

# Life at Rothwell Grammar School in the 1950s

by

**Michael Wild**

## **Introduction**

This is not intended to be part of a school history. It is merely one working class lad's view of Rothwell Grammar School (RGS). Others who were there at the time will no doubt disagree with some of my opinions but within the limitations of my memory I have tried to be as accurate as possible.

To appreciate some of the following reminiscences it is necessary to know something about British society in the 1950s. In those days it was stratified by class, people being working class, middle class or upper class with some exceptions such as people in the entertainment industries. Broadly speaking, the working class worked with their hands, the middle class with their brains and the upper class ran things. You did not normally escape your class. If your father was a miner you were a miner. If your father had a clerical job then you could expect to have a clerical job also. This applied only to boys. The girls could do secretarial-type work but it was expected that they would marry in their early 20s and devote the time afterwards to having and rearing children, with the exception of those who became teachers.

There was only one significant way of escaping your class and that was to get to the grammar school. Getting to the grammar school was almost the only way that working class children could climb the social ladder to a better life. Getting and staying there was a serious business to be taken seriously by those fortunate enough to have got there by passing the 11+ exam.

Good O Level and A Level results opened the door to employment outside what was expected of your class, to higher education and even to university although in the 1950s a far smaller proportion of people went to university than does now.

Whatever may have been the defects of the 11+ exam it treated everyone even-handedly. It did not matter what your father did for a living, if you passed you went to the grammar school, if you failed you went to the secondary modern. And so it was that I found myself required to attend RGS having taken and passed the 11+ in early 1952.

## **First Impressions**



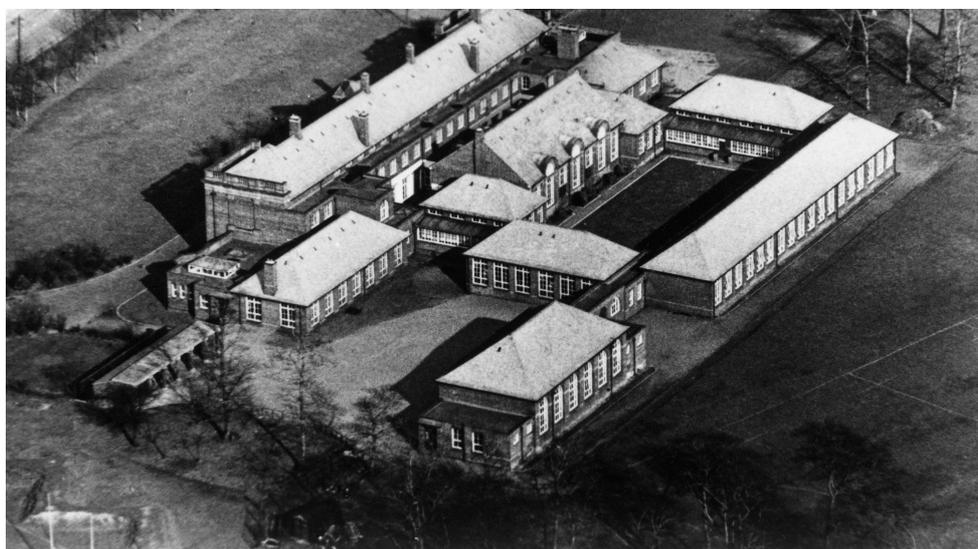
It was on a morning in September 1952 that I began my five years at RGS. Dressed in school blazer, shirt, short grey trousers, school cap and long socks and carrying my brand new leather satchel I walked up the drive leading to the boy's entrance. If it had not been for the fact that the elder brother of my friend Jimmy Newton was already at the school I would have arrived unaccompanied at a place I had entered only once previously i.e. when I sat the 11+ exam.

On arrival, we were directed to the woodwork room where we piled our satchels on a bench. There was an overpowering smell of fresh leather from the 40-odd satchels piled thereon and to this day, whenever I smell fresh leather I am transported back to that distant time.

RGS was an intimidating place to a newly-arrived 11 year old. In place of the kindly spinsters of Lofthouse Gate Junior and Infants School there were men, intimidating men, wearing black gowns who swept about the school trailing a sense of significance and importance. They were the archangels in this pantheon of AUTHORITY, the prefects being the angels and the headmaster, Mr E. R. Manley being GOD. He was universally known as Gaff or the Gaffer, in contrast to the teacher of woodwork and metalwork who was known as Guff. I have no idea why.

