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GETTING CREATIVE

Private education is changing. No longer focused purely on academic excellence, schools are now offering children the opportunity to express themselves and think outside the box.

Vanessa Berridge investigates...

WHEN I WAS at school, one teacher's mantra was 'if you write in the exam what I have taught you, you will pass. If you do not, you will not.' Creative activities were limited to making shapeless wicker baskets and school trips to a Sussex dairy farm. And as for careers guidance: the Greek mistress would rifle through a shoebox of index cards before each careers session. Her advice was based on what she had chanced upon the previous evening, resulting in her advising the shyest girl in the year to aim for the diplomatic service, and another, completely without artistic ability, to become a landscape designer.

I returned recently to my school and found it transformed. No longer was it a convent-like stockade, designed to keep the world out, but somewhere girls are encouraged to look beyond their studies to their professional future. Notice boards bore witness to a dazzling range of activities. Schools have wised-up to what is needed, acknowledges Dr Helen Wright, president of the Girls' Schools Association, and headmistress of St Mary's Calne. 'Good schools are preparing their pupils not just for university but for life.'

WITHIN THE ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

Academic achievement remains the benchmark of a school's success, and is the first point of reference for parents. But even academic curricula have been re-evaluated, with the increasing popularity of the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma, which offers a broader range of study, plus an element of 'creativity, action and service'. Sixth formers are encouraged to play sport, take part in art, music or drama, and involve themselves in the local com-

munity. Another qualification is the AQA Baccalaureate This works with A-levels, while picking elements from the IB, and includes training in employability, critical thinking and citizenship. It has been adopted by Lady Eleanor Holles School, in Hampton, in preference to the IB or A-Level alternative – the Cambridge Pre-U.

'The danger is that schools become too absorbed in exams,' says Karen Davies, deputy head of Cheltenham College, in Gloucestershire. 'We want to encourage employable skills such as lateral thinking and problem solving.' This is done within the context of academic study. Recently, pupils, staff and parents attended evenings on the Elements, the Renaissance and the Golden Section. The latter involved presentations from students studying art, architecture, maths and music.

The academic curriculum is also under scrutiny pre-Common Entrance, with the introduction this autumn of the Independent Curriculum (IC), devised by a board of independent-school teachers. Its curriculum is published by Galore Park Publishing, whose managing director, Nicholas Oulton, a former classics teacher, comments: 'It is starting to prepare today's nine-year-olds for jobs which may not yet exist.' The aim is to give children confidence, empathy, communication skills and global awareness by presenting the basic academic curriculum differently. Children will be encouraged to discover material for themselves and then apply their newly acquired knowledge through verbal and visual presentation. John Brett, headmaster of Old Buckenham Hall School in Suffolk, will be using the new curriculum from this September, with support from public-school heads. 'The idea is to relax



the vice-like grip of Common Entrance on teaching,' he explains. 'If exams dominate learning, creativity and discovery are limited.' The IC, he believes, is more reflective, and caters for the less academic, as well as high achievers, as pupils will be allowed to include a portfolio alongside the exam when applying to public schools.

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

But academics are just part of the story at any good school, particularly at boarding schools where half of pupils' time is non-teaching time. These schools can introduce their students to a wide range of stimulating and developmental activities. Good day schools are also rising to the challenge to engage their pupils beyond the constraints of the school day.

STARTING EARLY

Natalie Stone, head of nursery at the academic Norwich High School, believes too

many children are caught up in a whirlwind of 'cosseted' activities, such as ballet, horse riding, and piano driven hither and thither by anxious parents. 'They're always being instructed,' she says. 'I want to remove our little girls from the artificial stresses of modern living.' The school has done this through the introduction of Forest School, which aims to give children a greater understanding of the natural environment. Children spend time in the school's woodland area, investigating wildlife and making dens and tools, for instance, using natural resources in an old-fashioned *Famous Five*-type way. 'Working outside with other children encourages communication and collaboration, boosting confidence and self-esteem.' One afternoon a week is timetabled for Forest School throughout the year. Pupils at Oxford's Dragon School have just taken their first commercial order for their 'Dragon Nectar' honey from a local sandwich-shop

chain. 'Ask most children about anything "eco"; says assistant head of science Kate Heath, 'and you will soon realise that it is the youngest generation who have the clearest grasp of what needs to be addressed for a brighter, cleaner future.' The bee-keeping project was led by pupils and is now in its second season. The weekly activity for years seven and eight (age 11-13), gets children involved in building hives, harvesting and bottling honey. Other schools have taken part in workshops, which relate bees to art, science and English classes. 'Beekeeping,' says Heath, 'provides a framework to address sustainability and the environment, through issues such as food, recycling and use of energy.'

