

Benson Junior School

Tuesday 3 September 1963 - July 1967

*Names have been redacted and some small sections have been omitted
for privacy reasons*

Changing schools became necessary because we moved from Addiscombe to Shirley. I have no idea if I would have remained at Tenterden if we hadn't moved. In our new home, the nearest state schools were St. John's or Monks Orchard. Instead, my parents decided to send me to Benson School, in West Way, Shirley, about a mile away on the other side of the main Wickham Road, primarily I think because * had moved to that school. The Headmaster was Mr H, a middle aged, balding man with glasses. We only really came into contact with him during assembly, or in cases of serious misconduct. Boys in my class, usually * or *, would be sent to him for the cane or the slipper. His secretary was Mrs L.

School hours were 9.10-12.10 and 1.40-3.55, allowing plenty of time for children to go home for lunch. The school had a two form entry, with about forty children in each class. In the first year we were divided by age. Those born from September to February were in 1H, with Mrs H and those from March to August, like myself, in 1J with Miss J. Miss J had reddish curly hair and glasses and was probably in her forties. Benson junior school was on two floors. 1J's class room was on the ground floor, at the opposite end of the building to the assembly hall. It was a very dark room, with high windows, on the shady side of the school, which I found depressing. Here, I sat near the front on the right hand side next to *. In an era before integration, * had just escaped attendance at a school for those with learning difficulties; not that they were labelled with such a politically correct term then. He was the shortest boy in the class, had a perpetually runny nose and always wrote with a very blunt pencil. I still

associate blunt pencils with runny noses. In this class, tables were learned up to twelve twelves only and when you had jumped through the hoop of a successful tables' test you moved on to the next times table. Poor * never seemed to get beyond his two times table.

When I was in the first year, I was chosen to read the commentary for a film that was being made to send to a school in New Zealand. A boy and girl from each class had to read a short passage about our school lives. My section was about the lollipop man.¹ *, who was the chosen 1J boy and I had to practice in the stock cupboard. I often wonder what happened to this film. None of my contemporaries, with whom I am in contact, remember it, so maybe only the participants were aware of it.²

Daily assembly for the whole school took place in the hall. The hall had a very distinctive smell, a stage and a shiny parquet floor with white tape marking out a grid. We had to parade into assembly in height order. In the first year, I was the second tallest girl, behind *. There would be prayers, notices and a hymn from a blue covered 'Songs of Praise'. I soon developed the ability to sing the words whilst thinking of something completely different. Favourites were '*When a Knight won his Spurs*' and '*God is Love, His the Care*', the latter was sung at my wedding. At the end of term, we always sang '*God be with You 'Til we Meet Again*'; quite a tear jerker for those who were leaving.

From the age of eight, the second year (today's year four), we were set by ability. These sets were cast in stone and I don't remember anyone

¹ The crossing patrols who held out their lollipop shaped sticks that said 'Stop, Children Crossing' were known as lollipop men and women.

² A letter that survives from Mr H, written in 1966, does mention contact with a Mr H who taught at Benson in 1961 and then went to New Zealand, before taking up a post on the Pacific Island of Niue. Detective work and help from a New Zealand researcher, revealed that the school in question was Lepperton School in New Plymouth. Contact was eventually made with Mr H's son who had still photographs of his father's time at Benson but knew nothing of the film.

moving from one set to the other. I was in the A stream. They weren't called the A and B stream but I think we were all aware that that is what they were. 2R was taught by Mr R, a middle aged gentleman, with a very red face; he probably suffered from high blood pressure. He used to shout a lot and throw chalk and board rubbers at those who misbehaved. 2R was another dark and gloomy classroom. In fact it may have been the same room as in the first year, just with a different teacher. I think we were sat alphabetically here as I was in the front next to *. Although we didn't look much alike, Mr R used to get me mixed up with *. As Mr R always called us by our surnames, I learned to answer to `*`.

