

# English at Walworth 1945-65

## *Research Bulletin 1*

By Peter Medway and Patrick Kingwell



### **Who we are**

We're a former teacher and pupil at Walworth School (Mina Road) in Southwark. Pete Medway taught English and World Studies (1964-71), Pat Kingwell was a pupil (1961-68).

### **The project**

We're part of a research team writing a history of English teaching in three London schools between 1945 and 1965 – what it was like, what were the teachers trying to do and how it changed.

The larger project is 'Social Change and English: A Study of Three English Departments 1945-1965'. It's run from the University of London Institute of Education (IOE) and King's College London and is supported by a three-year grant from the Leverhulme Trust.

Walworth/Mina Road is one of the three schools. It was known in London and nationally as a pioneer comprehensive school, not least for its new approaches to subjects. English in Walworth had a special reputation.

### **Progress so far**

Our Walworth inquiry is well under way. We've interviewed former teachers and pupils and have heard from both by email. But there's more that we need.

We had two starting points. Pat went on the Friends Reunited website asking for information while Pete with his colleague John Hardcastle contacted several people who had taught English or been pupils at Walworth. As a result we've heard from over 60 respondents.

*This bulletin* is to update everyone who's helped us so far, to interest others interested and to appeal for more memories and material.

### **The school**

Walworth was a new school in 1946. It was one of 5 LCC 'experimental' or 'interim'

comprehensive schools and in 1953 it was still being called 'experimental' by teachers, pupils and people in the neighbourhood; the pupils were said to be 'guinea pigs'.

There were no new buildings, just the two that had previously been occupied by the pre-war Walworth Central Schools, one boys' and one girls', divided by a wall across the playground. The buildings dated from 1882 and 1905. The second, pictured above, is still there (it's now part of Walworth Academy); the first was demolished in the 1960s.

The first real head teacher was the formidable **Miss O'Reilly** who saw the school through the difficult first years after the war and put her stamp on the school. *Has anyone got a photo of her?* She retired in 1954 and **Guy Rogers**, the deputy head, took over.

## English teachers



The first head of English that we know about was **Arthur Harvey** (1947-55).

He's the dapper chap in the suit, to the left of **Mr (Bruno) Le Brun**. (And to

Bruno's right, that looks like **Paddy Price**.)

We've learned a lot about Harvey from pupils on whom he made a great impression. Indeed, two of them included him in novels they wrote while still at school. (Valerie Avery's *London Morning* and *London Spring*, about growing up off the Old Kent Road and going to Mina Road, got published.)

Roy Boardman sent us a description of Arthur Harvey's teaching:

*He rarely, if ever, got us to read "around the class", but read a bit at a time himself and then elicited comments to get us to relate what we*

*read to personal experience. So the first question on beginning to read *Pride and Prejudice* was something like "Have you ever heard a woman talk as much as Mrs Bennett?" ... He'd then get us to write about [people we knew].*

*We wrote constantly, in class and out of class, and the "best" pieces were pinned to the notice board in the corridor outside the library (first floor of the Upper School?) When we said we didn't know how to start, he said, "Just write something like *Sausages and Eggs* and go on from there. It'll come."*

Arthur Harvey's thing was literature and drama. Pupils were expected to write poetically and with imagination – titles, as one pupil told us, like "The Redheaded Man With A Glass Eye".

Harvey believed in grammar and would fill his blackboard with clause analysis. He was well connected in the literary world (knew Dylan Thomas) and worked to introduce his brightest pupils to it. He encouraged 'proper' English speech and seems to have frowned on the cockney speech of ordinary people.

Did he teach only the top classes?

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From the same period people also recall **Mr Hall, Miss Judith Wild, Mr Sparrow and Mr Gus Grealy** -- mainly as good teachers. **Alec or Alex McLeod** (right), a New Zealander, taught in the school twice, returning home for a few years in between.



The next head of department after Arthur Harvey was very different.

**Harold Rosen** (1956-8 -- does anyone have a photo?) died only last year and we managed to talk to him twice – in fact that's how this project started, before we'd even decided it was a project. Harold came from a poor Jewish background in the East End and seems to have cared most that his pupils should have the confidence to speak their own minds and to write and talk about their own lives in the way that came most naturally to them. He was less convinced of the value of grammar, and although he valued literature and was extremely well-read, he was most concerned to find books and poems that would speak to Walworth children.

