

4 HERTFORD GRAMMAR SCHOOL

In August 1929 I was moved from Applecroft Primary School to Hertford Grammar School. The fees were £5 per term. I believe this was a little less than the fees at Hitchin Grammar School, but only half of the £10 charged by St Albans Grammar School. As there was no grammar school at WGC at the time the majority of bourgeois boys of the town went to one of these three schools. Any WGC boy who did not do so soon dropped out of my consciousness, but there was an elementary school in Applecroft Road to cater for such; there was also a grammar school for girls at Hitchin. There was something of a ghetto system in WGC, much of the area west of the railway falling into the bourgeois ghetto, but because of the small size of the town the numbers in the west travelling to each school were quite small.

School uniforms including caps were obligatory. I went to Hertford daily by train with several other boys from the Welwyn and Hatfield areas, some of whom became good friends. The three-coach train on the Hertford line, now closed, was pulled by a tank engine belching a good deal of smoke, and it stopped at Cole Green and Hertingfordbury before reaching Hertford North.

At Hertingfordbury was stationed a very easily irritated porter, with whom some of us savoured the delights of dangerous living by taunting him as the train departed, 'Trotty Walker can't catch me', and other similar comments. This had to be done with care, as he was entirely capable of jumping onto the moving train, delivering hefty boxings on the ears all round, and leaping off before the end of the platform. We persisted in this dangerous sport for several years. I suppose it was the equivalent of more recent vogues in Northern Ireland for stoning the police; at all events it got the adrenalin moving and with skill we were usually able to avoid the disaster situation which we courted.

Hertford Grammar School, now renamed the Richard Hale School, had some 350 pupils at that time and its pupils, at least, regarded it as the elite school of the area. With one serious omission, the absence of any teaching of biology, it gave me an entirely adequate education and it got me to university at a time when this was not too easy. I regret now that it took me 62 years (until 2000) to get round to revisiting the school after leaving in 1938. I offer the slightly limp excuses of the disruption caused by the War, and the initial absence of any effective mechanism for keeping former pupils together.

In my early years at HGS I more or less bumbled my way happily through. My standard class position was usually about seventh in a 'b' stream class of around 30. Although about 18 months younger than the average age of the class, I was started in form 2b, apparently because class 1 was at an academic level below that which I had reached at primary school.

It gradually became apparent that my forte was not in Latin, nor particularly in mathematical subjects, but I was not too bad at English and History. At the end of year 4, and following a parental consultation, it was decided that for there to be any hope of making something of me it was desirable to hold me back by one year and produce a re-orientation to the 'a' stream. This manoeuvre, initiated I believe by my parents, was successfully carried out and once again I found myself occupying a comparable position

in the class order, but now in the 'a' stream. However, my Latin did not improve; I never quite managed to achieve bottom of the class in Latin, but came very near to it, and part way through year five I was mercifully let off the hook.

It has been my view, from age fifteen onwards, that I woke up and turned into an autonomous human being at age fourteen and a half, which is when I suddenly became aware of the natural world and the damage being inflicted on it by Homo sapiens sapiens. (In my later years I did become less convinced of the 'autonomous' label as an appropriate description of humans.) The trigger for my adolescent awakening was a history class debate on the motion that 'The Industrial Revolution is to be deplored', or words to that effect. As a proposer of the motion I made a nervous but impassioned speech which I had learnt by heart, and I still recollect the phrase 'The black towns spread out their hideous tentacles, like those of a gigantic octopus, engulfing all beauty before them'. My speech was applauded satisfactorily, and I was proud that at the end the history teacher, Mr Baird - whom I respected - complimented me on it. I had become a confirmed conservationist, to the extent that I happily put the interests of the natural world not on a par with those of the human world but well ahead of them.