Most of the time, we were taught by our form teacher but we had occasional lessons with other teachers. Miss S, the other second year teacher, taught us Religious Knowledge and handwriting. I had real trouble with handwriting, as here it still was joined up but devoid of ornament or loops. This need to completely change from the style I was used to and the fact that by this time I was locked into writing with my right hand, despite being naturally left-handed, is my excuse for having illegible handwriting. Each lesson, we would concentrate on a different letter, doing rows and rows of `f`s or `g`s, keeping within the lines. Then we would be allowed to do a `handwriting pattern` at the bottom of the page - a series of loops or minims that were letter-like but not actual letters. These could then be coloured-in.

Benson school didn't really go in for young members of staff. We did have a student in my first term, Miss P; I think we gave her a hard time. She had a long hair, with part of it piled ludicrously high on her head and the rest left loose. My autograph book says we had another student called Miss F M but I don't remember her at all. Of the permanent staff, Miss M was a flamboyant lady with dark hair, who taught art and I think needlework, or it may have been Miss S who taught needlework. The girls had a needlework task each year. In the first year we made felt needle

cases. Mine was green with a red house on. In year two it was gingham tray cloths with cross stitch decorations; mine was red. Third years made gingham hanky cases. I had rebelliously gone beyond the stipulated black embroidery silk cross stitch decoration in the corners and had added a 'J' in the middle. We had to parade on stage at the end of term to show these off. I remember trying to hold mine in such a way that the 'J' didn't show. The fourth years reached the dizzy heights of aprons with pockets. I think mine was blue and yellow. I have no idea how these tasks were made to span a whole year's worth of needlework lessons. One aspect of sewing lessons that I detested was when girls would deliberately sew the black embroidery silk through the skin at the corners of their fingers. *, who I sat next to, was always doing this, so I had to put up with it a lot in the second year. Of course, while we did needlework the boys did woodwork and never the twain should meet.



Sewing Projects Years 1 and 2 (equivalent to current years 3 and 4)

The pattern was that we had the same class teachers for the third and fourth years. This meant that one year Mr M, who taught science and Mrs B had the fourth year and the next it was Mrs W and Mr T. Miss M seemed to have been used to make a third class when there was a particularly large year group. In my third and fourth year Mrs W had the A stream and Mr T, the B stream. I don't think I would describe Mrs W as an inspirational teacher but my goodness could she get children through the

eleven plus. From the outset of the third year, we were rigorously drilled to enable us to do as well as possible in this test, taken in the January of the fourth year. I sat mine on Tuesday and Wednesday 17th and 18th January 1967. The outcome of the English, Maths, General Knowledge and Essay papers would seal our fate for the remainder of our school careers.

Croydon was one of the last education authorities to retain this test before comprehensive education took over. In many areas, the choice would be between one local grammar school for those who passed and one secondary modern for those who failed - and we did refer to it as failing. In Croydon however we could be sent to a school anywhere in the area, some more than ten miles and two bus journeys away. Most of the grammar schools were single sex and girls and boys could place the twenty or so schools open to them in order of preference. There was a strict ranking of these schools and pupils were allocated to them according to ability. You would gain a place at whichever school you were deemed clever enough for, that was highest up your parents' preference list. Each week, under Mrs W's watchful eye, we did practice papers for the eleven plus. I later found out that the B stream had no practice whatsoever. I found the essay writing hardest. Every Friday a topic would be chosen from the text book and sometimes I just wasn't inspired. I have no idea what the topic could possibly have been but I know mum wrote one of the homework essays for me. It was, bizarrely, about my nightdress case and favourite bedtime toy 'Honey'. She entitled the essay '*All Furry with a Zip up his Back*'; sadly this tour de force does not survive!

In Mrs W's sunny, upper floor classroom we were grouped according to ability and stature. It was never openly acknowledged but those in the back three rows were expected to gain places at the most prestigious grammar schools. Within these three rows we were sat according to

height, observing a strict boy, girl, boy, girl pattern. Two pairs of double desks were on each side of a central gangway. By this time, I had stopped being ridiculously tall for my age and I was in the third row from the back next to *, with * and * further along my row on the right hand side of the room, furthest from the window. I suspect that there were two more ability bands of rows in front of us.

