

MEMORIES OF A WONDERFUL SCHOOL, SOME WONDERFUL TEACHERS AND A WOMAN

WHO UNKNOWINGLY HELPED TO MAKE ME WHAT I AM.

My childhood, before I went to Fishwick Secondary Modern School as an 11+ failure in 1956, was spent at St Matthew's C of E Infant and Junior School - as it was then called - in New Hall Lane, Preston. Since then I have spent most of my working life in classrooms and as I now



St. Matthew's today – but still as I largely remember it. Cock Roberts' classroom was behind the two classroom windows on the upper left.

look back, half way through my eighth decade, I can remember with considerable clarity my school life as a child, a teacher, a head teacher, a school inspector and as a course leader/assessor for trainee teachers on the Graduate Teacher Programme. Looking back I not only remember the people and the events but, strange to tell and such is the power of memory, that I can also remember how I felt at the time, and the sounds and smells of those far off days. American author Maya Angelou famously said that *"People will forget what you did and people will forget what you said. But people will never forget how you made them feel"* – well that is undeniably true, but, in my view, only to point. People do remember what was said to them and what was done and when I look back to my years at St. Matthew's I remember with gratitude and considerable humility what the teachers there said and did, and, of course, how they made me feel all those years ago – in short they went a long way to making me what I became and what I am. I can pay them, and the school, no higher tribute.

I lived in Caroline Street which was just round the corner from the school and one of my first memories of St Matthew's stands out as if yesterday. It was a February morning in 1952 when I was almost seven and I was in the Infant section of the school which in those days was shared with the Junior Girl's section (the boys and girls were separated on reaching junior school age at seven, the boys moved into the boys' department). The whole infant and girls' school were suddenly taken from our classrooms in mid morning and herded into the space that served as a school hall. There, I remember a grim faced head mistress, through her tears, telling the assembled school and weeping staff that she was very sad to tell us that the King – George VI – had died that morning. We all had to bow our head in prayer and then the headmistress told us that as a mark of respect for the dead King we would all be sent home forthwith, school was closed for the day. So I left, wrapped up in my coat, my ears kept warm by the balaclava knitted

by my mother, and walked home through the cold February air. There was no letter to explain to my mother that the school was closed it was just expected that we were grown up enough to go home, explain and, if there was no-one in at home to let us in, keep ourselves safe for the rest of the day. I was lucky my mother did not work and I can remember knocking on the front door and explaining to her why I had come home half way through the morning. Looking back it all seemed so natural – today, of course would be so different, health and safety legislation would prevent any school taking such a course of action – but in those days it seemed perfectly right and proper that the King's passing should be marked in such a way. My mother, I remember, was unperturbed by my early arrival home and clearly accepted that it was right and proper that the school should take the action it did; looking back now it was an age when parents never questioned, as they might today, the actions and views of schools, teachers or others in "authority". It was an age, for people like my mother, when "the school knew best", and "ours not to reason why". My mother had not heard the news of the King's demise and she immediately switched on our brown plastic Rediffusion wireless which sat in the corner of our front room to hear the details of the King's death. I can still hear the sorrowful music that was being played and the BBC announcer giving the details of the death, the national mourning and the protocol of the occasion, his grim subdued voice speaking in the BBC English so prevalent at the time and

sounding quite alien to me as a working class child of Lancashire.



Another memory of my life at St Matthew's was the weekly school's radio broadcast "Singing Together" – one of the great children's radio programmes. Even today, I can still remember sitting in Mr Morris' class (more of Mr Morris later!) as a nine or ten

The pavements look a bit wider and there were no trees or quite so many cars on New Hall Lane in the 1950s – but this is very definitely the New Hall Lane & St Matthew's I remember

year old joining in with the music while Mr Morris "conducted" us. I can remember exactly the words of many of the songs that we sang: "*The Vicar of Bray*", "*Where 'er you walk*", "*Michael Finnigan*", "*Lillibullero*", "*The Skye Boat Song*", "*Barbara Allen.....*". Now, as a grumpy old man, I often think that children today are being actively disadvantaged by not experiencing these traditional songs and poems – for in their words lies so much of our nation's history; put simply they help to explain who and what we are, where we have come from and they give a context to