### The School Buildings

The photograph below shows the school's layout. It was taken about 1954 or 1955.



The school was basically in three parts, a two-storey block fronting on to Longthorpe Lane, a row of buildings behind and attached to it and a group of classrooms. The gymnasium was connected to the classrooms by a covered corridor.



The main block had the offices and cloakrooms on the ground floor with the laboratories and music and art rooms on the first floor, a sensible arrangement in that if anything blew up or caught fire, only the upper floor and roof would be affected.

The classrooms were arranged round three sides of a quadrangle, with the library/hall/kitchen block occupying the fourth. A glass-roofed corridor connected the classrooms. The corridors were rather narrow as can be seen in the photograph on the left and when 300 or so children turned out of the classrooms at break time they became very crowded. The photo was taken in 2004 and

shows the walls and floor were in good condition after 71 years of use, a tribute to the quality of

construction.

Along one leg of the corridor were lockers where the boys left our PT i.e. games kit on the days we brought it to school in black drawstring bags. The lockers had no locks but I do not recall any problems of theft, possibly because no one had anything worth stealing.

### **Facilities**

By current standards the teaching apparatus was negligible. A film projector was used by the film society to show films in the main hall after hours but I have no recollection of it being used during lessons. There was a piano in the music room and another one on the platform in the main hall and a 78 rpm record player in the library. I recall this being used to play a recording of French professors speaking French in an attempt to teach us pronunciation. There was the equipment necessary for the teaching of practical subjects and the sciences and that was it. There were no photocopiers, wall charts, flip charts or anything like that. The classroom walls were bare apart from the blackboard at which the teacher stood, chalk in hand. The only thing I can remember being on any of the school walls was a stag's head on the wall of the staircase leading to the first floor of the main block at the boys' end

### **Organisation**

The school was well organised with seventeen forms and sixteen classrooms including rooms for music, art, woodwork and metalwork, and domestic science and laboratories for physics, chemistry and biology plus the library and gymnasium. There were three forms streamed by ability, in each of five years plus the sixth for arts and science with promotion and relegation between the forms in each year, depending on how well the pupil coped.

With a three-form entry of around 30 pupils each year there were around 500 pupils in the school and after a while one could put a name to every face.

Superimposed on the functional organisation was the house system. There were four houses in the school and you were allocated into one of them on arrival. The houses were named Livingstone, Faraday, Grenfell and Nightingale, these being the names of Britons thought worthy of emulation. I don't know the point of the house system apart from it being an excuse for a competition in subjects ranging from German Speaking and Recitation to Model Aircraft by way of Embroidery and Chess.

There was no formal provision of what I believe would nowadays be called pastoral care although the teachers were not without sympathy and compassion. I remember an incident in a French class when a girl seated at the back of the room struggled to read something on the board and then burst into tears. "I can't see Miss" she sobbed so the teacher quietly told her to change places with a girl at the front and the lesson carried on. Very soon afterwards the girl appeared wearing glasses so I think words must have been had with her parents.

### **The Timetable**

The school day consisted of a morning assembly followed by eight lessons. There were five lessons in the morning with a break between the third and fourth and three in the afternoon. I believe but am not certain that the lunch break was from 12.30 to 2.00 pm for reasons given in the next paragraph.

At the start of the fourth year the timetable was structured to reflect the way that subjects were grouped, depending on what kind of career the pupil was aiming at. For example, I couldn't study Biology because I had opted for Geometrical and Engineering Drawing.

### **School meals**

Lunchtime meals were provided in the school hall. A number of tables were set up by the dinner ladies with eight or ten children at each table with a prefect at the head. There were two sittings, the hall not being large enough for everyone to sit down at the same time. First preference was given to the children who were in the choir because choir practice was during the lunch period and of course the entire choir needed to be present for this. The hall was then filled to capacity by children whose surnames put them in the earlier part of the alphabet. If your name fell outside this

group you were in the second sitting which was a nuisance if you wanted to take part in lunch time activities. One could hang around hoping that there would be a spare place that one could occupy during first sitting but this did not often happen. It was for this reason that I resorted to taking sandwiches and eating them in the domestic science room along with others in the same position.

### School uniform

This photograph of the school choir taken in April 1956 shows the clothes we wore.