The aim is to give children confidence, empathy, communication skills and global awareness

Eleven-year-olds at Orwell Park School in Suffolk had history brought alive to them in May on a 16-hour day trip to Ypres, where some of the fiercest fighting of the First World War took place. They also visited Tyne Cot, where 50,000 British soldiers are buried, and a German cemetery, too, to make them aware of the casualties suffered on both sides of the war. 'The children sat quietly and ate their lunch, thinking of what went on all those years ago,' says a school representative.

LATER STAGES

As children progress to their senior schools age 11 or 13, the need increases to make them aware of a world beyond narrowly academic confines. Abbotsholme in Staffordshire has a working farm in which the pupils take an active role, as does Atlantic College, a sixth-form school in South Glamorgan. One of the earliest proponents of the IB, the school expects students to commit several hours a week to community service. The 350 16-19-year-olds help with lambing, working on the allotments and maintaining 20 hectares of agricultural land and woodland. They also man the local RNLI station, prepare the boats and go out on calls.

At King's College School, Wimbledon, a day-school with a packed timetable, Friday afternoon is devoted to extra-curricular activities. A recent popular course was Global Issues, which resulted in 'Make a Difference Day', at which boys sold fair trade coffee, and highlighted to fellow pupils a range of environmental concerns.

Bedales, a co-educational boarding school in Hampshire, puts a greater

emphasis on the arts than more conventional competitors, such as Shrewsbury, Radley and Downe House, according to headmaster Keith Budge. 'New pupils are invited to look at the broad range offered, rather than being confronted with a set structure,' he says. Potential activities include working on the school's farm, as well as cabinet-making, barn-making and martial arts. 'Because the school makes a virtue of individuality, we tend to attract strong-minded, inventive youngsters with an unusual way of looking at the world.' A recent Bedales pupil, Claudia White, set up a website, www.grincampaign.co.uk (GRIN = Global Respect in Schools) to campaign against bullying.

Stephen Walsh, head of English and sixth form at Christ's Hospital School, and a published writer, launched a creative-writing competition at the school. 'I wanted to conquer children's feeling that writing was not for them,' he tells me. Each year, year-10 pupils examine a novel with an episodic structure. They are challenged to write a story to fit into the structure, and, at the end of the competition, the stories are bound into a book, with artwork created by the pupils. 'The restriction of the book's structure can be liberating,' believes Walsh. 'Given a free rein, boys will often just write about violence and girls about emotions. What we're trying to do is to open their eyes to the pleasure of writing whether as a hobby or as a career.'

Heather Hanbury is keen to prepare pupils for life in business, the City, construction and design. Headmistress of Wimbledon High School, she was a City management consultant for eight years before taking up teaching. Determined to stop girls leaving at 16 to join mixed sixth forms, she came up with the slogan, 'Six is the Best'. A friend from her consultancy days chaired a session, open to girls in years 10-13, to come up with ideas for refurbishing the school's sixth-form block. 'I wanted to give girls the chance to make decisions about the day-to-day and about the future,' she says. A core team of 12 girls worked with architects, designers and builders, and were given training from business consultants to manage the project. 'They reported back to me, but otherwise I left them to it,' Hanbury recalls. 'I didn't have to say no to anything because they worked out the practicalities for themselves.'

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Academic excellence? Empathy? A good sense of humour? Vanessa Berridge asks...

WHAT REALLY MAKES A GREAT TEACHER?

YOU MAY REMEMBER the scene at the end of *Dead Poets' Society*, when the boys clamber on their desks to declare their support for their inspirational but beleaguered English teacher, played by Robin Williams. A tear-jerking movie moment, but with no basis in reality, says Niall Browne, a former boarding-school master and now schools' consultant at the educational trust, Gabbitas. 'It's an awful film and a bad cliché,' he states firmly. 'It's a twee idea that one inspirational teacher can turn a child's life round. Children need stability not controversy.'