our lives. On a different tack I can also recall with painful clarity the daily PT drill on the school playground. This wasn't physical education in the way I learned to teach it to generations of my own primary school charges but physical training akin to the exercises performed by soldiers. There was no school hall in the junior boys' section of St Matthews so indoor PE was not possible which meant that it was done on the playground – in any weather! All of us standing in straight lines running on the spot, jumping up and down in time with the teacher, touching our toes to the rhythm of the teacher's clapping hands; and all done in complete silence, no laughing or giggling, our breath misty in the cold morning air. It was usually one of the two younger teachers - either Mr Sharples or Mr Morris - who led this daily ritual which more often than not was bolted on to the end of morning playtime so there was no time wasted going inside and getting changed - we just did it in our outdoor clothes.

As I explained above in those far off days the school was split into separate boy and girl departments. Although we were all together at the infant school once we reached the age of seven and became juniors the boys went into the boys' side of the building and the girls into theirs which was also shared with the infant section. We had separate playgrounds with a high wall so never the twain should meet! Once a week, summer and winter, each class of boys would be taken by either Mr Morris or Mr Sharples through the streets to what we knew as Paul's Pad – an open space surrounded by houses. We would walk in a long crocodile up New Hall Lane, onto Delaware Street, over Maitland Street and then to Paul's Pad. Those of us lucky enough to have football kit (not many of us!) would have it on, our boots click clacking on the pavement as we walked and old comics stuffed down our socks as shin guards! The boots in those days had leather studs which were hammered in (each stud had three little nails) and walking along the pavement soon wore them out so my dad was forever putting new studs in my boots which we bought from the shoe shop and cobbler's on New Hall Lane, owned by a



Paul's Pad has hardly changed – maybe a bit more grass today! The site of many grazed knees in my childhood!

pleasant bold haired gentleman named Mr Rawlinson. Every few weeks I would go to his shop for half a dozen new studs which he would count out and put into little a white paper bag. My dad would sit in the kitchen and hammer them into my boots while I watched. I still have the iron last that he used all those years ago. One couldn't call Paul's Pad a park – its surface was, as I remember it, covered with cinders and gravel and each November 5th the local bonfire was built there but every week, whatever the season or weather we would go to play football there. Classes were large, in my class when I was eleven there were 52 of us, so all 52 of us

would be chasing one ball around in a mad cap whirl, running off our energy – I suspect much to the teachers' satisfaction. I remember week after week coming home with grazed knees where I had fallen on the gravel and cinders as, like all my classmates, I sought to emulate our hero the great Preston North End footballer Tommy Finney!

In the junior boys' school there were four teachers and four classes – two classrooms downstairs and two upstairs where the oldest children were taught. As a seven/eight year old we were in Mrs Bargh's class – a quiet but strict, matronly, middle aged lady who was held in high regard, bordering upon awe and wonder, amongst us boys because we knew that she was married to George Bargh who had been a Preston North End footballer before the war but in the 1950s was the team's trainer. More of Mrs Bargh later!

The next class was for the eight/nine year olds and was taught by Mr Sharples – a young man, I suspect he was one of those wonderful men who were emergency trained as teachers immediately after being demobbed from the war; the booming birth rate in the aftermath of the war meant that the country was desperately short of teachers. Mr Sharples was a warm, kindly man, full of fun, who always had time and who would join in with the football; he had endless patience and every boy, I think, looked up to him. I remember him always wearing a grey suit with a knitted cardigan underneath it and although he was clean shaven he always seemed to me to have a dark chin, blue bearded, I think the term is. I remember on one occasion my mother had to go to see him - I think I had been off school for a week or two with an illness and she went to explain my absence. This, of course, was a time when parents' evenings were unheard of,



Mr Sharples just as I remember him.

when teachers and schools were seen very much as authoritarian places and held in high esteem by ordinary folk so a parent going into school was a little bit different. My mother, I am sure, would have been anxious - talking to teachers was not what ordinary folk did! I can still remember her standing in the cloakroom talking to Mr Sharples and explaining my absence while he was surrounded by a gaggle of little boys (me amongst them!), all pulling on his hand and jacket trying to grab his attention. After that event my mother on many occasions would say *"I don't know how that teacher copes with them all - he needs a big stick, he must have the patience of Job that man!"* But that was Mr Sharples, loved by all who came in contact with him; he had time for every child and when I became a primary school

teacher almost twenty years later I often (until the end of my career 40 odd years later) thought back to him and my time in his class and hoped that I made my lessons as interesting as he and

that I dealt with my charges as kindly, enthusiastically and thoughtfully as he did. A wonderful teacher and a wonderful man. I learned recently that Mr Sharples eventually became the Head Teacher at St Matthews – I'm pleased; it was, I am sure, thoroughly deserved and to the benefit of generations of children in the New Hall Lane area.

