

Durlston in the mid 1930s

Extracts from the Autobiography of David Croft O.B.E.



(Pat Cox) was young and enormously enthusiastic and had an infectious giggle which was accompanied by a percussive rush of air through his back teeth. My entry (to Durlston Court) was confirmed and Mum and I found ourselves at Rowe and Co of Bond Street who were the Rolls Royce of School Outfitters. Here, aided by an elderly shop assistant who knew the uniform of every school by heart, we purchased all the goods necessary to send a ten year old to Boarding School. It included mackintoshes, overcoats, woolly gloves, blazer, grey cap with circular bands of white, lots of pairs of flannel shorts, long trousers and stiff Eton Collars and straw boaters for Sunday, football boots, shirts and woolly, scratchy underwear and socks for every occasion, a wooden tuck box, a trunk and countless Cashes Name Tapes which my Nanny, Olive, sewed onto every article including 12 handkerchiefs, a toothbrush, and a sponge.

All this was assembled and packed and consigned "Luggage In Advance" via Carter Patterson's horse drawn cart for the princely sum of two shillings, the railway ticket having been purchased a week or so previously. At Waterloo, met by the ever cheerful Pat Cox, we joined the parents of half a dozen other new boys. It was Pat's custom to reserve a carriage for the London boys and he personally conducted the new boys into a reserved compartment.

All too soon, the whistle was blown and amid much steam and smoke and puff puffing we all embarked upon the first great lone adventure of our lives. It would have been a tearful farewell but, as we all knew, boys don't cry. Girls and French boys might cry but British boys - never. The first part of the journey I knew well having been many times to Bournemouth. The last part past Holton Heath, which was a Cordite factory in the Great War, Wareham, the spectacular, craggy Corfe Castle, and then the single line to Swanage was all new to me. We got off the train at the end of the line which was Swanage. Then, clinging to our overnight cases, we walked with the rest of the boys through the little town and up the steep hill past St Aldhelm's church to the turreted Durlston Court.

The building had started life in the Mid Victorian era as a large private house. Edwardian and twenty's additions had been made when it had become a school in order to contain more pupils and to confuse the draughts. Cox's wife and family lived on the ground and first floors. The classrooms

were on the rest of the ground floor. Dormitories were on the second and top floors. Three foot central heating radiators had been put into most of the rooms except the top floor but between the usual inadequate boiler and the relentless east wind they simply served to take the draughts from the very cold or freezing mark to the temperature at which good white wine should be consumed.

There followed a quick tour round the school which was confusing because all over England it is a fact that one classroom devoted to the enlightenment of small boys looks very like another used for the same purpose. A brief meal was served and then came a rather frightening time when we were left alone to find shelter from the older pupils who screamed and rushed around corridors as if they had some great and urgent satanic mission to complete - which they hadn't. Then came evening prayers with that hymn which goes "Lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom" (of which we were well aware by now) followed by "The night is dark and I am far from home" (which was all too obvious) and concluded "Lead Thou Me On". "He", on this occasion, led me on to an eight bed dormitory where we all climbed into our stiff new flannel pyjamas and prayed kneeling beside our beds that our parents would realise the mistake they had made and come to rescue us next morning. Morning came and, to the great disappointment of eight small boys, not one single parent turned up in answer to our eight earnest God destined entreaties. So boarding schooldays started and were to carry on, in my case, for six years.

Our general welfare and health, which was good - bugs and disease being incapable of survival at those temperatures - was looked after by the caring, mousy Miss Lawton and her young warm hearted sidekick Miss Lupton. On the rare occasions when any of us had a temperature, we were packed off to a room which was known as "The San". Nobody had asthma and allergies had not been invented.

The staff led by Pat Cox and his two partners Ellis and Fawkus were pleasant and efficient. Pat Cox took Latin and French which he spoke with the most appalling Edward Heath accent with plentiful pleas not to pass his pronunciation on to Mr Tolson who spoke it quite well. Maths was taken by a tall, hearty young master called Anderson who appeared every day wearing only slacks and a collarless flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It required not a little fortitude on his part to stand in a chill classroom clad in this fashion. We were well wrapped up in woolly vests, pullovers and jackets. He lost his two front teeth playing rigger which added to his carefree, pirate King like appearance. I think because of him I acquired above average ability in Arithmetic which later got me into Rugby. He also taught two little poems that have stood me in good stead. Mr Anderson said with a smile, Seventeen sixty yards in a mile. And also Mr Anderson likes to drink beer Three hundred and sixty five days in a year.

