

The Day the School was Born

By Charlie McLeod – Member of staff and Deputy Headteacher 1954 – 1978

It's 1954 and there's great news! Rationing is over at last. Now we can buy what we like – if we can find it and afford it. We won the war, now we are trying to win the peace. Winston Churchill is Prime Minister; our young Queen is in the second year of her reign; television is still black and white but next year we will have three channels.

More locally work is to begin on the new Coventry Cathedral and a new Church of England secondary school is to open in Rugby – the first there for about 100 years.

It'll be a fine modern building, tall. Light and airy, quite different from the grim old schools still in use.

But that is not what I saw when I first visited in May 1953. Light and airy it certainly was – there were neither walls nor a roof, just a framework of girders amid all the paraphernalia of a building site set in muddy acres.

Arriving on September 7th the first pupils saw little more than a bit of brickwork until at the rear they come to what is now the dining room but which was then to serve as four dual purpose rooms for teaching and dining. To two of these rooms the 76 boys were directed as Form 1A (under Mr Evans) and 1B (my class). The other two were stacked with furniture waiting to go to rooms still not built with a small space for the head and secretary. Together with a caretaker and dinner ladies this was the Harris Church of England Secondary Modern School.

By 9:30am, after a short service, the boys had answered their names (Allen, Arbuthnot et al), paid their dinner money (five old piece I believe) and started their first lesson – a composition on 'Myself'. Peace reigned.

This start was not made without a lot of preparatory work. Mr Wellington, the first Headmaster, Mr Evans and I met frequently during the summer term and the holidays to discuss the head's plans for his school of (eventually) 600+ students. We discussed its ethos, the curriculum, administration and organisation, whether there would be mixed or single-sex classes, building links with parents and the 27 parishes sending children, and the timetable. We needed a school badge and a motto, a uniform (which mustn't clash with the others) to be designed, manufactured and handled by the chosen retailer. There seems no end to the challenges. It was a relief then at the end of the first day to be able to say that it had gone well on the whole.

That panic at dinner time was a bit of family fun (and we were a family weren't we?) In answer to the screams from the kitchen the staff had chased a large rat out of the kitchen, cheered on by the boys: "Go on! Get 'im Sir!"

How the school grew to 573 boys and girls a year later, the two years of intense fundraising needed to complete the building and how demand for admission was such that we soon turned away more than we admitted is another story.