

Cyril Dennis

1929 - 1940

REEDHAM IN THE NINETEEN THIRTIES

In Eddie Rolph's excellent story of Reedham, *The Home on the Hill*,¹ there is no mention of Mr Tregenza² who succeeded H E Clarke³ as headmaster when he retired in 1934. As Eddie left school around this time⁴, this omission must have been deliberate. In a recent edition of *Rosabeam*, Maureen Gibson wrote that very little is ever written about the years immediately before WW2. (She went on to ask if anyone remembered the Gibson Girls of that period - as if anyone could possibly forget them.) When I rejoined ROSA in 1994 after a gap of about 45 years, I wondered why so few of my generation were members. Surely we were not all dead? I could make a long list of the people who we don't know what happened to. Am I being controversial in suggesting that Reedham went through a bad patch when Clarke left, and this together with the war coming when it did may be the reason why there are so few of us. I have been asked by Derrick Smith, the ROSA Historian, to write some of my memories of those days; good and bad, trivial and serious. I do this but stress that what I write is my own opinion and others might take a different view.

I first went to Reedham in 1929 at the age of five and was there for nearly eleven years. I remember very well my first day. My mother was in tears and I screamed the place down as I had a tug-of-war with the woman who came to collect me. I don't remember very much of my years in the infants but I do remember the name of the teacher, a Miss Edie.

In 1932 I moved up into the main school where life went on as it had probably done for many years. I remember a Nurse Winch who was in charge of the Sanatorium. She was probably a very nice lady but we thought of her as a bit of a 'battleaxe'. She seemed to have one remedy for all complaints - a laxative. "Get your cup for white mixture." was her familiar cry. After a few years she left and her replacement, I think she was a Nurse Rayner, was a more understanding character. Even so, she would periodically give the whole school a dose of senna pods on the same day. This caused great embarrassment as the toilets next to the dormitories were quite small.

There was one very amusing incident that happened when I was in the first year of the junior school. The science lab was immediately opposite our classroom and Mr Bennell,⁵ the science master, was conducting an experiment with the sixth form which created a big smell which then drifted over to our classroom. Miss Smith⁶ our teacher, began sending individuals out into the corridor one by one until Mr Bennell, with a big smile on his face, came in to explain the position.

¹ Rolph, H E *The Home on the Hill - The Story of Reedham*, 1981, Reedham Old Scholars' Association, Purley

² John B "Trigger" Tregenza, headmaster 1934 -1937

³ H E Clarke, headmaster 1908 -1934

⁴ Harry Edward Rolph, at Reedham 1928 -1937

⁵ John H Bennell, at Reedham 1932 - 1937

⁶ Miss F A Smith, at Reedham 1929 - 1944

In 1934 Clarke retired and was replaced by Tregenza. Life at Reedham was never to be the same again. I think that the Board of Management thought that he made too many changes too soon and what was worse, the changes were very expensive. He had a massive [headmaster's] house built in the school grounds facing Higher Drive. He also had two prefects' rooms built, one for the boys and one for the girls. However, not all the changes were bad. Some were very good and much needed. The biggest improvement was in respect of dress. We used to wear waistcoats, and jackets that had no collars because we had stiff Eton collars about one and a half to two inches deep and made of celluloid. If there had been any Health and Safety Regulators they would have gone berserk. For ties we had ribbons of red, yellow, blue or green, according to which house we were in. The ends of the ribbon would go up under the front of the collar and then down through the loop.

The Matron at this time was a Miss Prince. She had very little to do with us boys but I mention her because she had a dog called Jack. It was only a small terrier but it was very vicious. On one occasion he chased me down the corridor and actually put his teeth into my leg. It was hardly a bite but it did bring out a bit of blood. I never said anything to anybody in case they thought I was afraid of dogs (which I was.)

While writing about Tregenza, I can remember two school assemblies he took, not because they reflect life at Reedham but because they give a good indication of National life at that time. The first was in May, 1935. Queen Mary was in Glasgow to launch a new Cunard liner that was to bear her name. There had been great secrecy as to what name was to be given to the ship which meanwhile had been known as the 534 - the number of the ship built on that particular dock. At the assembly that morning Tregenza said, "It is a great day for the British Empire, boys and girls. Hymn 534, *For those in peril on the sea*. There you are, boys and girls - proof that God is on the side of the British Empire." Looking back now, that remark is pathetically hilarious, but in those days the Empire was hailed as God's gift to humanity.

The other assembly I remember from Tregenza was more good news when he told us that school-leavers who were unable to get a job, were now able to go straight on the dole without waiting to get the required number of stamps on our card. Big deal!

I don't know how long Tregenza stayed at Reedham but it could not have been very long. He left quite suddenly. I had one experience with him which leads me to believe that his reason for leaving was more serious than making too many changes too soon. Eddie Rolph never gives him a mention.

The period after Tregenza left was the unhappiest of my schooldays. I cannot remember how long he was there [1934-37] or the date he left but I do know that from then until Mr Fairbairn was appointed head [1938] was the unhappiest time of all my schooldays. Looking back I think it was probably because there was not just one person in charge.