I became a vegetarian, too, and remained one for around three years, and an anti fur-coat agitator as well. If we went out to dinner, or to see the family at Southampton, my mother was obliged to take a packet of sage and onion mix with her, because she soon had no option but to accept that nothing short of force-feeding - impractical as I gained in size and strength - would persuade me to eat anything animal. The sage and onion mix was important to her, because she was very keen on a balanced diet with plenty of appropriate vitamins.

It was around the time of my Industrial Revolution speech that I began to be studious, so that when I took my School Certificate (later called 'O' Level) examination in 1936 I did quite well enough to be considered a serious candidate for further academic pushing. I passed with reasonably satisfactory results in English, History, Geography, French, Physics, Chemistry, and Maths, and entered the Lower Sixth to study the first three for Higher School Certificate.

A major activity at Hertford Grammar School was that of the Officers Training Corps, OTC, as it was called in the inter-war years. Membership was very nearly obligatory for older pupils, although there was provision for conscientious objection. Until the late thirties, however, conscientious objection automatically debarred a boy from achieving the status of school prefect and the honour of sitting on a special line of chairs arranged up the left hand side of the hall at morning assembly, senior at the front, junior at the back.

The school war memorial, with a lengthy list of names inscribed on it (now with supplementary lists added at the bases of all four sides), stood (stands) prominently in front of the school as an indication of a strong military tradition. The school caretaker was Regimental Sergeant Major Ingram, a World War I veteran, and one day per week, when army uniforms were worn by all members of the OTC, he was reinstated into the position of a serious authority. One or two of the schoolmasters, too, transformed into convincing junior officers.

From our geography lessons we had all become aware of the large amount of red on the map of the world. This and the isolation provided by an island life was very helpful to the persistence of a sense of national self esteem without histrionics. We did not feel any need to formulate or argue the case, but it seemed self evident that we were special, and the weekly military sessions were one aspect of our status.

Drill was a major preoccupation of the OTC and was largely practiced in the form of competitions between the five Houses into which the school was divided. I was in a recently created House, called Hale, presumably named after the same Richard Hale who has subsequently given his name to the whole school. Despite being non-professionals in the military sense we were all, in fact, excellent at drill; a good deal better, as I later became aware, than most units of the regular army.

One day, when I was taking my turn as NCO in charge of drill in preparation for an important competition, I significantly damaged my voice by persisting with shouted commands at a time when I had a severe throat cold. My voice turned into a hoarse croak as the drill proceeded, and next day I had lost it completely. When I got it back I found I was quite unable to shout properly at full throttle, and indeed I am still unable to do so. This did not prevent me from rising to the rank of sergeant at school and passing a military examination called Certificate A, and later, at university, Certificate B.

It almost seemed to be an echo of the Boer War, but a useful perk enjoyed by OTC sergeants was that they were provided with riding lessons, albeit at a somewhat basic level, as I was to discover during my subsequent horsey experiences. We also engaged in target practice, and I became good enough to be a member of the school shooting team. This gave me the chance to observe an interesting phenomenon, namely that I could score mostly bulls eyes when I was feeling nervous about my performance, but that I mostly failed to score as soon as I gained confidence and relaxed.

Probably the most enjoyable part of the OTC year was the two-week annual tented camp on Salisbury Plain. This included such exercises as night marches and mock battles with blank ammunition involving a number of schools. One of the schools represented each year was Eton, whose cadets wore a distinctive pinkish brown uniform which gave them an enviable cachet. I subsequently learnt that the special colour was because, as a disgrace, they were not permitted to wear the King's uniform on account of having bayoneted a fellow cadet in the course of horseplay at an earlier camp.

I have no problem in believing this. In my own school corps some of the senior cadets took a dislike to a particular rather bumptious youth, and one night decided to put him in his place. Not content with removing his trousers and polishing his backside with black boot polish, they caused him to run a gauntlet of cane-swinging cadets who had worked themselves up into some sort of mystical blood lust. He eventually escaped, but the incident demonstrated a primitive facet of the genetic inheritance of the young human male - strong enough to surface even in a tightly controlled group and despite all the cultural conditioning.

