

# My Quest To Wear A Grammar School Nutshell

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(Article from A Miscellany of Merriott Memories)

*They* didn't call it the eleven-plus when I was a lad, they called it the 'scholarship', but it was the same thing. It was the moment when your educational future was decided, at the tender age of eleven.

If you passed the scholarship, you were really somebody because then you went to Crewkerne Grammar School and wore a blue and white ringed cap (ie a 'nutshell') with a badge on the front, and the kids who didn't go to grammar school cat-called and called you a '*grammar school nutshell*'. That's if you were a boy. If you were a girl, you went to Ilminster Girls' Grammar School that was equally as prestigious, no doubt, and equally as divisive.

There must have been fifteen, perhaps as many as twenty of us, boys and girls, who sat the scholarship at Merriott school in 1945. Some of us were no-hopers of course but everyone had to go through the motions. Not that I was a no-hoper; on the contrary. I had the distinct impression I was expected to pass.

When we lined up in the school playground that morning the scholarship people had to form a special line and were led off into the school before all the others, straight into Miss Bishop's room which was specially laid out for the occasion.

The two-seater iron-framed desks were set wide apart with only one child being permitted to sit at a desk, so that we couldn't cheat. On each desk, there was a square of pink blotting paper and a pen with a brand new nib. The inkpots were freshly filled.

All morning we scribbled away in the special answer books. There was nothing to it, not as far as I was concerned. Nor again in the afternoon, which I thought was even easier. When it was all over, I knew I'd be going to grammar school. It was just a case of waiting for the result, and within a couple of weeks my father was already thinking it was time we heard it.

*'Hast thee heard anything up school yet?' he asked me.*

*'No, Father,' I replied.*



Crewkerne Grammar School nutshell

I was equally as keen to hear the good news although I must admit I was a little apprehensive about the possibility of leaving the village school behind me. I was very happy there and it was all very familiar.

In Merriott, there was the 'Little School' and the 'Big School', Little School being the small building skirting the churchyard, and Big School the much bigger building across the road.



You started in the Little School in Miss Bunstone's class and progressed to Miss



Winch's class. Then you went over the road to the Big School to join Miss Davies and Miss Bishop. It was about this time that the scholarship intervened and you made your bid to go to grammar school. Failing that you moved on into Freddie Masters' class; Freddie was the school headmaster. It was a well-worn path. The paucity of grammar school places made it inevitable that the vast majority of children ended up in Freddie's class. You did very well indeed if you passed the scholarship.

There were three classrooms in the Little School but, except for the early war years when an influx of evacuees swelled numbers, only two were used. Miss Bunstone's room

was at one end, Miss Winch's at the other.

There was also a tiny, over-crowded playground. At the bottom of the playground there was a row of toilets that only flushed when a teacher pulled the chain in the teachers' cubicle. In the corner of the playground there was a urinal, open to the sky and surrounded by an L-shaped brick wall; it's still there! The height of the wall presented something of a challenge to some boys; you could be standing in the playground on a sunny summer day when suddenly it would start raining! In spite of my best red-faced, puff cheeked efforts it was a feat I never managed to accomplish.

Miss Bunstone took what I suppose they'd now call the reception class. She was a rather prim but kindly lady and wore her grey hair tied in a bun. I remember very little about the days spent in her charge except that we wrote on slates, at least we did for a while, when we first started. And I remember the open fire and, on rainy mornings, the fireguard festooned with gently steaming clothing.

It was when you reached Miss Winch's class the serious learning began. The curriculum was limited of course, centred almost entirely on the three R's - well, two R's and one S. We learnt to read and rite but we didn't do rithmetic. We did sums, not arithmetic.

And there were *'fit-togethers'*, I remember. A fit-together kit consisted of a picture and a lot of individual words, each written on a small piece of card. The idea was that you shuffled through the words and fitted them together to make sentences to tell a story that related to the picture. I liked fit-togethers and I know I was quite good at them. And if you were good at fit-togethers when you were in Miss Winch's class it was an early sign that you would probably pass the scholarship and go to grammar school, and have a satchel and a bike and cycle to Crewkerne every day. My father must have got to hear I was good at fit-togethers and that's why he had such high hopes of me. And he desperately wanted confirmation that I had passed.

*'Hast thee heard anything up school?'*

*'No, Father.'*

He asked me the same question at least once a week and got very impatient with my negative responses.