Benson school was divided into teams. I was in green team. I don't know if I chose this, or if we were allocated randomly. I also don't know if green only established itself as my favourite colour as a result of being in green team. Team points were awarded for work and other meritorious activities and were displayed on a board in the school hall. Each week, wooden pieces were slotted into the board, creating a bar chart to show which team was in the lead. At the end of each term, or half term, the winning team would be awarded a cup, which would be decorated with the appropriate coloured ribbons before being returned to the display cabinet. I took this terribly seriously and on one occasion had words with *, one of the troublesome boys in the B stream, who kept losing green team points. Each class had a captain and vice-captain for each team. These elevated individuals were allowed to wear coloured bands, such as those used for distinguishing games teams; the captain wore two, like a cross and the vice-captain one. Oh how I longed to be able to wear those bands. I have a feeling that team captains were elected by their class mates on a termly basis. This probably explains why I only got to be a joint vice-captain, with *, for a single term and that was probably fixed. A studious, tall girl with glasses, who is hopeless at sport, is rarely popular in a school environment. I was however resilient and managed to be both self-reliant and maintain my self-esteem. I certainly never felt bullied, although I probably was. I do remember being called 'penguin feet' because my feet stuck out at an angle when I walked; this I treated with the contempt it deserved, responding with 'pigeon toes'.

During the summer holidays between years two and three, when I was nine, I started to wear glasses. I am sure I required them before this really but my position in the front row of Mr R's class masked this need. I wasn't the only girl with glasses but I do remember being upset when I was teased about this. Mum mentioned the 'sticks and stones can break my bones' adage and there was no lasting impact. It was on the first day of this summer holiday that my dad died. When it was time to return to school, I think the rest of the class had been warned to be especially nice to me. I remember * saying it wasn't anything to make a fuss about as her uncle had died.

There was a mortifying incident that came out of this. For science homework we were required to make the necessary apparatus to demonstrate that light travelled in straight lines. The rest of the class duly arrived with three pieces of cardboard with small holes in, drawing-pinned to blocks of wood. I suppose I must have been told not to do this homework as I was presented with elaborately-crafted wooden versions. I presume it was thought that my mother, a mere woman, would be incapable of drawing pinning a piece of cardboard to a block of wood; this could not have been further from the case. Despite being the only one parent child in the school (for any reason) until I was sixteen, this was one of only two occasions³ that I felt that this singled me out. It was probably done, perhaps by Mr W, with the best of intentions but it was not the right thing to do.

Certain lessons and projects stick in my mind. One summer term we did a project on one of the trees in the playground. There was a row of trees by the fence, poking their way bravely through the tarmac and each group was allocated one. I know we measured it, collected leaves and did bark rubbings but I am not sure what else was involved. I also remember

³See under Health and Hygiene for the incident of the school medical.

making models of the ark of the covenant and compiling a project about France, which I still have.

Also still in the archives is my project about the book Jane Eyre. In the fourth year, we all had to write a synopsis of a classic and Jane Eyre was my choice, or maybe it was

allocated to me. I seem to remember

handing this in late and using the 'the dog ate my homework' excuse. We had library lessons when we could research subjects that we were interested in. I really enjoyed these and one of my resulting projects was about 'The Cuntry'. Spelling was not my best subject, although now my spelling and grammar are comparatively good. My reports suggest that, in general, my performance was good but not outstanding, with plenty of Bs and Cs; I think As were rarely given. Maths and reading produced the highest grades, with, at the other end of the scale, PE never rising above a C. I don't know how far down the alphabet these grades stretched. My lowest was a solitary C- awarded for handwriting.

History was garnered from a series four books by R J Unstead; one forming the basis of our lessons for each school year. We started with cave men in the first year and worked our way through to the Victorians in the fourth year. 'History' of course did not then extend into the

Class 1J. Feb. 1964

SUBJECT	TEST MARKS		Classwork Grading A to E
	Possible	Obtained	
English—			
Reading	20	20	A
Oral Expression	20	15	C
Spelling	20	20	B+
Language Study	20	18	B
Composition	20	16	B
Mathematics—			
Written	20	19	B+
Oral	20	20	A
History	10	9	B
Geography	10	7	C
Natural Science	10	10	B+
Art	10	8	B
Craftwork	10	7	C
Handwriting	10	9	B+
P.E.			C