There is, of course, something indefinable about what makes a good teacher. Lisa Cook, director of Teaching and Learning at Central Newcastle High School, sets standards for teaching there. She reels off a list of what she regards as essential qualities: passion, enthusiasm, creativity, empathy, excellence of subject knowledge and the ability to change, respond and develop, and to deliver well-planned lessons. Teachers must also be able to inspire, challenge and develop pupils' independent thinking, as well as to communicate with parents and colleagues. Potential teachers spend a day in the school, teach an observed lesson, lunch with the girls and staff and are interviewed by the department head, senior line manager and the headmistress. The girls are asked for feedback on the lesson taught – and the school is even considering using a panel of different-aged girls to interview candidates. 'We have a very active pupils' forum,' she explains, 'and it would be interesting to see how a potential teacher responds to the girls in such a setting.'

Helen Madaras, an educational consultant and director of Heathfield School's

Summer School, says that a class measures within seconds whether a teacher will be able to maintain discipline.

'What teachers need,' she argues, 'is confidence in their subject knowledge. They must have an air of authority and be comfortable in themselves.'

A MORE CREATIVE APPROACH

Teaching has certainly become much more imaginative over the past 30-plus years since I was at school, when teachers taught from well-thumbed copies of Shakespeare, with passages marked, we were convinced, with reminders to 'laugh here'. Louise Robinson, president elect of the Girls' Schools Association (GSA) and headmistress of Merchant Taylors' School for Girls in Crosby, believes that high expectations of both themselves and their students is crucial for any teacher. 'They must prepare thoroughly, know the criteria, and do their own homework,' she asserts. 'They can't just teach the same lessons year after year.'

Willingness to go the extra mile is essential. Robinson spent four weeks this summer holiday in Ecuador with 22 girls taking part in World Challenge. 'That extra commitment is what parents are paying for. Teachers need energy and stamina.'

Academic rigour is another essential. 'You must have high standards,' says Niall Browne. 'A poor or even mediocre essay is unacceptable, as are untidiness, poor spelling and bad grammar. Children at demanding schools respond to this approach – and remember.'

But alongside exacting standards must come empathy, and an appreciation of individual children's needs. Teachers should be aware of parental illness or

family bereavement. You also have to assess how to get the best out of pupils.

Academic high flyers are not necessarily always the best teachers, but those are the people that educational charity Teach First is recruiting to teach in challenging schools. The aim of the charity is to break the link between parental income and educational achievement. James Darley, director of Graduate Recruitment and a former investment banker, says that he is looking to find graduates who have the potential to become what he calls 'impactful' teachers. He is looking for the competencies outlined by Lisa Cook at Newcastle, as well as leadership, and organisational and problem-solving ability. 'We have three other key criteria,' he says. 'Humility, self-evaluation and resilience – and we evaluate these twice during the selection process.'

Resilience echoes through what many of the teachers say. Former teacher Kevin Stannard was appointed Innovation and Learning director for the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) in January 2011 after five years with an exam board.

'What surprised me is the extent to which exams now dominate teaching,' he tells me. 'Teachers should be shock absorbers. They have to rise above the potentially constraining influence of exams and, while meeting the criteria, teach as if those constraints weren't there.'

Subject knowledge and genuine enthusiasm for the subject are key, believes Niall Browne and the other teachers I have spoken to. 'Some of the best teachers may seem a bit dull, but if they are passionate about their subject, they will be able to communicate that to the children – who will then feel that they are in safe hands.' ♦



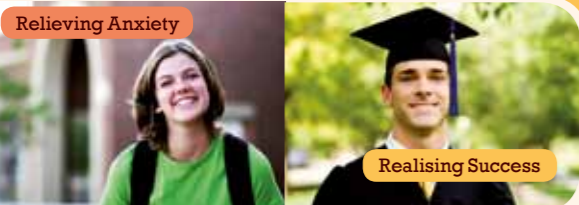
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WHEN TO GO PRIVATE

Private education doesn't come cheap, but you don't have to send your children for their entire school career. Vanessa Berridge examines the options

THE HIKE IN TUITION FEES to as much as £9,000 a year will mean more parents think twice before committing themselves to long-term independent education for their children.

So, if you've got a limited pot of cash, which are the key school years to spend it on? Gill Richards, head of Bolton Girls' School, acknowledges that it's hard to choose: 'There's an argument for every stage being crucial.'

