

Memoirs of Ronald Swan (BGS 1936-41)

Part I

Ron Swan won a scholarship from Broadway School, Sheerness to Borden in September 1936, and was one of the students evacuated to Lewis School, Pengam during the Second World War. He left Borden to become an apprentice at Sheerness Dockyard in July 1941. Now aged ninety-four, he must almost certainly be the oldest Old Bordenian. Here Ron has very kindly provided some memories of his school days before the Second World War.

On my first day of going to Borden Grammar School I had to get used to the idea of getting up early, getting to the train at Sheerness, catching the appropriate train to allow ample time for the walk from Sittingbourne Station to the School. I must admit that I quite frankly have no memories of this whatsoever on my first day: I can only imagine that us new boys were easily distinguished by our new caps and blazers and that we were marshalled along by the 'old hands' to the reserved compartments on the train. These were of course the old slam-door, non-corridor trains so once we were in you just sat tight. I can only imagine there was a lot of chatter between the group in the compartment, a few of whom I probably knew from my old school but there were undoubtedly other little groups of a similar nature from the other schools on the island. When we got to Sittingbourne, we followed the crowd going up past the Bull Inn and Bull Passage to reach the School. All of this is in my imagination, I can't see how it could be otherwise after all these years, but we soon got ourselves sorted into our respective forms and then presumably went for assembly. Following which we were taken to our respective form masters and our new world started.

My first impressions of the school were quite largely influenced by the cricket ground which started behind the school building up to the fence of the large recreation ground with its swings and children's play area. This was the 1st XI cricket ground and in the other terms at one end were the 1st XI football and hockey pitches; from those pitches behind the tennis courts, which are still there I think, there was a bank a few feet high which fell away to the lower sports field which was used for 2nd XI matches, athletic sports and other games activities. Now some of the 1st XI cricket ground is occupied by the Hardy Block and a number of other buildings used for teaching and laboratories for various technical subjects.

When I visited the School about three years ago, I was quite surprised to see the Headmaster's study with a chair or two outside for those waiting to go in, exactly as it was in my day, so much so that I almost expected the door to open and Mr Claydon to come out! Contrary to this I cannot remember what was opposite to the Headmaster's study where the reception and enquiries desk now stands. Perhaps that was there, I really can't say.

When we were in assembly, my seat was at the end of a row and on occasions such as when somebody was making a long speech on a speech day, my attention wandered to the honours board and the entry at the bottom of that board where I was sitting was to S. G. Hooker with the brief details of his first degree at London University followed by his second at Oxford and I wondered where he was at that time. Many Old Bordenians know the answer to that and have done so for a number of years as Sir Stanley, as he became, was I believe an active member of the Association in his retirement. I had to wait a number of years to know the answer when his autobiography was published. Of course Sir Stanley attended BGS when it was in the village of Borden prior to the building of the present school.

I find it difficult to remember some of the staff who taught me in my first years there. Mr Tempany, whom I think was the second master, took us for English. He was, I thought, quite a good teacher but he had a strange habit of remaining seated throughout the whole period.

I remember also Mr Alan Highton (known to us as 'Herbie') who was an inspirational teacher of History. I also remember 'Pop' Preston, a short, tubbly little man, rather bald, who taught us three subjects, Music, Chemistry and Woodwork. Sad to say that I was not very good at any of these subjects and I soon dropped them from my curriculum. Curiously, I later took up cabinet making as a hobby, which I thoroughly enjoyed and there are several pieces of furniture which I made in the room where I am now sitting. I think, but I cannot be sure, that Maths and Physics were taught to me by the younger element of the staff, Mr Higson, but I honestly can't remember. Similarly, I am uncertain about my French teacher but think it was Mr Snelling, who by about 1939 had us reading *The Three Musketeers* in French. When they were teaching all of the staff wore academic gowns and one or two carried their mortarboards.

For my first two years at BGS the Head Boy was Ron Jarrett, who was one of those gifted people, a scholar but equally a good sportsman: he was an outstanding batsman at cricket, possibly with a first-class career in the game ahead of him and he was coached by some of the leading Kent Players, including Frank Woolley, whom we used to see at the School. After leaving BGS, Ron went up to Oxford but when war was declared in 1939 he interrupted his studies and joined the Army. Sad to say he was killed in North Africa.

