



## Where Two Paths Led



*Two students from 1964-67 explore the effects of their contrasting experiences of education prior to Keswick.*

Both Mick and Rod were born in Ipswich in 1946. For seven years, Rod cycled past Mick's house on his way to the local grammar school. For one whole year at his secondary modern school, Mick was taught in classrooms at the primary school immediately opposite Rod's house. It turned out that they knew a lot of people in common - pupils who had been to one of their two respective primary schools and then gone on to each other's secondary schools. They also both regularly watched Ipswich Town at Portman Road but, until their first night in Hostel H3E, they had never knowingly met. Fifty years after leaving Keswick, they are still close friends and regularly meet up. In this article, Mick and Rod explore their contrasting experiences prior to Keswick and consider how this affected their attitude to college work once they started the course.



**Mick writes** ....I can identify the actual day that I shot my chances of going to grammar school in the foot! Not only do I think that I could have benefited from a grammar school education but the school was only a few hundred yards from where I lived! My primary school head mistress came into the classroom at morning break while we were drinking our third of a pint of milk and asked me, "Would your parents be very disappointed if you didn't go to grammar school?" Well as my brother had gone to the secondary modern and as my mother had sent me off to school on the days of the 11 plus exam with, "just do your best," I assumed that they would not! It seemed to me that each year my C of E Primary was allocated 12 grammar school places – six for boys and six for girls. *I wonder if that was true?* Not only that but a boy had joined us from another school only the year before. Teachers were always telling him he could do better. They did not say that to me. I think his father was head of another school in the town. *Did he really steal my grammar school place?*

I did not hate primary school but neither did I find the classroom side of it very exciting. It seemed to me to mostly involve copying from blackboards. In geography, history, or nature study it was just a matter of trying to keep up as the teacher finished writing on the third blackboard and then started wiping out the first to continue what seemed to me her endless urge to write "stuff". With a dip-in pen and an inkwell, I never went home without ink stained on to my fingers! Arithmetic was a bit better providing you learnt the tricks of the trade like "borrowing ten" when taking away. I had no understanding of why you should do that, just that it meant that you stood more chance of getting the sum right. I did like writing compositions in English providing that no one troubled me about my spelling, my grammar or my handwriting.

Secondary school was both better and worse. Better, because I went from an all female-staff at primary to an all male-staff at the boys only sec mod. Most of these men had fought in the war. "I spent four years in Nagasaki boy, Nagasaki." After all that they had been

through, teaching a few lads a thing or two was no big deal to them. None of the clowns of Education Secretaries that we have endured in the last 30 years would have got them to come to heel! Worse, because we had to do handicraft – woodwork one year, then metal work the next. “You have been selected for a secondary modern education because you are more practical rather than academic”. Rubbish – give me the airy fairy world of academia any day. I still cannot knock a nail in straight nor do any other single thing involving DIY – *ask my wife if you do not believe me.*

I spoke to some of my former primary school friends who had gone on to the grammar. They talked a lot about homework. I do not say that I never got any. I clearly remember being asked to do the odd bit of maths *in my own time* and possibly a little in other subjects but it never got in the way of real life. Not until it had been decided that, despite our limitations when 11, at 15 we might just be able to scrape a few GCEs if we *stayed on* for the fifth year and did a bit of homework. I did get four GCE O-levels and left at 16 to take a job in an office. I added a fifth by reading the syllabus for religious knowledge (then 100% Christian) and, coming from a church going family, all I did was to read the bits of the Bible that were to be tested. In one year at evening classes, I got A-level English and the next, having failed the O-level economic history twice, decided I might as well take the A-level and passed that.

