through the loop and wound up. When placed on a flat or even an inclined surface like a desk lid, the "tank" was driven by the lolly-pop stick bearing down on the surface as the elastic band tried to unwind. With more elastic bands wrapped around the drum of the cotton reel the "tank" had a passable traction and could climb pretty serious slopes. The wax, grooved onto the stick provided just enough friction to slow the unwinding motion to a slow and majestic crawl. Rival "tanks" were often competed against or raced over impromptu courses. Great fun!). Once the parents had double-thought through that, assembled the bits, a return letter and/or parcel would arrive mid-week and voraciously devoured. God Help anyone who interrupted that flow of information or goodies!

SHOPPING

45. Once a week a Master, Pa Judge or Mr Cooke, would take orders from the boys for required 'bits' – caps for cap guns, balsa wood and glue for the latest project, more drawing pins and elastic bands etc – purchase them and distribute them the next day.

POCKET MONEY

46. At the beginning of Term our bits of money were handed in and a 'bank' set up in our name. The cost of the 'shopping', tuck and any other minor items such as stamps, envelopes, writing paper would be carefully deducted. When credit was getting low, we were advised to

[6] Detention was held in Form 1, invigilated by a Master, or the Headmaster on non-film nights. The Headmaster always wanted to play billiards and a Form 1 boy, starting with the Head Boy and descending, had to provide a, not-too good, opponent.

[7] No mobiles, laptops, Facetime or the such then. Telephones were manual, wire-connected things with home numbers such as "Pocklington 2212", "Gargrave 383", "Flaxman …" in London. "Yardley Gobion…" seemed to be one of the most exotic and mysterious destinations to me.

[8] We spent seemly ages copying out single copper-plate letters to fill exactly between two ruled lines so as to get out 'fist' suitably trained. Hence the term "Copy Book" in modern day parlance.

seek more and certainly enough to be left for end of Term for incidentals on the journey home.

MATRON & SICK BAY

47. I have touched on Matron and her staff (normally one or two). She had a little dispensary on the Headmaster's side of the house and a corridor of a couple of sick-bays leading off it. There she dealt with the normal cuts and bruises, boils (of which we seemed to be prone) and any other sets of ailments. Some boys seemed to be regular visitors (Tadman Minor springs to mind who always seemed to be in the wars).
48. This little staff also had the dubious pleasure of looking after our clothes, mending and sowing together holes and rents, packing and un-packing trunks and sending notes to parents that items had been outgrown or beyond repair. Matron also did the rounds once a week as we prepared for bed to cut finger nails (where not nibbled by nervous boys) and toe nails. (I solved my problem by always carrying a pair of nail scissors, leaving nothing available to be nibbled. Lateral thinking?)

OTHER STAFF

49. Cooks. That central part of the school (- Dining Room, Scullery and Pantry) were raised to a half-mezzanine. The kitchen was at ground floor with a serving hatch at floor level behind the headmaster's chair. The two Italian cooks operated from there, flinging up the hatch and delivering the appropriate morning egg-per-person, toast, large pots of tea or whatever.
50. Maid. One maid (I never knew what she did and I did not really care) arrived one winter, reputedly straight from a German Concentration Camp. (The timings may seem to be out of kilter, it being 1955 or so by this time. In fact, this is quite believable as much later I was stationed in Hohne, W Germany, an old Division-sized Wehrmacht Range Camp from WW2 and just next to Belsen Concentration Camp. When this was liberated by the Allies in 1945, all the utterly starved inmates were transported into this large, purpose-built barracks to recover (-if they could). There they stayed until about 1954 when they were distributed, mainly to Israel, and the camp vacated.) She, poor dumpy thing I remember, arrived in our freezing cold. The Headmaster's wife, "Ma Mike", gave her a thick overcoat and she burst into tears; this was the first present she had ever had. Mr Cooke got into a bit of trouble over her when she annoyed him over something and he called her "That damned Hun!". I think she moved on far smartly after that.

