

Further Reminiscences of Grangetown

On my daily walk in Sunderland Cemetery (to exercise my dog, still complete with plastic bags) I perchance to see two graves of former school classmates from my days at Commercial Road School and also the family grave of the Briggs family. This set me thinking of school life in the 1940s and where progress has taken it to now. The visit also raised a connection between the present-day Southmoor School and Hylton Castle.

But firstly many of your older readers will remember Commercial Road as it was. When I first started in 1942 there was an Infants School on the ground floor (complete with outside toilets). The Head teacher was Miss Watson a very tall prim lady who with her hair always in a bun and dark horn rimmed glasses looked very stern to small five year olds. Upstairs was the Junior School with Mr Watson and later Mr Foster as Head teacher.

The Seniors with Mr Parker as Head was across the playground in the new building built in 1935. This was partially taken over by Hendon Valley Road School following the bombing of their school in the early part of the war.

Although in wartime sweets were rationed and in very short supply you could still get sherbert, liquorice root and locust (like a dried banana) and on very rare occasions cinnamon sticks at Herbie Jones shop opposite the school or Victory Vs at Fords paper shop further along the street.

On a number of occasions we were turned away from school following air raids as the halls were being used as reception and rest centers for bomb victims.

We had regular visits from the Fire Wardens to warn us about the dangers of picking up “butterfly bombs” and anti personnel explosives made to look like toys, dropped by German aircraft and telling us to go to the nearest warden or policeman if we found any. It was great fun learning how to use a stirrup pump and many a soaking resulted.

However this did not stop us swapping anti aircraft shrapnel found after the raids usually from the guns at the camp on Clarks farm.

We regularly marched alongside the home guard as they drilled in the schoolyard.

The first school dinners appeared towards the end of the war with teachers serving meals in the infants hall (5d for the first child and 2d for the rest). Children of poor families and those whose fathers were prisoners of war got free. The meals were delivered in hot locks by the dinner van that everyone helped unload.

At the end of the war a servery was built at the rear of the old building (on the site of the lily pond as older readers will remember). This heralded the arrival of the “dinner ladies”. I can still remember the horrid smell of school cabbage and mince meat (minced what we never found out) that pervaded the school.

I have fond memories of the Junior School with Miss Penny, Miss Earle and Mrs. Mc Bain who took the eleven plus class. The virtuosos with the cane were Miss Newey and Miss Harold who need very little excuse to exercise their skill.

Miss Cartledge who was very keen on art, held her classes in the “Hut” a wooden building that was said to date from the First World War. Mr Gibson, who was a very rare animal then – a male teacher, was also in the hut

Older readers will remember the bell to end classes. It was a keenly sought after job to ring the bell as got you out of classes five minutes early.

For football we had to go to “Sparkies Farm” and although there were gymnasiums in the senior school we had to use the infants hall for exercise as Valley Road School still had most of the seniors school building

The previously mentioned Briggs family led to the connection between “Moorlands” the site of the present Southmoor Community School and Hylton Castle.

William Briggs was born in 1803 and owned “Moorlands” but bought Hylton Castle in 1863. He demolished the wings of the castle to form a family home but this proved a disaster and was potentially the start of its demise to its present condition.

He was appointed High Sheriff of Durham the year before his death in 1871, his wife Margaret dying a year later.

Although Williams headstone States “Of Hylton Castle” It is obvious that the family seat remained “Moorlands” as his eldest son Robert Scott Briggs was born there in 1828 some 35 years before he bought the castle and “Moorlands” remained the home of Williams descendents.

As an apprentice joiner for a Sunderland builder I was frequently sent to “Moorlands” to work in the early 1950s and that time there was only the two sisters and a brother remaining. Miss Eleanor who died in 1953, Mr Robert who died in 1954 and Miss Susan who died in 1960.

The house had vast orchards and greenhouses and the store sheds were always full of apples and pears packed in straw. Strikes, then Sunderland’s premier florist used to cut supplies of maidenhair fern from the greenhouses for their wedding buttonholes and bouquets etc. They also took grapes for their shops, which grew in abundance in the greenhouses there.

The grapes were a great attraction to us apprentices and many a stomach ache was the result.

Miss Susan frequently came into the courtyard and robins would come to feed from her hand on seed she kept in a small perfume bottle in her pocket.

In front of the house down to Ryhope Road was a large paddock and the region of where the caretakers house now stands was home to American soldiers preparing for the invasion of Europe in 1944.

Prior to her death Miss Susan granted a corner of the paddock for the construction of St Cecilia’s Church, which was opened in 1957. The land, was in recognition of the Parishes support for the petition to save the Grand National, which was under threat.

In September 1959 Sunderland Council opened a replacement for the old Villiers Street Technical School on the land but did retain the house. Because of its link with Villiers Street the old brown blazers tradition was maintained until its change within the last few years.

The school was designated a “comprehensive” and children who would normally have gone to Commercial Road Seniors were transferred to the new school.

At first the old Commercial Road Senior school was used as the “lower school” but this closed in 1983 and was later demolished.

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Part of the Briggs family history still remains on the Moorlands site. The old house is now used as a technology centre but most poignant is the stone memorial situated on the left hand side of the site to a wartime parachute mine, which was dropped but failed to explode. It carries the inscription “In the early hours of Sunday May 16th 1943 a landmine fell here and did not explode. Thank God”

Education has moved a long way in Grangetown in my lifetime but just maybe the Cauld Lad of Hylton left his home in the ruined castle and moved to Grangetown with the Briggs family—who knows?

Colin Clifford.