

## Recollections of Chesterfield Grammar School in the 1920s

### Harry Blakemore Thorpe

In the September of 1921 I started at the Chesterfield Grammar School which was founded in the year 1594. It was my mother's wish that I should get a good education, I had no trouble in passing the entrance examination, which pleased her. She was given a list of requirements which included a cap with two green rings around the top which signified that I was to be put into Heathcote House, a school blazer with the school badge on the breast pocket, a leather satchel, a pen, pencil, ruler, eraser, set squares and protractor. On the first day of school my mother arranged for an older boy to call for me and to escort me to school. The school was about one and a half miles away. He called for me at 8:15 am and school started at 8:50 am. Mother had made sure that I was all clean and shiny, wearing brand new clothes from cap to shoes. My mother's idea of what a Grammar School boy looked like was old fashioned to say the least. She made me wear a large white celluloid collar which fitted outside the collar of my jacket. She must have got the ideas from the pictures of Eton College boys. I hated it. It looked ridiculous.

My form was form two. There were two Thorpes and one Thorp in the entire school, by coincidence they all started in form two on the same day. I was the senior by age so I went through my school years known as Thorpe Major to the masters and sometimes to the pupils. The other Thorpe was Christened Harry like myself and he was Thorpe Minor. Thorp whose Christian name I have forgotten was Thorp<sup>1</sup> minimus. It worked very well. There were no mistaken identities. The teacher was Miss Polly Kyle, she was about 35 years old, her sister Minnie Kyle taught form one. Most of the form one boys came from the school's kindergarten. It was the first time I had ever heard of a kindergarten. In form two we were each given a curriculum. This was another first, previously the pupils of St Thomas' had never known what the next lesson was to be, no doubt the teachers had some form of programme. Another novelty was one's own private desk in which we kept our books etc., and odds and ends which had nothing to do with school. We all put locks on our desks and if a boy lost or forgot to bring his keys, a little amateur, and sometimes successful lock-picking took place.

I suppose I had looked upon my past lady teachers as mother figures, therefore it came as a shock when male teachers took over from Miss Kyle and gave lessons in their own special subjects. Some were welcome some were not. One was a Mr Slack<sup>2</sup> who taught maths. I did not like him, and he sensed it. He was strict and sarcastic, and I was on the receiving end, with no defence. He made my life a misery. I had been very good at maths at my previous school. When faced with algebra I could not cope with it, to me, obscurity which did nothing to better my relations with Mr Slack. Mr Smith, who taught History and English, was a different character. He was kind and gentle and I produced good work for him. Mr Varley, the P.T teacher, always referred to as "Nigger" was also well liked. Mr Woods took art and French. Our music master was Dr Sadler, a doctor of music, second only to the great Mr Staten who was a professor of music. I liked Dr Sadler, and he always played some beautiful chords on the piano before starting the lesson. He auditioned the school for a choral version of "The Mikado", and I was selected, but declined to take the part because the act of singing in public scared me. It was the same with the annual sports day, during the whole of the four years that I was at that school I never entered for one sporting event. As I have said it was a shock to find

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<sup>1</sup> This was James Harold Thorp who was the brother of Philip Riden's mother. Philip Riden is the author of *A History of Chesterfield Grammar School*.

<sup>2</sup> This is almost certainly Ernest Henry Slack listed in the 1911 census as an assistant master, and in the 1939 census as an assistant master of mathematics at the Grammar School.

men teachers taking form two pupils, although I knew it had to come at some time. To me these black-gowned men with their mortar boards perched upon their heads were an awesome sight.