SPRING & SUMMER TREATS

51. Spring Walk. The Spring Walk was noticeable more for its absence than its presence. During a spell of fine weather, the Headmaster would announce a day for the Spring Walk. This meant a whole day out and a chance to venture further afield – great excitement! After breakfast we were to collect a small packet lunch, don out raincoats and stout outside shoes (to Walter's chagrin and fear of what was to return), and shepherded by a Master (each) the Senior and Junior Walks would set off to some probably separate far destination. The English weather normally played foul on us and either the Walk was cancelled at the last moment or curtailed before we all got too soaked.
52. Summer Treat. The Summer Treat normally had a better chance of success. A series of destinations were selected, put up on the board and boys asked to make their choice. Since I managed to get into the 1st Cricket XI I was duty-bound to go and watch a cricket match, normally at Worcester. The train journey was the best part. Malvern Station, perched half-way up the hillside is a Betjeman-esk delight, with its special exit and ramp up to the Ladies College. In a field just on the other side of Malvern, as the rail takes a long sweep down to the plain, there used to be a 5-Bladed propellor Spitfire, parked nonchalantly in its own little

enclosure just beside the track. It was always a land-mark for me until one day sadly it disappeared. The cricket match was never very exciting and boys tended to wander off. The only excitement was being able to get under the pavilion during the tea interval, poke slips of paper up through the cracks in the floor-boards for players to autograph and 'post' back again. Another venue was the 3-Counties Show, held in a big field down near Merebrook Camp, at the base of Malvern Wells. This held all sorts of farming delights and boys could get themselves well out of the sight of any Master for the whole day. (My Father commanded 1 Training Regiment, Royal Engineers at Merebrook Camp when we first came back from Egypt. He also built a bridging lake in the woods just behind the 3-Counties Show Ground. At the age of two had been taken to the Regiment Open Day in those woods, when they laid on a simulated Assault River Crossing, with lots a blank firing and Thunderflashes. To make it more realistic soldiers were seen to fall as if wounded or killed. I panicked, thinking they were actually being killed and implored by parents (located far part on the stands) by running backwards and forwards to them, to stop the whole thing and this horrible slaughter. I was going down Memory Lane even at the age of 10!)

53. "Climbing Mount Everest". I think it must have been during my very first term, Spring 1954, that one afternoon the whole school was packed onto the train at Colwall and shipped to Malvern to see the recently released film of the conquest of Mount Everest the year before – very educational, but probably totally over my head at the time.

MUSIC and ARTS

54. Singing. Mr Harland manfully tried to get us to sing – good Jingoistic stuff – with limited success. We did have a choir of sorts for Sunday Evensong.
55. Plays. We did put on little plays such as a school version of "A Christmas Carol", the 'ghosts' were illuminated under the chin with little pea-torches (normally used for reading under the bedclothes after lights-out). "Pa" Judge making us act a school play (which he wrote) all in French. We also had a foray into the Colwall Village Hall to lay on The Elms version/Pantomime of "Cinderella", based on "Cinderella" leaving her gumboots behind after a school dance (- I was No 1. Gumboot Carrier). The Masters sang the Noel Coward song "The Stately Homes of England" and elements of our Choir sang various applicable songs, which I have thankfully forgotten and I hope so have the audience.
56. TV. The older boys, Dorm Seniors, were allowed to watch the Headmaster and wife's TV in their sitting room whilst they were having supper. The number of boys allowed was very limited because the screen, black and white, 525 lines and very flickery, was the size of a couple of outstretched hands (17 inches diagonally across, I think). "Quatermass and the Pit" was probably the first "SciFi" on the 'Tele' and sent us to bed suitably terrified (- but we could not admit it or show it to anybody, being SENIOR BOYS (Note Capitals)). The "Billy Cotton Band Show" was the pre-cursor of the musical genre; guests included Mike Hawthorn[9], the then Pin-Up Boy racing driver who continued his racing personality off the track (- or so I am told!)

