

Tenterden School January 1961-July 1963

On 12 January 1961, nearly three months before my fifth birthday, I started at Tenterden School, Teevan Road, Addiscombe. This was a small, private establishment that took children from the age of four to school leaving age, then fifteen. I believe that my grandfather had



Tenterden School

requested that money he left should be used to send me to a private school. According to the 'Prospectus' (a folded A6 card) fees were £5 5/- a term for those under seven and the school hours were 9.15-12.00 and 2.15-3.45, with Wednesday afternoons off. Allegedly, my mum had tried to get me a place at nursery school but they had refused to take me as I could already read and they didn't want to get the blame from a future school for teaching me by some incorrect method. In reality there was no 'method'. I have no recollection of not being able to read. I was read to and then I could read myself; I certainly had some reading aptitude by the age of two.

Tenterden was run on very old-fashioned lines, reminiscent of the period before the First World War. The school was held in the private home, 'The Pines', of the head teacher, Miss Isobel Howell.¹ There were two classes. The youngest pupils were taught by 'Madam'; I believe her real name was Miss Saunders. She seemed very elderly at the time but with a child's perception, may only have been in her fifties. Her classroom

1. Isobel Eleanor Howell was born 10 August 1896 in Norwood, Croydon. A school admissions' register for her shows her entering All Saints Girls' School in 1903 when her address was 35 Birchanger Road. Her address was 303 Morland Road when she entered Portland Road Girls' School in 1909. In 1911, she was living in Morland Road, Croydon with her family; her father was a builder's foreman. She died in 1984. I learned much later, from a Facebook memories group, that she and her mother used to run the school.

was in the house itself and we drank break-time milk in the large kitchen. I can picture the range on the left by the door, the large wooden table in the centre and the green framed windows with plants on the window sill. This is bound up with a memory of being asked how much milk I wanted, perhaps on my first day and asking for a tiny drop, to be told scathingly that there was no such thing. This milk was warm, something I loathed and now I do not have milk at any temperature.

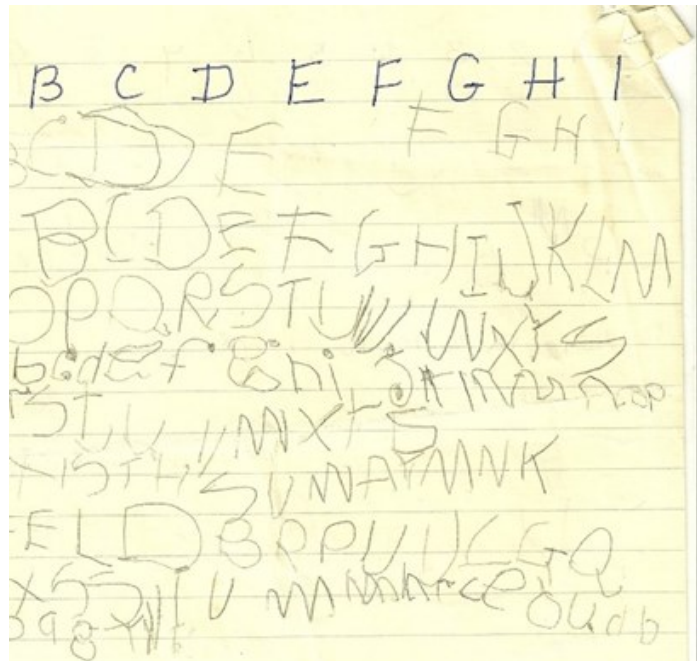
The toilet was between the classroom and the kitchen. I remember us all queuing outside the toilet and Miss Howell banging on the door because a hapless child called D was taking longer than expected. I only have these single memories of both the kitchen and toilet. I probably never used the latter as I went home for lunch each day. Maybe after the first unfortunate milk incident I was excused from this part of the school day. D was the child I remember least well from my age group, she is the only one whose surname I cannot recall. I don't think she was there very long. She always fell asleep at her desk in the afternoon.

We sat on benches at desks that were joined in rows. I started somewhere near the middle next to C, who offered kindly to show me his 'winkle'; I declined. For most of my time in Madam's class I sat at the back on the right. I think we may have been moved further towards the back as our ability increased. Considering that there were only about forty children in the whole school, there seemed to be a large number in my age group, many of whom were only children. There were only two people, L and C, whose houses I went to, unless there was a party. I did later go to M's house but not, I think, until after I left the school.

A's father must have been in the forces, as they lived in nearby married quarters. At the age of six he and I declared that we would get married and wore rings made from black beads on pieces of elastic to prove it. We were quite philosophical about it and acknowledged that we might not actually know each other by the time we reached marriageable age. M, a dark haired girl with glasses, was about fourteen when I arrived at the school. She took on the role of a pupil teacher and played the piano for assembly and singing.

The curriculum was very dated, as was the equipment. The younger class had slates to write on, although we did have paper and exercise books as well. The books from which we learned to read had first been printed in the 1890s and were based on the presumption that the shorter the word, the easier it was to read. This gave rise to sentences such as 'Lo, here is the big red ox' and 'Let us sit on the sod'. Each day we had to read a new page to Madam and she would initial at the bottom. I don't know what happened if you couldn't read them as I don't remember any actual instruction but that may be because they were well within my reading capability, so working my way through Primers one and two was a formality. Once you got to the end of Primer two you were on your own and certainly I could read anything I needed to by then.

