

THE MAYFIELD MEMOIRS: Alan Thompson was a pupil at Mayfield Secondary Boys School in Ilford from 1960, after moving from London, until 1964. He later worked for local newspapers as a reporter including a spell with the Ilford Recorder in the mid 1970s. Here he recounts his time with the school and what inspired him to take the career path he chose into journalism and broadcasting and now has several documentaries to his name both here and in the US including “Egypt – Journey of a Lifetime” for the BBC. He has an association with the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and is currently the regional evening bulletin editor for the BBC in the Eastern Counties at “Look East”.

Part 1: 1960-61

The automatic phone alarm went off bang on time at 6-30 am in the hotel room in New York with a schmaltzy American telling me in a robotic voice that it was now six-thirty. After showering with a power shower that could knock an enemy off his feet in two seconds flat I was off to an important meeting at a plush hotel to meet two senior delegates of America’s CBS network.

It was a bitterly cold morning with that famous New York wind that cuts right through as I made my way the few blocks to the hotel in midtown Manhattan where the breakfast meeting was due to start at 7-30 sharp. One of the delegates was the senior Programme Director at CBS’s flagship radio station in New York and after business was completed I was invited back to the headquarters not far from trendy Madison Avenue. I was asked what inspired my career in broadcasting to which I replied “with local newspapers”. No, that wasn’t the answer my Programme Director friend was looking for. Where did it start?

My mind wandered back to the time I went in for writing stories at school – some in my own time – and of course the House Drama we did in those far off days of the early 60s. If I was to be honest it really had to be the House Drama at Mayfield School we did in 1963 that fired my enthusiasm for performing. By that time I had gained more confidence in my own written work and was able to take on drama as a sort of extension to that work.

But how different the early days at Mayfield were for me. Almost four years before the performance that “inspired” me I had started at the school in January 1960 and it occurred to me that it was almost 38 years to the day of the meeting with CBS 3,000 miles away in New York. It may never have happened had I not been at the school I was.

It was a different world in 1960, one that would be unrecognisable today. You knew your place at school – and if you didn’t a teacher would very soon tell you!

As a result of my father’s work, we moved from Walthamstow into a brand new semi-detached house at Freshwell Avenue, Little Heath, and I was told that I would be going to Mayfield Secondary School in Goodmayes Lane, which would mean a bus journey. Good, I thought. I liked riding on buses. However the novelty quickly wore off when all the buses were full up and it would take almost an hour to get home of an evening and it was dark. I was only 11 at the time.

When I started at Mayfield in class 1B2 the teacher was a Mr A J Allison, a thin young man with glasses. I didn't enjoy that initial time, I felt vulnerable and I didn't know anyone. I did not do too well in that first year sometimes scoring low marks although I did quite well in English and later in Mathematics. The ethos of Mayfield was different to what I had been used to at my previous school in Walthamstow. It was a mixed school and there I had friends of both sexes. Most teachers including the headmaster called us by our first names. This time it was an all boy school and teachers called you by your last name only and discipline was rigidly enforced.

During those first few weeks I was hit by someone almost every day and some of the older boys would torment the younger ones on their way home. That, plus the jostling to get on the bus home and many times I, and others, walked the two miles in the most appalling weather - and the strange new environment, I hated it. I should say that where the school itself was concerned, there was nothing wrong - but I was an 11 year old who couldn't settle.

But I did find that I could make people laugh as I had an array of schoolboy jokes from Walthamstow that nobody in Ilford had heard. I figured that if I could make people laugh they were less likely to hit me! The strategy worked - at school at least. When I first went out to work in a City office, I squirted Fairy Liquid in the director's tea and was sacked! No sense of humour those city types. But I digress - that's another story.

After about six weeks during the half term holidays I went back to my old school as their dates were slightly different to ours. I went to catch up with my old school chums and my former headmaster and teacher. I realised how much I missed them all and that I wanted to go back there where I felt familiar and safe. In a way I felt (wrongly) resentful towards my parents for taking me out of a school where I was doing very well to one where I was not doing so well.

Within weeks I was threatened with the cane and two boys were caned by the headmaster, Mr C F W Hicks one morning for being late - when in fact it had been because there was no bus at Little Heath to get any of us to school. I was given a telling off by the teacher in front of the class as "there was no excuse for being late".