BUILDINGS

57. The School was going through a great expansion to cope with the increase of children born after WW2, the "Baby Boomers". The whole of the East Wing was completed during my time, as was a new cricket pavilion on the gym side of the main field, the batch of basins outside Form 2 were refurbished and with press-button hot taps as we could not be trusted to turn them off, the loos out the back and down the corridor between Forms 1 and 2 were refurbished – two cubicles on each side with a open air *pissoir* wall at the end (- visited by me from North, nightly, on a call of nature – very cold but often lit by sparkling clear, frosty

[9] Mike Hawthorn/Fangeo, Jaguar/Mercedes, battle at the 1955 Le Mans 24-hour race and deadliest crash is the stuff of legends. Mike Hawthorn killed himself in sliding his car on the Guildford By-pass.

stars above me.) 'Wet Area' floors were laid down with a polished stone/concrete composite.

DISCIPLINE

58. The wrath of the Headmaster, or the threat of it, was normally enough. Yes, I got the cane once: two strokes from the mildest of the canes, the 'Rhino Hide' (- other weapons in his arsenal were the "Bendy Bonker" and the "Whippy Cane"). There was an experiment with awarding "Black Marks" to miscreants, totalled up by Dormitory at the end of Term and a small treat awarded to the least scoring group average; one of the South's normally won as they were deemed to be "Goody Goodies".

BOYS

59. Yes, there were lots of them. I suppose that if there were 70(+) older than me when I arrived and another 70(+) below me when I left, I should be able to talk about 140(+), and a mixed bag they were. The Elms was one of the oldest still surviving schools in the Country and collected the offspring of a number of well-known figures. It is worth remembering that the UK still had outposts in the Colonies across the World and still run by Brits. The sons of these Diplomats and staff still were sent back to UK for their education.
60. Move to Public School. We all moved on to other Schools and consequently lost touch. I was the only one to go onto Cheltenham College (- a family tradition).

SUMMARY

61. Fun. As a bunch of exuberant growing young lads we seemed to keep moving, made the most of what we had, and learnt a lot not only in class but from our Masters out of class and from each other. We made the most of our freedom and got into a suitable number of scrapes. We had fun; only one boy ran away (Costley-White, son of the Arch Bishop of Worcester) to be recovered from somewhere up on the Malvern Hills.
62. Life-time Lessons learnt. Throughout our time I think you have gathered that we acquired life-time lessons which really be summed up as Conduct Befitting a Gentleman – not always followed, but at least we were given a baseline.
63. Apology. I am sorry if this seems to be a bit of a 'brain-dump', but if it is not written down, it will become lost over time. I hope this may be a bit of fun to you too.

Annex:

A. Obituary of Colonel Michael Singleton
B. Obituary of Major Harry Judge

Annex A

OBITUARY OF COLONEL MICHAEL SINGLETON – HEADMASTER OF THE ELMS

Colonel Michael Singleton, who has died aged 89, was a pipe-smoking classicist whose family ran one of England's oldest prep schools for much of the 20th century.

As a soldier he raised an infantry company which was called to the colours at the outbreak of war in 1939. He was also a chairman of the Bench, High Sheriff and fine left-arm spinner.

From 1948 to 1973 Singleton was headmaster of The Elms school near Malvern. Believing that boys should be neither cosseted nor cowed, he ran the school to robust, rural routines. Before breakfast every morning, Singleton would march everyone outside for several minutes of physical exercise. "Breathers" was held in all weathers, all seasons.

Long walks, cold dormitories and regular hymn-singing were also an integral part of the education, along with cricket nets and Latin prose.

Despite a brisk code of discipline, Singleton took a laissez-faire approach out of the classroom. Every November 5 the smallest boy in the school was sent down a tunnel to light the very core of the bonfire. None, so far as anyone can recall, was ever lost.

George Michael Singleton was born at Repton on May 12 1913, the son of a schoolmaster who, in 1916, accepted the headmastership of a small prep school in Herefordshire. The Elms, at Colwall, had been founded in 1614 and was set in the lee of the Malvern Hills with a view up to the British Camp.

Michael was the eldest of four brothers. Sandy went on to captain Oxford and Worcestershire at cricket (Michael himself had one game for the county); John farmed in Scotland after a successful Army career; Tim became president of the Law Society. The Singletons were Thirties Herefordshire's It-Boys.

After Uppingham, Michael won an Exhibition to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he became a lethal shot with a soda siphon and discovered a secret door from college to the nearby Little Rose pub. After Cambridge he went to teach at West Down school, Winchester, and later joined his father at The Elms.

