Autobiography of a Professional Educator

Episode Two

Did Miss Pickering teach you?

And a note about Bootle

Others may have experienced or remembered my junior school differently (I began there in 1949)

Beach Road Council School in Litherland segregated boys and girls from the age of seven. The girls were downstairs and had a separate playground where they always seemed to be playing complicated skipping games accompanied with songs. Boys were taught upstairs and, observed from above, our playground must have looked like midges swirling around on a summer evening. We played lamppost tick, off-ground tick and relievo, also called allalio (alladio in a nearby Catholic school so I have recently been told). When we played ollies no fudging was allowed.

It has been pointed out to me that not everyone might have a complete grasp of what I am on about so I shall add some explanation at the end.

If two lads had a fight the chant 'big fight' went up and a circle was formed. Honour was very important in that playground, as was the ability to take the cane, mostly on the hand, without crying. I can remember only once getting 'six of the best' on the backside up on the huge table that served as a stage in our assembly hall. The reason for that particular caning escapes me but I seem to remember it gained me kudos. Almost every day I was, however, caned on the hand. I went home for my dinner, which meant that four times a day I crossed the Leeds, Liverpool canal usually over the swing bridge. Even if the bridge was not swung out of the way to allow barges through there were plenty of distractions and most mornings I joined the queue of lads waiting outside the office of the head Joe (not his real name) Lowe to be caned for being late.

There was always some discussion going on about where it was best to be in the queue. If you were near the front Mr. Lowe might not yet have warmed up and got his eye in so that might be a good place to position yourself. On the other hand, if his aim was not good he might catch you on the tips of your fingers or close to the wrist. Neither was desirable. Perhaps he might be getting tired when he got to the end of the, usually long, queue. That could be a good place. But he might be bad tempered by then and hit harder. Probably, I used to conclude, it was best to be in the middle and hold my hand steady

so that he would hit it on the palm. To the people who assert that the cane 'did me no harm' I would ask what good it did. Strangely, it may have provided us with one strength: the power to show authority that, do what it might, it could never completely subdue us. 'Didn't hurt' was a phrase often heard.

Positives? Mr. Lowe read Percy F Westerman to us; from time to time he used to pull me up by my shoulders onto the stage at assembly to sing a verse from a hymn almost certainly by Charles Wesley; he was embarrassingly pleased when I saved a boy from drowning in the canal (the lad was so strong that all I did was to hold his hand while he climbed out, though the lads holding my jacket so that I could lean out let go at that point to jump up and down and cheer so I nearly went in myself); and when George VI died in 1952 Mr. Lowe walked along the corridor opening classroom doors, putting his head round to say, 'The King is dead.' I was still mourning the death of Al Jolson.

Miss Pickering? I believe she had been at the school almost since it opened well before the First World War. I remember that she was slim and taller than my mother and so to me at the time she appeared very tall with grey hair pulled back. She was very famous locally and had high status. My mother once stopped her in the street to ask how I was doing. Miss Pickering's response was blandly reassuring. I suppose that like my mother I never thought to question this. In fact she only taught me once or twice. She taught the clever kids and I was in the class on the other side of the corridor.

When my brother Ivor was dying we sometimes talked about school. He was twelve years older than me. One day I asked him: **'Did Miss Pickering teach you?'** 'Only once or twice,' he said, 'because she only taught the clever kids and I was in the bottom class.' 'So was I.' I replied. Twelve years apart Ivor and I had sat at the same desk, the one that indicated you were second from bottom. There were thirty-three in Ivor's class but there were forty in mine so I claimed the family honour of being the thickest. I don't know what happened to the lad next to me who was bottom of the bottom class in my day but Allan Williams, the lad next to Ivor, became the pre-Epstein manager of the Beatles.

I like to believe that it secretly pleased Allan that whenever the Beatles played at Litherland Town Hall they were performing on the site of what had been the farmhouse of Pickering's Farm where Miss Pickering had grown up. Perhaps it consoled him for not being considered good enough to be taught by her.

I had long suspected that my eldest brother Trevor was taught by Miss Pickering. It is no longer a secret because when I recently asked **'Did Miss Pickering teach you?'** he admitted that this was so. 'Put your hands on your desks' was apparently her favoured way of quietening down boys who became obstreperous. Somehow though I cannot help feeling that Trevor let the family down by being selected to be in the top class.

I learned nothing about the girls school from my eighteen years older sister Olwen but unlike me her children Elaine, David and Paul went to the mixed infants where on his first day David, seeing his sister, went to sit by Elaine.

Being forcefully dragged away established in his mind what school was about. Perhaps I should have spoken more to Auntie Cissie from Belfast. She went to the school in 1912 I think.

Going back about fifty years later was a shock. I had won a contract from the Government Office on Merseyside for the University of Liverpool to evaluate the impact of its funded educational initiatives. Beach Road had money from that fund to work on a collaborative venture in Africa. I went to interview the head teacher.

The playground seemed to have shrunk but climbing the worn steps that turned to the right and looking again at the glazed brown bricks on the wall to my left I knew that my classroom would be the first on the right. Well, it sort of was. There was no wall. It was open to the corridor. A man who I later learned was the deputy head was teaching. But children were asking questions. Really! The head's office was opposite. It was where Miss Pickering's classroom had been. We chatted amiably. In the school where every teacher had been in the all-encompassing category of 'grown ups' this man was younger than me. He showed me round. We went downstairs. What had been the girls school. But the school was now mixed. A little girl approached the head and asked a question about what was going to happen later in the day. He did not shut her up. He did not cane her. He responded to her question as though she, a mere child, had the right to engage him in conversation. It was like all of the schools I had worked in and visited. But it was not my Beach Road.