Catherine Walters, director of Assessment, Guidance and Consultancy at Gabbitas, put her three children through private school. But, she says, if she had had to choose, she would have opted for the independent sector for pre-prep and prep.

'My gut feeling is that the crucial years are three to 11 for a girl and three to 13 for a boy. That's when they learn to learn and establish good patterns of work. Then, if you're lucky to live near a good grammar school, you've got no worries – or you could back up a poor comprehensive with tutors. It's much easier to teach younger children than to reach a bolshie teenager.'

Peter Green, headmaster of co-educational Ardingly, agrees, but would lay greater emphasis on pre-prep. 'You then get the basics right, and, once the children have a strong foundation, they can be transferred at seven or eight to a state primary. We get a certain number of pupils coming in from the state sector at year nine or 10 for GCSEs. They stay for those four years when exams are so important.'

Prep-school years are the magical part of private education, says Janette Wallis, senior editor of the *Good Schools Guide*. 'Those are the years when schools have freedom to develop their pupils before they become straitjacketed by exams. If you want something different for your child, choose an independent prep school.'

Gill Richards, believes, however, the best value would be the first five years of secondary education. 'Adolescence is tricky. Girls in particular are influenced by peer pressure and can go off the boil.'

But, if money is tight, then it's probably worth investing just in the two GCSE years, says Wallis, while pointing out that the choice of school may be restricted because not all will have places available at that stage. 'Very few parents have the nerve to take that course,' she admits, 'and it's certainly not ideal in terms of friendships or continuity for a child. But, if funds

USEFUL CONTACTS

Gabbitas (educational consultants):

020-7734 0161, www.gabbitas.co.uk

Galore Park Publishing (educational

publishers): 01580-767206,

www.galorepark.co.uk

Girls' Day School Trust (GDST):

020-7393 6666, www.gdst.net

Girls' Schools Association (GSA):

0116-254 1619, www.gsa.uk.com

Good Schools Guide: 020-3286 6824,

www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk

Independent Schools Council (ISC):

020-7766 7070, www.isc.co.uk

are limited, you'll get most bang for your buck by paying for those two years.'

Wallis is less convinced by the argument for transferring to private at 16, although she acknowledges that bright pupils without like-minded friends might benefit from boarding at that stage if there isn't good local state sixth-form provision.

'It's hard to beat a good state sixth-form college academically,' she says – and the success of Hills Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge seems to prove her point. Jenny Walker, who moved from a small private school to state Esher College for the sixth form, was happy to have made the change, finding excellent teaching and pastoral care at her college.

But the major advantage of independent sixth-form education is smaller classes. Most public schools operate a tutorial system, which means that students' strengths and weaknesses are easily spotted.

'Students will be working with other able pupils,' says Richards, 'who will challenge and stretch them.'

It's a tricky choice. Kevin Stannard, Innovation and Learning director at The Girls' Day School Trust (GDST), believes it's more a question of *whether* you are going to spend money on independent education, rather than when. 'It's an invidious question: the huge advantage of GDST schools is that they offer an all-through perspective. The sixth form is not just a two-year course, but a qualification built on foundations laid in earlier years.' ♦

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UNLIKE CATHERINE, I LOVED BOARDING

The Duchess of Cambridge may have had a horrible time, but, says Olivia Williams, boarding school can be a rip-roaring adventure, too...

THE DUCHESS OF CAMBRIDGE had such a horrible time at her girls' boarding school, Downe House, that she left after two terms. Wisdom would tell us that such experiences are character-building. However, nowadays parents expect complete assurance that their progeny are going to be carefully looked after – not have their lacrosse stick stolen and made to sit alone at lunch. But are girls' boarding schools these days hotbeds of bullying, as the Duchess' case suggests?

At my Downe House entrance interview, I was asked why I wanted to board. I can't have been the only candidate struggling not to blurt out 'lashings of ginger beer for tea! Midnight feasts! Jolly japes in the dorm before lights out!'

Like many others, I mistook *Mallory Towers* for a prospectus. During my first few weeks I remember, during the nightly ritual of crying in the bathroom, wondering what on earth I was doing there. I felt far from home, further still from *Mallory Towers*. I cursed Enid Blyton and went back to bed.

