

What a unique place it was! Educationally I was unpromising clay, but three boys in my year all bagged scholarships to the public schools of their choice, and this sort of performance was not unusual. Most of the credit for this lay in Michael Singleton's remarkable personality. He had a quality of leadership which was very rare. No wonder the post-war military wanted to retain his services.

Some describe him as inspiring fear - his hooded eyes seemingly could see right through you - but I held him in awe and much respect. He expected you to achieve, but the message very much was that he knew that you could. Very confidence inspiring. He extracted the same levels of performance from the motley collection of ex-servicemen who served as the school staff. None of them were particularly academic, but some had seen combat, and they all brought their own unique life-experiences to their task.

Well, the memories do flow. I can offer you three recollections of particular events...

The first is the school bonfire on Guy Fawkes' day. As the youngest & smallest boy in November 1956 I was the one who had to set it alight. It was a magnificent edifice - the Headmaster spent many days constructing it. Trailer-loads of cordwood were employed. Ladders were necessary. A narrow tunnel led into the core, which was saturated in kerosene. My task was to advance into the centre, bearing a flaming torch. I had a rope attached to my waist, for safety. The other end was attached to the headmaster. The worst that could happen to me, the Headmaster assured my anxious mother, was that my eyelashes might get singed. In the end it passed off alright, and I exited rapidly, pursued by a fireball.

The Guy that year was Colonel Nasser of Egypt. For two days beforehand the good Colonel had been on display, on the bench near the Headmaster's study. From a distance, he looked very lifelike, in his fez. His body contained explosives. It was very timely, because the Franco-British military force invaded Suez on the 5th of November. Of course, it was a monumental fiasco and the end of the Eden government. I happened to meet Eden - then Lord Avon - some years later, but unfortunately, I forgot to mention to him that The Elms had dealt with Nasser rather more effectively than he had. He might not have appreciated the joke!

Sparks from the magnificent bonfire distributed far and wide and inevitably found their way into at least one family's collection of fireworks. It happened every year, and often to the most wealthy family, with the largest collection of fireworks. Mothers would seek anxiously after their errant children in the darkness, whilst rockets flew past at waist height. It was the most glorious mayhem! And after the parents had departed, the evening was rounded off with a firework fight with the "knave", as the village boys were called. They would approach from the rear of the school, uttering vernacular oaths, and we would throw bangers down from the dormitory windows. The more adventurous of us would attempt a flank attack at ground level, via the toilets. The knack lay in not throwing the banger so prematurely that it could be thrown back at you. Of course, things did not always go according to plan, and one boy injured his hand, but not seriously.

The following morning some of us would get up early and collect the sticks from the rockets that had embedded in the sports fields. They made good arrow shafts. I can remember the lingering smell of gunpowder and the low-lying autumn mist.

I left at the end of the spring term of '62, having been head boy for my last two terms. I had to stay on a bit longer than the rest of my year, being too young to go to Repton, so the job was mine. Plant was Captain of Games. We pretty much had the place sewn up and made a conscientious attempt to deal with those petty iniquities that can plague the lives of the smaller boys, although the most effective head boy that I recall had a distinguished career in the Coldstream Guards.

As leavers, the final rite of passage that we had to endure, was a talk from the Headmaster on "The Facts of Life". It may be difficult for people to conceive nowadays how peculiarly innocent about sex we were back then. The Headmaster informed us that it was to be used "for the purposes of procreation" & "not to be abused". But what exactly was "It"?

Plant & I stared at each other in bafflement. The behaviour of the nematode worms in Mr Archer's glass tank did not supply a ready answer. "Are there any questions?"... 'Well Sir, there were just one or two points that I didn't quite...' ... "Shut up, Plant!"

Although my trip to the Old Boys Reunion in '62 was the last time I visited The Elms, a few years after my retirement I had cause to visit Newent and made a detour via Colwall. I drove past the school, which seemed in a very prosperous state, but did not linger, for fear of causing alarm. But I did visit the Church.

I had not kept up with events, but a sad sense of anticipation told me that that was where Mr Michael was probably to be found. I could not imagine that he would have chosen anywhere else - a quiet corner of the Churchyard. I searched for the Pings, but without success.