When I went to Beach Road at seven I could write in cursive double, do long multiplication and division and enjoyed playing the piano. I was told that at my age I should only be printing and it always seemed to be the case that if I was allowed a dip in pen half the nib would be broken. Within a year I could hardly read, write or do sums and I was actively campaigning for my mother to stop my music lessons. I preferred to play out.

I had, however, built a cultural archive upon which I could draw when my school teaching career began in Balliol Boys Secondary Modern in neighbouring Bootle. I was the only member of my family not to have lived in Bootle so it felt good to work there. Sitting in my classroom, a hut by the bins and the coke for the boiler, as befitted a probationary teacher of low status who had no legal power to use the cane, waiting for my first ever class to arrive, in walked the head. He had been there since 1937. He presented me with a huge cane saying, 'Here you are lad, you won't survive without using this.' I never used it and lived to tell the tale.

Ah Bootle! We hear about the London Blitz, the Liverpool Blitz and the bombing of Coventry and more. Seventy four percent of the houses in Bootle were uninhabitable after the bombing and only 7% undamaged. There was a good military reason for this. Although officially part of the entire network of Merseyside docks, thirty-seven miles in length, the docks in Bootle were deeper, more modern, closest to the mouth of the river and usable at any state of tide. They were crucial to the survival of Britain in the war and it was

from Bootle that the frigates and sloops sailed to fight the Battle of the Atlantic. The town has, in my view, never recovered from the war and given its absence from the national narrative of World War Two I doubt it ever will.

There were a number of Welsh churches in Bootle and, having left Wales in 1909, my father actually improved his Welsh grammar at Sunday school. Brother Ivor told me that he and Allan Williams saw themselves as Bootle Welsh though by the war we had moved a crucial couple of miles and escaped the worst of the bombing. Beach Road School was close to the border with Bootle, very close to the recently closed Litherland Library that I loved and only a short distance from what must have been the most spectacular bombing of the time.

Fortunately there were no workers in Bryant and Mays Matchworks that night but imagine the sight of a factory full of wood and phosphor blazing away. My neighbour of today lived a few hundred yards away and remembers it clearly. I keep wondering what the smell would have been like had the Sausage Factory opposite the library been bombed.

Miss Pickering was probably born around 1890. Her life saw the death of Queen Victoria, the beginning of National Insurance, two World Wars, the Depression, the General Strike, votes for women, the transformation of her family farm into a park and the demolition of the farmhouse to build the town hall. The year before I started at the school came the NHS making antibiotics available for the first time to those previously unable to buy them.

She would have seen probably fifteen different prime ministers, some of them doing the job at least twice, seven monarchs and one abdication. Powered flight was in the future when she was little but by the time she retired breaking the sound barrier was routine. I imagine her listening to George Vth's first Christmas wireless broadcast in 1932. My father told me that he put the earphones in a large plant pot to amplify the speech for the family. Or might that have been 1924 when the King made his first broadcast? In 1953 Miss Pickering could have watched the Coronation on a television set.

Empire Day was celebrated on the 24th May, Queen Victoria's birthday. We wore white and lined up at the bottom of the playground so that we could see Mr. Lowe break the union flag from the top of the school flagpole. Ivor's birthday was the 25th May and for years he believed our father when he said that all the flags and bunting your saw everywhere in those days was there just for his birthday. I can't help wondering when schools like Beach Road dropped celebrating Empire Day. What might be the reaction of today's schoolteachers if asked to make a school ready for such a celebration?

Horizon. I learned the meaning of that word in an art lesson. I liked art and we were told to paint a landscape, whatever that was. I listened to Miss Allen (she may have moved to the girls school later). So I painted some brownish land with some brownish and greenish trees and a bluish sky with some whitish clouds; but horizon? Miss told us that it was a line across the picture and that it should not be in the middle; it should be two thirds of the way up or

down. Well that was what I understood her to say. I waited till the paint dried, got a ruler and a pencil and drew a line across the painting. It seemed strange but if Miss said we should do it we had to. I think I have always taken my teachers rather literally.

What would my life have been like if Miss Pickering had taught me? I might have passed the scholarship, as we referred to the 11-Plus examination that purported to test our general intelligence. If I had passed I would have gone to Waterloo Boys Grammar School where Trevor's speciality best subject was playing truant. Mr. Lowe told my mother that it was a mistake to take me from the school. Eventually it was a good decision and yet I am proud of having been to Beach Road School where I learned that horizons could move. I even boast that **Miss Pickering did not teach me.**

Explanations

The link below might help. It also shows the part of the UK that for some strange reason refers to the evening meal as 'dinner.' Everybody knows that the order of meals is breakfast, dinner and tea, supper being a piece of toast after you have put your pyjamas on (don't forget to clean your teeth afterwards).

Relievo/allalio/alladio were versions of gang tick in which even if only one person in a gang was free they could release the other members who were imprisoned in what had, I suppose, once been Beach Road's bike shed by evading all opponents and, with arm outstretched, run past shouting 'allalio.'

'Ollies' were what posh kids called 'marbles' and was played in two forms. One was along the middle of a back entry/enog/jigger and the other, in the playground, required a chalked circle with two ollies just inside the perimeter. One boy standing opposite outside the circle tried to flick his olly to knock the other two out of the circle. The owner of the two stationary ollies would stand behind them with heels together, toes apart so that no ollies would be scattered across the playground. 'Fudging' was when he stood too close so that when hit his ollies stayed inside the circle; hence the cry of 'no fudging': a useful piece of advice to get you through life.

I freely acknowledge not only a fading and unreliable memory but also that what may seem to be fixed rules and terminology change with time.

http://www.opieproject.group.shef.ac.uk/opies-biography.html

Cliff Jones August 2016

PS I am sure that Mr. Lowe drove a Morris 8. It was not the Series E version so must have been pre-war.