

Memories of a life at London Nautical School Woolverstone. September 1948 to July 1951.

By

Alan Arthur Rawlinson.

Having won a scholarship to a Nautical School in 1948 my young life was turned over dramatically. Bear in mind WW2 had not long ended and sweet rationing was still in place. I had fallen into bad ways, attending Chandos secondary Modern school, a vast and unwelcoming comprehensive. I was scrapping regularly, often returning home with black eyes. Worse, my out of school activities were questionable and I was keeping company with lads that ended up in Borstal for various offences, including some serious house breaking. So this total change jerked me back to a disciplined world. It was quite a shock, not least because my parents, well meaning, but not pushy, had failed to do any serious investigation into what I was letting myself in for. So off I went.

The application to The LCC was made on the spur of the moment in response to a circular letter sent to all the schools. One day a teacher with a clipboard put her head around the door in an agonising Maths session, saying, " Any budding sailors here? " and I leapt at it, glad to escape. An interview held later with the Headmaster, a Mr. Bezant, ended gloomily as he told my parents that my chances at the forthcoming written examination were slim or worse. In the event, and much to my surprise, I was the only success from that school. An oral test and interview in London followed, again successfully. A financial award enabled my parents to pay only a nominal amount each month, but it was still a significant part of their monthly budget.

That year was the year of the Olympic Games at Wembley. They had touched my life briefly when the marathon took place, and the road route for the runners clashed with my summer holiday job, pulling a bread cart on its rounds for 'Brills Bakery' of Edgware. A policeman ushered us off the road in Honeypot Lane, Stanmore, to make way for the runners! Shortly after, on September 6th, my parents and I took the tube to London and they waved me off on a coach outside County Hall. Destination - Woolverstone Hall, out in Suffolk, 5 miles from Ipswich. There were a mixed bunch of lads on the bus, one or two still in the striped school uniform jacket of their previous posh school. Our personal effects were in a green covered suitcase that had been stipulated in the instruction to parents and which was approved naval luggage of precise dimensions. It was a totally unnecessary expense for hard pressed parents, but insisted upon by those running the

school. This smart case with leather corners was quickly trashed when rocks and other rubbish was placed in it by the bigger lads in the Dormitory.

There were only 144 boys, (12 dormitories x 12 boys) at the school, and each dorm had a leader who slept in the bunk near the loos! His bunk was lengthwise and all the others ran across the Nissan huts, which had the trademark curved roofs. Heating was provided by 2 electric heaters in the centre of the aisle, conveniently sited for ad hoc cricket! Flooring was Lino, and the routine was for the boys to clean the dormitories and polish this Lino on Saturday mornings, which were set aside for this purpose. An inspection took place after which there was a welcome break when we could dress down for the day. In practice this meant dispensing with the collar, silk, lanyard, and cap, leaving us in bell bottom trousers and the tight top. It felt like heaven, somehow.

One of the very first tasks after stepping off the coach, was to get kitted out. The store, which was in a Nissan hut, was crammed full of uniforms, caps, boots, and all of the naval kit we would wear for our stay. A strong smell emanated from the new piles of blue serge material, and we trooped through, being supplied with our uniforms by the naval superintendents, before being allocated a dormitory. At the kitting out, we were all assigned a number, mine being 717. For the whole of my stay I was 717 Rawlinson. The 'powers that be' divided the boys alphabetically, with the result that my Dormitory had names starting with 'L' up to 'W'. A bunk was allocated, and the combination of the strange surroundings, the unfamiliar kit, and the bugle commands to eat and parade made for a very uncomfortable experience. It took me a long time to adjust. A few delicate souls never made it, and either ran away, or were withdrawn by parents. In my case, old habits die hard, and I was soon playing fisticuffs with my more obnoxious dorm mates. In particular, a lad called McCarthy who was in the next bunk, and who squared up to me on a regular basis. The usual boarding school hierarchy existed, and us new boys were expected to flunk for the old hands, cleaning boots etc. The discipline and lifestyle badly affected me, and it was many months before I started to settle. Not before a period of bed wetting which was extremely embarrassing and was made worse by my efforts to disguise the wet sheets by quickly making up the bed in the morning. It meant I returned to a damp and smelly bed each evening!

