

9. Aberlour House

As we sat, shivering in our classroom in Wester Elchies, Mr. Delap told us about Aberlour House, the new branch of the school to which many of us would be moving next term. Mr. Brereton was to be the headmaster. We could expect something much more like Gordonstoun with two cold showers a day, and a morning run during wearing only shorts and gym-shoes. It sounded like a descent to an even deeper level of Hell.

Aberlour House is a grand Georgian mansion set in large grounds. In front of the house there is a formal lawn and a huge column built to glorify the first owner.

Inside, the house is noticeably more modern than Wester Elchies. There are a few hot pipes, and you can walk through all the passages without crouching. Sensibly, all the dormitories and wash-rooms are upstairs, and the class rooms and dining room are on the ground floor.

As well as some 60 boys, there were a few girls at the school, mainly the daughters of staff members. They had their own dormitories and wash-rooms. There were too few of them to have any impact on our lives, and I can't remember much about them.

We arrived at Aberlour House on a cold January day in 1948. I had been brought up to believe that I was a delicate child with frail health, and I was certain that running around half-naked in winter would kill me. To my surprise I survived the first run, and the second. I took several years to be thoroughly convinced, but in fact I enjoy excellent health. Overall, the dreaded Hell never materialised.

I was at Aberlour House for two years. The school policy was a mixture of enlightenment and incompetence. For example, Mr. Brereton continued to be a disaster as far as Mathematics was concerned, but an inspiring teacher of Biology. He organised a competition with points being awarded to the first finder of every species of plant and flower, with bonuses for stating both its common and Latin names correctly. His dissections of frogs and rabbits were revolting but fascinating, and he used to leave lying around several thick books on human anatomy and physiology. We read them furtively (they always fell open at the same places) but I now understand that we were meant to read those very passages. Just before I left Aberlour House I was called in to Mr. Brereton's study for the customary sex talk.

“Well, Colin, you know all about it, don't you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Alright. You can go.”

Our English teacher was a Mrs. Stewart, whose one-legged husband was the school bursar. Mrs. Stewart had favourites; she was admired by a few and loathed by the rest. Nevertheless, she taught me the elements of English Grammar, how to identify a part of speech and parse a sentence. She encouraged us to read widely, and was the first to persuade me that the *Reader's Digest* was not the acme of English Literature. On balance she was one of the better teachers.

The same cannot be said of Col. Davidson, nicknamed Colonel Dodd. A tall, elderly gentleman of military appearance, he ran the school bank (with cheque-books) and taught History. We had two History lessons a week. On Tuesdays we had to learn the dates of British kings by heart, and on Thursdays this knowledge would be tested. I did extremely well, and got excellent reports without actually learning any History!

Notwithstanding his methods of teaching, Col. Dodd was popular with the boys. One boy had filled up a lemonade bottle with urine and was trying to sell it for two pence as orange squash. Col Dodd guessed what was going on, bought the bottle, and then made the boy drink it himself.

Riding was taught by Miss Reckitt, a tall young woman who presided over the horses in the stable. I was her pupil for three terms, but I hated riding so much, and was so bad at it, that eventually she gave up hope and my riding lessons ceased.

Music was the province of Mr. Milton, an excellent pianist and teacher. He managed to teach the recorder to a whole class. I still play it today.

Soon after he came to the school his wife left him, and he had an affair with Miss Reckitt. It was given out that he was teaching her the cello, but matters were so blatant that they were obvious even to us twelve-year-old children.

Mr. Haines taught Latin and Geography. Latin was excruciatingly dull. Mr Haines was a rock-climber, and he became interesting whenever he talked about outdoor pursuits such as map-reading or orienteering.

Once he took a party for a camping week-end by Loch Morlich (near Aviemore). It was brilliant sunshine and we spent the whole time swimming or following compass courses across the hills.

The dormitories upstairs were of various sizes from four to thirteen beds. It was a matter of principle that we should sleep with the windows wide open, and in winter it was common to wake with your bed covered with a dusting of snow. It didn't matter - the temperature in the dormitory was below freezing so you could just shake the snow off and brush it away.

The food situation was much better than at Wester Elchies; I don't remember feeling the same degree of hunger. Nevertheless, during the two years I was at Aberlour House I grew twelve inches and remained the same weight.

Mealtimes were often strained and unpleasant. If you didn't like something, you could ask for a small portion, but you were not allowed to refuse it altogether. I had to struggle with bits of liver and rabbit which I detested and I don't think the experience did me any good. On one occasion we all had to eat rabbit covered in maggots. Did you know that kippers glow in the dark if you leave them too long?

One boy was allergic to cheese, which made him vomit. This was not considered sufficient to be excused from eating it, and he was regularly sick after Welsh Rarebit on Tuesdays.