General Remarks *Janet is a quiet conscientious worker who always tries to do her best. In all subjects she has made good progress.*

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twentieth century. Let us just say that my love of history was not engendered by this pedestrian method of presentation. Grammar was well taught, using a book called 'First Aid in English'. I remember, when Mrs W first gave them out, *, a great devotee of St John Ambulance, asking if it was half first aid and half English; I am afraid we laughed. I do still have a copy of a year 4 geography test, duplicated in purple ink on a Banda machine. I later gave this test to my sixteen year old pupils who were totally floored. Questions included: 'Describe briefly what is needed in a country for the free flow of world trade' and 'Give a brief account of the cultivation of rubber or jute or tea'. Somehow I scored 16/20 for this test.

Each term, a new 'Time and Tune' magazine came out to accompany the BBC radio programme of the same name. I believe we had to pay for these but we could colour in the pictures. Further up the school, we graduated to 'Singing Together'. I vividly remember a 'Singing Together' cover that depicted a duck but I can't for the life of me remember what song it was associated with. This was probably memorable because it was the first one I coloured with newly invented felt-tip pens. The repertoire of these programmes is best described as 'traditional British', *'Raggle Taggle Gypsies'*, *'The Oak and the Ash'*, *'Cargoes'* and others of that ilk. There was also an issue that centred round London street cries that was particularly unforgettable. There were other songs that stick in the memory but they did not come from the BBC: *'We are the Red Men, tall and quaint, In our feathers and war paint: Pow-wow, pow-wow, We're the men of the Old Dun Cow. All of us are Red Men, Feathers-in-our-head-men, Down-among-the-dead-men, Pow-wow, pow-wow.'* Then there was the woad song *'Ancient Britons never hit on Anything as fine as woad to fit on Neck or knees or where you sit on - Go it Ancient Bs'*. I seem to recall that these were performed at the end of term just before we left.

I learned the recorder at school. Not everybody was chosen to do this, I think it might have been because I couldn't sing. Some graduated to

treble recorders but I stuck to the descant recorder and was quite proficient. I know I was one of a group who got to play at the Fairfield Halls. This might have been as part of '*The Daniel Jazz*', which was a light opera that those who could sing performed. The lyrics '*Darius the Mede, was a king and a wonder, His eye was proud, and his voice was thunder*', linger in my subconscious. I do have vague memories that we were performing a quartet of recorder tunes, so maybe this was a different occasion. We also got a chance to try out other instruments, these included a glockenspiel and melodicas. I seem to remember there was an incident when a melodica got stuck up with glue and everyone got into trouble for it because no one would own up.

In the fourth year, we started to learn French. This pretty much consisted of learning our names, ages, how to say hello and a few nouns. The third or fourth French lesson coincided with my school medical. I returned to find that I had missed a whole list of new words, words like 'star'. Somehow I never quite got to grips with French after that, although I do now know that star is 'étoile'.

I was never athletic in any way shape or form. We did netball in the winter, rounders in the summer and gym, probably all the year round. I didn't mind gym so much, as long as I wasn't required to be too high off the ground. When I was three or four I was visiting my dad's place of work, Associated Electrical Industries (AEI). I was taken up on the roof of the building, that was probably five or six floors high, in order to look down on the neighbouring Queen's garden. My mum, not a heights fan herself, panicked and pulled me back from the edge, leaving me feeling uneasy about being too far off the ground ever since. Gym often consisted of an 'obstacle course' of apparatus, one part of which always seemed to involve crawling along a nine inch wide bench that was slung between two metal A frames, about four foot off the ground. I dreaded getting to that part of the course. Sometimes though we got to do country dancing,

which I loved. *Brighton Races, Patta-Cake Polka*, splitting the willow - the latter was a step not a dance - this was a form of exercise that I could actually do. Then there was 'Music and Movement', a series of radio programmes where we were encouraged to 'find a space' and then pretend to be such things as a tree. This was all a little too 'arty' for my taste.