The boys wore grey trousers, initially short, progressing to long by the third year, the school blazer, a pullover when necessary, the school tie with green, white and black stripes and a cap. In winter the girls wore black passion-killer gym slips for the first four years and then switched to black skirts, ties and cream coloured blouses. They could also wear a cardigan when necessary. The photograph below shows the first year girls at the school Speech Day in November 1952 wearing their gym slips and blouses.



In summer all the girls up to the fourth year wore mid-calf length dresses. The fifth- and sixth-year girls could wear skirts and blouses in summer if they wished. Summer dresses were available in a variety of styles although all of approximately mid-calf length but were all made from the same material with a fine green and off-white check pattern. The material was sold by the school, the patterns were readily available commercially and the dresses were made up by anyone who was handy with a sewing machine. Sometimes this was the girls' mothers and sometimes they were made by two ladies who lived not far from the school. The girls had the choice of berets or hats, each bearing the school badge and they wore white ankle socks all year round.. There was a school scarf available, this was black with green and white transverse stripes but I have no recollection of it being a compulsory part of the school uniform.

The girls had far more kit to be concerned about than the boys. It included indoor and outdoor shoes, a clothes brush, a hair brush, a shoe brush and shoe polish.

As well as their normal clothing the girls needed their PT dress consisting of a short divided skirt and a blouse in a shade of medium blue, hockey boots, a hockey stick and a tennis racquet.

All this kit was kept in lockers in the girls' cloakroom.



Winners of Ilkley Sevens - 1954

The boys needed a white vest black shorts and plimsolls (a type of sports shoe) for PT and white shorts, a rugby shirt and boots as shown on the left.

Those items of clothing that had to be purchased were available only from two suppliers and the prices were considered unreasonably high by the parents. It was a far less affluent society in the 1950s than nowadays and the cost of equipping a child for the grammar school had a much greater impact on household budgets.

Trousers were not part of the girls uniform, in those days women rarely wore trousers.

## The headmaster

I recall the headmaster as being a sour-faced little man in a brown suit who spoke with that terribly terribly, Oh bleddy hell, aren't I posh Oxford drawl, personified nowadays by the art critic and broadcaster Brian Sewell. This set him well apart from some of his pupils who spoke with robust Yorkshire accents typical of the working class. I found him intimidating (that word again) and tried to keep out of his way. To what extent this apparent intimidation was deliberate or merely a by-product of his attitude to the problem of educating his pupils I have no means of judging. In fairness, once I became used to his regime I found the school to be well run with teachers who were reasonable people and good at their jobs.

The headmaster taught English to the first form and one of his pet themes was public speaking and with it, elocution. This was at a time when the only socially acceptable accents were BBC English or Scots. Any other regional accent marked you as an oik from the provinces with limited intelligence and not worth bothering with by the those in authority. It was never explained to us that this was an attitude that we would meet and we would have to tone down our accents in order to get on in life.

I recall his trying to get us to say 'If you want to hammer, hammer on the hard high road, hire a hack' as an exercise in pronouncing our aitches. One poor lad simply couldn't do it and it came out as 'If yer want ter ammer ammer on t'ard igh road ire a nack.'

The public speaking theme was continued when each morning some unfortunate child was pounced on by 'Daddy' Bulmer the Religious Instruction master and told to read the lesson in school assembly.

## **The staff**

The teachers were good, they really knew how to teach. Some of them were very popular, all of those I knew, with one exception were OK. The exception was the PT mistress. I can recall only one lesson with her, at Wakefield Swimming Baths where we were bussed on Mondays during the first year. She was disliked by many of the girls because of her bullying manner and sarcastic tongue. Some of her behaviour verged on the sadistic. It is on record that on one occasion she made the girls run barefoot in the frozen snow.

By current standards there was a paucity of women teachers. Out of a teaching staff of 21 there were only six, Mrs Pemberton, senior mistress, Miss Blakey, music, Miss Simpson, maths, Miss Dean, domestic science, Miss Moore, French and the afore mentioned PT teacher.

One of the many characters in the school was the caretaker, Mr Kirby, universally known as Rip after an American comic strip character. He would often be seen going about the school accompanied by a hairy hearthrug of a dog and at break times by a group of children as well. He lived in a bungalow on the premises.