I had been looking forward to learning French, but my interest waned when the whole of the first term was taken up by learning phonetics. We were also taught simple woodwork, and it took me a whole term to make a simple toothbrush-holder - not a very good one at that. Even the woodwork lessons were marred by putting-away-tools drill

I had been looking forward to learning French, but my interest waned when the whole of the first term was taken up by learning phonetics. We were also taught simple woodwork, and it took me a whole term to make a simple toothbrush-holder - not a very good one at that. Even the \ woodwork lessons were marred by putting-away-tools drill which seemed to take ages, considerably cutting down on the actual lesson time. I soon began to dislike the school system of Wednesday being a half day off and having to go to school on Saturday mornings, thus following the French system. Our school times were 8:50am until 12:30pm and 1:45pm until 3:45pm, Saturday mornings 8:50am until 11:45am. The school punishments were: impositions, writing 100 lines for example; detentions, which meant a pupil had to stay back and do one hour of extra work under supervision. If we were given two detentions in one week we had to attend school on Wednesday afternoon. Time was forfeited for both detentions as well as the Wednesday afternoons. I had my share of detentions and lost Wednesday afternoons, but I can remember having only one imposition. Caning of the worst offenders was carried by the headmaster in his study. Those unfortunates were made to bend over a chair and given six strokes of the cane on their bottoms. I escaped an actual caning, but I had a very narrow escape. I was sent to the headmaster's study over some misdemeanour, I cannot remember what it was. I got a severe lecture, then he pulled me over his knees and went through the motions of caning me. I was really scared. The year in form two passed fairly well for me even though I was by no means brilliant in studies, I managed to scrape into form three C.

Form three was divided into three separate forms. 3C was for the ones who had not distinguished themselves in form 2 and for new pupils of that age group. Forms 3B and 3A were for better scholars. The number of pupils was kept fairly constant in the three grades by newcomers from the same type of school or by the better pupils "leapfrogging," so to speak, from form 2 to form 3B or from form 3C to form 3A.

The rest of my stay at the grammar school was fairly uneventful. A new venture for me was taking science lessons in a real laboratory with bunsen burners, fine balances and all the paraphernalia of scientific learning. I was reasonably good at science. The fees for attending school were three pounds and eleven shillings per term, collected on the first day of the new term. I usually paid mine to my arch enemy Mr Slack. These fees were collected in the science lab., probably because it was the most convenient room in the building with the exception of the assembly hall. On arriving at school each morning the pupils had to go to the assembly hall for a prayer and a hymn. I liked this because of the organ playing of one of the masters. The organ bellows were pumped by hand, and I envied the boy who had the task of the pumping. As far as I can remember, it was the same boy all the time that I was at that school.

My year in form three C was not a happy one. Our form master was a Mr Brookes who, as far as I was concerned, was in about the same category as Mr Slack. One afternoon he gave me a detention, and by coincidence he was the master rostered to take the detention class that day. We waited for him, while doing so playing outside the classroom which was situated on the edge of the playing field. When he had not turned up by the time of the end of the detention period we all went home fearful of what the next morning would bring. We need not have worried because Mr Brookes had been

sacked on the spot for homosexual activities with some of the older boys. I was absolutely delighted. I had previously heard rumours of his inviting pupils to his home on Sunday afternoons, and taking photographs of the pupils minus their trousers. I was too naive to realise the real nature of these tea parties. Eddie Hyde, one of my friends, was a guest at these Sunday afternoon sessions.

The headmaster of the school was Mr Bescoby and as far as I was concerned he was in the same category as Mr Slack and Mr Brookes. He was a large man with a large round face and small eyes like a pig, or so it seemed to me, probably due to my intense dislike of him. In the main corridor of the school there was a school notice board where the names of all the boys who had received detentions were displayed. Mr Bescoby read this daily, and he must have made a mental note of those names for future reference. Occasionally he would take us for a lesson, and he got to know us all fairly well. Therefore he knew who was on the detention board. There is not much more to tell about the rest of my stay at that school. I was in form 3A for the final year and came out fairly well in the exams, I was in the eighth position in French which was not bad considering all the competition. However, I had had enough of academic tuition, my mind was more fitted to the practical side of life. I was mechanically minded, and leaned more to carrying out the ideas of academics rather than creating them. In the July of 1925 I left the Chesterfield Grammar School in spite of the fact that the school governors offered to waive my fees if I would stay at the school for another two years. Shortly after leaving school I was delighted to hear that the headmaster, Mr Bescoby had been sacked for homosexual activities, although I am not certain it was true. (*Ed.: It most likely Bescoby was innocent of this claim, see Note below*<sup>3</sup>). Whether the pupils were involved I do not know for sure. Probably they were, and this explained to me why he had pulled me over his knee and gone through the motions of caning me. Two of my pet hates had bitten the dust, Mr Brookes and Mr Bescoby. How I would have loved to have added the name of my arch enemy Mr Slack.