The next class was for the nine/ten year olds and was led by Mr Morris – again, I suspect an emergency trained teacher. Quiet, gentle, softly spoken, tall and thin he looked like a professor but was very strict in a gentle sort of way, rarely, if ever, raising his voice. I loved being in his class. At the far end of his classroom was a small room that passed



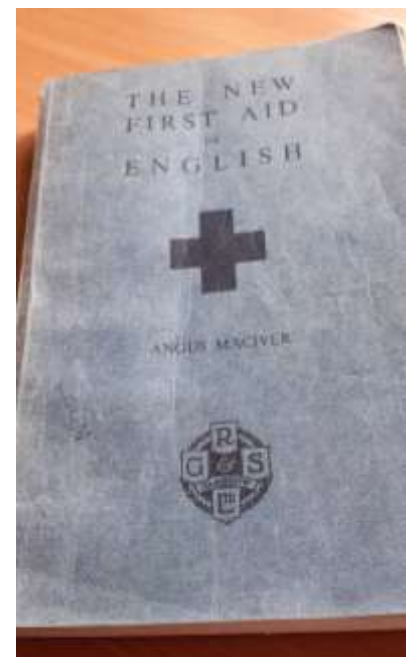
Remember them well!

for a staff room and I still remember being so proud when I was chosen to go round the school collecting the teachers' "tea money" once a week and after each playtime washing up their cups in the wash basins in that room. Mr Morris always seemed to encourage reading and I can well remember spending huge amounts of time wading through the upper end of the "Wide Range Readers" in his class. Some of the stories, such as one about how ancient cave men first made fire or one describing the various tasks and duties that mediaeval knights had to perform in order to claim the right to be recognised as a knight I can still remember and picture today. I can also remember every Thursday morning at 11 o'clock we would all squash up on our desks so that the "top class" could join us and for an hour we all sat and chanted multiplication tables, imperial measures tables and money tables: "12 pennies = 1 shilling, 20 shillings = £1, 21 shillings = 1 guinea, 240 pennies = £1....." and so it went on. As we all sat erect in our desks Mr Morris "conducted" us rather like an orchestra to keep us all in time together - just as he did when we joined together to sing while listening to "Singing Together" on the radio! Like Mr Sharples, Mr Morris was a wonderful teacher and one to whom I will always be grateful - I knew when I was in his class (and still today believe) that he was giving me something that would stay with me and would serve me well throughout my life.

And then the "top class" – the ten and eleven year olds! That was taught by Mr Roberts, the headmaster of the Junior Boys' School. A frightening, growling man, heavy jowled, balding and stout, always in a dark grey suit with waistcoat and with a commanding presence. We called him "Cock Roberts": the stories of his strict discipline were the stuff of school legend – all went in fear

of his commanding voice, his cane, the flying blackboard rubbers and the raps over the knuckles as he walked around the classroom up and down the lines of desks. He sat at a raised desk at the front of the class. Nobody misbehaved in Mr Roberts' class! When he spoke there was always a deathly silence and work was always carried out in total silence. Each week we would do exercises from a book called "First Aid in English" by a man called Angus Maciver. When I began teaching I discovered in my own first classroom a stack of these books which brought back many memories. I have one no on my desk here at home and throughout my teaching career would dip into it for my own lessons! I can also remember that in Mr Roberts' class we spent a lot of time doing history and each week would read out aloud around the class chapters from historical text books. I can vividly remember reading about Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 - I was engrossed by this tale and have absolutely no doubts that it was one of the reasons for my own life-long interest in all things historical. Of course, the reading aloud around the classroom wasn't popular with all the boys in the class. I was lucky as by then, although not a confident child at least when reading to the whole class I was a enough good reader to get by, but some of my classmates struggled. I can remember still with sorrow how Mr Roberts would castigate and punish boys who struggled. Finally, I can remember that each week we had a poem to learn by heart and on Friday mornings either in groups or individually we would have to stand at the front and recite the poem – without the book - to the class and Mr Roberts. Again, a number of boys suffered Mr Roberts' wrath on their "failure" to remember the words but I managed to somehow get through. Today, I can still recite most of those poems by heart – Wordsworth's *Daffodils*, Yeats' *Lake Isle of Innisfree*, Newbold's *Drake's Drum*, Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, Kipling's *If*, Auden's *Night Mail* and many, many others. A trial these times might have been but they had a lasting effect, those Friday mornings gave me a lasting love of all poetry.