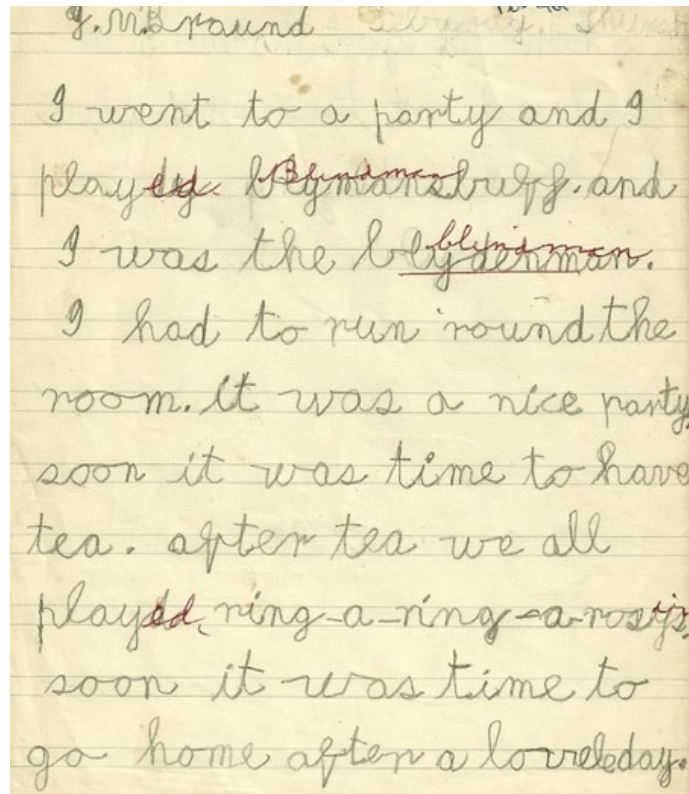
Straight away, we were drilled in a highly flowery, embellished version of the Marion Richardson joined-up handwriting style, with loops at every available opportunity. I have a story about a birthday party that I wrote in this manner. Allegedly this was during my first term. If they managed to get me to this state in a month, from the decidedly shaky upper case letters I wrote on my first day, it is a miracle. I rather think mum may have written the wrong year on the back, although this would be out of character. I was certainly no more than six at the time but I think it unlikely that I was four. My main difficulty was that I was, like my father, naturally left handed but this was seen by the school as a sign of moral weakness and I was forced to use my right hand.



There was little on offer beyond the three 'Rs' but my goodness were they well

**Written on my first day at school
12 January 1961
aged 4 years and 9 months**

taught. I did not repeat the maths I learnt here as an infant until I was in secondary school. We all, whatever our ability, learnt our tables up to twenty twentys. Madam would call out 'seventeen eightens' and point at someone who would give the answer. I don't remember anyone not knowing instantly. Now I would need a few seconds to work some of these out! Again, I can recall no teaching of these skills, only the reciting followed by the testing. We learnt units of measurement: feet and inches, furlongs and miles, ounces and pounds and believe it or not, rods, poles and perches. I vaguely remember cardboard coins to help with money. I am pretty sure this was at school not just at home. We learnt to recite the alphabet both forwards and backwards; this I can still do. I left this school at the age of seven years and three months, at the end of what would have been the infants, ready to go on to the first year of juniors elsewhere. By this time, I could do long multiplication, long division and add and subtract pounds, shillings and pence and I was not exceptionally ahead of my peers.



G. M. B. found
I went to a party and I
played ~~Blindman's bluff~~ and
I was the ~~Blindman~~ blind man.
I had to run round the
room. It was a nice party
soon it was time to have
tea. after tea we all
played ~~ring-a-ring-a-rosie~~
soon it was time to
go home after a lovely day.

**Allegedly Written in February 1961
aged 4 years and 10 months**

Miss Howell's class, for the older children, was housed in some form of outbuilding. I and the rest of my cohort reached this class before I left. Miss Howell was a tall thin lady, with greying hair, I would have said she was perhaps in her late forties but she was actually in her mid-sixties when I started at the school. She certainly seemed noticeably younger than Madam. My main memory of her was her abhorrence of the word 'got'. 'There is no need to use the word 'got''. It was 'I have', not 'I've got'. I can only recall sitting in her classroom, towards the front on the

left hand side, in the summer, so I may have just spent one term in this class. I know I had very short hair at this time and had got my ears sunburnt. I can remember doing singing in Miss Howell's class, also walking round the room with the encyclopaedia *Look*



A Colouring Text

and Learn, a compulsory purchase for pupils, on my head² and doing eye exercises. The only other form of physical activity was skipping in the concrete playground, with Miss Howell and M turning the ends of the rope. I don't recall anything, in either class, that could constitute, science, geography or history. 'Art', for infants only, consisted of colouring-in Bible texts.

I walked to and from school twice a day; I don't know if it was possible to stay for lunch, probably not. I can remember my friends and I walking up and down the huge snow piles at the sides of the road in the long hard winter of 1962/3. I am not sure if I ever walked to school unaccompanied, I think I probably did. I know mum would buy cigarettes at the kiosk under Bingham Road bridge on the way home.

2. I should explain that this was part of a deportment lesson and not me fooling about.