I arrived at Keswick with a few bits of paper qualifications, not as many as nearly everyone else and with huge gaps in my education. I was doing English mains but had never read a Shakespeare tragedy. I had not been in a sixth form. I had no strategy for studying and not a clue what you were supposed to do in what was called “revision”. Even though I had worked for two years I was still one of the youngest in the year. Socially I was immature and shy. The one thing I was not worried about was failing. I had done that at 11. If I did not make it as a teacher it would not have been the end of the world. However, it seemed unlikely to me that with such a shortage of teachers, and particularly a demand for male primary teachers, they were going to waste money training me and all the others for three years, just to say we had failed to make the grade at the end of it.

I did what my mother had told me those years previously, “I did my best”. I attended the lectures, I wrote the essays. Actually I typed them as my handwriting was so dreadful and it took me so long. I read as much as I could to fill up what I knew was the void in my previous education. I found the education lectures interesting. I thought the basic courses in subjects would enable me to make things more interesting for my future pupils than they had been for me. I enjoyed the teaching practices but was glad that they were not any longer.



I liked being in the Drama Society. I had never really done much of it at school. I wrote articles and in my third year became editor of *Aspect*, the college newspaper. I was puzzled that some students seemed to work so hard. Fine, if they enjoyed it but often they did not seem to. I could not really see how you could go to school for something like 13 years, then go to college for three and then go back to school and teach, possibly for the rest of your life. OK so I had only worked for two years but I felt I had a more relaxed attitude to education. Some of them seemed to think that it was *the be all and end all of everything.*



**Rod writes...** I was born in the front bedroom of our house in Ipswich. The first time I opened my eyes and turned my head, I would have looked straight into the windows of the primary school opposite. It was almost as if I was destined for a life in the classroom!

Starting school held no terrors for me. My father, sister and cousins had all attended the same school and it wasn't as if I had far to go. The teaching was solid, if unspectacular and it helped greatly that I could read from a very early age. With a minimum of trouble, I sailed through to my 11 plus year where my teacher was Mr Jackson, an emergency-trained ex-RAF man. He had limited patience with young children but made us work hard and got the best from us.

Compared to SATs today, when pupils often begin working through past papers from October onwards, we had no preparation whatsoever for the 11 plus – arguably a far more important test with, for some, far-reaching consequences. In fact, it was not till afterwards that I realised I had actually sat the first paper!

My school served a mainly working-class community not far from the town centre and compared to schools in the outer suburbs sent far fewer pupils to the grammar school. Between three and five was the norm but my year group excelled itself with nine of us obtaining a place.

I was the first of my family to attend grammar school. Money was tight but somehow enough was found to equip me with a full school uniform and all the requisite extras. Some things, like my handicraft apron, my mother made herself but I had all I needed and when I first donned my black school cap and blazer and hoisted my new leather satchel on to my back, I was bursting with pride.

Northgate was the only state-run boys' grammar in a town of over 120,000 people and it thrived on its role of educating what it considered the elite. It was run along the lines of a minor public school. Indeed, no attempt was ever made to liaise with the local secondary moderns. The masters, many Oxbridge educated, wore black gowns and rarely engaged with pupils on a personal level. Latin featured on the timetable from the first year onwards and rugby and hockey were the winter term sports – football was certainly not encouraged! Uniform policy was rigidly enforced and homework (prep) could be up to two hours per night. This was the world of academia – and I loved being part of it!

Although many boys, like me, were from working class families, others had real pedigree – sons of doctors, clergymen, solicitors.... In my first class, I sat between a head-teacher's son and the son of a prominent architect. Some were high fliers who breezed their way through the work. In contrast, I found it challenging and had to work hard to keep my head above water.

Without doubt, examination success was the school's main *raison d'être* and training began early. At the end of each term, we had exams in up to 10 subjects which determined one's form position. At the end of the year, more exams determined one's form for the following year. Then it was 'mock' GCEs, before the O-level and A-level examinations themselves.