The staff room was a place where we never set foot. If it was necessary to contact a teacher during a break between lessons the technique was to go to a sliding window with frosted glass in the lowest pane fronting on to the ground floor corridor of the main block. By the window was a box containing cards each bearing the name of a teacher. One held up the appropriate card to a clear glass part of the window and knocked. The required teacher would then slide back the window, exposing one to a hubbub of noise and a wall of tobacco smoke. There was one card which said, I think, 'Urgent, any teacher' for emergency use. The older boys tried to persuade the younger ones to use this card but I can't remember anyone falling for this ruse.

## **In the Classroom**

We sat at single wooden desks arranged in rows and columns so the teacher could walk up and down, keeping an eye on things. Separation of pupils in this way made it difficult to communicate with the pupils around you without attracting the teacher's attention. The desks had a lift-up lid and we kept our books in the desk in our form room. The desks were made of wood with inkwells covered by a sliding brass cover but the relentless advance of technology in the form of fountain pens meant that the inkwells were unused.

The teacher's desk was on a dais about 10 inches high. This meant a better view could be had of what the pupils were doing and no doubt there was an element of dominance in the teacher being raised above the pupils.

Whereas at primary school we stayed in the same classroom all day, at RGS we moved around the school to whichever classroom contained the teacher for the next subject.

There were no real disciplinary problems, we occasionally played up the teachers but there was nothing serious. It was unthinkable to challenge authority, we were there to learn and that was what we did. I can remember the shock when a boy who happened to be the son of the senior master was reluctant to hand over a note of an amorous nature that someone had passed to him.

If the teacher thought that any pupil was not paying attention or misbehaving in any way, a piece of chalk or even a blackboard duster would be thrown at him or her as the girls were not immune from this treatment. Joe Holmes the Latin master rarely missed and my diary records my being hit on the head by a blackboard duster thrown by a chemistry teacher. The duster was used for wiping the black board when it was necessary to enter new information thereon. It consisted of a piece of wood about 15cm long, 4cm wide and 1cm thick with a piece of felt about 2cm thick bonded to the wood.

## **Sport**

There was plenty of room for sport, two rugby pitches, a cricket square, hard and grass courts for tennis and a cinder running track encircling a hockey pitch. The boys played cricket and rugby and the girls played rounders, hockey and tennis.

One of the strange things about RGS was what has always seemed to me to be an over-

emphasis on sport. I have to declare an interest here in that I was hopeless at sport in spite of occasional selection as hooker in the equivalent of the Extra-B rugby XV. When cricket was on the bill during games periods those of us whose lack of talent and the arithmetic of eleven-a-side meant that we could not play were given a baseball bat and left to our own devices. So, totally unsupervised we played a kind of coarse baseball. We were however allowed to push the roller whenever the cricket square needed rolling.

Although I did not realise it at the time the strangest manifestation of this sport thing was the Victores Ludorum. This was an award handed out at the annual Speech Day for outstanding performances in sport. This pretentious Latin title was so out of kilter with the working classes of the West Riding as to be beyond belief. Imagine the following.

Lad's father, having finished his shift at t'pit is sitting down having his tea. Lad bursts in full of excitement.

LAD: Hey dad, ave got Victores Ludorum!

DAD: Well get thissen off to t'doctors wi' thy mother and gerrit sorted aht.

Something else we did was the cross-country run. This consisted of three laps of the school perimeter usually on cold winter afternoons with plenty of mud on the ground. I estimate that it was about a two miles, say 3.2km and it was a boys-only event.

### **The Speech Day**

This took place in November. We were all taken to Unity Hall in Wakefield for the presentation of prizes for achievement in various competitions that were held throughout the school year. Parents could attend this event but I can't recall many being present. The prizes were presented by worthy individuals who had achieved some degree of fame in various fields such as the man who led the first successful Everest expedition. Said individual would give a speech and also a lecture at the school in the evening. The assembly was also addressed by the headmaster and the chairman of the West Riding County Council Education Committee.

The event was called a speech day because three or four of the pupils delivered speeches made by famous figures in history. The tone of the event can be gathered from my recollection of a girl in my form delivering an extract from the History of the Second Peloponnesian War by Thucydides.

### **What we didn't have**

Although I did not realise it at the time, having nothing to compare it with, in retrospect RGS was an austere institution in austere times as I hope my description has made clear. By current standards there were many things we did not have and I leave it to my readers to judge how disadvantageous this was. Among these things were:-

#### **iThingys**

There were no portable electronic devices although I recall what a stir it created when one of the boys brought in a portable radio about the size of three bricks on which we listened to a cricket commentary on the playing fields at the end of the summer term. This also meant that there was no cyber bullying although there was some of the old fashioned type.