Parents were only allowed a couple of one-day visits in a thirteen week term with a two-day visit for sports day and half term in the summer so one got a definite feeling of isolation. Nevertheless, Pat Cox had devised a routine that made every hour of the day a crowded one. We were taught to play rigger. I learnt very quickly that if I was in receipt of that odd shaped ball the best thing to do was to throw it away - backwards. If I hung on to it and ran I would swiftly find myself face down in the mud, which was never a favourite position for me.

Durlston Court had a pretty large staff. Cooks and kitchen maids we never saw. There was an enormous, heavy browed houseman who cleaned our shoes and tried to keep the changing room

clean. Beds were made, dormitories cleaned and meals served by anonymous maids. I never knew the name of any of them.

Once a week in the evening Cox would trot out his 16 millimetre silent projector and show a film. Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy were in the repertoire but the favourite was a detective serial called Sexton Blake. This gave a great opportunity for the boys to raise the roof with hisses, boos and cheers and was the highlight of the week. From time to time members of the private school lecturing circuit would descend on us. One such was Grey Owl who purported to be a Red Indian but was in fact a complete phoney named Archie Belaney from Hastings. He gave a great performance however and we all lapped it up. A member of Shackleton's expedition to the South Pole was another well cheered lecturer. An outstanding success amongst the boys was a deep-sea diver with full diving suit, lead boots and brass diving helmet who was fed air by two boys turning a large wheel to activate the pumps. Not being in the water, he blew up like a Michelin man which caused such hysterical hilarity among the boys that the pump operators ceased pumping so the diver nearly passed out. They all came with slides which were shown on the school lantern operated at a signal by a hand clicker by a reliable, much envied senior.



A Football team in 1936

On Sunday we made our own beds and then struggled with studs and stiff Eton Collars to ready ourselves for Chapel at St Aldhelm's, a name which I used as the Church in "Dad's Army". In order to look neater and tidier for this occasion, we all lined up for Miss Lupton to sprinkle our heads with water and tame our unruly locks with a brush and comb. Although it was only two or three hundred yards away we "Crocodiled" as was the custom for schools at the time. Quite soon I got into the choir which meant a smaller "Crocodile" but the same Eton Collars. The choir wore gowns and surplices as did Pat Cox whose tuneful baritone drowned our pre-pubescent piping. Pat later proceeded into the pulpit and delivered the sermon. On Sunday afternoon, we donned overcoats, gloves and scarves and walked as a mob on the windswept cliffs of the Purbeck Hills. Only the very sick were excused.

Twice a week, Pat conducted us all in the large dining room as we sang popular songs such as “Old Father Thames”. Not surprisingly, he became rather emotional as he taught us to sing “The Road to the Menin Gate” which clearly brought back memories of the terrible 14/18 war during which he lost so many of his friends.

In summer we made two or three visits a week to swim from the beach at Swanage. Swimming was well taught and started with Mr Anderson taking all the non swimmers to the Gym, putting them face down on benches where we all made frog like movements and gasped for breath at appropriate intervals. The next stage was to go to the Grosvenor Hotel at the bottom of the hill where we practised and gulped in their swimming pool on the rocks. When we reached a certain level of competence we were taken to the sea where the object was to swim to the bathing raft some forty or so yards from the shore. Once on the raft, we were declared to be swimmers and received the reward of a “Bag of Tuck”. This was approximately two ounces of sweets but much sought after because our weekly allowance was only two bags.

Once every summer, led by Pat Cox, we took a morning train from the little terminus station at Swanage and went to Corfe Castle. There we climbed to the top of Ballard Down, ate a picnic lunch and walked back to Swanage. On the one side the view went over the rugged Purbeck hills. On the other side we could see over Poole Harbour as far as Bournemouth. It was unforgettable. Also once every summer the ever enthusiastic Pat hired a pleasure boat which took us from Swanage, round Old Harry Rock to Studland Bay where we had a picnic, caught hoards of tiny crabs with lumps of meat on string and bathed in the calm clear water.