Margaret Barton recalls: *Mr Rosen was our English teacher and a very good one at that. I have him to thank for my interest in reading today. I remember the books we had to read for our 4th year were *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* and *Julius Caesar*. Because of his love of literature I enjoy the classics and this has led me to enjoy history so much more.*



Through all this period, from 1953 one name constantly crops up in people's memories, that of **Miss Pip Porchetta** (left) with **Mlle Diligence**. Everyone agrees she was fierce, strict, devoted to grammar and the memorising of Shakespeare.

Pupils with little interest in English may not have been inspired by her but others were helped by her to confidence and examination success. There's no doubt that she was devoted to Walworth and its pupils.

Brian Catling appreciated being taught by both Porchetta and McLeod. Did they have different ways of doing things?

*Yes, they did. Hers was to focus - the funnel was going to the point. McLeod was going out. So he would take a point, and if you went with it you could run in all directions, and you'd get information and be taken to different places. Whereas she would always say - now come on, come on, down to here. Because she was quite hard with me. Which I really needed, because I was way behind everybody, and so, in lots of things I was way behind, certainly in exams, I've never been good at that, I never was. So it was like, so that that funnelling was to make me concentrate on the things she knew I was bad at. But at the same time she was very wise by seeing where I really wanted to go. I have always been driven by my imagination. It is the entire thing and there is nothing else. And so they locked on to that, so they set carrots.*

### **Tony McLean and Pete Jones talking about Andrew Salkey and Alex McLeod:**

[Andrew Salkey] was black, exotic. He had a beard and he was cool. And he was rich. Really sharp. He did a lot of Dickens with us, I think, Great Expectations. And he was very clear about what we didn't need to do. This was the first time anybody had explained to me that one page of literature was different or more relevant or more poignant or whatever, than the next. So he said 'Right, Dickens. Here's Great Expectations, this is the plot, this is what you say, boom, boom, boom, boom.' And the guy did that, so he pulled the skeleton out of Great Expectations. He said 'You've got to know that that that that and who did it.'

Alex [McLeod] never did that, but what he never did do was close down your wish to know about anything. It was like talking to some sort of Buddhist priest, you know? You are talking to the Abbot of Kyoto, you keep talking and I will keep listening. And that was pretty good too, at the time. The lessons would actually stray from English quite a bit, because, as Tony says, he didn't want to shut you down, you know, he didn't want to stop the quest for knowledge, as it were, the idea that you wanted to learn something.

After Harold Rosen left, there was a whole batch of new teachers; most of them we'd like know more about.

Names that stand out are John Dixon, Andrew Salkey, Simon Clements, Leslie Stratta and Charles Stuart Jervis.



*Classroom in the old Upper School*

Judith Wild and Pip Porchetta continued and Brenda Harvey joined in 1962.

Eventually (1963) Alec McLeod came back from NZ and replaced John Dixon.

We have been sent good recollections on some of these, including this from a former pupil in Connecticut:

*Stuart Jervis was brilliant. I can still see him walking up and down trying to get us great "unwashed" to understand T.S. Elliot's "Hollow Man" and I am particularly grateful for the absolute dissection of Jane Austin's "Pride and Prejudice" to this day I understand Elizabeth Bennett completely. Stuart Jervis I believe just loved the English language - he truly seemed to believe that we could all understand it and we would be better human beings for understanding it.*

## ENGLISH IN THE EXHIBITION OF WORK, SUMMER 1961

Do you remember doing 'Charlie Stories' or their female equivalent? Those are from Simon Clement's class. The headings on the wall in the other picture read: *Journey to and from school, Watching the world go by, Grim streets, Man and his mania, Cats and dogs, That homework problem* -- do they ring any bells? Please tell us.



## CAN YOU HELP US?

To everyone who has thanked us, we owe a big thank you.

For the rest of you: we need more people to come forward to help us with their memories. We especially need information on the period 1956-1963. **Is your memory of English teachers quite sharp? Would you be prepared to help us?** This could mean an interview or an exchange of emails or letters. If you're in or near London we could come to you, or you could visit us at our expense. We can send you a detailed set of questions for you to check how much you remember.

ALSO **Can you think of anyone else** who has a good memory and who it would be good to talk to or email with?

Especially necessary in a history are **documents from the time**, which are mostly so much more trustworthy than memories over 40-60 years. So:

**Have you saved any of your English work?** Your exercise books or copied out writing? Or do

you know anyone who has? (We promise to return it.)

OR did you keep a **diary** at school? Or write a **novel or story** about life at school? Do you still have copies of **letters** in which you might have talked about your time at Walworth?

OR have you any **photographs** of Walworth teachers?

At the end of the project, as well as writing a book, we will deposit everything we've collected about Walworth (interviews, documents, photographs) in archive collections where anyone interested can get at them.

If you can help us, **please write or email** to Pete Medway: his email and address are

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