Three things happened in this period; not all at the same time but there may have been some overlap. Firstly there was a member of the Board who became very prominent. His name was Major Hall-Patch. He was the Reedham Secretary but he now took over in charge of discipline, which became very, very severe. Fortunately he didn't become involved with our education but he would probably have liked to have done so, if allowed. I don't know what his brief was. It may be that he was instructed to try and return us to "the good old days of H E Clarke". Anyway, I think he was a natural bully.

He was a great believer in the cane. He introduced a system whereby prefects could give a black mark to any boy who they alleged had misbehaved. This was done without any reference to a master. At the end of each month all the marks were added up. Anyone with three or more was caned without any opportunity to plead their innocence. I do not think this practice lasted very long. The same applies to another thing he introduced: We had to get up half an hour earlier than the normal 6.30 am and go for an organised run around the school grounds. We were led by a different member of staff each day. The usual route was to run along the path at the lower end of the football pitch and parallel to the paddock. Then cross over to the woods on the other side and return in front of the Sanatorium and the Church, and then along the back road behind the school. I rather enjoyed the run but I know that not everyone did. It was probably not popular with the staff either. Strangely, I do not remember it ever raining when we were running. My memory is a bit hazy but I think that all we wore was a pair of shorts. I can't remember what we had on our feet. I must ask one of my contemporaries. The girls also had to get up early, in order to endure a session of drill from Joe Bristow. Joe became very proud of "his girls".

The second thing that happened around this time was a change of Matron. I think her name was Miss Fraser [1934-36]. In those days there was no such thing as a "job description". If there had been she would certainly have been guilty of exceeding what was required of her. She was really quite harmless but she would frequently come into the dining hall after meals and lecture us at length about how bad our manners and behaviour were. To be fair to her, however, she did bring in one or two improvements. For example, once a month at Sunday tea-time, brothers and sisters were allowed to sit together at the same table. However, when I recently spoke to another old scholar, he said that because he and his sister had always been kept apart they hardly knew each other and didn't know what to talk about. Nevertheless, the improvement was a move in the right direction. It was also Miss Fraser who introduced dancing lessons for those in the top form. That was something!

Eventually Miss Fraser left and was replaced by Miss Blake [1936-49], who seemed to be a very kindly lady although she didn't get involved very much with us boys. I understand she was at Reedham for many years and was still there some years after the war.

The third thing that happened in this period concerns a prefect who was allowed to get away with far too much. He made our lives sheer hell. It is interesting that he later became a prominent member of ROSA.

On the lighter side, I remember Kirkbride [1928-35] scoring an unbeaten half-century (I think it was 92 not out) against the Old Scholars side during the Whit-Monday Reunion. He was given a special presentation the following week.

About this time I had a big disappointment. Each year it was the custom to have a cross country race for seniors and a mile race for semi-seniors. The mile race started outside the Lodge and proceeded along Old Lodge Lane to the tennis courts and then back again, finishing along the length of the cricket field. The cross country race started up in Higher Drive, went into Hayes Lane, down over Coulsdon Common and back down Old Lodge Lane. This was an annual event but one year a boy - I think his name was Seall [1926-36] - collapsed and fainted en-route and the event was cancelled for future years. I was quite young at the time so it might have been in the days of Clarke or Tregenza. I have always regretted that I was never able to participate.

I remember December, 1936 very well. A notice had been put on the board advising us of the abdication of King Edward VIII. A group of about a dozen boys (I was not one of them) were booing (i.e. barracking - not crying). I don't know whether they booed in support or in opposition to the King. They probably didn't know either. The King was very popular with the majority of people. Anyway, Joe Bristow came out and stopped all the noise.

Eventually, Fairbairn, who had been a teacher on the staff for some time, was appointed headmaster. He had been form teacher in the top class and geography teacher for the whole school. He was highly regarded and I remember hearing Robinson and another Old Scholar saying how lucky we were. Strangely, I can't remember him being resident in his early years. He married one of the housemistresses, Miss Barton, and they had a daughter who later became a pupil in the school. He had experience of Reedham under both H. E. Clarke and Tregenza and took over after a time of turmoil, both in the school and with a divided Board of Management. Also, discipline had become a problem and we were becoming a bit unruly. He was highly regarded and we thought the world of him. I have always thought him very fair minded and just. He was very musical and also had a passionate interest (almost a hobby) in weather forecasting. We had one or two lessons on it and in later years it became an after school activity. On the negative side, I must say that he had some spies in the school who he encouraged to report back to him on things that were going on. Life could not have been easy, particularly with the war approaching and all of the preparations that had to be made for it. All I know about him in the years after I left is hearsay but I do remember an Old Scholars' Day, shortly after he left, when a number of us were talking to Joe [Bristow]. Joe told us how he was summoned by the Board of Management to give evidence against Fairbairn and that he had refused to do so and had got very angry with the Board.