When war with Hitler was inevitable, Michael Singleton organised a company of the Hereford Light Infantry. He was later seconded to the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and landed in France just after D-Day. Fighting across Belgium and Holland, he was wounded three times and was awarded the MC for his leadership and courage.

Medical attention bored him. More than once he had a batman dress his wounds and discharged himself from hospital to return to his men. Singleton had a low esteem for the higher ranks, and was a stranger to snobbery.

A burst of Luftwaffe fire left his body sprinkled with German shrapnel. When a doctor submitted Singleton to an X-Ray in the 1960s, his sole reaction was to exclaim: "God Almighty!" Singleton murmured: "Oh, it's just a bit of Krupp's metal."

Knocked unconscious during action in Holland, he was saved only when a family emerged from a farmhouse cellar to drag him inside. In peacetime he returned to thank them and was delighted to be reunited with the field glasses which he had mislaid in the blast.

In 1946 Singleton was offered a regular battalion but declined it in favour of a return to The Elms, where he soon became headmaster. His staff was composed mainly of ex-Army friends - "We have more MCs than MAs," he would say. Maths and wicketkeeping were taught by E A "Betty" Snowball, a noted figure in the England women's cricket team in the 1920s.

On Sunday mornings the entire school walked to church and back, while in the afternoons the pupils were sent up the Malvern Hills. Older boys were allowed to roam unsupervised. Few failed to relish the freedom, and many developed a lifelong taste for hill walking.

What central heating there existed was not always effective, or even switched on. Boys were permitted to capture owls and keep them in the fives court, provided they caught enough sparrows to feed them. One boy recalls being given the task of rearing a lamb to which he developed some emotional attachment. The animal, called Lottie, disappeared shortly before the school's Christmas feast, and the boy realised what had happened only when he was the first to be summoned for second helpings.

Singleton was known to his face as "Mr Michael", in his absence as "Boss". He habitually dressed in three-piece Prince of Wales checks, in summer with a carnation buttonhole. Outdoors, women would be greeted with a raised hat and a crease of his hooded eyes. His pipe, meanwhile, served as a useful early warning signal to boys misbehaving after lights-out (a form of curling, played with chamber pots on the polished floor, was a popular pastime). Singleton's tobacco could be scented long before he was heard, and the pipe was seldom far from his lips. He would even smoke it while bowling in the cricket nets.

If he was an authoritarian, sometimes distant figure, his wife ("Mrs Michael") was artistic and warm, giving boys jam toast in reward for minor errands. She organised ballroom dancing matches against local girls' schools.

The school minibus, an ancient Bedford, struggled with the Malvern gradients and did not always win. At the wheel would be the serene figure of Mr Michael, though it was hard to say if more smoke poured from his pipe or through the Bedford's floorboards.

Singleton was appointed CBE at the same investiture as his brother Tim was knighted. On being presented with a second Singleton in such a short space of time, the Queen did a double-take.

Michael Singleton played cricket for the Free Foresters, Frogs and IZ (members were offered discounted school fees), and was a keen country sportsman. As he would sometimes tell animal rights fainthearts, he knew precisely what it was like to be shot at - and hit.

He was the first High Sheriff of Hereford and Worcester, a Deputy Lieutenant and a member of the West Midlands Police Authority.

Unusually for a magistrate, he rolled his own cigars and brewed a potent beer. His funeral eulogy reported long-standing rumours that Singleton was also familiar with the workings, and product, of a "not entirely licensed still".

Major Harry Judge

12:03AM GMT 13 Dec 2003

Major Harry Judge, who has died aged 90, was a prep school master, farmer and Army reconnaissance officer responsible for liberating numerous Dutch towns in the spring of 1945.

With his aquiline nose and crisp tones, Judge was a notable figure in the turret of his 10-ton Humber armoured car. He was the first Allied officer seen by thousands of Dutch civilians after their years of German occupation, and they could not have wished for a better specimen of the fair-minded, incisive Englishman.

On the long journey from the beaches of Normandy to the liberated Low Countries, Judge's squadron - sometimes credited with being the first into Holland - endured severe casualties as they flushed out retreating Germans. Yet Judge himself came through the war unscathed, notwithstanding his fearless conduct.