There were occasionally instances when individual seniors were inclined to take the mickey out of me also. After going bright red on these occasions, my instinctive reaction, and it later became my conscious policy, was to remain unresponsive for a fairly brief period, adequate to lull the culprit into a sense of false security. I then turned

and delivered him the most hefty blow to the face that I could manage, quite irrespective of any possible retribution which might follow. On one memorable occasion this caused considerable disruption in the course of a route march, when the gentleman behind persisted in treading on my heels. I found that the element of surprise was usually, but not invariably, adequate to prevent a response, and on the whole these episodes had a useful place in the necessary establishment of an appropriate pecking order.

Perhaps my most vivid memories of the OTC are the annual Armistice Day ceremonies. We marched proudly to the Hertford town war memorial and formed up on one side of the square around the monument.

*Before the hills in order stood
Or earth received her frame
From everlasting thou art God
To endless years the same*

It was not so much the wistfulness of the words or the tune which impressed me as the thin quality of their sound as they were lost into the breeze.

In view of my vegetarian convictions and general humanitarian approach to the natural world at the time, it is now surprising to me that I remained for so long in the OTC. Perhaps I did not consider human beings to be so much in need of my sympathy. Perhaps it was because to begin with it seemed to be good harmless fun of the sort which I enjoyed.

As the war clouds began to gather in the late 1930s, however, it became obvious that there was a need to think rather more carefully about what was involved in the 'fun' of target practice, night marches and so on. I had already been appointed a sergeant in the OTC and a school prefect (rather reluctantly on the part of the headmaster I believe) when I came to the view that under no circumstances was I willing to be party to depriving any fellow human of his unique and priceless life. It seemed some sort of obscene crime to even contemplate doing so under any circumstances.

By this time members of the sixth form were allowed a degree of latitude, so that after a rather tense series of interviews I was allowed to get away with resigning from the OTC. Not, however, before I had made it clear that my decision was no way to be influenced by any possible consequences. I suspect that one of the reasons why I was allowed to nominate myself a Conscientious Objector without being sacked as a prefect was that Alderman Graveson, a senior governor of the school, may have intervened on my behalf, since we had developed a fellow feeling centred on a common interest in wild flowers – I was at one stage on visiting terms at his house, and we swapped information about flower localities..

The matter of conscientious objection was, in fact, not my only brush with the school authorities. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons during term time were devoted to compulsory sports (We had classes on Saturday mornings). During the winter I enjoyed rugby as an energetic and satisfyingly muddy means of letting off steam - I became a member of the school first fifteen. In the spring I enjoyed cross-country running for rather similar reasons. In summer I greatly enjoyed swimming classes in the Hertford town pool, which at that time was not only open air, but merely a partitioned-off section

of the local river. River water entered at one end under a board, and exited at the other end, also under a board.

Cricket during the summer term was another matter altogether, involving standing around for hours when fielding, hoping the ball would not come my way, and similar wasted hours waiting to bat for a few brief minutes - ie I was distinctly no good at cricket. When the authorities recognised this and relegated me to a team I regarded as being below my status I had had enough. This decision also involved protracted interviews, but my determination not to yield was fortified by my appreciation that the powers that be could do nothing about it. My case was that I wished to get on with my studies of natural history, which involved lengthy country walks, and I simply did not have time available to waste in an activity of mind numbing boredom.

My interest in natural history was something of a consuming passion from age fourteen or so onwards. From the beginning of 1935 I kept a regular diary detailing weather, flowers and birds, and events to do with the natural world. I have, too, a parallel notebook in which from 10 Jan 1935 I listed wild flowers with their dates of first flowering, location, peak flowering, and in a few cases last flowering. I got up to number 147 by 31 July 1935, after which the numbering system broke down. In the same notebook I listed for 1935 17 birds seen in our garden, photographs of 13 flowers, 9 natural history books, 6 Cornish butterflies, 10 'plants or seeds collected'. The book list included comments ranging from 'Hudson at his best' (W H Hudson 'Hampshire Days'), through 'Good maps, otherwise terribly dry' to 'Rotten'.