On another occasion, and those in my year would no doubt remember an incident when a teacher hit a boy round the head who had not long had an operation. I won't mention the names of the teacher or the boy concerned, but the scene that followed was quite distressing for the lad to which the teacher apologised in the class. None of us knows what happened after that, whether the teacher was disciplined or given a warning but I don't think he ever did it again. He left in 1961. Today that would have meant court action for assault. But, like I said, it was a different world in 1960.

During that early part of the school year I contracted scarlet fever and was off for some weeks.

I didn't have to go to hospital but I was laid up in bed at home for some time and even swallowing saliva was painful and sore and I couldn't eat properly. As a result of this illness, I missed a lot of crucial schoolwork putting me behind the others.

On a lighter note, Mr Allison did ask me on one occasion to play a Town Crier for the school concert that was to be staged just before breaking up for the Easter Holidays. I was chosen, as I was able to project my deep voice. So on the afternoon in question sporting a black gown and three-cornered hat – I made my debut on the school library stage with the words: “Now hear ye this. Now hear ye this...” Our class did a skit on Tom Pearce and his old grey mare. One of our boys, Geoff Chaplin sat astride a sort of pantomime horse made of blankets hanging on for dear life with a klaxon horn which he sounded and brought the young audience to laughter as the rest of class sang “*Tom Pearce Tom Pearce lend me your grey mare....*”

At the same concert there was a version of *Toad of Toad Hall* with the participants wearing papier machete “heads” of the characters with a tape recording of the script played out at the same time. The teacher responsible for this was a Mr Glyn Summers who was to play an important role in my academic life a couple of years later.

By this time, I had made a few friends in the class – one of them, Geoff Filmer and I are still friends to this day after 42 years! There are not many people who would admit to knowing me *that* long. Then there was Stephen Marcar and another boy from Chadwell Heath, Robert (Bob) Kearney both of whom I'd later go on Red Rover (bus) tickets with to London.

As that first school year ended in July 1960 I was just glad to get out of the place for six weeks and sometimes I felt that I still wanted to go back to Walthamstow. Upon returning to classes in September that year I still wasn't doing well. So much so that my Dad did say that he was going to try and find another school. Before he did so he went to see the headmaster and I was sent for.

Ironically, just prior to this, we had to sit a music test from the school's music teacher, whom I won't name. If any of us were to get less than five out of ten we would be caned. The same threat was given to the class above us. In their case the threat was carried out as half of the class didn't get that five points. In our case he mused: “As I have kept you waiting ...and it's very kind of me really...you can have the choice of the cane or the slipper”. Half of our class didn't get those magical five points either – including me. He called out our names and of course we all chose the slipper.

There was uproar among parents afterwards and my father – who was something of a musician himself - said that this was a failure on the part of the teacher. Some parents did complain directly to the headmaster.

I don't understand why the teacher did this as he was a gifted musician and composed his own music for piano.

As a result of Dad seeing Mr Hicks, the headmaster, I was offered the chance to go to class 2C with form teacher Mr Don Pusey for the remainder of the year. In fact I was asked if I wanted to go back to my previous class just after Christmas 1960 but I chose to stay in his class as I had suddenly picked up again. That was really the turning point.

Mr Pusey was a younger teacher with fair hair and he encouraged us to have classroom discussions and write one-minute speeches. As English was my best subject, I was only too pleased to oblige.

I don't think I ever saw him administer the cane although he would dish out the slipper if anyone deserved it! But out of the three teachers whom I owe a debt of gratitude, Mr Pusey is one of them. During the course of the term year we had a number of interesting history and science lessons. On one occasion he took us to look at historic sites around the area including Barking Abbey, which has a history dating back to Norman times.

Then there was a visit in London for the Commonwealth Museum and the Science Museum and along with us on this occasion was a Mr Prentice, a young science teacher who had a passion for reading cloth cap poetry in a northern accent. His party piece was "The Lion and Albert".

During our visit to the Science Museum, one of the boys recited a poem of, shall we say, dubious content on an adult theme into a tape recorder, which was still a novelty in those days. The tape recorder automatically played back his message just as Mr Prentice came up to say that we were now moving off. To this day I can still see the cringe-making expression on his face as his smutty rhyme was played back in front of the teacher. I am sure he learned a valuable lesson that day, not necessarily of the academic kind!

It's ironic that kids always think they're the first ones to do something like that, many years later while I worked for the BBC in the west, we would have various school initiatives and the children would tell us what they got up to in class and the names they called the teacher behind their backs. Times change – but kids don't!