During the Christmas term we performed a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. These switched between “The Pirates of Penzance”, “The Mikado”, “Iolanthe” and “The Gondoliers”. Auditions were held for the principal roles. I copped “Ko Ko” in “The Mikado”. After much preparation, the first performance arrived. I gave my “Tit Willow” to the best of my ability and at the end there was a brief moment of dead silence. I thought I must have screwed up somehow but then the little theatre burst into thunderous applause. It is a very potent drug. I was hooked for life.

Looking back I have every reason to be grateful to Pat Cox. He taught us to be honest, truthful, loyal and polite and in fact totally unsuitable to enter into commercial activity of any description. Thanks to his leadership my days at Durlston were as happy as one could expect them to be considering I was away from a very comfortable home. But I couldn't wait to grow up and leave. I had experienced applause.

****David Coft's Autobiography was published by the BBC. in 2003 with the title, 'You 'ye all done very well!'***

John Warnford-Davis 1936 -1940



These memories inevitably fade but I have some.

I remember Pat Cox very well and his mannerism of rubbing his lower back with the back of his hand. This was due, we were told, to a shrapnel wound from WW1

I remember Mr Ellis - Deputy Head Master - whose caning was feared more than that of Pat.

I remember being a goody-goody because of my deep fear of being caned - I never was!

I remember Penelope Lonsdale - Matron - otherwise known as the Purple Glory - because of her addiction to everything and anything purple.

I remember being 'slipped' by Miss Lonsdale as a new boy, for some trivial offence, such as talking after lights out, on my bare bottom. I didn't mind that as it did not hurt and was only a minor humiliation.

I remember the Cadet Force and learning WW1 arms drill with Lee Enfield Army Rifles. During my time we had to convert from "Form Fours!" to "Form Three's".

I remember Mr Anderson who rewarded good work in Maths by drawing a picture on your exercise book - any subject.

I remember Mr Rogers - whom I loved.

I remember building huts in the woods near the school and we all were members of camps.

I remember eating interminable rabbits in all its variations and not being able to face it ever again.

I remember winning school colours in shooting and being so proud of wearing the cap, white and grey with crossed rifles, on Sunday walks.

I remember swimming in the Grosvenor Hotel pool and then being promoted to swimming in the sea - which was freezing! I have hated cold water ever since!

I remember all the Gilbert and Sullivan's - I was a fairy in Iolanthe.

I remember paddle steamer trips and towing aeroplane shaped 'skimmers' made during carpentry lessons.

I remember going on a school trip to the Royal Naval Revue in 1936 - Silver Jubilee year for George V and seeing HMS Hood, HMS Nelson and HMS Rodney.

I remember having 6d worth of tuck per week. Got a lot for what is now 2.5p!

I remember asking some masters to buy me a Dinky Toy with my pocket money when he went shopping.



Headmaster Pat Cox

I remember Ian Hunter, Rathbone, Frankau, Franks (twins, I think, with whom I shared a birthday on 14 June), Molesdale brothers, Dunn (who sincerely believed in ghosts and frightened us all with his bedtime stories), Hancock and, I believe, some little Cox's.

I remember playing 'Chain he' in the playground on roller skates and being sent flying by the 'chain' catching me behind my neck. Subsequently I was told that my nose had, at some time been broken. I know it was then.

I remember having to tell Matron whether or not I had done No.2 each morning - if not - a dose of Syrup of Figs!

I remember after the War broke out in September 1939 that we were sure that there were German spies operating from the Water Tower at the back of the school sending flashing light signals.

I remember that the Radar towers on the Downs were actually weapons that had ray guns which would stop the engines of any incoming German Bombers. We knew nothing about Radar at that time.

I was known as Warnford-Davis J and my cousin was Warnford-Davis D - and I remember my school number - 78. I am now 79!

I wonder if my flashes of memories will spark some others from that period?

I remember being terribly home-sick and that Pat Cox and his wife were very kind to me.

I would love to hear from anyone who remembers me.

John Warnford-Davis