Nissan huts were situated all over the grounds, and used for storage, seamanship lessons, a tuck shop, the dormitories themselves, and a mess-hall created by siting 2 Nissan huts close together and arranging two passage ways through from one to the other. The seamanship huts were situated some way down the lawns on the right hand side facing the main

building, past the Diana statue, and involved quite a trek. One hut was fitted out as a classroom for signals and hobbies, and the other was a treasure trove of Stockholm tar, rope, cordage, and all the paraphernalia of boats and sailing. It gave out a delicious pungent smell never forgotten. It was here we learned how to "worm and parcel with the lay", and "serve the rope the other way". This ditty has been handed down from Nelson's navy and was great if you served in the wooden walled ships with miles of standing rigging. Something more useless as preparation for the post WW2 world would be hard to find! Even the modern shipping world had moved on.

The stable block housed the sickbay, the showers, the band room, the woodwork room, and some accommodation for Masters. One project in the woodwork room expertly run by a Mr. Young, was the creation of the two Dolphins in oak, which have featured in some photos and which supported the old Exmouth bell. This was placed in front of the main building forecourt and was used in flag raising ceremonies usually at 0900 each morning (2 bells). Mr. Young was also the proud owner of a yawl kept on moorings off of the hard at Woolverstone, and the boys (me included) volunteered for crewing duties, taking part in regattas and the like at weekends.

The daily routine never varied when the school was L.N.S Woolverstone.

There were 4 'houses' with a Nautical theme. They were the Forecastle, Foretop, Maintop, and Quarterdeck. Every morning, bugles roused the boys who had to run across the grounds to the showers in the stable block. This was done in stages to accommodate the numbers in the showers. The rallying call ended with blasts, and the drill was to listen for the number of blasts which ran in sequence from one to four. It follows that the Quarterdeck boys got the longest lay in as they went last, and we waited to go on 4 blasts! In winter, it mattered not if it was raining or 6 inches deep in overnight snow – the call to the showers had to be obeyed and was overseen by the Navy instructors, and in the time honoured way, each of these had a nickname, not always complimentary. At the showers in the stable block, it was obligatory to run through a tray of permanganate of potash, a purple mixture that left a long lasting tide mark round the ankles. It was a safeguard against foot rot. This, and conjunctivitis were common ailments among the boys. The showers themselves were operated by an overhead chain pull, and the technique was to hang on them for dear life with both hands up at the shoulder. (I still do this strap hanging involuntarily today nearly 70 years later). The shower ended abruptly when the instructors hosed us out with icy water.

Back in the dormitory there was a period, maybe an hour, when the boys dressed for the day in the navy square rig. This consisted of a serge two piece uniform, bell bottom trousers, and a tight fitting, over the head top jacket. Then the blue and white navy collar, lanyard and silk, all carefully arranged. At weekends it was permitted to dispense with the collar, lanyard, silk, and the cap. A navy system of rank was used so that there were petty officers (leading hands, who wore a navy killick on their left sleeve) and chief petty officers (CPO's) who sported the coveted cross anchors. Badges were also worn for signals expertise etc., and the author proudly wore a crossed flags badge signifying the holder of 'Advanced Signals', one of only two at the school. The bugle called the boy's to the mess-hall situated behind the main building on the east side. It happened that there were chickens in a big coop nearby, and any food like unwanted cake would be hurled over the wire to the grateful hens as the boys left the dining room. In the dining room, each table corresponded with the dormitory so that the head of the dormitory sat at the head of the table. The fare was mediocre, with rabbit stew, often with lead pellets in it, and unpalatable tapioca quite frequently for pudding. Slabs of cake were a feature, and if not thrown across at other tables, the chickens outside were grateful recipients. Local girls from the village had jobs serving in the mess room. In the way of things, informal but permanent arrangements were made between the boys to swap unwanted meals with favoured items. This way, it was possible to suddenly accumulate a dozen boiled eggs or many bowls of soup! No one wanted the rabbit stew, which was not surprising.

An important part of the day was the so called 'divisions' where all the boys lined up in front of the main building. Any announcements were then made, and a nominal inspection took place. The bell was then rung, the flag was raised (by me and a helper), and the bugles played. It seems comic today, viewed many years later. Gilbert and Sullivan comes to mind. Then the normal school day began.

After school and the evening meal, the boys were free for an hour or two, before a bugle call summoned them to double to supper. Homework was not enforced, although some lads used the time to study. The evening supper was ALWAYS cocoa from an urn, and wicker baskets held dry bread in one, and cheese cut into squares in the other which the boys filed past, helping themselves. The mood was normally good, and on some occasions an impromptu sing song would break out! I can recall one evening when all the lads joined in singing "Little Jimmy Brown" which had caught on for some reason. Like all schools, there were fads, hobbies, and slang which went around rapidly. The seamanship Master at one stage promoted the making of coloured spill holders, and this led to all the boys bizarrely toting around a short pole in their hands with coloured cord dangling.