The strange thing about Mr Roberts' class is that I don't today remember him actually teaching us very much! As I remember it lessons were brief; he would stand at the front show us how to do a particular sum or complete a particular piece of English and then told us to get on with the task, there was little or no further explanation, it was sink or swim while he returned to his desk and got on with whatever he was doing while we worked away in total silence. If you were one of the lucky ones, like me, and caught on then you had a chance but if not you were in trouble and would be punished harshly for your failure. Each morning when we walked in the black board, sitting on its



Memories of Cock Roberts' class – and of my own classrooms when I became a teacher!. My own copy of Maciver

easel, would be already filled with rows of neatly written sums or sentences to be corrected or answered and once the register had been taken we just got on with them in total silence - the punishment for those, like a boy in the class called Victor, who got them wrong or couldn't do them came later. Whatever the rights and obvious wrongs of this there was no doubt that it concentrated the mind - nobody messed around, everyone knew that concentration and hard work were the order of the day. But even then as a child I felt sorry for those who struggled; it was manifestly obvious to my young eyes that those like Victor who struggled with all their school work were being punished not for their laziness or lack of attention but for their lack of ability - and that didn't seem right to me.

Although we were all afraid of Mr Roberts there was one part of the week that we all looked forward to - Friday afternoon.

Each Friday we were allowed to bring something from home - a game, a book, some comics, a model to make etc. and we were allowed to use these on Friday afternoons. We all sat in total silence



Everything one ever needed to know about English grammar could be found in Maciver!

reading our books or comics or playing silent games of Dominoes, Snakes and Ladders or Ludo while Mr Roberts, as Head Master, sat at his desk doing all the school administration for the week such totalling the attendance registers, checking the dinner totals, writing letters and so on. No one dared break the room's silence or interrupt him - to do so would mean standing, hands behind one's back and totally still for the rest of the afternoon with one's nose pressed against the wall holding a piece of paper with your nose so that it didn't fall to the floor – that, of course, was after a couple of strokes of his cane! Should you sneeze or change position and the paper fluttered to the floor it was another whack with the cane. Looking back it seems bizarre - all those little boys playing totally silent games, showing no emotion when they won or lost, or exchanging comics with their friends without saying a word but at the time we thought nothing of it, it was just what we did and we looked forward to this break from the sums and the comprehension and all the other school subjects. At the end of every school day – and in every class – we would all stand, heads bowed and hands in prayer, while the teacher recited the end of lessons prayer: *"Now the busy day is done, Jesus bless us everyone. Keep us safely through the night, Until the pleasant morning light. Amen"*. Throughout my time at St Matthew's this always seemed to me to be the right thing to do, as a school we often went into St Matthew's Church to celebrate certain

festivals and of course the 1950s was still a time when saying one's prayers was a common part of life for many, maybe most, of the population. Having said that I can remember increasingly, as an eleven year old in Mr Roberts' class, finding the prayer increasingly incongruous and even to my young ears slightly jarring. It wasn't the prayer but the fact that these words about love and safety were being "growled" by this man who most of the boys, in various ways, were terrified of and who would, if he saw a child open their eyes when they should be praying, whack them across the back of their bare legs with the cane as he walked past! In Mrs Bargh, Mr Sharples and Mr Morris' class it all seemed right and appropriate – sadly, not so much in Cock Roberts' domain!