In primary school, I tried hard at all sports but there was no getting away from the fact that I was just no good at physical activity. Apart from general ineptitude and a bout of glandular fever, once I started to wear glasses, I was always frightened of getting them broken. Taking them off wasn't an option as then I couldn't see. On one occasion, all the fourth year girls were being picked to make up four rounders' teams. There were forty girls to choose from and nine in each team; I was not selected. Even when I did get picked, all did not go well. Once I managed to reach first post, grab the post and swing round in order to avoid going too far and being run out. As I did so, I fell over, embedding gravel from the adjacent high jump pit in my right knee; I still bear the scar.

Sports Day was something to be endured; I inevitably came last. There were running races, egg and spoon races, sack races, wheelbarrow races, obstacle races and something called the 'going to school race' where you had to stop at intervals and put on a coat, hat or scarf. As we got older there were more traditional athletics events. I enjoyed athletics and was sad that there was no athletics in my high school; I was still however last at everything, except once.⁴ I came third in a hurdles race, mainly because I was tall enough to step over them and * didn't realise that you had to carry on running after you'd crossed the last hurdle. We went to watch Croydon schools' athletics at Crystal Palace, which was a national

⁴ This is certainly my recollection but cards amongst my souvenirs suggest that I also reached a 'Going to School' race final and an egg and spoon race final, for which there had been heats, in unspecified years.

stadium and is still a prominent professional athletics venue. It was very exciting cheering on our classmates and Benson usually did quite well. * and her brother *, one a year younger and the other a year older than I, usually raced to victory.

In the fourth year (today's year 6) we had swimming lessons. Every other week we either went to the small pool at Croydon baths or an even smaller pool at the Shirley Oaks Children's Home complex. The Croydon baths were cold and old fashioned. I fainted occasionally as a child, usually followed by being sick. One momentous occasion was after swimming,⁵ as we queued up to get sweets (usually chocolate covered Poppets in a cardboard box) from the vending machine, for the coach trip back to school. For swimming, we were divided into three groups, those who couldn't swim, those who could swim a width and those who could swim a length or more. Just before the summer holidays, we'd been asked into which category we fell, prior to commencing swimming lessons the following school year. I said I could swim a width. I couldn't. Fortunately, that summer, we spent a week at Butlin's. Grim determination and daily swimming, with I think some lessons, meant that, when the first school swimming session came around, I just about got away with it.

Every year at Christmas there was a fancy dress party. You had to parade across the stage and say what you had come as. Some of the older pupils didn't dress up and it was super cool to say that you had just come as yourself. I dressed up every year but the only costume I can remember was a Scottish girl in the first year. This was because an existing tartan dress needed very little adaptation to create the costume, although normally mum went to a great deal of trouble for this sort of thing. The party also involved the showing of a film and those whose costumes

⁵ This may have been after High School, rather than Primary School, swimming.

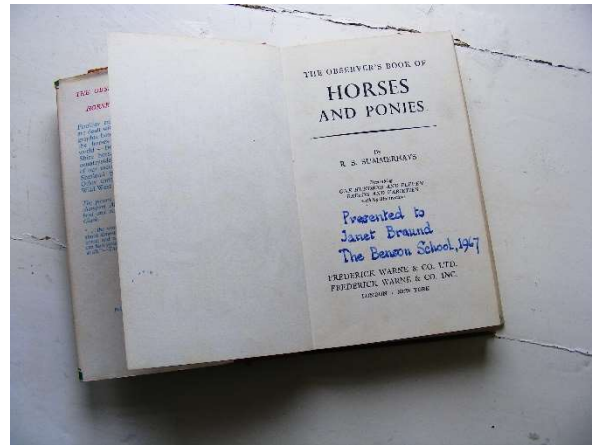
involved tall headgear were asked to remove their hats. I was very indignant and embarrassed when the person behind me asked me to take my Scottish girl hat off. I didn't consider a Tam o'shanter came into this category. In the run up to Christmas, a post box was put by the door to the hall and cards could be posted for classmates. On the last day of the Christmas term these would be brought round by monitors and delivered at regular intervals to the lucky recipients. Inevitably, some people received very few but there was no suggestion that the feelings of those children needed to be spared.