Harry Judge was born near Sutton Coldfield on December 8 1912, the son of a slightly threadbare Midlands entrepreneur whose raffish enterprises included ownership of a garage and a public house. His wife provided the household with a measure of purpose, however, and young Harry was soon installed at Bishop Vesey's Grammar School. He excelled academically and was twice Victor Ludorum.

At Birmingham University he read English, played rugby and deployed his baritone in several Gilbert & Sullivan productions, the tunes from which he would sing (even in his Humber turret) for the rest of his life. He took a First, was awarded a research scholarship, and went on to gain an MA.

A nascent teaching career was interrupted by Hitler's invasion of Poland. Judge, never one to dither, immediately joined the Queen's Regiment (West Surrey), seeing action in France in 1940. The next year he transferred to the 49th West Riding Reconnaissance Regiment, and was promoted to major in 1942.

The job of reconnaissance is to locate trouble and hold it until assistance can be summoned. A certain jaunty optimism is invaluable. Having landed in France just after D-Day, Judge was given command of his regiment's C Squadron. Behind flimsy cover one day, as bullets ricocheted all around, Judge shouted cheerfully to his fellow officer Peter Harding Hill: "Know what, Pete? Nothing concentrates the mind like the unwelcome realisation you're the target of aimed small-arms fire!"

C Squadron was the inquisitive snout of the infamous "Polar Bears", as the 49th Division was called owing to its high quota of Canadians and its past service record in Iceland. By December 1944 they had reached the small town of Dodeward, Holland, when C Squadron spotted a large number of Germans advancing down a railway line. Judge engaged them at once, whereupon the enemy sheltered in a farmhouse.

Although badly outnumbered, Judge knew he must attack before the surprise was lost; delay would be fatal. With (in the words of his MC's citation) "commendable initiative . . . regardless of the hazards", he took a handful of men and crossed 500 yards of exposed, ice-packed ground. They reached the farmhouse and forced the enemy to surrender.

The citation, approved by Montgomery, hailed Judge's "personal qualities of leadership and grip", and mentioned the "almost impossible" terrain.

After the war Judge became second master at The Elms, a prep school at Colwall, near Malvern. Its headmaster, Col G M Singleton, employed more MCs than MAs.

Judge, who stayed at The Elms until his retirement in 1979, taught English, French and rugby with a firm but benevolent authority. In generations of pupils he instilled a love of Kipling, irregular verbs and low tackling. He was highly popular, not least because he allowed boys to buy Airfix toys and gave them gulps of sherry before the annual school play.

During the late 1940s Judge's father-in-law had given him two pigs, which promptly escaped in the middle of Bromsgrove in the rush hour. (It was the start of a secondary career which saw Judge farm 30 acres of soft fruit.) Experience of teaching small boys gave him an enduring affection for pigs. He would observe that, while they possessed most of the virtues of boys and few of their vices, they could always, unlike boys, be sent to the butcher.

Judge was a regular after-dinner speaker at cricket clubs, and at the Edgbaston pre-Test dinner of 1968 he shared the bill with Sir Robert Menzies, the Australian prime minister. Judge's theme at such events was his own dislike of cricket: he had spent too many hours umpiring eight-year olds on cold May afternoons.

Judge encouraged his sons to take up rod and gun. Yet although a good shot, he himself had little taste for fieldsports; he had seen enough killing in the war. One of the few times he was persuaded to try fishing he was almost immediately accosted by a Welsh water bailiff for not having a licence. It took all Judge's powers of persuasion, and a substantial dose of whisky, to avoid prosecution.

After his first wife's death in 1979, Judge found himself in an entirely new world. His second wife was the actress Noel Dyson, whose television credits included Father Dear Father and Potter, and she introduced him to the thespian set. One of her co-stars, Arthur Lowe, invited Judge to join him on his yacht and the two became friends.

Last December, after a long night of 90th birthday toasts in Pembrokeshire, there was only one person at the breakfast table early the next morning. Washed, shaved, and immaculately suited as always, the now blind Judge asked if there was any chance of a full English breakfast.

In 1995 he had led a parade of old soldiers through the streets of Utrecht to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the war.