We also did metalwork for the first time in the second year and although I was never going to be a toolmaker, I did make a couple tools while I was there.

On one occasion one of the boys had finished hotting the irons in the forge and pulled it out red hot and wandered back to his workbench with it in front of him at chest level.

The scene of the other boys scuttling out of the way and jumping over benches with that savoury schoolboy language as they tried to avoid him is beyond my description!

In 1961 we were told of the extended course that would start in the third year. Our parents were invited to a meeting that would be chaired by the headmaster Mr Hicks, Mr Summers who was an extended course teacher, and representatives from the youth employment service.

I think most parents who attended thought it a good idea for us to stay on the extra year and gain the necessary qualifications.

So it was decided that I would stay on at school until the summer of 1964. And at the age of almost 13, three years, seemed a long way off. As the end of the term approached I had done well in the end of term exams, yes Thompson was more like his old self.

The reason I had done well that year was entirely due to the encouragement of Mr Pusey for the fact that he had made lessons both instructive and interesting. Although he could be strict, he was fair and like all good teachers praised good work. During the class discussions he would seek our opinions on subjects that ranged from the New English Bible, which at that time had just been published, to social issues and in doing so found out what made us tick. He remained with the school until retirement in 1994.

Next week Alan explains what happened on the extended course, his treading the boards and the two teachers who saw his potential as a performer, how he had a shocking experience – and what the headmaster said about his possible journalistic career.

Continuing the two part series on former Ilford Recorder reporter Alan Thompson's Mayfield School Memoirs, he tells of the teachers who saw him as a performer and what the headmaster said about a career in journalism.

Part 2:1961-64

In September 1961 as we ventured back to school some of us started the extended course in class 3X4 which would see us through to the summer of 1964. Our form master was a Mr G W Foley an east-ender who would have no hesitation in telling any noisy pupil to "Shut your trap". On another occasion he stopped a reading session by exclaiming that he knew there was some "...bloody hard words in that book..." but at least to *try*.

He also took us for maths and divided us into two groups. Basic and upper maths. At that time I was having extra home tuition with mathematics from a teacher at the school, a Mr Anthony Browne a young man from Hornchurch who spoke with a high pitch voice. But he was good at his subject and I quickly advanced in my maths, so it was therefore surprising that Mr Foley thought it right that I go to the basic maths group, something that baffled not only me but also Mr Browne. I had mastered fractions to decimals and vice-versa and advanced mathematical problems.

Mr Foley didn't appear to like me, on one occasion calling me a "smart Alec" for moving from the back of the class closer to the front, as we had been instructed, in another "foreign" classroom. Our classroom was one of the science labs that had to be given up for other classes.

Our science lessons were the domain of Mr Howard L Cutting BSc known out of earshot as "Chinky". It has been rumoured that he was a Spitfire pilot during the war, but I cannot say for certain. He drove an old Rover car and some pupils had once "spudded" the exhaust on the last day of term! Whether anyone was ever bought to book over it....I don't know, but I don't think anyone ever owned up! In that first year we learned about the four-stroke engine and....the two stroke...and electricity.

To demonstrate the theory of electricity he got us all to hold hands around the lab as one boy had his hand on an implement which when cranked generated a small charge. Of course we had a shocking experience but he laughed and told us that we all now knew what electricity was. When discussing the humble light-bulb he asked what the two gasses were that were emitted from the tungsten to which I replied: "Nitrogen and argon sir.." – he was pleased with my answer. But he wasn't always pleased with me having threatened the cane on more than one occasion and I received four heavy blows around the head as he didn't like my drawing of an ant! Ah yes those were the days and I've never drawn an ant since.

The threat of the cane was always there if we didn't get more than five out of 10 for science homework. He did on one occasion give a boy the slipper and whilst administering it jokingly chimed in: "I must not talk while sir is talking". If I remember correctly, it was Brian Farrell who, years later, was the drummer in the hit making rock group "Gun". To be fair, I don't think HLC ever carried out the threat of the cane for poor marks, although he did cane one boy in our class for something else.

We had HLC for three years and went over the same old stuff for those three years – our marks getting better each time! When we did astronomy he asked what certain bodies were ..Mars, Milky Way, the Galaxy and I quipped "*Maltesers*" – he was not amused and I was shouted at to go and stand by the door. I later received a couple of mild slaps on the hand and he was trying hard not to laugh – so perhaps he *did* have a sense of humour after all.