#### **Sex, drugs and rock and roll**

There wasn't any although the boys took the usual interest in the girls and vice versa. In Philip Larkin's words

Sexual intercourse began

In nineteen sixty-three

(which was rather late for me) -

Between the end of the "Chatterley" ban

And the Beatles' first LP

and we'd long left school by then and many of the girls were married with children.

By current standards RGS was an incredibly chaste place (although I believe there were at least fourteen marriages among the pupils who were there when I was). The boys and girls never deliberately touched each other although this was probably a reflection of the society we lived in. It was more formal and less demonstrative than nowadays. There was no kissing, no hugging, no arms round shoulders and certainly no hand holding. There was no school rule about this, it was just the way things were although one couple who held hands were told to stop. There was one cherished exception to the no touching state of affairs. This was when we did Scottish country dancing in the gym when the weather was too bad for games lessons outside. This was an occasion to be savoured because not only did us boys get to see the girls' legs, normally hidden by skirts or dresses, we also had physical contact with them as it was necessary to put our arms around their waists and to hold their hands.

This did nothing to suppress teenage lust. The boys fancied the girls and the girls fancied the boys and the passion-killer gym slips did nothing to suppress this particularly as by the fourth year some of the girls were, like June, bustin' out all over. At a time when the hourglass figure was the desirable female body shape some of the girls tightened the belts of their gym slips to highlight their developing charms to such an extent that they were admonished by the senior mistress not to do it as it was bad for their health.

Mid-calf length skirts and dresses meant that the boys never had the slightest glimpse of knickers even on windy days although there was one never to be forgotten occasion when during a PT lesson we boys had to carry some equipment out of the gym. The route took us past the girls changing room and shock horror the door had been left open and we could see the girls' clothes hanging on the pegs!

In those days sex was the elephant in the room. It was never talked about except in a nudge nudge, wink wink kind of way. One manifestation of this attitude was to be found in the Encyclopaedia Britannica in the school library. The facing pages that contained the entry for 'prostitute' were black with greasy finger marks! Another was in the widely read womens' magazines such as Woman or Woman's Weekly.. Sexual intercourse was described as 'the physical side of marriage'. Nothing else was ever said about it apart from the goings on reported in the News of the World which I read during my Sunday morning paper round.

There was no sex education in the current sense. We looked forward to the part of our biology textbook that dealt with human reproduction hoping that the teacher would be embarrassed but our hopes were unfulfilled. It was all to do with the biology and said nothing about relationships.

And so we were left to stumble and fumble our way through the process of finding out how to become an adult and of creating a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

As far as drugs were concerned, well weren't they something to do with the drug stores in the black and white films we saw at the cinema? Here beautiful and wholesome American teenage girls had milk shakes and sundaes and talked about the boys.

Rock and roll came in almost at the end my time at RGS. Although denounced by irate colonels writing to the Daily Telegraph as heralding the end of civilisation as we knew it, it affected some of us much more than others.

### **Teenage pregnancies**

Unthinkable. Becoming pregnant was a mysterious process that happened to married people who were far older than we were ever likely to be or so it seemed.

### **Ethnic minorities**

This term was meaningless as were political correctness, software and credit cards, none of which existed at the time. Large scale immigration from the Commonwealth had barely begun and there wasn't a non-white face in the school or indeed in the surrounding area.

### **Parents who divorced**

There were a few children in one-parent families but this was the result of death rather than divorce. There was great sympathy for one boy in my form whose father died during my time there.

### **The school run**

Nobody came to school in a car, apart from some of the staff. (I can remember some of the children pushing Mr Porter's station wagon when it wouldn't start. What would health and safety make of that, never mind cries of child exploitation and abuse). We came to school on foot or on bicycles or on the buses of the West Riding Automobile Company Limited. Every afternoon three or four green double-decker buses would stand at the bottom of Longthorpe Lane, close to the junction with Leeds Road, their Leyland engines ticking over with that characteristic rhythmic vroom vroom signifying an unresponsive governor although I didn't realise that until I'd studied mechanical engineering for a number of years.