As I have said, the boys at the school came from very varied walks of life, where some of the parents belonged to the town's social elite, and others were ordinary working people. The Grammar school seemed to be a social leveller. The masters may have had a few preferences, but the boys treated one and all as equal. While the masters were hardly seen without their caps and gowns, Minnie and Polly Kyle, the form one and two teachers, dressed in blouses and skirts, the boys wore their uniforms, there was one person who was noticeable because he wore a bib and brace overalls. His name was Mr Swain, the school's caretaker. His job was to keep the school yard tidy, keep two large areas of grass neat and tidy, prepare cricket pitches for matches, as far as I can remember without the aid of a motor mower. He also got all of the paraphernalia ready for the annual sports, looked after the sports gear which meant applying linseed oil to many cricket bats, inflated the footballs for winter matches and did many other jobs about the school. He must have been the most useful member of the staff. The point I am arriving at is that Swain was the odd man out, because he was a workman, and was treated as such by the youngest first former to the most senior member of staff. He was never addressed as *Mr Swain*, but always Swain. Everyone called him Swain, whether speaking to him or referring to him. For what he did, he deserved much better, but he was the victim

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<sup>3</sup> *Editor's Note:*

We are told on good authority that the rumoured homosexual incident involving Bescoby that probably triggered his departure did not in fact take place and was made up by the two boys involved to get themselves out of a scrape. Philip Riden, in his "A History of Chesterfield Grammar School", states that "Bescoby abruptly resigned from his post early in 1934 after 13 years' service", quoting from the Sheffield Independent of February 10<sup>th</sup>.1934. Later he states that "there was not the slightest suggestion, then or later, that he asked to resign because of financial impropriety or misconduct towards pupils" and again "Whatever the reason for Bescoby's abrupt departure, it did not prevent him remaining in teaching."

of the class system operated by people who imitated Eton and Harrow, and other such schools. Even so, Swain did his job well, he was liked by the majority of the boys.

## Outside School Hours

The Chesterfield Grammar School was an old institution founded in 1594, no doubt altering with the times. Gone were the days of flogging and harsh treatment which must have taken place along with other schools and colleges of earlier periods. Anyone who has read "Tom Brown's Schooldays", which had Rugby school as its setting, will understand what awful places they could be in those days. I was fortunate to be at school when discipline was strict, but not harsh. This meant that out of school certain school rules applied. For example, one must not dishonour the school in any way, always be polite and raise our school caps to any of our school masters whom we met in the street, or to any adult female of our acquaintance. During my time at the school some alterations had taken place in the parish churchyard. A new pathway had been cut through, a small cenotaph erected in honour of those who had died in World War One. It was decreed by the school authorities that all boys who passed this cenotaph should raise their caps in respect for the dead. We obeyed this ruling, but I always felt embarrassed when I raised my cap when others were passing who did not have to pay the same respect as I did. Because of our distinctive uniforms, everyone knew what school that we attended so we had to observe the school rules. If we failed to give up our seats on the tramcar, or any other impoliteness, we would at times be ticked off by complete strangers.

One of the worst things that one could do was the throwing of snowballs in the street. It was considered that anyone who did this was really letting the school down. During the Christmas holidays of 1923 there had been a good fall of snow, and the school and its rules were far from my mind when I engaged in a snowball fight with another boy. He was on one side and I on the opposite side of the street. I was far too intent on what I was doing to see anything but my target, therefore I failed to see the approaching teacher who was no other than the dreaded Mr Slack and his wife. I could have happily disappeared down the nearest grate. Mr Slack said nothing, but he let me know that he had seen me. Immediately after assembly and prayers on the first day back at school at the beginning of the term, the fees for the following term were paid. The fees were collected by teachers who sat at the long benches of the science lab. The boys formed queues to pay whichever master was taking fees and giving receipts. The term after the snowballing incident I joined one of the queues to pay fees, and who was the master taking the fees at the end of the queue which I had joined? You have guessed - it was Mr Slack. When it was my turn to pay he turned his face towards me; his steely eyes gazed at me through his pince-nez eyeglasses and paused just like a serpent ready to strike. He struck alright, and he gave me a real roasting about the honour of the school, and what an awful creature I was and so on.