We were allowed to take in games to play on the last day of term. One year I took in Buccaneer. *, an interesting and highly intelligent boy who would today almost certainly be considered to be on the autistic spectrum, stood on the table and dropped a scout knife on to the board from above; the board still displays the evidence of this.

A visit to The Commonwealth Institute in London in the fourth year was another highlight. This was followed by a project on a Commonwealth country of our choice; mine was India. We also had a day trip to Portsmouth on 10th July 1967, at the end of our Benson careers. I think once the eleven plus was over the exciting activities could begin. Our parents paid 21/- for the trip. We went on the train and allegedly went by launch round the harbour, looked over The Victory and had 'a set tea' somewhere. I remember The Victory but have no recollection of the launch or the set tea. I do recall getting wet in the sea, probably deliberately, so that I had to wear my plastic mac over my underwear on the way home, in order to let my dress dry off.

The end of school residential trip was to Pilgrim Fort Camp, in nearby Caterham. Allegedly, there were not enough places for everyone to go so names were drawn out of a hat. I think * and I were the only ones who asked not to be considered. I was concerned about the food, so elected to

stay behind. It was a pretty selective 'hat' as most of the badly behaved people did not get chosen. We did get a day trip to see the others in residence at camp. Whilst they were gone, the remnants of the two fourth year classes were amalgamated for 'fun' activities. There was a competition for the best collection of wild flowers, which I won. I rather think this may have been fixed. My prize was a choice of 'Observer' book; I selected horses.



The School Prize

A highlight of our final year was the pantomime. The intensive rehearsing was not allowed to interfere with eleven plus preparation, so it was performed out of pantomime season in March. The two fourth year classes put on an ambitious performance of Cinderella, with * in the title role and * as Buttons. There were various songs for the chorus to perform. I was a huntsman in a shiny red tunic for the 'Tally Ho' song and for the ballroom scene we had cotton wool wigs and green and pink ball dresses that mum helped to make.

School dinners were my *bête noir*. At intervals, my mum decided that I should try them again and there was the added attraction that I didn't lose play time walking home and back but it never lasted long. I just detested everything about school dinners, especially as we were expected to eat a significant proportion, if not all, of them. There was never any choice of menu; things like vegetarianism were unheard of. My three pet hates included mashed potato, which used to be served with a large scoop, now more commonly used for ice cream and always had awful lumps in; I still can't stomach mashed potato. Then there was semolina and jam that we mixed together and turned pink, when we could get

away with it. Worst of all was cod in parsley sauce. The greenish tinge to the parsley sauce put me off a perfectly nice doll whose hair was parsley sauce coloured, (odd I know but there). I had special permission not to have to have this item on my plate. My other strategies were to hide as much as possible under my knife or to try to pass anything I didn't want, ie. most of it, to someone else!

I did quite enjoy playground games, supervised by our two dinner ladies and usually managed to find someone willing to let me play. We played skipping, swaysies and overs. I could never get the hang of the timing to run in when the rope was turned over and could only manage if I started standing next to the rope before it began turning. There were many skipping rhymes. I preferred French skipping, which involved jumping on and twisting round elastic that was stretched round the ankles of two 'enders'. Once the moves (on the elastic, inside the elastic, outside the elastic, twist the elastic round, jump up and land clear outside the elastic again) were completed successfully, the elastic was raised from ankles to knees and then to the waists of the enders. Necksies was banned for obvious reasons. I even invented a new pattern of French skipping, which involved standing at the side of the elastic. It soon caught on but no one believed I had invented it; hopscotch was also popular. There were four brick panels, interspersed with windows, outside Miss Js' classroom that were the perfect width for handstands. We used to rush to 'bagsy' one of these spaces in the hand-stand season. Often one girl (it seemed to be a girl thing) would do a handstand and then move her legs apart to allow another one or even two girls to handstand up in front of her. It didn't seem to matter that this revealed our knickers, although sometimes we tucked our dresses into them first.