### **Fat children**

There were no fat children in the school. I can remember two in my year who were slightly plump but none more than that

### **Asthma and allergies**

I can recall only one boy who suffered from asthma although he took part in games like everyone else. I have no recollection of him having an inhaler so perhaps his was a mild case. There was one boy who was excused games because of what was described as a weak heart.

### **The end of school prom**

On the last day at school we had the usual end of term assembly, I believe the headmaster said a few words of encouragement to those of us who were leaving, we sang the school hymn, we all shook hands and went home in the usual way at the usual time and that was that. I left a stamped addressed postcard with the subjects that I had taken at GCE O level and a few weeks later I received said card with ticks against the subjects that I had passed.

### **Litter bins**

There were no litter bins because there was no litter in spite of the availability of sweets and chocolates from the school tuck shop.

### **Computers**

I doubt if anyone had heard the word although a handful of computers were in the country. They were huge devices in air-conditioned rooms and tended by men in white coats.

### **Snippets**

Filling the upper floor of the main block with sulphur dioxide when we turned our Bunsen burners up too far so that the sulphur we were supposed to be melting caught fire.

Mr Cresswell, the maths teacher selling a sixpenny magazine called Mathematical Pie

Standing up when Miss Moore entered the classroom and her saying 'Assayez-vous' to tell us to sit down.

Playing throw the ball with the girls at lunch time. Half a dozen or so girls would stand in a rough circle and throw a tennis ball to each other. The boys would stand behind each girl and try to intercept the ball and if successful would then throw it among themselves and the girls would try to recover it. The boys of course were just showing off.

Opening the door to the air raid shelters and looking at the slatted wooden benches and the puddles on the floor.

The first German lesson with Mr Porter, universally known as Jock. We were given a text book written in heavy Gothic script and each told to read out loud a paragraph in German. Having no idea

of how to pronounce German we just stumbled through it.

Miss Moore's way, like Queen Elizabeth I of progressing round her realm, the crowds of children parting before her like the Red Sea before Moses.

Bill Tordoffe, the English master, reducing a class of boys to hysterical laughter when he remarked how the girls were developing enormous busts and brains.

The suppressed sniggers when, in Shakespeare's Henry V, the king having received a present of tennis balls from the King of France tells the Dauphin who has delivered the tennis balls that "We will turn his balls to gun stones".

The amazing chemistry experiment when the teacher heated a piece of metal that caught fire when exposed to air in a stream of a greenish poisonous gas until the metal burned with an orange flame. After everything had cooled we were invited to taste the white powder left and discovered that it was salt!

Our form being berated by the art master, Mr Shaw, (inevitably known as 'Arty' after an American band leader) for not knowing anything about those things that made daily life possible such as the diesel engines that powered the buses that brought us to school. I, being the class nerd, knew all about how diesel engines worked as well as everything else he mentioned.

The exchange students from Germany. It was a brave thing to do to have German students in the 1950s. The war had been over for less than ten years and inevitably there was a good deal of anti-German feeling around although I have no recollection of it ever being expressed to the students. Quite the opposite in the case of an RGS girl who went to Germany and was delighted to find that a German lad who she'd fancied when he was at RGS lived not far from where she was staying.

Going into the physics lab one morning and seeing a block of ice about 60 x 30 x 30 cm supported at each end. Embedded in the ice about half way down was part of a loop of piano wire. Hanging on the part of the loop in fresh air was a heavy weight. How had this being done? The answer was found in the phenomenon of regelation.

The biology lesson when one lad put up his hand and said 'Sir, Sir what erects the penis?' 'Blood pressure' came the deadpan reply.

## **In conclusion**

I think now that although RGS was in some respects an academic sausage machine with we, the pupils being the sausage meat, it was not the dull, colourless, nose-to-the-grindstone sort of place that my reader might imagine. We had friends and quite a lot of fun. I don't think we felt deprived and the education which was the whole point of the place was really good. After all, I left RGS with eight O-levels so they must have done something right.

## **Acknowledgements**

My thanks to Jennifer Johnson, Ruth Porter and Christine Wild for supplying some of the information about the girls.

## **Further viewing**

A description of the school's origin and early years together with a lot of information about the headmaster can be found here

<http://www.woodlesfordstation.co.uk/Pages/RothwellGrammarSchool.aspx>

A video slightly cheesy in places but showing everyday scenes at the school can be found here

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LPV7lggUhg>

Finally, if anyone has a comment or query about these reminiscences I can be reached at

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