At the beginning, though I wasn't bullied, I did feel claustrophobic and homesick. In fact I nearly left, but I gave it another year and I am really glad that

I did. I don't wish to undermine how unpleasant the Duchess of Cambridge's experience was, but talking to my fellow alumnae, we were tempted to think that she could have given Downe House another term or two, and become a boarder.

To a great extent, how much you enjoy school depends on how nice the other girls are. Some years are full of nasty girls and others, like my year, had only a handful – essentially it's a lottery. I had a wonderful time. But it is all too easy for it not to be.

The reaction of Miss Cameron, the headmistress while Catherine was there, was 'girls will be girls', in an interview with the *Daily Mail*. I find that alarming.

Indeed, a *laissez-faire* attitude to pastoral care is where girls' boarding schools can come unstuck. We were essentially self-governing – sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't. I was surprised how little housemistresses noticed. They didn't seem to have taken on board that they were in *loco parentis*. They ranged from ineffectual to actively unpleasant. A friend's father commented that he wouldn't like to bump into one of our housemistresses on a dark night – I didn't enjoy it in a well-lit common room. Mainly, we were



Olivia Williams and friends at Downe House

left to take care of each other. We were so close that we even nit-combed each other's hair.

Friendship is particularly precious when you're away from your family. It made us close-knit, but also made it challenging for newcomers, and it raised the stakes when we fell out.

Stephanie recalls when she joined Downe House in sixth form: 'It was really hard at the beginning. It was cliquy as everyone had formed such strong friendship groups, much more so than at day schools.'

However, in our rural isolation, we managed to avoid many teenage-girl pitfalls. As far as I know, there was little depression, self-harm or alcohol abuse, and no drug abuse at all. Considering what a minefield growing up can be, we were relatively unscathed.

A few girls had eating problems, but far fewer than other schools. Eating was a joyous communal activity. Rather than calorie counting, we spent our time having food fights or distracting the kitchen staff so that we could sneak illicit third helpings of pudding. We were so overzealous at teatime they stopped sending female cooks to put the cakes out because they were too scared. They had to send a man, fending us off and shouting 'get back' at regular intervals.

Particularly for London girls, being cloistered away is no bad thing, and it is ideal for the easily distracted or the potentially wayward. As Oscar Wilde sagely observed, 'anybody can be good in the country'.

Personally, I can't see my teenage self getting any work done in London. Comparing myself with my day-school friends, I was relieved to be in self-imposed exile. I led a sheltered life. We were grindingly uncool for years at school and I am grateful for that.

I see really young girls on the King's Road immaculately groomed, with huge handbags and slavishly fashionable clothes, and I feel sorry for them. At their age I was padding around in a fleece and trainers. When you're on a hill in deepest Berkshire, with no man in sight except your housemistress' paunchy husband, straightening your hair and faffing around with fake tan hardly seems worth it.

I am glad that I was spared the anxiety for so long. Saskia Harris-O'Donoghue left Cranbrook for a mixed school in sixth form: 'We couldn't get anything done. Everyone was too busy trying to impress the boys. Cranbrook was so relaxed. Suddenly I had to start trowelling on make-up and dithering over my wardrobe.'

I didn't find school particularly bitchy. To my mind, the main drawback was the mismanagement of relations with boys. 'Socials' were our only means of term-time interaction and they were pretty awful. They were essentially kissing competitions in near-pitch darkness; with a Latin master lurking in the corners of the hall to make sure it didn't go any further.

We didn't talk to the boys. We just kissed as many as we could, then left. My best friend's tally was 14 in one night – this has been verified by several eyewitnesses. My first social, at Wellington, had a chalkboard with a tally chart ready for our arrival. As Beatrice, who went to Wycombe Abbey reflected, 'having such limited interaction with boys means you have no idea what they're really like and that had a really negative effect on us'.

Beatrice eventually left Wycombe for a mixed boarding school. Alice, who went to St Mary's Ascot agrees, 'we just didn't know the nature of the beast'. A substantial majority of my year never had a boyfriend the entire time they were at school and few

Friendship is particularly precious when you're away from your family'

male friends. I don't think the sense of trepidation surrounding men has ever left some of us.

Downe House deliberately did not employ attractive male teachers, leaving few outlets for our attentions. One teacher came for a trial lesson and there was so much sexual tension in the room that it was brought to a premature end. The maintenance men weren't safe either. A girl in my year asked one of them to accompany her to our leavers' ball. In fact, if any man came near the place we were like rats up a drainpipe.