Thirteen flower photographs may not sound many, but each represented a considerable logistic achievement. Colour photography did not exist at that time, or at least was not commercially available, so the photographs were in black and white. They were taken with my father's camera, a German plate camera of a make which I have always understood to be called 'Kameros', focussed by means of adjustable bellows onto a ground glass screen. The camera was mounted on a tripod and the screen viewed from below a black cloth. Once the bellows had been adjusted to bring the subject into focus, the screen was removed and a glass photographic plate inserted in its place. If the light was inadequate I used a floodlight or a flash consisting of a small tray loaded with an explosive magnesium powder.

I did my own developing, fixing, printing and enlargements. The first three I could manage with my father's equipment, long disused by him, since by now he had little spare time for anything but gardening; photographic enlargements had to be done on school equipment.

My photography was mainly of flowers, but I graduated to a few bird photographs and in particular to attempting badger photographs. Both of these involved using a thread to achieve remote control of the shutter. The badger photographs were taken in the dark; a pull on the thread opened the shutter and set off a magnesium flare; I then had to scramble quickly from my observation post to close the shutter before any adventitious light could enter.

I say badger photographs in the plural, but the truth is that although my efforts were most distinctly plural I actually succeeded only once in getting a face-on photograph of a badger emerging from its sett. An abiding memory is of hearing the poor badger sobbing like a child a few feet back from the entrance of its hole after its evening stroll

had been so rudely interrupted. I saw this as a minor inconvenience for the badger, but for me the photograph was a triumph of which I was distinctly proud, and remain so to this day.

I was not the founder of the school Field Club, but I became its secretary in September 1935 when it was quite a small group, and by Spring 1938 had built it up into a substantial personal fiefdom. I tirelessly dragooned my closer contacts into activities such as holding club offices, lecturing and producing written accounts for the club magazine, the 'Rambler'. For example my brother Richard, Eden III, totally devoid of interest in natural history, was persuaded to produce articles on the mole, the bat, the linnet ...

I started the Rambler in July 1935, and thereafter issues were produced each term until the year after I left - there were 9 issues in all of which I was editor of 7. The business plan was to produce it on the last day of each term, when people tended to be at a loose end and it sold well (price 2d.). Initially, publishing consisted of me writing the entire contents out by hand in a special ink, which was then transferred to the surface of a jelly medium from which copies could be lifted off. The first issue (Summer Term 1935) was 17 pages long, and I believe we distributed about 50 copies. By issue 3, Spring Term 1936 we had upgraded the publication to a typed format; Mrs Powers, close friend of my mother, and mother of another Hertfordian, Kenneth Powers (with whom I did not get on at all well), was the typist. She typed onto a wax sheet which was then cyclostyled on the school cyclostyle machine.

Kenneth Powers was killed in the war. He was a crewman in a bomber which was airborne and accidentally shot up by one of our own fighters somewhere over Eastern England during a German air raid. He had previously explained to his friends that the safest place to be during an air raid was in the air.

By the winter 1936 issue the Rambler had moved to a stick-on colour photograph on the cover, and this issue contained an article by my friend Alderman Graveson, who announced he had recorded fewer than normal wild flowers in 1936 - only 680! This issue commenced with the following poem by Thomas Grey, which rather set the tone of my approach to life at this time:

*Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch
A broader browner shade,
Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech
O'er canopies the glade,
Beside some water's rushy brink
With me the muse must sit, and think
(At ease reclined in rustic state)
How vain the ardour of the Crowd,*