I remember one incident in Mr Roberts' class as if yesterday. I had been off school for several weeks with a nasty kidney infection which led to a short stay in hospital and when at last I returned to school the world had moved on. On the first morning back I sat gazing at the blackboard which had rows of sums – all of which involved adding and subtracting fractions. I hadn't a clue what to do – fractions were a new world for me – I had missed this bit of the math's curriculum during my absence! I was far too terrified to ask Mr Roberts so I tried to peep at what my desk partner and best friend Brian Rigby was writing but he put his arm around his work so that I couldn't copy! I was becoming desperate and then I watched as another friend – who I also knew was better at maths than me – Stephen Hitchen went off with Billy Masheter to distribute the daily bottles of milk to all the classes in school. They were the week's milk monitors. I sat fidgeting, wondering if I dare ask to go to the toilet. In the end I plucked up courage stood before Mr Roberts who I knew was aware that I had been ill and so let me go to the lavatory. I ran down the staircase, through the cloakroom and out onto the playground to the toilets which were at the far end. I knew that I would find Stephen and Billy in there, wasting a few minutes between delivering crates of milk around the school. As expected they were there and as we stood in the lavatories Stephen and Billy - who each Saturday afternoon I went with to the Guild Cinema in nearby Geoffrey Street to scream and shout with hundreds of other kids as we watched black and white Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, Robin Hood or Flash Gordon films - gave me a few brief tips on fractions; a life line! Returning to the classroom I must have managed to write something down that was vaguely meaningful and didn't incur Mr Roberts' wrath too much – and at least I got a bit of breathing space to find out how to tackle the addition and subtraction of fractions. When, years afterwards, I found myself teaching fractions to my class, I remembered that mathematical discussion in the open air lavatories at St Matthews and always had a huge sympathy for the many children who just didn't "get it" – I knew exactly how they felt!

I could go on down this nostalgic memory lane: the ten minute daily walk from school every dinner time when those of us who had a school dinner walked in a two abreast crocodile up New

Hall Lane and then onto Fishwick Parade and eventually to the emergency built, tin roofed dining hall on Samuel Street. There we would tuck into our dinners, queuing Oliver Twist like with our plates, sitting at long trestle tables with the teachers at the head of the table eating with us, telling us how to hold our knives and forks, and saying grace before the meal.



Exactly like the desk that I shared with Brian Rigby! Our paths parted when Brian passed his 11+

I can remember, too, the friendly taunting between we St Matthew's boys and our friends who went to the local Catholic School just up Rigby Street – St Joseph's; our Catholic friends would chant to us as we went to school: "*St Matt's penny rats, three for tuppence ha'penny*" and we would retaliate with "*St Joe's have no clothes they wear a baby's nappy*". And, as mentioned above, I remember, too,

the daily bottle of milk that we all drank at morning playtime – in winter the milk was often frozen so that the silver cap was bulging off the bottle as the frozen milk had expanded. When you were in Cock Roberts' class you might, if you were lucky, be the milk monitor for a week delivering the crates of milk around the school. And finally, the ink wells, the job of ink monitor, washing out and then refilling the classroom ink wells each Friday afternoon so they were ready for the following week, and then, the associated skill of learning to write with a pen and ink. It is this last distant memory of pens and ink that stands out above all and for which I have long been grateful - and which in recent months has come to the fore.



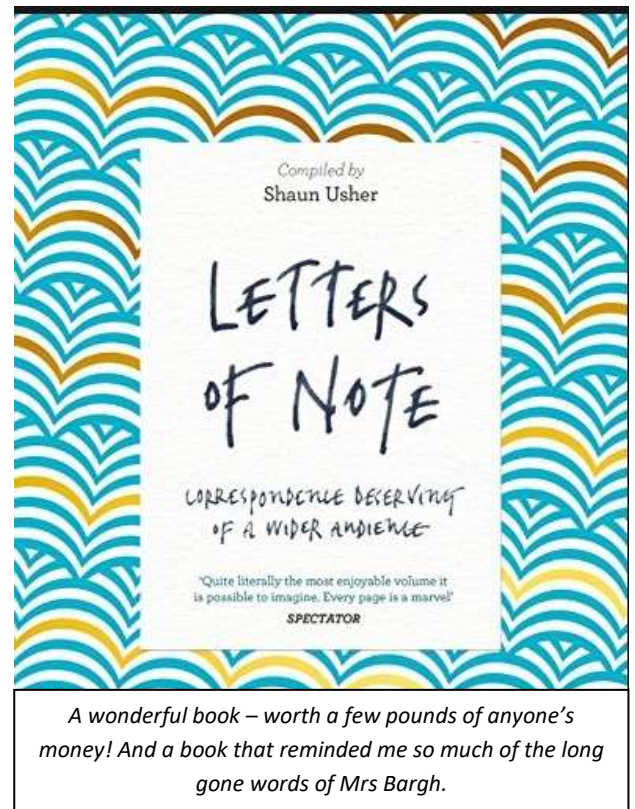
Friday afternoon was ink well washing and refilling time – ready for Monday morning!