The girls who left for sixth form almost uniformly went to mixed boarding schools. It wasn't boarding they were fed up with; it was the absence of men.

Girls' boarding needs a bit of tweaking, but I still recommend it. For me, one of the great benefits was prolonging my childhood. After all, it's a precious commodity. We were naughty, but in an innocent way. You have the rest of your life to be mature, anxious about your appearance and try to understand relationships. I felt under little pressure to impress anyone while I was at school, how many teenage girls can say that these days? ♦





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 E: registrar@heathfieldschool.net www.heathfieldschool.net

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Open Day: Wednesday 21 September 2011



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Ofsted Inspection Report for Boarding 2011

Dragon School Open Mornings

Saturday 24 September 2011

Saturday 15 October 2011

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To include 11+ enquiries for years 7 & 8 (bursaries available)
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ONLY GIRL IN THE CLASS

Judith Anderson *fondly remembers her days at an all-boys' prep school*

WHEN I TOUR THE North of England teaching or giving talks about my textile art, there is usually a gasp when I say that I neither learned my needle skills at my mother's knee nor from a 'wonderful needlework teacher' – as I went to a boys' prep school between the ages of five and 12. However, I do know where silly mid-off is and can name all of the 10 'outs' at cricket. I also inform audiences that there is a Washington in Sussex as well as in Tyne and Wear.

Even today, I am often reminded of my time at Windlesham House – only recently a newspaper featured some letters about school reports and I thought of one of mine. It said 'A rose among thorns'. One would have to know that I was the sole girl in the science class for this to make any sense as it says nothing whatsoever about any ability I might have had in the subject (minimal).

Not only was I the only girl in my class for most of the time, but also the only girl boarder for several years. Later other girls joined and the 'girls' wing' was built for the start of 'co-ed proper' in 1967.

Windlesham memories come back to me most of all when I am having fun. Pupils now will hardly believe that we didn't have half terms and weekend exams in the early 1960s. The only day that there were no lessons was All Saints' Day when we played 'The Wide Game'. In my early days, I didn't join in with the

'I do know where silly mid-off is and can name all of the 10 "outs" at cricket'

sports although I participated in activities such as swimming or gym and joined in enthusiastically when it was declared there would be a 'free swim' or a game of 'British Bulldogs'. It was only when there were perhaps half a dozen girls that activities were organised and we went riding, skating in Brighton and took dancing lessons – ballroom, ballet and tap.

Many memories are linked to the food; which was excellent (with the exception of banana custard which I still cannot even contemplate eating without a shudder). There was no choice and we had to eat everything. I have always felt like writing to Nigella and telling her that she was way behind the times – we had bowls of Marmite mixed with butter on the supper table at prep school 45 years ago.



Windlesham House School, West Sussex

I was also introduced to classical music at Windlesham where Music Appreciation lessons would see us sitting under tables half asleep letting the strains of Beethoven, Mozart and Rossini wash over us. As well as classical recitals, we were treated to performances of other genres: pop musicians gave concerts, riotous singsongs took place and films were screened. Well before *Britain's Got Talent*, we had our own talent show where I did a Scottish dance accompanied by a fellow pupil on the drums.

Other things also changed in 1967 – we learnt French skipping and to play with jacks rather than marbles and balsa aeroplanes. The school became more colourful as the monochrome uniform changed to red, green and blue, and on Sundays the girls wore their 'best' dresses providing a welcome contrast to the boys' suits.

However, with these changes standards did not slip and Mr Charles, the headmaster, still presided over the pre-Chapel inspection of cleanliness of hands and shoes and we waited with bated breath to see which House had won.

An invitation to the centenary celebrations has brought back a flood of memories; push-starting Mr Chilvers' Austin 7, cooking Sunday lunch on a fire in the woods, trying to tame feral kittens, catching slow worms, Chinese burns and dead legs, the 'fainting' craze, kicking crunchy beech leaves in the autumn and running barefoot on the lawn on a warm summer's evening.

Oh, and I did do some schoolwork as well. Amongst a crowded timetable, I started French at six and Latin at seven – with vast amounts of 'vocab' to be learnt during 'prep' in the corridor. Happy days indeed. ♦

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To book a place at an Open Event or for more information please contact:
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