*How low, how little are the Proud'
How indigent the Great!*

In Spring Term 1938 I gave up the editorial role to M Tybjerg, who as well as being a naturalist was something of a poet in an appropriately wistful vein. Here is the start of

his poem "To a Nightingale", published in the Summer 1937 Rambler, when he was about 16. Major M Tyjberg also was killed during the war - in his case in Burma:

*Here by this brook I lie. 'Tis not the mood
Soliloquy, but Nature's company
I seek. The running brook may not for ever
Run with such delightful melody.
Will it stay awhile its cheerful company
Because no human ear is close enow
To hear or even to appreciate
Its song? And will that cloud that spreads
Like racing wheels across the sky, delay
Because none look to see its snowy shape?
These things have been since earliest of time,
And if no man can these appreciate
The loss is his and not by Nature borne.
Alas we cannot in just one short life
Learn near enough to let us comprehend
All that beauty which around us lies! ...*

My younger brother Richard – Eden III - eventually became Treasurer of the Field Club. The Treasurer's report dated 15 March 1938, appropriate to a future Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, read as follows:

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

The financial position of the Club is highly gratifying and it is hoped to be able to put it to some useful purpose in the near future.

Receipts	Expenditure
£ ..s ..d	£ ..s ..d
18 1 from balance	1 9 on ramble refreshments
6 donation	
2 6 donation by Whipsnade party	
6 2 Subscriptions to date 15/3/38	
4 10 subscriptions of Christmas Term 1937	
<hr/>	1 10 4 to balance
1 12 1	1 12 1

Although the Field Club was a thriving organisation with frequent outings and lectures, considerable arm twisting was needed to persuade people to produce articles for the Rambler. I had a major difference of opinion with my principal early collaborator, PA Tookey, as a result of which we ceased to communicate. However, before our break in communication he had unwisely entrusted me with a largish stock of potential articles for the magazine, and to his chagrin I found it convenient to feed these into the system long after he had ceased being willing to produce them. It was a pity about Tookey. He had significant promise as a poet, in particular in relation to the natural world.

Regular contributors included GT Dawson. Dawson II as he was called, was another pacifist, I was going to say a rabid one, but he became more of a nihilist. He developed an interest in classical music which can only be described as all consuming, involving

abandonment of his considerable academic abilities in favour alone of his interest in listening to music. This particular interest had little money-earning potential, hence Dawson II had a distinct problem as to his place in the materialist civilisation we all could see looming beyond the school gates.

It was typical of him that in line with his approach to life he went straight from pacifism into the most dangerous of all war jobs - tail gunner of a bomber.

I received a letter from him in August 1940 ..

'the clouds are my destination, and I am now about half way, with moderate prospects of success, into the RAF ... Your views have always baffled me, from the early days when you desired, with impressive fanaticism, the complete destruction of humanity to make way for animals and plants, even up to the present day. At the same time I have nearly always ended up by accepting them myself ... However I am sure you will not convert me any more - in fact it is a philosophical impossibility because I now accept everything and believe in nothing. Thus I am not a pacifist, or a non-pacifist, and take part in the war only as a matter of convenience and personal inclination... Meanwhile I do not drift idly; I concentrate rather on aesthetic matters as being the most fruitful in knowledge.'

Like Tyjberg and Kenneth Powers, Dawson II was killed in the war, but how and where I do not know. His problem was thus solved.

A couple of years after my departure from school the Field Club effectively collapsed according to Dawson's letter of August 1940, at which time he listed its moribund possessions as including 15/- cash, an ancient microscope with collection of eyepieces and lenses, an empty aquarium, several accumulator tanks, one large cabinet of British Lepidoptera, one small cabinet of exotic Lepidoptera, a cabinet of British Gasteropoda, a cabinet of cameos, and a collection of mineral samples.