For some reason he did not report me to the headmaster who would have taken great delight in giving me six of the best on my backside, even so I had some awful moments thinking what would have happened had one of my snowballs hit him or his wife. I was really scared of that man. Even today I could almost pinpoint the exact place where this snowballing took place. I think one of the problems was that all the masters were born, reared and educated in the Victorian Era, which did not end with the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, the concepts and social rules continued to be observed up to the 1914-18 war. They embraced the whole of the reign of Edward VIIth and four years of the reign of George V. World War One was a great leveller, men from all walks of life had been thrown together in one common cause, which was to beat the enemy. Women successfully did many jobs reserved entirely for men before 1914, although it was not apparent to us boys. The fact is that we boys of the twentieth century were more influenced by nineteenth century conditions. A big change in society was taking place, but the schools still held on to their Victorian image, which explains why some of the rules inside and outside of the school were a little archaic.

I had three options open to me as to how I travelled to school which was about one and a half miles away from home - to take the tramcar, to cycle or to walk. I used all three options. The most convenient way to travel by tram was to buy scholars' tickets, which cost three shillings and sixpence for fifty. If the weather was bad I would use the trams. The trams stopped at the Chesterfield Girls' High School where the girls alighted, the tram then continued to the stop outside our school. The drivers seemed to object to stopping after such a short journey from the previous stop just to let a bunch of schoolboys get off. After the girls had got off we had to make for the rear platform quickly. There would be about twenty boys to get off; the first boys would be on the steps hanging onto the rails, or each other, whilst the last would be only half way down the stairs. Some drivers would stop, some would slow down to a crawl, others would travel at about half speed which was fairly fast. The boys on the bottom step were urged to jump off by the boys on the platform, particularly by those on the stairs who did not want to be taken too far past the school. From time to time I found myself among the leaders on the bottom step, or on the platform or stairs. I was therefore urged to jump, or urging the others to jump. It must have been a strange sight to see an approaching tram with a bunch of schoolboys hanging on to the rear step, then all of a sudden seeing twenty or so boys jumping off within a few seconds from first to last, fortunately traffic was light in those days. There were two diversions on the tram when travelling to and from school, one was getting hold of a "Lucky Ticket". We were given a ticket in exchange for our scholar's ticket. These tickets were numbered from 0000 to 9999; a lucky ticket was one where the numbers added up to 21. For example, the ticket number 8652 would add up to 21, or any other combination of numbers which added up to 21 were considered to be lucky. We collected these tickets, whether they brought any luck I don't know.

The other diversion was the high school girls. To us they appeared to be very refined, well behaved and pretty, which may have been an illusion to their admirers on the tram. My favourite was a girl named Kitty Emerson, a pretty girl of my age who travelled with her not so pretty elder sister. I had a crush on Kitty, and would get as near to her as possible. I think I wasted my time, she never showed any indication that she knew I was there. I did not know where she came from, also I never saw her out except when she was on the tram. I suppose that other boys on the tram had their favourite girls, but we never discussed girls with each other for fear of being teased, and possibly embarrassed. The thought of some mischievous boy teasing me about Kitty, in front of Kitty filled me with terror. We never knew who was the object of each other's fascination.