Very soon after the start of that first term, all of us new boys were told to go to the fence between the recreation ground and the School and to spread ourselves out along that fence line, then a whistle was blown, we had to race down to the school, a distance of about 200 yards or possibly a little more. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that I had won that race after the *en masse* start by sixty or seventy boys. This was all arranged by Mr Horlock, a retired army physical training instructor who took us all for PT. There was at the School for one year only (1936-37) a young man named Claxton who always wore a blazer proudly sporting the five Olympic rings badge; exactly what his role was I am uncertain and I am equally uncertain as to which Olympic games he had been a participant. However, having won that race I began to realise that I had some athletic ability.

Reverting to the trains, the line between Sittingbourne and Sheerness was a single track apart from stations such as Kemsley and Queenborough, where to ensure that only one train got onto the track at a time, a key was passed from the platform staff to the fireman as they left the station: this key was of the form similar to a horse collar and about the same size, with a wallet attached. There were two Sixth Form members of the School who on occasions would get into the last compartment of the train and, after it was in motion and out of the station, they would open the door, get onto the running board and proceed to the end of the train by the end of the journey. Obviously, they were in no danger from passing trains because of the single line, and at the intermediate stations I assume they got into a convenient compartment so as not to be seen, whereupon they would recommence their 'walk' when the train left the station. I have often wondered what happened to them, their names were Bagshaw and Buckwell.

A further point on the railway issue was that if you were in any disagreement with one of your colleagues, you were always liable to lose your cap and for it to be thrown out of the window. Somehow there was always a collection of caps ejected from the train which were taken to the lost property office, either at Sheerness or Sittingbourne, where for a small fee you could recover your cap.

At school, cooked lunches were available but I did not partake of these. I took a packed lunch every day, as did a number of others.

In these very early days at Borden, one of the boys that I became very friendly with was John Carter. I had not known him prior to Borden because he was at school in Minster,

whereas I was at school in Sheerness. I am pleased to say, however, that we became good friends and remained so throughout our lives until John's sad death about three years ago. On leaving Borden in 1941, John started a career in Barclays Bank with a position in the Sheerness branch. Over the years, he worked in many branches of Barclays, always in Kent, and lived in many parts of the county; despite this and my own nomadic career, especially in the earlier days, we somehow managed to keep in touch and meet up whenever we could.

I will conclude this pre-war section of notes with a short personal statement on my running. Every year, I took part in the school sports and if you were a winner you received a small certificate recording your individual performance in the event including whether it was a school record or not. Over the years 1937-39, I amassed a small collection of these certificates but after I had left home my parents twice moved house and I am afraid that collection disappeared. Nevertheless, I cannot be sure whether it was in 1938 or 1939 that six or seven BGS boys, including myself, were invited to go to some events around the county representing Sittingbourne town. I cannot remember now who the other members of this little group were except for one who was Geoffrey Westacott, known to me as 'Jimmy', also from Sheerness, two years older than me who did field events as opposed to track events [Geoffrey Westacott was killed in action in April 1945, aged only twenty-one, while serving with RAF Bomber Command]. We were given red and black vests to wear and curiously enough, one of these events was held at Sheerness where I was several times asked why I was running for Sittingbourne instead of Sheerness and Sheppey. In my age group I think the maximum distance we could run was the quarter mile and that was the distance I took part in. My mother and father came to this meeting, the only time they saw me in a competitive race and I am pleased to say they were not disappointed at the result! Following upon these various meetings, we were entered for the Kent Championships which I think were held in or near Maidstone and in my event, I achieved third place and so put myself in an accepted county standard at the event. I was determined to improve my status in the county at my event and I used to undertake a lot of training runs on my own. These were quite amusing at times because when war was declared, I would find that the route I had taken one day had been blocked off with barbed wire and the next or coastal strip allegedly by mines. We were not to know that hostilities would put an end to these activities with the declaration of war on 3 September 1939.

Just a few words on the structured sport at Borden of cricket and football. I enjoyed both games and played as well as I could but I was not quite up to the standard to get into the Under 14 teams at either sport. I did, however, play in the House matches which I thoroughly enjoyed and one highlight of a cricket House match was that I faced an over when the bowler sent down five balls of the over on a perfect line for a right-handed batsman, whereas I was a left-handed batsman and I hit him for two sixes and three fives. Needless to say, he adjusted his line on the last ball of the over and clean bowled me: these tactics on my part would have been eminently suitable for T20 today.

Part II to follow...



BGS House photo (1936)

Ron Swan: front row, middle, black jacket
Geoffrey Westacott: third row, sixth from left
John Carter: second row, second from right



Ron with his family