Let me explain. Last Christmas my wife bought me a wonderful book – one of those that you don't have to read cover to cover, but that you can dip into and each time you do so you find something to excite, uplift or enjoy. It is called "*Letters of Note*" and is a compilation of what it calls "*correspondence deserving of a wider audience*". Ever since Christmas I have been dipping into this delightful treasure trove, taking it down from one of my office shelves where it resides

within easy reach so that I can pass a few moments reading, and often re-reading, what others have written. Whenever I pick this book up and read or reread one of the entries I am taken back

to St Matthew's and to weekly lesson with Mrs Bargh; and as my mind wanders back to those far off days somewhere deep in my subconscious little voice says a silent "Thank you" to this long gone woman from my past.

The contents of the book that I have so enjoyed are hundreds of letters written by a range of people from the great and good: the Queen, Charles Dickens, Albert Einstein, Rudyard Kipling, President Kennedy and many, many more to complete unknowns like the three young Elvis Presley fans who wrote to US President Eisenhower pleading that when Elvis was conscripted into the US army he should not be made to have his hair cut! The letters in the book range from the tragic to the humorous and from the trivial to the momentous but the common thread of all is their clarity, humanity and style. Some are gut wrenching pleas such as that written by an unknown mother in 1860's New York – the letter was pinned to her



month old baby which she could not afford to keep and it asks that the sisters at the Foundling Hospital take care of him: *".....[his] name is Walter Cooper and he is not Christen [sic] yet will you be so good as to do it I should not like him to die without it..... I do not have a dollar in the world to give him or I would give it to him.....I wish that you would keep him..."*. Other letters are potentially great historical documents for example, on March 19th 1953 Francis Crick wrote to his 12 years old son, Michael, to give him advance notice that he and his co-scientist Jim Watson at Cambridge University had discovered DNA. The letter is long, handwritten and filled with diagrams – the excitement of this monumental discovery shines through every word and phrase but at the same time is filled with typical British understatement: *"Jim Watson and I have probably made a most important discovery.....we have two chains [of DNA] winding around each other – each one is a helix.....I can't draw it very well but it looks like this. The model looks much nicer than this!....."* The letter is detailed and Crick's son had all this information several weeks before the discovery was made public and, of course, Crick and Watson subsequently received the Nobel Prize for one of the most important scientific discoveries ever. In April 2013 it became the most expensive letter ever when it was sold at auction for almost £5 million. Despite the importance and the magnitude of this discovery Francis Crick's letter is both human and touching. It does what any personal letter should and must do – pass on not only information but

also feelings – and, importantly respect the reader; Crick was writing to a child about a hugely complicated subject and he does so with thought and care to ensure that his son is able to make sense of this wonderful bit of science. And, finally, many of the letters are marvellous little peeps into the minds of people; one I liked especially and which made me smile is that sent by Clyde Barrow (the gangster of Bonnie & Clyde fame) to Henry Ford the founder of the Ford Motor Company. Clyde wrote in praise of the Ford V8 car: *"Dear Sir, While I still have breath in my lungs I will tell you what a dandy car you make. I have drove Fords exclusively when I could get away with one. For sustained speed and freedom from trouble the Ford has got every other car skinned and even if my business hasen't been strickly [sic] legal it don't hurt anything to tell you what a fine car you got in the V8. Yours truly Clyde Champion Barrow."*

I could go on – three hundred pages of letters, each one photographed so that you can see the original, plus a printed version of the letter and a little summary of its background – a real treasure trove; a peep into the minds of other humans. For that, of course, is what we do – or should do – when we sit down to write a letter – we set out what is in our mind for others to see and understand. Writing a letter is not something to be done casually or with no thought; to do so compromises the whole point of a letter. In today's world where ubiquitous, ill thought out, badly composed and carelessly composed emails, tweets and social media posts are increasingly accepted I find myself too often confused, unable to really understand the message that people are trying to convey, and at the same time I am alarmed at the insight that these poorly composed and written pieces give into the minds of those writing.

