

## 8. Wester Elchies

When I was born, my parents registered me for St. Paul's School in London. When it became clear that I could not live there without serious asthma problems, they decided to send me to Gordonstoun instead. This was done mainly on the basis that Kurt Hahn, the founder and headmaster, was a distant relation of my father.

As I was not old enough to start Gordonstoun yet, I was sent to Wester Elchies, the preparatory school associated with Gordonstoun.

I was sad to be leaving home again so soon after returning from Switzerland, but my parents gave Wester Elchies a great build-up. It was supposed to be a wonderful modern school near Craigellachie (which they pronounced as two words: Craigel Lachie).

In the event, the school was a disappointment. At La Soleillette we were at least warm and well-fed. At Wester Elchies we were neither.

My mother and I set out by sleeper one evening. The next day we arrived at Craigellachie, which is by the river Spey in the Scottish Highlands. We took a taxi, which delivered us at Wester Elchies. My mother handed me over to Mrs. Delap the headmaster's wife and returned to the hotel at Craigellachie where she was staying.

The school was housed in a seventeenth-century manor, on a rise above the Spey valley.

The building was innocent of any modern developments. There was no electricity, and at night the rooms were lit by acetylene gas, generated from large drums of calcium carbide in a smelly shed. There was no central heating, in fact no heating at all except in the teachers' quarters. When the wind blew, icy drafts were inescapable.

Some of the classrooms were separate from the main building. I well remember trudging through the snow to a circular classroom called the 'Obs' where we sat with our feet soaking and teeth chattering while Colonel Davidson made us learn the dates of the kings.

At Wester Elchies I learned a useful habit. It isn't that I don't feel the cold; I do, but the sensation is not unpleasant. I am quite comfortable working in a room at 15°C.

In general, the teaching was unusually bad. Mathematics was taught (if that is the right word) by Mr. Brereton. He had a supply of Victorian drill books, as thick as bibles. The first hundred pages contained addition sums, then next hundred, subtraction, and so on. Mr. Brereton started us at page one and told us to get going. At first I tried to get through the problems as quickly as possible, but I was soon overwhelmed by the sheer volume of drudgery. I lost

heart and effectively gave up, doing the minimum necessary to avoid punishment.

To balance this dismal report, I should mention that Mr. Brereton was an excellent biology teacher. He showed us amoebas and parameciums through a microscope, and taught us to identify plants and flowers by observing their characteristics.

The school dining room was a wooden shed attached to the back of the house. Here we received meagre supplies of food, typically half a slice of bread with baked beans for supper. Although there was plenty left over there were no 'seconds' as there would not have been enough to go round everyone. The remnants were fed to the pigs.

The sanitary arrangements were extraordinary. We were all supposed to have a bath every night, but to save energy we would all use the same water, one after the other. By the time I got in, it was lukewarm and black.

When we got out, naked and shivering, we had to display our genitals to the matron, to make sure that we were not infected with ring-worm.

To be sure, there were some good moments. On the occasion of Princess Elizabeth's wedding to the Duke of Edinburgh, we were all invited to listen to the wireless in the Headmaster's living room. For a couple of hours we were actually warm!

The field in front of the school was planted with potatoes. Some time in October teaching stopped for three days and we went potato picking. We dug out the potatoes with our hands and put them into buckets, and Mr. Brereton drove round in a tractor and trailer to collect the crop. We were paid (!) two shillings a day.

When I joined the school, it was in the process of moving to a larger and more comfortable home at Aberlour House. I was only at Wester Elchies for one term.

This was perhaps the worst period of my childhood. From then on, things got steadily better.

I am sure the headmaster could have found excellent reasons for the way the school was run. The war had only recently ended. Food rationing was in force and the whole country lived in an atmosphere of 'austerity'. Good teachers were almost impossible to recruit, and so on.

On a recent trip to the area I enquired about Wester Elchies, and learned that it had been declared to be in a dangerous state of decay, and totally demolished. We visited the site, which was quite flat and grassy except for a few blocks of stone.