A classic illustration of the teaching methods employed would see the geography master striding into the classroom, dictating for 40 minutes from his notes and then striding out again. I came to accept this was what teaching was all about – the more pages of notes I had, the better the lesson. In contrast, when the history master spent a whole lesson discussing Hogarth's painting 'Gin Lane' to illustrate conditions in 18<sup>th</sup> century London, I was appalled. At the end of the lesson, I had just four lines of notes in my exercise book. This man did not know how to teach!

By the time I left school, I'd taken a total of 16 sets of exams. I took nine O-levels, passed eight and moved onto the 6<sup>th</sup> form to take history, geography and economics. By then, I had learned the recipe for exam success in my chosen subjects: take lots of notes; be highly selective in which topics to revise; cram the relevant facts into the short-term memory bank; regurgitate for the exam; then forget everything you just learned. It seldom failed!

Only five boys opted for economics at A-level and in the absence of a suitably-qualified master, we had to attend lectures at the local Civic College. This was a severe culture shock. For a start, there were girls (!) in our class; the students were referred to by their first names and dressed casually, making us feel awkward in our school blazers; absences were not checked up on and if you didn't fulfil the (occasional) homework task, then so be it. You certainly didn't get a severe reprimand or detention. This laissez-faire approach didn't suit somebody used to school discipline and although I achieved A-levels in both history and geography, I fell short in economics gaining a compensatory O-level.

In hindsight, I should have taken a year out before starting at Keswick. Apart from a six-week stint temping in a bakery during the summer holiday, I had no experience whatsoever of life beyond the classroom. However, all my schoolmates were applying to either university or teacher training college so I followed suit.

Once at college, I simply continued to work in the way I'd been trained at school: copious note-taking, successful completion of set tasks and short-term focussed revision when exams came around. I did no background reading whatsoever. Furthering my overall knowledge didn't come into it unless there was an exam paper involved.

My subject was geography and having passed comfortably at O-level and A-level, I found it relatively undemanding. That was not to say our lecturers, with Tony Cartwright at the helm, weren't excellent and the five of us who took the Advanced Main course were all successful. I did enjoy the course, in particular, the many field trips - seeing erosion taking place before one's eyes was far superior to copying notes about it from a text-book! However, I would have got even more from it had I been able to free myself from the shackles of working for work's sake.

By rigidly applying the methods instilled in me from my schooldays I had no difficulty with the rest of the course work. I completed three successful teaching practices and overall had a marvellous three years at Keswick, making the most of the opportunities on offer and living college life to the full. A whole new world had opened up.

Seventeen years later, I began an in-service degree and realised that study didn't have to be merely a means to an end but could provide fulfilment and immense satisfaction. No more did I see education just about ticking boxes and passing tests.



Then the Government introduced its regime of continual assessment in our schools. SATs results dominated everything. It was back to square one...

Together, Mick and Rod write: The 11 plus test was without doubt a defining moment for us both and ultimately affected the way we approached our studies at Keswick.

At grammar school, Rod worked furiously to justify his place and if this meant long hours of tedious homework and mind-numbing revision that was the price to pay. Mick, on the other hand, buried his sense of disappointment at missing out, left school at 16 and resigned himself to an office job. However, by attending evening classes, he began to reduce the size of the chasm that had opened up between him and those contemporaries who had been eased through multiple O-levels and on to A-levels.

When we arrived together at Keswick, Rod simply applied the tried and trusted techniques to his studies learned over seven years of continuous schooling. Mick, by his own admission, had 'no strategy for studying' and 'not a clue' when it came to "revision". As Rod continued with his single-minded approach, he couldn't quite fathom Mick's 'more relaxed attitude to education'. In contrast, Mick probably included Rod amongst those who 'puzzled' him in thinking that work was the 'be all and end all'.

It's difficult to assess which of us had the easier ride. Rod felt the more comfortable in the academic environment but Mick's more open approach meant he probably got more from the course.

In the end, it didn't matter one way or the other, the rewards were the same. We both obtained our teaching certificates. Our paths that had diverged radically when we were aged 11 had come together again ten years later.