But, back to St Matthew's and Mrs Bargh. Every week Mrs Bargh came and took each class for a handwriting and spelling lesson. I assume that she did this while one of the men teachers – Mr Sharples or Mr Morris - were off taking a games lesson with other boys or while Mr Roberts completed some of his duties as Head Master. Well, whatever the reason, she did this each week throughout my four years at St Matthew's Junior Boys, and I can well remember a lesson - it must have been in 1954 since I was in Mr Sharples' class - when Mrs Bargh announced that it was an important day because those of us who were ready would be given a pen and ink to use. Of course, everyone wanted to have this privilege but only a few got it in the first place; I was one of the lucky ones. So for the next weeks and months we slowly got to grips with using one of the old "stick pens" where one had to dip the nib into the ink well. I have to say, my efforts were very poor and I often looked with envy at Brian Rigby or Barry Alston's neat pages of script and then back at my scrappy efforts where blobs of ink and a spidery scrawl seemed more the message than any writing that I had attempted. Of course, the older we got the more we used our pens in

our everyday lessons and by the time we were in Cock Roberts' class most of us used pen and ink all the time but it was Mrs Bargh who set us on the road with her weekly lessons.

We must have spent hours copying what, as teacher I later learned, were Marion Richardson handwriting patterns, learning how to underline using an inverted ruler so that the wet ink didn't drag across the page, copying poems out (and learning them by heart) and writing lists of spellings but out of all these there is one lesson that I remember with absolute clarity.

As I sit here now writing I can, in my mind's eye, see and hear Mrs Bargh at the front of the class giving us firm, never to be broken rules for letter writing and what a letter should comprise of. She showed us on the blackboard how a letter must be set out, where the address went, how it should be signed, when to use "faithfully" or when to use "sincerely", where the date should go,

how the recipient should be addressed and all the other conventions of letter writing. And I can hear her now *saying "When you write a letter you are sending a piece of yourself to someone, you are telling them what is in your mind so it must make sense. You are also sending something to them which you want them to read so*



Some of the pages of the letter that Francis Crick wrote to his son telling him of the discovery of DNA

you must be polite so that they will want to read it. It must be beautifully neat so that they can read it easily and so that they can see that you have taken care because if it's untidy or poorly spelled or badly composed then it shows that you haven't really taken care and the person reading it will think that as you don't care and then they won't bother to read it or reply. Never, ever, write a letter in green or red ink – it's impolite, disrespectful and wrong - it shows that you are not thinking seriously about what you write. Letters must always be in dark blue or black ink....." and so she went on. I have never forgotten her words, each time over the years – and still today - when I have taken my fountain pen to write a letter, a child's end of year report, a job application and the rest Mrs Bargh's words have run through my mind. Her advice and rules made abundant sense to me then and they still do today. When we write anything down it has to make sense, be readable and fulfil its function but when we are writing to someone else, then other things kick in for it is someone else who is going to read it and we owe that person an obligation to write in a way that not only communicates what we want to tell them but also shows a respect for them; if we can't be bothered to do that then why should the reader be bothered to

take note of our letter or reply to it? It does not mean that letters have to be full of complicated, elaborate flowing language but it does mean that they need to be thought about and fulfil their function in a clear, organised, polite and correct manner. Mrs Bargh made sense then and she still does today!

In our modern world of emails, tweets and social media postings we have, too often, lost the art of letter writing and wider written communication but though there is perhaps less need to write letters in the ways of yesteryear I do not believe that there is any less of a requirement to write clearly, correctly and politely. Today we read the banal, mad cap and frankly disreputable ramblings of Donald Trump in his mindless and ill composed Twitter offerings and I suspect most of us in our heart of hearts know that what he writes gives a pretty good insight into what going on in his brain: his writings tell the tale of his brain cells and of his disrespect for those who read his communications. Sadly, too, in our modern world anyone who is insistent on the established conventions of written communication is often dismissed or abused for their pedantry. This is, in my view, a dangerous path to go down – it is not simply about writing a nice or good letter, it goes to the very heart of what we are and how we have developed as a species.