Studies of English, History and Geography in the sixth form became more and more rarified as time passed and fellow scholars drifted off into jobs, until when the time came to take my Higher School Certificate I was getting pretty well individual tuition in each subject, and taking to them enthusiastically. I had become a swot, apt to pursue my swotting at all available hours, somewhat irrespective of the effect of my preoccupation on others. On our twice yearly visits to Southampton relatives, for example, I was apt to spend much of my time in a corner somewhere with my head in my books.

It was decided I was to study Geography as an Arts student at University College, London. All Arts students there had to have Latin up to at least School Certificate level, so in the Upper Sixth I took up Latin once more, also with individual tuition. Unfortunately (or otherwise) my swotting did not extend to my Latin studies, particularly to Latin grammar. My slightly thin excuse has to be that they were supervised by the classics teacher, Mr Taphouse, in what I found an excessively uninspiring fashion. When it came to the exam I scored around 90% in the set books paper, having learnt most of the set books off by heart, and around 5% in the grammar paper. My overall mark was in fact above pass level, but there was a provision in the regulations that a certain minimum standard must be achieved in both papers. I failed.

What to do? Geography at London University could be taken as either an Arts or a Science subject. It was discovered that I could step back yet one more year and enter the first year at university (instead of the second year, which would have been appropriate for a student with the exemptions accorded by Higher School Certificate), to take the London Intermediate examination in Geography, Physics, Botany and Geology, the latter to make up the required four subjects. I was delighted about the Botany, which I had long regretted not having been able to study at school; Physics was expected to be no problem; Geology was reputed to be easy - almost impossible to fail at Intermediate level.

A person with whom I became friendly during my final years at school was Peter Burbidge, who I believe was a year ahead of me. He lived in Hatfield, and we were apt to meet mid-way during the vacations, in order to go for long walks together engaging in lengthy philosophical discussions. Peter was very much an intellectual, urbane and a ladies man, but his approach was consciously ruthless - 'never explain and never apologise'. He later became the leading light of Cambridge University Press, famed for his distinctive views, and died aged 61 following a heart attack whilst playing tennis.

Something of his style is evident in a letter dated 10 July 1939:

Miriam is a most enchanting creature, although I must confess that my reactions towards her have a peculiar psychological deformity. Holding her in my arms I wished I were not holding her. And yet now, when she is several miles away, I have such nostalgic longings for those arms that I conceive the highest peak of happiness as being able to return to them. Perhaps my lady's shadow detaches itself from my conscience and stands between us. Perhaps my introspective imaginings conjure up a Miriam who is not a Miriam at all, but a subtle blend of all the excellencies in woman, a harmony and counterpoint of Miriam, my lady, the lady of the raven hair, and numerous other altars at which I have worshipped the god Eros ...

Miriam is like a flower which blooms only in the brightest sunshine; and when she feels the warmth of my sun her petals are only half opened. And so once again my lady is triumphant. Owing to the peculiar moral dispensation under which we live her triumph will have to be an unconscious one.

There could be no greater contrast than between Peter Burbidge and Bob Watson, or between the letters I received from the two of them. Bob was probably my most consistent friend at school and he remained so for several years after. If Peter was an intellectual Bob might best be described as an intellectual (failed). He was a small rather thickset red faced type of person with short dark hair, who constantly joked about nearly every aspect of life, both in the flesh and in his letters. I responded in like vein. We vied in inventing laboured insults which neither of us took to heart and none of which I now propose to repeat. During one lesson at school we stared at each other for the full period on the grounds that neither of us was going to be the first to look away.

He somehow managed to get to the Engineering Dept of UCL a year after myself, when it was evacuated to Swansea, but was ejected after failing the first year exam. In one particular five-question paper he answered one only of the questions, becoming so engrossed in constructing a perfect reply (it was in fact to produce a machine diagram)

that he had no time to deal with the other four - ie he was wholly lacking in the worldly wiles needed to carve a place for himself in the sun.