After supper, there was a brief period at leisure before lights out. This was overseen by the Navy Masters who strolled around the dormitories leisurely enforcing the routine of bed and lights out. These ex Navy men were authority personified, and each had a character, some quite benevolent, and some not so. Mr. Matthews, the senior one, was an old timer from the Exmouth days, and although a tough character, easily irritated, he was very kindly and well regarded. In particular, his habit of carrying and reading poetry from little notes in his pocket was a talking point. The young boys regarded him as an eccentric, but he was a long experienced seaman instructor and he also had a kindly wife, an old lady to the boys, who readily darned their socks on request! These elderly instructors inadvertently projected the founding image of the Exmouth where many of them had served. By telling us hair raising tales of the strict discipline and corresponding punishments meted out afloat, they reinforced the concept that LNS Woolverstone was a correction school, although it was not. The LCC were at pains to project the place as a grammar school in the country, but these old instructors were wedded to the Exmouth concept. Even today, arguments can arise over the precise nature of the Exmouth ship itself. Below the main building was a crypt, out of bounds, but some boys made their way there after dark, and as a dare. Records and punishment books from the "Exmouth" were stored there, and they always made good reading. One of the more colourful entries was six strokes of the cane for "throwing the post boy overboard!"

In the years in this article, the main building was quite care worn. Internally, the decor was shabby, and the plaster walls marked superficially. The very top floor housed the navigation room with a splendid view down the Orwell towards Felixstowe. At this time, the last working sailing barges were flogging their way up and down to the mills at Ipswich and these added to the beauty of the view. The boys who frequented the river banks regularly came to meet the crew if for some reason they dropped anchor near the school 'hard' or further down at Pin Mill, where the well known pub, the "Butt and Oyster" was a strong draw! A typical crew was a Master, a boy, and a dog. No more, no less. It was an amazing feat given the size and unwieldy bulk of the spritsail barges with their Lee boards – an important part of the sailing kit which assisted in the crabbing movement when 'reaching' back and forth across the Orwell river.

Other floors held the school rooms, and the 'wings' around the forecourt housed staff. Facing the building on the left was the home of Commander Smethick, in charge of the school, and on the opposite side lived Captain Wiseman. The headmaster was a Mr Langley. Staff, from memory, included Lidster – Maths, Croot – History, Evans - P.E, Johannson – Navigation, Matthews - Seamanship and signals. 1951 saw the first 'O' levels introduced

to the U.K. and they were taken by a number of the boys. Seamanship and Navigation (papers set by Pangbourne College) were on offer and were taken and passed by me. The seamanship 'O' level involved practical work on the river, sailing and sculling (with a single oar) and taking charge of a manned boat with oars. Great fun.

In the building forecourt were two ugly water tanks remaining from the war precautions, and which acted as a dare for boys to swim at night. They were situated either side of the gates close to the railings on the inside. A mast with a small yard, stood in the centre of the green area, and flew the Woolverstone flag which was an ensign with a specially approved logo.

The grounds were surrounded by a high wire fence, except at the river end. Boys were compelled to double, or run, everywhere and walking was not generally encouraged. Trips out were not allowed except in an organised way at weekends, when a van, in Navy parlance, a Liberty bus, ran into Ipswich. Anyone opting for this had to be in their best uniform with all the correct dress. Going outside of the wire was strictly forbidden, but trips into Chelmondiston or Pin Mill were still quite common, sneaking through the wire and in dress down mode. In the innocence of those years it was simply to buy bread or sweets, maybe the odd packet of fags, but a far cry from all of the sad temptations for today's youth. A field of ripe sweet corn on the way provided an additional incentive.

Like most schools, especially boarding, sport was a big part of the week. Saturdays there were cricket or football matches, and the school was in a league with Ganges at Shotley, Holbrook nearby, and other schools. The 'liberty' bus was used to ferry boys to away matches, and the trip to Ganges was always an eye opener. The discipline there, and the terror of the big mast never failed to leave an impression. Many of the Woolverstone boys went on to Ganges, and some musical ones went into the Royal Marine Band school. The odd boy with high academic ability went to Dartmouth, and a number, including myself were dispatched into the Merchant Navy as apprentices. Some chose to be RN Artificers after successfully sitting the entry exam. The way careers were decided remains a mystery to the writer, and a suspicion remains that there was a default process, meaning that if parents failed to take any interest, or were too slow, the school authorities took it upon themselves to allocate boys according to their perceived ability.

We were not privy to the application process to shipping companies, for example. Possibly the Burser or someone else in authority fired off applications to several companies, scatter gun style. Some colleagues tell me today that the career chosen was arranged by their parents, but in my case I was simply informed one day that I would be joining a famous 'tramp' company as an apprentice navigator. As it turned out, I regard it now as

having won the jackpot because it was an iconic company recognised throughout the industry as a no frills but wide ranging Nautical education – which it fortunately was.