Part of the curriculum was Social Studies – History and Geography. Our history teacher was Mr Kenneth Weetch an expert on modern history and political science and later went on to become a Labour MP. He had a way with words and I enjoyed his lessons of the industrial revolution and early engineering feats. He always gave me good marks.

On one occasion someone – not in our class – had scribbled what he described as "obscene lang-gwij" (language) in a textbook. We were later told that the "culprit had now been caught and that his extended course was to end the following afternoon". His way with words encompassed an expression he would use if warning someone to buck up their ideas; "I'll drop on you" to which on one occasion pal Geoff Filmer replied: "Happy landing!" He got away with it.

As we ventured in to the fourth year in class 4E4 there are many stories I could relate but I think for me personally this was really when things started to take shape. For a start we had a much respected form teacher a Mr H L Braham, a man in his 40s, who was an art teacher and an excellent communicator. Secondly, at that time we had an English teacher, a Welshman, Mr Glyn Summers BA. Like Mr Braham, he was a gifted communicator and actually taught at the school from 1959 to 1966 and played Rugby.

Such was his inspiration that I don't think any of us did badly in his English classes apart from one or two. My first composition was on the subject of money and I received a B++. I never scored lower than C+. He was a hard taskmaster but knew how to get the best out of the pupil. I had also started to write stories in my own time and I once asked him to cast an eye over one story.

He did and put me right on a number of points when writing short stories. That advice has stayed with me ever since.

At Christmas 1962 Mr Braham allowed us to have a party in the art block the last day of term and we could bring our own goodies and bottles of soft drinks and play pop records. Two boys brought along cola bottles filled with beer. Mr Braham immediately realised this was not mineral water by the smell and banished the pair to the pottery room in the art block while the party continued. They were lucky there was no punishment – we were only 14 at the time. Other teachers would probably have stopped the frivolities there and then.

Our music lessons were now the domain of a Mr Douglas Shaw a short man with a baldhead who could play piano and sing in almost operatic tones. We were told that pop music lyrics were senseless and repetitive. Then we would sing a good old English sea shanty with meaningful words like:

Hilly Holly Hilly Holly Ho!
Cheerily boys, cheerily
Bend your backs and give a pull...

Answers please on a postcard. Mr Shaw was then affectionately known as “Old Hilly Holly”. Talking of nicknames the deputy head, a Mr Charles Ivey, was known as “Bouncer” as he rocked back and forth on his shoes while giving a Maths lesson. At an open evening on one occasion the mother of a boy attended to meet his form teacher and with hand graciously outstretched she exclaimed: “Nice to meet you *Mr Bouncer*.”

As far as the music lessons were concerned, I found them uninspiring especially when we were told that “classical music is jolly good stuff” (with apologies to Kenny Everett). After I left school I later developed a taste for things classical and when I presented on commercial radio in the west in the 80s I actually had a classical slot on my regular afternoon programme and many people said they suddenly had a liking for the light classics. I have since compered classical concerts in Swindon and Cheltenham. So I suppose more sank in than I realised at the time.

As the fourth academic year ended and we prepared for the last year at school in form 5E4, it was time to start thinking about careers. But that didn't mean there was any let up in the academic subjects. Mr Braham had organised a space project taking in most of our English lessons, which we would work on for the next 10 months culminating in an exhibition in the school library. He had also on a previous occasion arranged a school exchange with a college in Canada and was responsible for sending and receiving audiotapes. If nothing else, he did attempt to make the best of things and was something of a radio-ham so he knew the power of the spoken word.

We were also invited to undertake a project of our own in the art block after school hours on Thursday afternoons. Geoff and I went and I decided that I would like to try my hand at cartography and proceeded to draw a map of the Ilford and Barking area with extensions to east London from memory.

Mr Braham congratulated me for the effort.

He did once say that I had “the gift of the gab” and I was bound to do well in a career that involved my personality. He didn’t want to see any of us in 5E4 ending up working on the assembly lines of local factories. Encouragement is two thirds of the doing.

At the beginning of term I was asked by our previous English teacher Mr Summers to take part in the House Drama Competition that was going to be staged at Christmas. I went along for the first meeting in the library and wasn’t convinced I could actually take on a part that would involve such dedication with all the other school work. Mr Summers said that with my voice and bent towards mimicry, I should do it. No, I wasn’t convinced but I reluctantly agreed to undertake the part of Kysh the cockney manservant in a short spy story called “*Shivering Shocks*”.