Running around, chasing games of various types involved someone being 'he' or 'it', This person was chosen by the use of a 'dip' rhyme, such as 'Ip dip, sky blue, who's it not you.' Sometimes followed by 'O U T spells out

and out you must go'. One word was said as you pointed to each person in the circle to determine who was chosen. Another dip began 'One potato, two potato, three potato four'. With some of these dips it was possible to employ mathematical skill to work out where you needed to stand in relation to whoever was calling the dip, in order to avoid being chosen. Games that followed dips included 'Off ground he', where you were safely 'home' if you were off ground and 'Stuck in the Mud'. In this game, if you were caught you stood still with your legs apart and another player could free you by crawling under your legs. I can't quite recall how the role of catcher changed. 'Grandmother's Footsteps' involved creeping up on someone who had their back turned. They would turn round frequently and if they spotted you moving you would have to go back and start again. If you were the first to reach the person with their back turned, you took their place. In my children's day, this was known as 'What's the Time Mr Wolf?' One of my favourites, whose name, if it had one, I've forgotten, involved making one's way down a course following instructions such as 'if you have an R in your name move 2 lampposts', 'a giant step if you have a brother', or '2 pigeon steps for those with hair ribbons'.⁶ It was obviously perfectly simple for whoever was doing the calling to fix the winner of this game.

Less energetic pastimes came and went in 'crazes'. These included games, such as Jacks, Conkers or Cat's Cradle and collections, involving swapping with friends. Most years bead collecting took its turn. Beads from discarded costume jewellery would be hoarded and swapped. I had an impressive collection. Sparklers, paste stones prized from rings or broches, were particularly popular, with rainbow sparklers being the most highly valued. Bead swapping was banned after I think someone swapped the family jewels without permission! Nowadays it would be banned in

⁶ A giant step was a large stride, a pigeon step was putting one foot in front of the other with the heel of one foot touching the toe of the other. A lamppost involved lying full length on the ground and then standing up again at the point where your head reached; clearly those who were tall had an advantage here.

case someone swallowed one, or tripped over one, or stuck one up their nose but no one thought of that in our day. We also had autograph books. Collecting autographs was usually an end of the summer term craze, when you needed to collect the signatures of those about to leave. People would write fairly awful rhymes in each other's books. We didn't have much in the way of school clubs but Mr M* did run a stamp club in the lunch hour; I still have my membership cards.

In the third year, we took our bikes to school to train for our Cycling Proficiency. I must have ridden my bike to and from school for this, although I didn't normally ride to school. I have a letter dated 6 July 1966 telling me I had got 80% - 75% was needed to pass.

I can still name almost everyone in my class four picture, visualise roughly where in the classroom they sat and probably say which team they were in but I never had best friends from primary school. Living where I did meant I was outside the main social groups. I was quite friendly with * and it was to her house I went before school when my mum had to go back to work after my dad died. She left Benson at the end of the third year.



4W Benson School 1967

Other people with whom I was friendly enough with to go to their houses, included, in the first year, *. * lived in the main Wickham Road and had I think five brothers and sisters. I also went to play with * and *, whose bedroom contained a hand basin that I coveted. * also lived on my side of the Wickham Road and we played together occasionally. At this period, *, who lived next door, was my best friend, so I didn't feel the need for a friend from school. If anything, I was friendlier with the boys than the girls. I often walked to school with *, who lived at the top of Wickham Avenue, or *, who was older and from Woodland Way. I was also friendly with *.

Other children who were memorable, included * who was with us for some weeks from Germany in, I think, the third year. This close to the war, this caused a certain amount of tension; indeed my own Germanic-sounding surname often led to raised eyebrows. I don't think * could speak any English but we tried to be kind. We referred to him as 'a refugee'; I am not quite sure how this could have been his status. I believe he was staying with one of our class, *. I know we learnt a German song 'Ach du Lieber Augustine'.⁷ I can still remember the words.

I remember the day that the eleven plus results were announced. We had already had a pass or fail letter but this day was to reveal which school we would be going to. I was the only one in the class who had left home before the postman arrived with the envelope informing us of our fate, so my destination was announced in class. I was surprised to learn later that this was the last year of the eleven plus in our area. I don't think that I was aware of this at the time.

⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIM-uhObl08.