In addition to the usual sports activities, there was an opportunity to sail, either with the schools boats, or as crew for the staff who owned boats. I was regularly in the boat owned by the Commander of the school, and spent many hours stranded on the mud waiting for the tide to return after a misjudgement. Boys were also invited to crew boats out of Pin Mill and no regard at all was made for safety. Those were the days! I can recall manning a very old and large schooner that had been laid up for a year or two, and in the breeze that sprang up, several sheets and ropes parted with a bang. There was also a memorable trip out of Harwich on a very stormy day with the woodwork Master and his wife, who took to praying on her knees in the middle of a storm when we came close to snagging an old mast from WW2 sticking up out of the water. By sailing, it was possible to escape the semi obligatory need to excel at field sports which I was not particularly interested in.

Like all schools, there was an annual sports day and prize giving ceremony. At Woolverstone, we also laid on a demonstration of our particular skills with ropes or apparatus each year. The band also played, and all in all, they were fun days.

In 1950, the feature chosen was a demonstration of the workings of the Breeches Buoy, which saved many lives particularly in the sailing ship era, when Strandings around the coast were common and frequent. This rescue entails the firing of a rocket over the ship in difficulty, and then setting up a rope hawser by which a Buoy is hauled backwards and forwards with the distressed mariners. The Buoy has canvas leggings attached – hence the breeches name. We performed in front of the VIP's and parents, and the green playing field was an imaginary turbulent sea! To add some humour and liven up the rescue, it was decided to dress up someone as the imaginary Captain's wife on board, and for her to leap up at the last moment, screaming and shouting hysterically to be saved. This came my way, as a volunteer, and I was duly tarted up with lipstick and a flowery dress and told to hide behind the cardboard bulwarks, leaping up frantically at the last minute. The whole thing went off very well, and the watching crowd cheered and applauded enthusiastically as I bobbed across the gap to safety, duly shouting and waving like mad. The naval superintendents congratulated me on the performance and I cleaned up and later found my Mother who was in the front row. Unfortunately, she was horrified and embarrassed that I had volunteered for this fun acting role. Such is life.

On Sundays there was a ritual which took place and which revolved around the church service. The band led the way and we marched to the church in full uniform for the morning service, followed by inspection. Great score was put on the detail of the uniform, and many hours were spent getting everything 'tiddly' in Navy parlance. The bell bottoms in particular were judged by the depth and sharpness of the ladders or creases showing. To achieve this, a strong wooden press was used, and admiring looks won if the creases were very strong. The cap issued was an oval shape, and many lads purchased round caps which were considered 'cool' in today's speak. (see photos). The other item which distinguished the smart ones from the rest of us was the cap bow at the side. This could be a simple bow, or it could be coaxed into a more butterfly shape which was greatly favoured. During the inspection, the band played lovely slow marches and other tunes suitable for the walk through the ranks. They were great pieces, remembered to this day. Sunday afternoon was more sport or sailing.

Down on the river bank, rope swings out over the water were improvised, and the big grounds provided ample scope for adventurous lads. Many pheasants nested around the ferny areas, and on occasions when wandering further afield, shotguns were fired at the fleeing boys.

Gradually my familiar pals in the dormitory left one by one, and in 1950 at the start of the academic year, the coaches from London delivered new and younger boys, only 11 years old. Furthermore, and unknown to me at the time, a decision had been made to revert to a non Nautical school, and the uniforms and the Nautical training scrapped. So for my final year, the young boys remained in civilian dress, whilst we 'old hands' stayed in our uniform. I was given charge of 12 dormitory and the privilege of 'lording it' over a dozen young beginners, all of whom I got to know well. As is the case, they were of mixed ability, and even more individual and different in their personalities. Looking back, and with the benefit of hindsight, I wish I could have been more supportive than I was at the time, but of course, I was still 'wet behind the ears' myself as I was to find out later at sea!

In 1951 as I departed the school, the Festival of Britain was taking place in London and it was a huge success for the nation. One of the key attractions on the South Bank was a feature called "The Dome of Discovery". It was an apt name for me personally, as it was the start of an amazing career commencing when I finally left Woolverstone Hall that summer, and climbed the rickety ladder of my first ship in Cardiff docks, the S.S. Forthbank. It was a two year round the world voyage, and my own 'dome of discovery' had truly begun.



The Nautical College – L.N.S. Woolverstone



An image of the Author before embarking on his “Dome of Discovery”

End