Even though the school was one and a half miles away, on fine days I often walked home during the lunch break, which lasted for one hour and a quarter, from twelve thirty pm until one forty five pm. This did not give much time to get home and back to school in time for afternoon lessons. We finished school at three forty five pm. I would hurry the half mile or so to the Central School where I met some of my friends for the walk home which was usually uneventful. With the exception of the Grammar School, all other schools were known as elementary schools. Unlike grammar school boys, elementary school boys still played marbles. There was a steep hill from the Central School it was called Foljambe Road which joined Chatsworth Road from the bottom of Foljambe Road. Chatsworth Road had no inclines for a mile or so, and this was ideal for a game of marbles with glass marbles, which were larger than ordinary ceramic marbles. These marbles had a value of two ceramic marbles for one glass marble. The game was simple. All one had to do was to "shoot" a marble along the gutter, distance did not matter. We usually kept the distance that the marble travelled to between twenty and forty feet. Our opponent then shot his marble along the gutter with the object of hitting the first marble. If or when the marble was hit by the other marble the shooter claimed his opponent's marble. The easiest way to win was to stop short of the opponent's marble then take a further shot. There was no shooting backwards, and if the marble went slightly past then it proved

an easy target. This was a pleasant way of walking the last half mile home. We often referred to the glass marbles as "popties" - the reason for this was that the glass marbles came out of lemonade or "pop" bottles. The marble was the stopper which was kept in place by the pressure of the gas in the lemonade which forced it up against a rubber seal. It was prevented from falling into the bottle by a ridge in the neck of the bottle, and the bottle had to be broken to extract the popty. Marbles in general were called ollies by Lancashire children, we called them mibs.

On the way home was a scrapyard owned by a Mr Sydney Sharp. He was never referred to by his proper name, and he was known to everyone as "Pinkeye". His establishment was always referred to as Pinkeye's. Instead of having a dog to guard the premises, he had a goat which did a very efficient job. It did a particularly efficient job for me also, as it was the practice of all the boys to take home full exercise books for their parents to examine. Some of my exercise books were fairly good and some were bad. The bad ones I fed to Pinkeye's goat. The yard was closed when we passed, the goat would come up to the gate and eat the pages which were pushed through one by one until it had had enough. The remaining would be tossed over to be eaten at leisure, to our mutual satisfaction.

I learned one lesson from school. I learned not to make rash statements. There were three of us walking home from school, Arnold Bates, a big, strong boy, Wilfred Arnold and myself. We were chatting as we walked, and suddenly Wilfred Arnold turned to me and asked me if I could fight Arnold Bates. Our idiomatic use of the word "fight" was to fight and win. As a face saver I was stupid enough to say that I could. Arnold said nothing. I breathed a sigh of relief and thought that I had got away with my bluff. The next day, on the way home from school, I was confronted by Arnold, who was prepared to fight and he made it very obvious he wanted to. I was petrified because he could have made mincemeat of me. I cannot remember what I said but I wangled myself out of the situation somehow. I was the moral loser, and thereafter I had a very healthy respect for Arnold. That was the last foolish challenge that I made with regard to fighting.

I learned another lesson too, which was to be careful of what I wrote. Every year the school issued a single page calendar of important events which would take place throughout the year. Each pupil was given a copy to keep him informed of sporting events, holidays, school concerts etc. One evening I was doodling on the calendar. I suppose that hatred for Mr Bescoby was uppermost in my mind, and I wrote some very defamatory remarks about him. What exactly I wrote I cannot remember, as the only thing I could liken him to was a pig, I probably wrote "Bescoby is a pig," "Pig eyes Bescoby" or "Pig face Bescoby". Then for some unknown reason I rubbed it out. I might have had a premonition of what the consequences could be, instead I wrote "may it come soon," alongside the date of the last day of term. The following may seem far-fetched but it is absolutely true. I lost my calendar which had my name on it, and it came into the possession of Mr Bescoby. Whether he found it, or it was handed to him I do not know. I would not have found out, but for the fact that Mr Bescoby must have been in an unusually jocular mood one morning. At assembly, when he held up a grubby piece of paper, and told the whole school that it belonged to a junior boy whose work was so untidy and badly written, that he had great difficulty in reading it, and so on. Until he finally told the school what I had written "and may it come soon," at the date of the term ending. He did not mention my name, but he clearly enjoyed himself and he got a laugh from the assembled boys, a rare event in assembly which was mostly devoted to hymns and prayers. If he had seen the original "Pig faced Bescoby," and so on I would have been put over a chair in his study to receive six of the best probably a little harder than usual. I had escaped a beating over the snowballing incident, a good hiding from Arnold Bates and six of the best from Bescoby. Lucky me! I was learning quickly not to repeat foolish actions, foolish talk and foolish writing.