Dutifully we rehearsed usually after school and as the nights closed in during the Autumn the time was getting nearer to actually performing the play. I went over the part time and time again on my bike going home until I could recite the necessary parts on cue. Then in December when we had a dress rehearsal my mind suddenly went blank! We redid the scene and if any of us tripped up the lines Mr Summers would say: “...go back do it again”. And we did until we had all got it right and knew each other’s movements and cues.

On the night of the first performance in the library all of us had to share a dressing room where we were also made up by Mr Braham. Some of the boys had to play women and wore skirts or dresses. One boy wore a bra and stuffed the cups with socks. Another boy grabbed hold of one of them and said: “Yeah...but not as good as the real thing though is it?!”

I was feeling a bit nervous but this was quickly allayed when Mr Summers tapped me on the shoulder grinning saying; “Don’t worry you’ll be great”.

We performed it in front of an audience three times altogether and although we did put on a polished performance, one scene did go slightly awry one night when a couple of policemen were supposed to burst in through a side door and rescue the main character from strangulation. Unfortunately someone had put the piece of fly wood as a latch on the inside of the door they were supposed to enter by. Both characters running the scene of the strangulation looked round to see when the policemen were going to come rushing in. The scene was extended by about 20 seconds that can seem a lifetime, if you are the one performing!

Behind the scenes there was a lot of intense scuffling going on as Mr Summers told one of the prompts to put his hand through the window and turn it. The audience saw a mysterious hand poking through the open window and fumbling around for the fly wood.! Rapturous laughter was heard from the audience!

On the third and final occasion we performed on the Thursday night there was a woman from a drama school in the audience who awarded us joint first place with another house - there were four – and each of us were congratulated for the hard work we had put into it. Of my performance she said that whilst I was holding a telephone conversation, it looked as though there really was someone on the other end of the line. Mr Summers gestured towards me at hearing that.

The previous day he told us that there was going to be this lady in the audience “who was about 90!” I repeated this in the class the following morning to which Mr Braham trying to conceal a smile said: “Thompson, if you are meaning to be rude, can I say you’re being very successful at it!”

I wanted to be able to develop my skills in acting but unfortunately it was not very likely as my parents did not have the money needed to send me to RADA.

As 1964 dawned, it was to be the last academic year at the school and the GCE Examinations were only a matter of some three months away.

In February we were visited, by the careers officer and various options were gone through. It was obvious that I should be looking at something creative but he said there are snags where the journalism is concerned as I would need something like five O levels to get in. This would now probably require me staying on for an extra year into the 6th form. My father attended the meeting and the headmaster was sent for. Dad had a word with him outside the interview room and the head’s answer was that it wouldn’t be worth staying on – as I probably wouldn’t qualify and become a journalist anyway.

This was a shattering blow. It was now only a matter of weeks before the exams were starting and I wondered whether it was going to be worth it. I did take the exams and although my academic qualifications could have been better, I *did* get the required minimum qualifications, and subsequently in to journalism. I must confess that I took a certain quiet delight in proving the headmaster wrong!

As the final bell went to herald the end of the day on Thursday 4th June 1964, I was in the library as we were holding the space exhibition there and I grinned thinking to myself “that’s it!” as it also heralded the end of my time at Mayfield.

So at the end of my schooling, did I feel resentment that the headmaster had said that I probably wouldn’t make a journalist? At the time I may have said yes but now I would say no.

Mr Braham and Mr Summers knew me better than the head and could see my potential. The headmaster could only go by what was on paper at the time and he did give me a glowing testimonial for which I should be thankful.

Hindsight is a wonderful science but I now realise that the teachers were actually on our side. I still don't agree with the head slapping but the teachers who were the greatest influence on me – as I recall - never did that anyway.

That one question from the Programme Director at CBS in New York had made me stop and think as to how things started for me and to whom I should be grateful. My documentaries have now been heard in much of the world. To the aforementioned teachers and to Mr Don Pusey I owe a debt of gratitude, one which I cannot repay to them but hopefully I have passed on in later years when I have been able to spot the talent and duly encouraged it.

I am probably the person I am today by upbringing and those teachers who taught us at Mayfield Secondary School in the 1960s. What goes round – comes round. I for one am thankful.

C Alan Thompson 2002. Adapted from the Thompson Memoirs in association with Golden Days Archive and Productions.