When Fairbairn became headmaster things slowly began to improve from the bad patch after H. E. Clarke left in 1934. However there were still problems. I understand that in later years Fairbairn had some sort of a breakdown but I remember him with great warmth. I think he was very fair-minded. He took over at a very difficult time and had to re-establish some of the good traditions of the past and at the same time continue some of the good changes that had already been introduced. The approach of WW2 could not have helped.

One of the earliest problems he had to deal with concerned behaviour. Two members of the staff, Bodle and Shane (Bodle in particular), had great difficulty in keeping order. Where they were concerned we were becoming a bit unruly. When they both left at the same time, after being at Reedham about a year, Fairbairn had to clamp down in order to avoid a recurrence with future staff. He must have been very concerned, as he closed the prefects' room and it was still closed when I left in 1940.

So far as education was concerned, I think we all suffered because of the large turnover of staff. I remember having three different French teachers in three years and each started at the beginning from the same textbook. I never got beyond the first year. Staff members, male and female, had to leave when they got married. It is interesting to recall that the teachers in the junior school, Miss Smith, Miss Hales and Miss Shears, remained the same throughout the whole time I was at school. The senior teachers were constantly on the move. I remember the names of Messrs Bennell, Bodle, Edgecumbe, Foad, Hitchcock, Major, Pownall, Shane and Wilkes, together with Misses Dyer and Faulkner. I do not think there was a bad teacher among them, but as far as I was concerned I thought Shane was the best.

The approach of WW2 didn't seem to affect our lives very much and most things were fairly normal. I remember a debate we had in the top form around this time. The subject was "Air travel is better than sea travel." Nowadays such a debate would be ridiculous but I remember it because the proposer of the motion said with a great cry of triumph, "When Mr Chamberlain went to see Adolph Hitler he went by plane!"

WW2 must have constantly been on the agenda of the Board of Management because we were recalled from our summer holiday in 1939 a few days early. The air-raid shelters were all ready and gas masks were issued to us all. During those early days of the "Phoney War" there was very little change although I remember the blackout was a bit of a problem. Apart from that notorious Sunday when the sirens went just half-an-hour after war was declared, I can really only remember using the shelter once.

I remember vividly the Old Scholars' Day in October 1939. Harry Arbon, who had left school two years before, said to me that he thought the war would last five years and not just the few months that a lot of the press were saying. How right Harry was. After all this time I still almost weep when I think how he never saw the end of the war.

My time at Reedham had now come to an end. But there is one more item that I must report. I had acquired the nickname of "Chelsea Bun" because of my support for the Chelsea football team. This seems strange to me now because although I have a passionate interest in cricket, I have very little interest in football.

In March 1940 I left school and for me it was a big, big shock. I am now a completely different person to the quiet, nervous and hesitant youth that was very shortly called up to join the navy. It took me years to become my real self. I am not the same person now although one thing about me has never changed. At school I never had any common sense. I still haven't got any!

All this prompts me to ask whether my school days were a benefit or not. Were they worthwhile? Much of what I have written has been negative but despite everything I must record that I had many happy days at Reedham. Conditions are very different now to what they were seventy years ago but although some things are better, I nevertheless feel it is debatable whether the modern system of foster-care is an improvement. At least we were well cared for and well fed, our health was amazingly good and we were not abused. Reedham was not run by the local council or by social workers.

The big advantage of Reedham was that it gave us a hardness and a toughness of character that enabled us to withstand most of the hard knocks of life. The disadvantage was that we received none of the loving care that even the toughest of children need. There was no way any boy could have individual attention. Housemasters were never able to carry out their proper function because of the sheer size of the task. Until I was 11 or 12 years old I frequently wet the bed. Nowadays this would be recognised as a nervous complaint but at Reedham it was then a crime that had to be severely punished. Only those few who had the same experience as mine can appreciate not only the embarrassment but also the sheer hell I went through.

I have a feeling that the education we were given in the thirties was not as good as it had been in the twenties. I have no direct evidence for this but I think that when the Surrey Education Committee took over [1920], standards fell and we became just another elementary school. I would have thought that Reedham should have been an ideal school where advice and guidance on careers could be given on an individual basis. I was exceptionally good at mathematics and would have welcomed some specialisation but instead I was constantly given the impression that I would be unlikely to make much of a career because my handwriting was so poor. My handwriting did turn out to be a slight handicap but with the coming of mechanisation the problem was not too serious and I was able to make a reasonable career in accountancy.

This account of life at Reedham in the thirties has turned out to be much longer than I expected. It is not a history, as very little research has gone into it. It is merely my own memories after seventy years, coupled with a few reflections on the overall picture. I have avoided giving details of the day to day routine, meals etc. as this was probably the same as at any other time. I trust that my account will make a useful addition to the archives.

I am aware that some of what I have written might be considered by others as controversial and better not talked about. However, surely in the 21st century we are adult enough to face up to the fact that there was someone named Tregenza who was headmaster for a short period. I wish I knew more about why he suddenly left. I know that there are contemporaries of mine who also think the school went through a bad patch during our time.

I close on a note of thankfulness. It was a good job that Reedham was in England and not in Germany. In Germany's attempt to build a super race, Reedham and places like it would have been ideal for separating the strong from the weak. We really have a lot to be thankful for.

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