In the winter of 1941 I was a 2nd Lieutenant with an Anti Aircraft regiment at Grantham and Bob was a Sapper with the REs at nearby Newark. We met up briefly, but in the circumstances the jocular chemistry failed to work - however great the willingness it proved not too easy for an officer and a Sapper to insult each other enjoyably, and that meeting killed off the correspondence until after the war. He then reappeared briefly in the early 1950's, once producing a familiar bit of cheerful insult about me addressed to my eldest son, then a very new baby, and finally in 1956 visiting us at Welwyn Garden City with a fresh faced, wide eyed young lady who was his wife. *Après ça je ne sais pas.*

I am not sure how much influence the HGS teachers had on my developing outlook. Not too much I suspect, but they were a good bunch dedicated to their students, and I can see that some of their enthusiasms did rub off. As I have said, my three sixth form subjects were History, English and Geography. I have already mentioned Mr Baird, History, who mildly egged me on. He was a confirmed socialist and made no secret of it, citing the waste involved in having three milkmen trundling independently down every street. He was also highly competent, and after the war I heard he had become Director of Education for Nottinghamshire. I intended to visit him in this capacity but regrettably never got round to it.

Mr Bishop was the senior English teacher for most of my time at school, but he finally departed to a school at Exeter. He had been the patron of my Field Club, and in sympathy with my leanings to the natural world. He recited Wordsworth with evident pleasure. In his Exeter school he put me in touch with a young male correspondent whose interests were supposedly comparable to mine. I was greatly envious of Exeter residents, since I saw Devon as a county rich in wildlife of all sorts, including red squirrels, orchids and lush vegetation. I fear that distance lent enchantment to the view, although no doubt Devon was richer in those years than it has become in the late Twentieth Century, seriously degraded by agrichemicals.

The senior Geography teacher was Mr James, Jamie, who got himself exiled to New Zealand for two of my crucial years on account of some hushed-up transgression, and was replaced by his New Zealand counterpart, a bluff square outdoor type, Mr Bbrittain. Both loyally encouraged my burgeoning geographical interests.

The only other teacher I shall mention is Mr Clouting, Physics, whose claim to remembrance resides in his advocacy that as we young men started shaving we should do so without using a mirror, because his experience was that in the trenches of War I this was a very necessary art.

I have arrived at the period of World War 2, which I place as having begun on about 26 September 1938. This may seem a slightly unconventional date, but for me it was a memorable day in the run-up to things to come. It was also a well chosen date, since by then I had conveniently just about grown up enough to readily enter the adult world.

Having finished my schooling under an increasing shadow of international tension, I was that autumn on the point of slotting into a university phase when we received the jolt which was to change everything, was to convert my university phase into a sub-section of a wartime experience.

From late September 1938 every facet of daily life became coloured by the thoroughly alarmed awakening of a deeply pacific people, hitherto quietly and happily doing its own thing running the red parts of the world map, to the probability of an impending conflict. Daily living continued thereafter on the basis that every decision and plan was provisional.

In the course of a brief spurt of diary-keeping I recorded the most critical days of 1938.

Monday 26 September 1938

Today Burbidge and I set out at 6.30am (I actually started at six) to walk to Aylesbury and back. We walked to within two miles of Aylesbury (ie twenty-eight miles) non-stop, had dinner, bathed our blistered feet, and then set out on the return journey. On a hill this side of Tring I found my first ever plant of deadly nightshade, and brought some of its shiny black berries home with me.

As we approached St Albans the pain in our feet gradually increased, and Burbidge had some trouble with a ligament which he had strained during his holidays. As he did not wish to have it bad again we decided to get a lift for the rest of the journey, after covering approximately fifty miles.

In the rush to get off in the morning I had forgotten to eat my breakfast, so I had a couple of sandwiches from my small lunch to assist me until midday. This lunch, four apples and two glasses of milk were all I had from 10pm one night to 10pm the next. When I reached home I was not feeling in the least tired, and I had no muscular fatigue whatever, but every toe on my feet had one or more unburst blisters on it, and on each heel was a large blister one and a half inches long by one inch wide.

