

Rendcomb College, 1946-54 Retrospective observations by Julian Comrie

I started school at Rendcomb, aged 11, in September 1946, just one year after the devastations and shortages of WW2, when the school was suffering from the aftereffects of the war, and was itself only 26 years old.

I won a Scholarship, but was not eligible for financial assistance, for although I had been at primary school in Gloucestershire, my parents lived in London – I had been evacuated in 1939 to live with my mother's sister and her parents, near Stroud.

Rendcomb was magnificent, and an eye-opener: how big, how cold in the winter, how powerful and wonderful to a small boy! The scale, after a small primary school, held one in awe – for a while. Discipline, common purposes, real authority from staff, who could, if necessary, induce levels of terror previously unknown, roll calls to establish presence, were all overpowering at first. And then, quite soon, it all became the norm.

Life blossomed. Yes, there were timetables to follow, lessons to attend, tasks to be done for oneself, and tasks for the common good – dusting and sweeping, collecting wood for fires, sawing, chopping, and delivering it to the third floor!

But there was also freedom, and encouragement to do one's own thing – draw, paint, play games, play the piano; but for me, the greatest freedom was the freedom to roam. The surrounding countryside of Cotswold hill and valley, trees, rivers and the lake were all freely accessible on foot or by bicycle – and I walked mile after mile in this beautiful part of England. That is one of the greatest pleasures Rendcomb gave me, and something I have enjoyed for the rest of my life – the ability to live in and appreciate true countryside; to walk the hills, and later in life, to climb some mountains.

Other pleasures were given by the subjects on the edge. I was taught the piano; I certainly didn't make a great pianist, but the ability to 'have a go', and the understanding of the theory of music has proved to be a great joy. Likewise, singing in the choir: it often seemed a chore at the time, but the joy it gives in retrospect is deep and precious.

And then, Art. Drawing with 'Mr Molly'. (Molineau?) How grateful I am to him and his successors for teaching me the rudiments of light and shade, composition, perspective, and the sensible use of colour when needed – concepts which I have used all my life in their application to photography. For a while, I was 'Picture Man', with the responsibility of selecting pictures from a series of books of prints by the great classical artists to display in a several frames around the school, changing them on a regular basis – another wonderful introduction to the world of formal, classical art.

Throughout my time at school, I was 'a scientist', fascinated by Physics, particularly optics, I think through the enthusiastic encouragement of my father. This meant doing Maths, Physics and Chemistry for 'A' Level, all of which I enjoyed, but didn't necessarily find easy!

This brings up one of the disadvantages of Rendcomb at that time - a relatively small school, and (particularly after the war) unable to recruit and fund teaching for certain subjects. Chemistry was one such – no Chemistry was taught in forms 1 to 5, and therefore to do Chemistry at 'A' level meant learning seven years of the subject in two! Well, thanks to the determination of Jack Fell – if not of his pupils – it could be done. (Jack Fell had taught at Rendcomb before the war, during which he was engaged in developing RADAR, and was subsequently awarded an MBE for his war work).

There were of course other casualties of this shortage, and the one I regret most was the lack of a Geography course: we had Geography lessons in Form 1, but after that, nothing. Had there been a complete course in Geography, I feel that would have been my chosen subject for sixth form study, and perhaps my career. I made partially made up for this later by studying Geology for my degree, and taking great interest in geographical topics throughout my life.

There were of course some issues which in retrospect were not particularly helpful. The previously mentioned 'tasks for the common good' known as Public Work, or PW, was seldom regarded with its true motive, but regarded instead as an unwanted chore, a feeling which was probably, though unintentionally, caused by using it on occasion as a punishment for misdemeanors. In that respect, it failed somewhat in its primary *raison d'être*.

In some ways, a more questionable state arose through an excellent idea: it was the school ethos, probably at the suggestion of the Founder, and supported by the Headmaster Mr Lee-Browne, that all boys at the school should be treated as equal. There was no known distinction between able or unable, rich or poor, good or bad; this was deemed to be a good thing, and at a young age, it was. This ethos however unfortunately produced an unhealthy lack of academic competition. Each boy was encouraged to be himself (a good thing) with no personal need to be better or worse than anyone else (a bad thing). It tended to produce adults who thought that everyone in the grown-up world would treat them politely, as equals, which one learns the hard way afterwards that it is not always the case.

There was also an unhealthy attitude to which pupils could succumb – I fell for it, alas – of decrying the academic topics the other boys were studying. The physicists decried biologists as 'pseudo-scientists', and the humanities were – well – just ridiculous. How misconstrued, sad, foolish, we were. One of my pleasures in later life has been to learn about all those things which I wrote off at school as irrelevant.

One other area of adult life was missing: I believe it may now be taught under the heading of Citizenship. This also was probably a casualty of resource, but I left school knowing nothing at all about too many things: try these headings, and build your own table of underlying principles, such as The Law – politics, parliament, police, the courts, punishment; Finance – economics, banking, budgeting; Business - the Companies Act, manufacturing, marketing, buying and selling, the need for firms to make profits in order to pay wages to their employees so that they can live. Unfortunately, this list could be endless, and one goes out into the world and gradually learns about those which are relevant to one's current situation: but a little pre-warning would have been very helpful

To counter-balance some of these issues, there was at the time a very good introduction to collective management known as 'The General Meeting', an assembly of all the boys once a week, tasked with managing some of the aspects of running the school. In theory, the Headmaster took no part in this, and that was usually the case.

Officers were elected – Chairman, Secretary, Banker, a Games Committee, etc, and formal procedures of running a meeting and carrying out specific duties were followed. This was an excellent scheme, teaching boys collective and personal responsibilities, and thereby relieving some of the staff of mundane tasks! There was also the Council, composed of about six senior boys, who acted as a form of legal court with powers of jurisdiction and punishment. (It took me a long time to realize this was how the world works!)

To revert to the Sixth form: I am eternally grateful to Jack Fell and Lewis Hull for their patience and skill at imparting the facts and joys of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics. They did very well, under what we would now consider to be relatively primitive conditions, to get ideas across and inspire us to

ask for more. They often provided some of those 'light bulb' moments, when some obscure concept suddenly becomes clear. I even remember some of it now!

Many years later I read a note somewhere which stated 'learning is something you do, not something that happens'. Ah, I thought, that's where I went wrong and had all those reports saying 'could do better' There must have been times when I thought that having been taught something, that was the end of it: now I know better, and it's a bit late!

So: what are the abiding memories? Pleasure: most of the time I was as happy as a sandboy, and my time at Rendcomb was a wonderful foundation for life. Happiness: the sound of piano music drifting over the lawns, the delicious smell of syringa late on sunny evenings in June; and at the same sort of time, the sound of the Stable clock striking ten, eleven, and possibly even twelve, if one couldn't sleep.

I very nearly grew up at Rendcomb. I certainly changed from a small boy to a young man. The next stage of my life – two years in the army – added considerably to that process!! But Rendcomb was my foundation, and a treasure: I am eternally grateful to my parents for sending me there, and I have never wished to have been at any other school. It has given me everlasting pleasure.

Julian Comrie 31 January 2020, revised March 2023