

THE SCHOOL FOR BAD LADS

In 1962 I was twelve years old and my local constabulary were sick of the number of times I was up before Judge Howard. This time, however, I wouldn't be going back home. As the judge read out the charges I just thought I would get off again just like all the other times but my dad knew what was coming this time. He said to me, 'You've had plenty of chances bonny lad but this time you're going to get sent away.'

And so it was. I remember hearing I'd be sent away for three years to an Approved School. As the police van drove off with me inside it my dad said, 'Now look after yourself son.' If I'd said anything I would have burst into tears. I was taken to Penshaw Remand Centre where it only took me two or three days to see the bad things that went on there - like if you did something wrong or absconded, the screws would make your life hell. They would grab you by the scruff of the neck, give you a good clip round the ear and make you do bunny hops up and down the corridor till you were knackered. They would make you scrub the toilets and make sure everybody could hear them giving you hell. The shouting was bad enough to stop you doing anything wrong. I said to myself, 'That's not going to happen to me.' If I was tempted to abscond it might just make me change my mind.

The first day when I came in to dinner, it was boiled fish and carrots and me being a particular sod when it came to food, I sat there thinking, 'There's no way I can eat this rubbish,' while the kid sitting opposite was tucking into his dinner. We weren't allowed to talk at the dinner table so I got his attention by kicking his foot. He knew what I meant (do you want my dinner?) and he nodded and I began to pile his plate up. Just then this hand came crashing down on the back of my neck.

'What do you think you're doing you little bastard?'

'I don't like boiled fish and carrots sir.'

That only made him worse. With the venom of a rattlesnake he yelled, 'So you don't like boiled fish and carrots, eh?' He frog-marched me down the corridor to find out what bunny hops were like. They might be alright for rabbits but they kill little kids. What a showing up in front of everybody. Needless to say, I never complained about the food again.

Some of the lads there were OK but I had the misfortune of lying in bed next to a kid who was well in with the screws. One night as I was lying in bed I hadn't anything to read. I could see he had more than enough comics but when I asked him for one the greedy sod refused so I grabbed a couple off him and it ended in a fight. The screw came in to see what all the fuss was about and I got the blame and more bunny hops. I remember this black kid fighting this white one over who was the hardest. It was just like the TV play called 'Scum' where Ray Winstone has a fight with a black kid to see who would be top dog in the Borstal.

After six weeks at Penshaw I was sent to Aycliffe Training School, quite a bit further for my parents to come but I settled in and it was ten times better than Penshaw. It was just like going to work each day. I wore overalls and every job was different. And we got paid at the end of the week!

Soon I was off again. This time it was nearer home to a place called Axwell Park near Blaydon where I would spend the rest of my three year sentence. As we drove through Swalwell past the rugby club I could see a massive factory on my left. It was the Ottovale Coke Works. Then we came to a stony bridge that led up a drive with trees on either side to some new houses for the teachers. When I saw the school I thought it was like something out of Charles Dickens. It was so huge.

What fate awaited me ran through my mind as we pulled up outside the front door. This little stocky fellow with white hair was sucking a sweet and waiting to greet me.. He was Mr. Richmond, the headmaster. He lived next door in a lovely house that still stands to this day and he was the one who did all the caning. I was introduced to the staff. It was all so polite. I thought, 'This can't be too bad. Just keep your nose clean and do your time.' It was just like school, except for the chores I had to do.

The one I hated most was when I and ten other kids had to kneel on the floor and polish it. If you didn't get the best rags for your hands and knees you ended up with blisters the size of tennis balls. When the head lad said, 'Go,' you had to keep in line with the other kids. Your knees went like the clappers. Your hands went from left to right in fast time and if you broke the chain you had to do it all over again. After a while you got used to it.

If you were any good at football or swimming you would get the chance to play for the school and go away for the day. I remember me and five other kids going to Leeds to swim. It was a great day out. And I won my heat, only to sink in the second round. We never won anything but I did get a certificate for winning my heat. I only wish I'd kept it to show my grandchildren.

A lot of absconding went on. As we weren't supervised all the time it was quite easy to take off but when you were returned you found out what it was like to have the cane across your backside - and it did leave a mark. Absconders were like heroes to the younger kids who would hear tales of stolen cars, breaking into shops for clothes and money. They put ideas into their heads. My turn would come later.

One of the good things about the school was the camping. We went all over the place. We could never have done this back at home. The food was great, the teachers were OK and on Saturdays, if your parents came they could take you out for a few hours. But visits were mainly for the new lads. For the likes of myself who had been there over a year, I could go home from twelve o' clock till four but by the time I got the bus along Scotswood Road to Marlborough Crescent bus station to get another bus home I only had time for a bite to eat and it was time to go back to school. At the finish I only went home once a month but I did look forward to the food parcels from my granny. Most Saturdays my mate and I walked down Blaydon High Street and spent time in the cafe playing records on the juke box. On Sundays we would get dressed up with our shoes polished and our ties on to march two by two to Saint Cuthbert's Church. Once a month we would go to the pictures at Blaydon.

When the older lads left I went up in the pecking order and started to get into bad habits like selling roll-ups for a shilling. A roll-up was just a cigarette paper with a bit of Golden Virginia tobacco wrapped up in it. Half an ounce was easy to smuggle into school in a flat packet in your sock. Most of the time you hardly got searched but now and again you got caught but they only took it off you and said nothing. I had a little book with all the names of lads who owed me money in it. On Saturdays I would collect it in. You could make a few bob that way unless you were caught doing it.

We had a great teacher called Mr. Quickfall who lived with his wife and little son across the walkway in the new homes on the drive. He must have been in an accident earlier in his life because he had a false hand and ear and you could see he had had a skin graft on the side of his face. When I think back, he put me in the mind of a fighter pilot with his moustache and pipe. What had happened to him we never asked. We had some good times with him. He had a great sense of humour. When we played five-a-side football with him he would take his false hand off and throw it at you. When he lit his pipe he would prise his false hand open with his good one and stick a box of matches in it. We called him

Quick-Nab as he was quick at catching you smoking and he could lay down the law at times but to me he was great to talk to about my problems at home.

Things started to go wrong for me when I mixed with the bad lads. As soon as I made enough money I was away on Saturdays getting tattooed. When I went home my mother used to say, 'Don't get any more done, son.' I wish I had taken notice of her. She was right. I absconded with six of the bad lads. After three days on the run we got caught and brought back to face the music. It was a stupid thing to do as I can still feel my backside on fire from the headmaster's cane. I got back into the swing of things but there was always somebody who had a good idea how to make money when they absconded. Twice more I went with them. I would have been out sooner probably but each time Mr. Quickfall put me forward for early release I would throw the chance away. The last time I was asked to go with the lads I refused and the ones who went were never seen at school again. Maybe they went to borstal. I don't know.

I kept my nose clean after that till it was my time to leave. I was fifteen years old and only had months to go and was back in Mr. Quickfall's good books. He was planning a trip to the Pennine Way with some of his class and I would miss it but there was nothing I could do about that.

The day came when I had to get my stuff and move out. I gave my baccy and one or two other things to the lads. I said, 'Goodbye,' to the best teacher in the school, Mr. Quickfall. Going down the drive for the last time I stood and looked at the place that had been my home for three years and thought it hadn't been a detention - more an extended holiday that would stay with me for life. I felt a bit sad at leaving. I had gone into the 'system' a stupid young kid and came out more like a man. Now I would get to know my family again and within months, at sixteen, start work at the paper-mill where I would meet my wife, June, and settle down and have a family.

Ray Wilson 2008