There wasn't much in the way of extra-curricula activity in a wartime village school but what there was I remember well, like fire fighting and learning to knit. It was whilst I was still a pupil in the Little School that I was taught how to use a stirrup pump, all to do with there being a war on I suppose.

The class I was in at the time was occupying the centre classroom, which was in normal times empty. Miss Aldridge, a new teacher who arrived with the evacuees, told us what to do.

We had just endured a session of crouching under the desks with our gas masks on, an ordeal made just bearable, when no one was looking, by slipping a finger under the rubber and easing the mask away from your face otherwise you couldn't breath! But





Water was squirted through the rear central window into the churchyard. The windows of Miss Bunstone's class were the two nearest the camera; Miss Winch's the two at the far end

when that was over Miss Aldridge had us squirting water out through the classroom window on to the graves in the churchyard immediately outside.

We took it in turns to have a pump and to hold the hose. Thoroughly enjoyable it was and if Hitler had chosen to drop an incendiary bomb in the churchyard, well, Merriott County Infants' School fire fighting unit were fully trained and ready to throw open the classroom windows and go into action.

There was, however, just one small snag. When the

Luftwaffe did bomb Merriott, the would-be fire fighters were all snugly tucked up in bed. In any case, the single bomb that fell on the village didn't land amongst the gravestones; it landed in an orchard some half a mile away. A few days later, I went to see the crater. I seem to remember we had to pay three pence for the privilege. I recall seeing numerous apples that had been blasted off the trees firmly embedded in the thatched roof of a nearby house.



Big School

I think it was after I'd moved over to the Big School and was in Miss Davies' class that I was taught how to knit. Everyone was to knit a square, and all the squares were to be sewn together to make blankets for the soldiers. Or so they said.

We learnt to cast on and cast off and knit one, drop one on very large wooden needles using very thick wool. Much emphasis seemed to be put on having the correct number of stitches and they were continually counted. But even if you had dropped a stitch, it wasn't that much of a problem. I soon found out that all you had to do to get the number right again was to split the thick wool of one stitch in half to make two stitches; and if you had too many stitches you just knitted a couple together. What was all the fuss about?

I don't think my father knew I was wasting my time learning how to use a stirrup pump or how to knit. It was just as well as it might have cast doubts in his mind regarding my ability to pass the scholarship and that would have been a great pity. As it was, he was able to question me in confidence. Or could he? I sensed he was beginning to have doubts about me. His questioning became more earnest and more frequent, almost daily.

*'Hast thee heard anything up school yet?'*

*'No, Father.'*

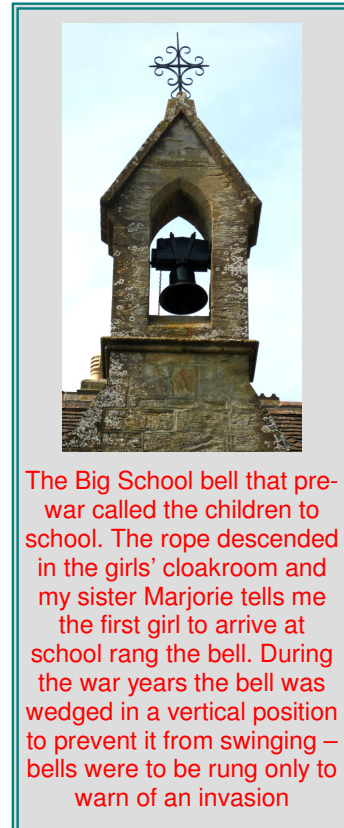
*'You sure?'*

*'Not a word, Father.'*

The school was regularly visited by the head-nurse who came to give us the once over for fleas and lice, and check our fingernails were clean - we used to hastily clean them. And, from time to time, the dentist came to sort out our molars.

When the school dentist came, he set up his surgery in the parlour of Mrs Swain's little house just across the road. Mrs Swain was the wife of the church sexton. We were sent over in twos and threes to wait in Mrs Swain's kitchen where the coals glowed in her black-leaded grate and the kettle, just off the boil, whistled quietly on the hob. *'And whose chil be you then?'* Mrs Swain would enquire, and we told her who our parents were as though we were telling her something she didn't already know. She was a gentle soul and did all she could to make us feel at ease.