For reasons I have always failed to understand, the school gradually introduced draconian rules about personal food. First we were banned from buying any during our walks to the village; then parents were prohibited from sending food in parcels, and finally it was announced that any parcel addressed to a boy was to be opened in his presence by the matron, who would extract and confiscate anything edible. One boy's mother (I understand she was a widow) had saved her ration of sugar and chocolate for months to bake and send her son a birthday cake. The parcel was duly opened, the boy was allowed to admire the cake, and then it was removed. According to one report the staff were seen eating it late at night when the boys were supposed to be asleep.

To get round these regulations my mother invented an ingenious technique. She used to send me pairs of socks with salami sausages inside them. They always got through the search undetected.

Do you think I shared these delightful items with my friends and colleagues? Think again! I would run off at the first opportunity, climb my favourite tree and eat the salami sausage all by myself.

On the matter of personal freedom the school was enlightened, more so than many schools today. After a term or so your name was put on a privilege list. This entitled you to go on expeditions in the surrounding countryside. We all had bicycles and would go to such places as Auchindoun and Balvenie castles, Aberlour, Rothes and Elgin. In Craigellachie there was an inn which served a superb high tea, as much as you could eat, for 2/6 (12 pence). Furthermore it was safe, the lady who ran it would not give us away to the school.

Some of the boys at Aberlour House were memorable characters. Martin dreamed of having his own Rolls Royce, with a chauffeur, by the time he was thirty. Watson had a great stock of rude jokes.

Gill was much given to dangerous experiments. He could make empty carbide drums explode by putting in a dribble of water, and a spark plug connected to a spark generator. Later, at Gordonstoun, he turned on the gas in a chemistry fume cupboard without lighting the Bunsen burner. Some time later he climbed on to the roof and dropped a burning match down the chimney.

Some of us decided to form an aero club. It never got very far, but I remember the first meeting. We had a long discussion about the constitution, and we decided that any member who didn't pay their subscription of sixpence a term would be dismembered [!]. However, if they paid up later, they could be remembered.

I made several good friends at Aberlour House. Tony Finlay, Jock Anderson and I formed a trio, and we would often visit local castles or take picnics out to the country on summer days. Jock died young, but Tony and I remain firm friends.

On reflection, I am surprised by the amount of freedom we had. We were even allowed to go on mountain expeditions by ourselves. One day Tony Finlay and I set out to climb Ben Rinnes, a substantial local mountain almost 3000 feet high.

We had no map or compass, and when we were near the top the mist came down. We descended the wrong side of the mountain, and were lucky enough to get a lift, otherwise we would have faced a 15-mile walk home.

One of my good friends was Sutton. I can't remember his first name because we didn't use them. He had a reputation as a bad boy and he often did things which earned him severe punishment. He was, however, a gifted model aircraft constructor, and he taught me much of what he knew about this craft. With his help I made the most successful model I have ever attempted. It flew perfectly and lasted a long time, until it landed in a field full of cows and was trampled to bits.

I never knew anything but kindness and consideration from Sutton. He once told me that at the age of eight he had killed another boy by arranging for him to ride a bicycle into a tree at full speed. According to Sutton the incident had been taken as an unfortunate accident.

Later, Sutton and I went on to Gordonstoun at about the same time. Sutton continued to get into serious trouble, mainly for drinking and smoking. One day they found a bottle of brandy under his pillow, and he was expelled. I remember him packing his trunk under the supervision of a prefect. I came up to say goodbye and shake him by the hand, but I was not allowed to speak to him. He was already a non-person. To this day I do not know what happened to him.

I cannot end this chapter without mentioning Mrs. Wilkinson the Art teacher. Professionally I must have been her despair, for I could not and still can't draw

even a pin man. Personally she was one of the warmest, most understanding people I have ever met. She was about 35 at the time and separated from her first husband. She would go on walks with us boys and talk to us as equals about the school, politics, our careers, hopes and fears. She, more than anyone on the staff, made life worth living by providing human contact.

Life at Aberlour House was often enjoyable, but over it all hung a vast shadow the spectre of Gordonstoun. It was rumoured that the rigours of Aberlour were as nothing compared to the constant hardships of the main school. Sometimes boys who had gone on to Gordonstoun would come back on their bikes for a few hours, in their new grey uniforms. When we asked them about Gordonstoun, they would assume looks of stoic bravery and say, through gritted teeth,

“Yes, it’s tough. I don’t think I should tell you too much.”

Two or three times a year we would actually be taken to Gordonstoun to see a play or hear a concert. The fact that all the boys seemed fit and happy did nothing to dispel our fears. We came to think of the move to Gordonstoun as something akin to death. It would come, inevitably, and we would face up to it with courage and fortitude.