Naturally I felt somewhat of a hero on my return, and although I did not expect much of a hero's welcome I was not prepared for the barrage of disapprobation, mainly from my mother, which met me when I staggered in. It was explained that the world was on the brink of war, which was worrying enough without also having my lengthy absence to be concerned about; moreover when the country had need of me to assist its preparations I had chosen to swan off and acquire some self-inflicted wounds. The wounds were, however, rapidly inspected and dressed.

Tuesday 27 September 1938

Meanwhile the political situation had deteriorated considerably, and gas masks were to be distributed today. Richard yesterday attended a class to learn how to fit them and spent today (and Wednesday and Thursday) in doing so.

I went round to the Council Offices and was employed during the morning and afternoon in assembling the masks, succeeding as a bye-product in raising blisters on my hands in addition to those on my feet.

Wednesday 28 September 1938

This morning I offered my services as an ARP worker and signed a book giving details of my capabilities, but was told that I could do nothing useful at the time; I would be informed when work was available. Later in the morning I went for a walk with Burbidge, and in the morning too I learnt that the opening of (University) College has been postponed for one week.

In the afternoon I went over to Hertford, where I had arranged to attend a rugger practice, and assisted in digging of a trench behind the school. The senior members of the school had been at it, stripped to the waist, all yesterday and today (and tomorrow).

Our gas masks arrived this evening.

Thursday 29 September 1938

I was to have started a trench in the garden today, but with Hitler's invitation to Chamberlain, Daladier and Mussolini the situation improved considerably and I left it. Many people, however, commenced trenches yesterday, and quite a number of public ones have already been dug.

This afternoon I cast off the cares of the world for a while and went for a walk in Sherrard's Wood. The blackberries are now at their best, and very numerous because nobody has troubled to pick them during the last few days. Had quite a good view of a weasel running round me at a cautious distance. The woods are now autumn-like, and very damp after the heavy rain of the last few days. Leaves are turning colour, soggy looking fungi are numerous, the sky is a watery blue with a scatter of thin clouds, the sun shines weakly, the robin sings, and the wren searches for food with loud staccato 'tacks'.

Mother, Dad and I went to see the Powers this evening. As we walked through the darkness of the woods we could see searchlights of varying degrees of brightness at all points of the horizon, for Anti-Aircraft territorials have been called up, as have members of the Observer Corps.

Friday 30 September 1938

Welwyn Garden City is now well prepared for air raids. There are a number of public dug-outs and trenches; notices indicate the way to these and other air-raid shelters. Many people have dug trenches in their gardens or collected the materials for a refuge room as indicated in the government publication 'Protection of your home from air raids' which was sent to all houses in the town today. The town hall has been sandbagged on its most open side. Many factories have painted their windows black in order to keep the light in during air raids, and kerbs have been painted with prominent white dashes in parts, in order to minimise danger during black-outs. The gas mask issue has been completed.

And now, when everything is ready, news comes through that the Czechoslovak problem has been settled peacefully and that Germany and England have signed a 'no war' manifesto. The danger is over. It is estimated that the scare must have cost the country about forty million pounds.

This afternoon I went blackberrying for a short time and obtained a remarkably good haul of clean, large, healthy blackberries.

This evening Mother and I went with a party of fifty from the Free Church to London to see a production of 'Light over England' at the Scala theatre. It is a pageant in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the English bible. It was quite good and the finale was particularly impressive.

Saturday 1 October 1938

This morning I dug up the grass walk on the Valley Road side of our house and prepared it for replanting, because the grass there has been poor for some time. In the afternoon I went up to the kitchen garden and commenced clearance of the land which I intend to dig shortly, and which I cut over a few weeks ago.

And that, I fear, was the last entry in my diary not only for 1938 but until well into the war, until May 1943.