The defining characteristic of humans over the animal kingdom is our use of language – it not only allows us to communicate with each other but, far more importantly, allows us to do what no animal can do, to think in a way that no other creature can. Unlike animals we have a sense of our place in the world, where we have come from and where we might go; animals do not generally have this, they are virtually entirely instinctive. We can think back to our history, look forward to our future, argue logically, think in the abstract, discriminate between right and wrong, good and bad, we can calculate, communicate our thoughts onto paper and use written words as a substitute for what we speak, describe things, identify how we feel and understand how others feel – and we do all of this through language, both spoken and written. We are what we are because language enables us to think. One needs only to read Donald Trump's utterances to know that his thought processes are severely limited by his inability to use language effectively. His paucity of vocabulary bears witness to his inability to use the most effective, most suitable and precise word for the context of his disapproval. The ability to think complex thoughts – as we all do all of the time – is both dependent upon and promotes increasingly complex language patterns; complex thought begets complex language and complex language begets increasingly complex thoughts - it is how mankind has developed. Donald Trump, and anyone else, shows their intellectual limits each and every time they write a trivial, badly composed or poorly structured tweet, email, letter or Facebook post; in short if you do not write clearly then you cannot, by definition, think clearly.

As I sit here writing this, at the side of me is my copy of *"Letters of Note"*. It is open at page 111 where a very short letter is reprinted. The letter was written in May 1945 by a Japanese suicide pilot who knew that on the next day he would die as he flew his aeroplane into an American battleship. Masanobu Kuno sat and wrote a letter to his five year old son and two year old daughter, it was a farewell letter. He wrote: *"Dear Masanori and Kiyoko, Even though you can't see me, I'll always be watching you. When you grow up, follow the path you like to become a fine Japanese man and woman. Do not envy the fathers of others. You father will become a god and*

Just like the pens that we used when Mrs Bargh introduced us to the skills, mysteries and conventions of writing with ink and writing a letter



watch over you two closely. Both of you must study hard and help your mother with work. I can't be your horse to ride, but you two be good friends.....".

And further on in the book is an ancient letter written in 1556 by the widow of a Korean man. The writer was pregnant with her husband's child and her husband had died suddenly. The letter was found resting on the chest of the mummified body by archaeologists when they opened the tomb in 1998. It said: *"To Won's Father, June 1 1586. You always said 'Dear let's live together until our hair turns gray and we die on the same day'. How could you pass away without me? Who should I and our little boy listen to and how should we live? How could you go ahead of me?.....I just cannot live without you. I just want to go to you. Please take me to where you are. My feelings towards you I cannot forget in this world and my sorrow knows no limit. Where should I put my heart now?.....Please look at this letter and tell me in detail in my dreams.....look closely and talk to me. When I give birth to the child in me, who should it call father? There is no tragedy like this under the sky.....I believe that I can see you in my dreams. Come to me secretly and show yourself....."*

Wow! – it makes the hairs on one's neck stand on end and makes Donald Trump's awful misuse of language and dreadful composition not only look pathetic but an insult to human intelligence and to the nation that he purported to lead.

We might, as a society, think ourselves very clever with our computers, mobile phones, tablets and all the other ephemera of the 21st century that we glorify and desire but maybe we have lost something in the quality of our communications. I think that Mrs Bargh would have understood that; her weekly writing lessons, as we sat at those awful, uncomfortable two seated iron and wood desks with our stick pens and blotting paper, me blobbing ink everywhere, have stayed with me to this day – not only the mechanics of writing but also the reason for writing with care and

respect for the reader, whoever they might be. When Mrs Bargh, in that St Matthew's classroom, passed on her wisdom and her non-negotiable rules all those years ago I don't expect that she ever dreamed that her words would still ring clear in the mind of at least one of her pupils over sixty years after he heard them. But, I'd like to think, too, that she would be quietly pleased to know that each time I open my "*Letters of Note*" or pick up my fountain pen or use my lap top to write an email or letter that somewhere deep in my subconscious I remember those long gone afternoons, her voice and her rules..... and that a little voice inside me says a "*Thank you*" to that matronly lady and to St Matthew's for what they gave me all those years ago.

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