

Miss Read returns to Chelsfield School School in Kent. We were eight years old when we first met, Norah and I, at the village school in Kent, now Chelsfield Primary School. And now, over half a century on, I was driving with her daughter and her granddaughter, aged six, for a return visit.

What should I find? All my life, I have looked back on those three school years, from 1921 to 1924, as idyllic, always afternoon, always sunny. No later school could touch it.

This morning might well start a day of disillusionment. For one thing, it pelted with rain. We splashed after the school bus, and drew up behind it at the old familiar steps up to the high playground. Other cars were disgorging tidy, dry children, with glossy shoes. Little girls rushed to greet their friends as I used to rush to meet Norah. But on such a morning we should have been in dripping mackintoshes, wet-faced, mud-spattered after our mile-long walks. On the other hand, we should have been carrying wet violets or dogroses, souvenirs of our adventurous journey denied to these non-pedestrians.

The children went up the steps, but the young headmaster, Michael Thomas, elegant and welcoming, bade me enter by my old headmaster Mr Robert Clarke's front door, his house having been incorporated into the school. It seemed positively sacrilegious to walk so boldly into Mr Clarke's hall. Ahead lay his sitting-room, once subfusc and holy, but now filled with steaming stoves and enormous saucepans and a vast basin full of sage and onion stuffing.

"It's roast pork today," said the lively cook. "You're lucky!"

And it was, and we were.

The headmaster led the way into assembly, held in the long classroom divided by a glass and wood partition as in my day. It was amazing how little the early Victorian architecture had been altered. I had feared a plethora of reeded glass and chrome. Apart from bright paint and pictures it was easily recognisable.

The children were singing *O Jesus I have promised*, followed by *Kum Ba Yah*. They sang much more melodiously than we did, and the soloists lacked shyness. We might have tittered to see our friends in the limelight. All that was missing was Mr Clarke's magnificent bass to lead us.

Then came the innovation. About ten children each read a short safety hint. The first advised us to wear our hard hats when riding our ponies. (Ponies! I was the luckiest child in the school because I owned a battered scooter!) The sensible warnings about plastic bags and petrol and playing barefoot went on, and I surveyed the new floor of polished tiles. You could not have gone barefoot on our old floor of splintery boards, scuffed with boys' steel-tipped boots, with here and there a knot of wood as hard and bright as a buttered brazil nut.

The children settled to their lessons, and the headmaster took me to view

the playground. The shed was in the same corner with, I swear, the same iron girder along which we used to swing hand over hand like monkeys.

"Have a go now!" I was urged. But my feet would have trailed on the ground. There were hieroglyphics painted on the asphalt for some up-to-date games which had superseded our drill in four lines. But the old lime

in a tank. "What do you call them?" I asked. (Morecambe and Wise? Janet and John?)

"Goldfish," said a boy politely.

In the top class Arithmetic was in progress, a bustle of busy set-squares and frowning in concentration, far removed from our inky exercise books and bored sighs. This is the better modern way, I see. They are working



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trees still flourished. "We're going to try to put back the seats under them," said the headmaster. "We've got some marvellously helpful parents!"

The four classrooms were humming gently. The infants were clustered chummily at round tables. Norah's grandchild smiled at me against a dazzling background of wall pictures. In the next room two goldfish sported

from within. Our work was imposed upon us.

The oldest child here was 11. We had 14-year-olds in this room when I sat here. They were known as Standard Seven and reckoned to be practically grown up. The school then was roughly 100 strong. Today it is nearer 120, but I found it more tranquil. The teachers are quieter. The children

work because they are interested. They were amazed when I showed them the cane which was occasionally used by Mr Clarke. It had to be unearthed from some hidden nook in Mr Clarke's bedroom, now the headmaster's office.

School dinner was eaten at the desks. I sat at the headmaster's table and examined the plates displayed for our inspection as they were returned. Greens, I observed, still get left, the rest of the excellent fare had gone.

"Like to ring the bell?" I was asked.

Like to! Heady stuff, this wielding of power in the shape of five pounds of solid wood and brass!

Painting was on the timetable that afternoon. Entranced, they dipped paper into trays of liquid and paint blobs. "We're marbling!" they said proudly. I was envious. Most of my afternoons had been spent sewing some loathsome hem on a blood-spotted oblong of calico smelling of dog biscuits. The boys did Mechanical Drawing, carefully shading cubes and cones on very small pieces of paper. Things had definitely improved.

I surveyed the room. Books and pictures were everywhere, bright, beguiling, an invitation to read, to learn, to discover more. One ginger-coloured bookcase I remembered, housed our library against the farther wall. Battered copies of Henty, Robert Louis Stevenson and some Nelson's Classics occupied most of the space, apart from a row of identical grey paperbacks entitled *Thrift* given, one supposes, by some Victorian society concerned to improve the native poor, and of no interest to any child.

In the lobby, between the warm stove and the row of washbasins, some boys knelt on the floor making boats with their boy-size carpentering sets. There was a snugness about the scene as they chattered and hammered. It might have been an orderly Victorian nursery on a wet afternoon.

It was this domestic atmosphere, which I so clearly remembered . . . and so feared to find gone . . . which impressed me most during this return visit. The well-preserved building contributes greatly to this homely aura. The serenity of the staff, and the courtesy of the children add to it. It was not ever thus. An entry in an old log book states: "June 8th, 1883. Obligated to expel Thos. Mills from this school for carrying stones in his pocket and threatening to throw them at the teachers' heads. He has been very tiresome lately."

I was only threatened with auto-graph books.

The school bus was due. I said my farewells, and I took a last fond look at those picture-decked walls. What happened to George V, ablaze with orders below his trim beard, I suddenly wondered? And Queen Mary, wasp-waisted in white lace? Vanished . . . like Empire Day, and the children I played with here so long ago.

Their descendants waved goodbye enthusiastically. "Smashing kids!" the photographer said, as we drove away. "Smashing school!"

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