

Growing up in Surrey Hills: First day at school

Gill Bell

It was a sunny morning in early February 1957 when Mum parked the grey family Morris Minor under a shady oak tree outside the primary school gates.

It was my first day at school, and my big sister Mary-Ann was there to lead the way. With some apprehension I eyed the streams of children heading towards the school.

I clutched my mother's hand as we entered the school grounds. I saw a tall white flagpole, some flowerbeds and a grand-looking red brick school building. It was all much more imposing than the little kindergarten I had attended the previous year, with its small tanbark playground.

Children were milling around, calling to one another.

My mother, like the other mothers, wore a full-skirted summer frock. All the little girls also wore skirts or dresses. In those post-war years many children wore the cast-off clothes of their older siblings. My own handkerchief was a simple hemmed squares of material from a worn-out shirt. We were not especially poor; it was just the thrifty way in which we lived.

The prolonged sound of a siren cut through the hubbub. It was the signal for parents to leave. Somehow my sister helped me find my new classroom, and then ran off, blonde plaits dancing, to join her second grade.

The country was in the middle of a post war baby boom, and classes were large. In my old black and white photo of our first grade there are ten girls and thirty boys! Teaching these numbers seems a daunting task these days, but I remember classes as orderly and focused on learning.

As newcomers we were designated 'Bubs'. We lined up outside our Bubs classroom. One poor little lad lost his breakfast on the asphalt. A cleaner covered his shame with a layer of sawdust.

We made our way into the dim coolness of our room. It smelt of furniture polish. There were rows of simple wooden desks, and one corner boasted a fireplace, a quaint feature of this nineteenth century building. We put our brand-new exercise books and pencils in our desks and hung our satchels on hooks in the corridor.

There had been no orientation day the previous year, and during the morning my major preoccupation was trying to work out where the toilet was in the room. I eventually decided on a wooden door at the front of the room. That must be it! Luckily, before I could test this theory the teacher pointed us in the direction of the toilets just across the playground. The wooden door opened onto a storage cupboard.

I had brought with me a well-thumbed orange copy of John and Betty with its beautifully drawn fifties-style illustrations. I didn't really need the text! Mary-Ann had already read her way through the reader two years earlier, and as I listened to her homework I had learned the text by heart.

This John.

This is Betty.

John can jump.

Betty can jump

... and so on. The phrases flow into my mind still almost 70 years later.

When the siren sounded for lunchtime, we made our way to the shelter sheds and sat on the wooden benches. Mum had made me white-bread sandwiches, probably Kraft cheese and vegemite, wrapped in grease-proof paper. The invention of cling-film was decades in the future. There was also a home-made biscuit and an apple.

Some of the older children went to buy their lunch at the tuck-shop across the road. All through primary school I longed for a meat pie, but this delicacy cost an incredible shilling. That was more than four tram rides!

Like many of the children I also had a pastel-coloured plastic drink bottle containing cordial. To my horror I found it was missing! This was too much, and my tears spilled over. Our teacher investigated the matter. A boy had mistaken my bottle for his own. I was happily reunited with my bottle.

Classes resumed after lunch. I do remember one special detail of the afternoon. The teacher showed us how to draw rows of interlocking loops, vaguely s-shaped.

It was a simple exercise, but for me it was a revelation. This was writing! I looked at the cover of my reader and saw that the long skinny shape of J represented a particular sound, while the rounded generous shape of B represented another. It was the start of a passion for words and language which has shaped my life.

When the siren sounded the end of the day, I collected my satchel and met my sister outside. I was bubbling over with news of what I had learned on this special day, my first day at school.

With deep gratitude to Canterbury Primary School for a wonderful introduction to learning.