Next door to the school was the tuck shop. According to school tradition, it was never called the sweet shop. The great universities and colleges never had sweet shops, they had tuck shops, which were exactly the same as sweet shops. One could buy a large variety of sweets and chocolates, fizzy drinks and ice cream. The proprietor, Mr Holmes, must have done well from the school's 350 pupils many of whom visited the shop daily.

As I have said I could walk to school or go by tramcar, I could also cycle. Before starting Grammar school my mother bought me a second-hand cycle from a friend. The cycle had an 18 inch frame which was the smallest of the real cycle range. It was alright for riding around the backstreets near home, and useful for errands when mother required anything from one of the other footwear warehouses where she traded. I would go to school on it sometimes. Compared to the cycles of the other boys with their 22 inch and 24 inch frames, mine looked very odd. I was ashamed of it. I would sneak into the schoolyard and leave it near to the gate. I was then able to come and go without attracting too much attention. I need not have worried; no-one seemed to take much notice of my cycle or me. In any case it had an uncontrollable rear mudguard rattle which was an embarrassment to me when I rode over rough roads. I made very many wooden wedges to silence it, but they were soon shaken out and lost. I was nearly twelve years old when my mother bought me a brand new three speed Raleigh cycle. It had a 22 inch frame, it cost nine pounds fifteen shillings. It was the top quality cycle of the day, also my pride and joy. My cycling to school was uneventful with one exception. I was riding back to school one afternoon, during the examinations period. I was about fifty yards past the hospital gates and riding between the tramlines. The proper way to get from between the tramlines and the roadway is to swerve to cross at about forty degrees. I must have been thinking about the exams because I did not swerve enough, my front wheel was caught in the tramlines which caused me to lose control. I did a dive over the handlebars and hit the road in front of an approaching ambulance which stopped. The ambulance men put me in the front seat with them for the few yards drive to the hospital. They took me to the casualty department where I was treated for abrasions and bruises. I was in slight shock and also in pain. The combination of the two caused me to cry, but the nurse who had attended to me was not at all sympathetic. She ticked me off - an elementary school boy would have probably got away with it, but Grammar School boys should never show their feelings. Someone had taken my cycle to school. I walked the short distance from hospital to school physically and mentally wounded. Even so I did quite well in the exam, I have a feeling that it was a geography exam.

Another of the school rules was a total ban of smoking by students, even out of school hours. Frank Bown, one of my close friends at school, stole cigarettes and cigars from his father's cabinet. One day he asked me if I would like to share a cigar with him after school. He produced a large cigar from his satchel. I could manage cigarettes. I also had a few puffs of cigars from time to time without ill effect, so I agreed. After school we went to the park annexe which was not often frequented by others, where Frank broke the cigar in two. We settled down with our backs to a tree where we started to smoke our cigars. After about one minute, I felt my stomach churning, my face must have turned pale, probably green. The landscape was going round and round. I think Frank must have been suffering as I was, but we were both too proud to admit it. I buried my cigar under some leaves at the base of the tree telling Frank that I would smoke the remainder some other day. Frank must have been relieved because he buried his cigar also. We went our separate ways. I staggered along with the help of trees until the effect had worn off. That was the last cigar that I ever tried to smoke. I was learning more about life while I was out of school than when I was in school. An out of school activity which I detested was homework. We were given a minimum of one and a half hours each evening. I begrudged the time spent on homework while my elementary school friends played

unencumbered by such chores. Some subjects I skipped, hoping to copy from the train boys, who always arrived at school early. They did not resent my copying their homework. Some I skimmed hoping for the best, some I did well according to what mood I was in. It seemed that the only times school rules did not apply was when I was in bed. A lot of my troubles with the masters stemmed from out of school activities, rather than in-school activities.