If you had a tooth extracted, or even if you had merely had one 'stopped', you could go back to class clutching a handkerchief to your face and feel very special, and with a bit of luck have everyone think how brave you were. If there was a trace of blood on the handkerchief so much the better. My dental experience in Mrs Swain's parlour never went beyond an inspection but on one occasion I still went back to the classroom clutching a handkerchief to my face to solicit sympathy but I don't recall receiving any.



The Big School bell that pre-war called the children to school. The rope descended in the girls' cloakroom and my sister Marjorie tells me the first girl to arrive at school rang the bell. During the war years the bell was wedged in a vertical position to prevent it from swinging – bells were to be rung only to warn of an invasion

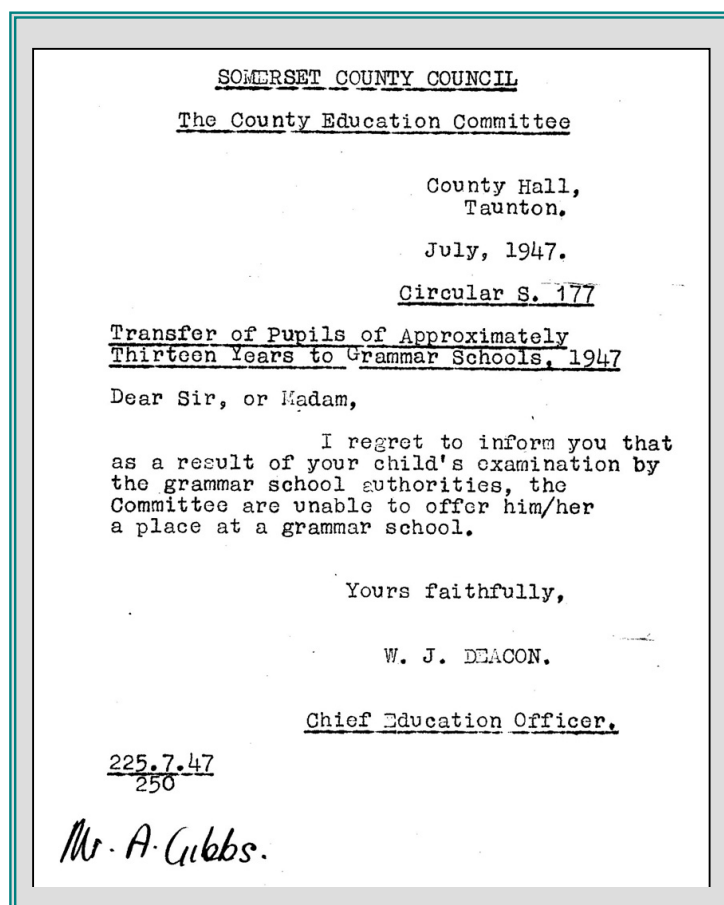
Nor can I remember getting much sympathy when it became increasingly obvious as the days slipped by that my dream of becoming a grammar school nutshell was beginning to fade. If my father had a little dream, and I think he probably did, that too was beginning to fade.

*'Hast thee still not heard anything up school yet?'*

*'No, Father.'*

In fact, I never did hear anything up school. Neither, as far as I know, did my father hear anything from up school or from anywhere else for that matter. I suppose I must have failed. But I was not alone. As far as I remember, not one child, boy or girl, who took the scholarship that year, was deemed to be worthy of secondary education. Not one of us went on to the grammar schools - except, that is, for one or two whose parents had a little bit more money than most and paid for them to go. For the rest of us, well, we'd had our stab at the big time and fluffed it. But if the examination had included a question on knitting, or how to use a stirrup pump, I can't help thinking things might well have been different.

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Two years after my 11+ failure, I was given another chance to prove my worth. One Saturday morning, I had to report to Crewkerne Grammar School to take a second test, as did about 30 other boys from all over the district, some from as far away as Yeovil. The test lasted about an hour and the result was eventually conveyed via this totally impersonal letter given to me at school to take home to my father. I think this 13+ so-called examination must have been something of a sham. The grammar school was quite small and I rather expect would have been incapable of

absorbing many 13+ boys in addition to its usual intake of 11+ and fee-paying boys, certainly not a whole class. My guess is that it would have been a case of filling a few empty seats in established classes, nothing more than that. At the time, I was very disappointed to have been deemed a failure a second time but I soon got over it.