

# Back when state education was still in its infancy



**LES WALTON**  
COLUMNIST

I STARTED school at the age of four in September 1949.

Highfield Infant School was for children between the ages of four and seven years. It was on the same site as Highfield Junior School, which was a separate school with a different headteacher.

When education became compulsory in England from 1877, infant schools were incorporated into the state school system. The late 1960s and 1970s saw hundreds of infant schools in Britain abolished in favour of 5-8 or 5-9 first schools, but some of these were then abolished in favour of a return to infant schools by the early 1980s, and most of them have now followed suit.

The first infant schools were established by Samuel Wilderspin by the schools set up at New Lanark, Scotland by Robert Owen. They influenced development in continental Europe and North America.

My mother walked me to school in the first few days. The walk was about half a mile from where we lived, along a winding path through woods. I then walked to school and back with other children, including my older sister. It never occurred to anyone that it might be dangerous. There was safety in numbers and very little traffic.

Classes were large, with about 30 to 40 children in each, and resources were minimal. It was not until nearly a half a century later, with the introduction of the School Standards and Framework Act in 1998, that legislation dictated classes in infant schools in England and Wales would be limited to no more than 30 children per schoolteacher.

All the classrooms were simple, large, dull rooms. The furniture would be no different to that which my mother used in her school in the early 1900s: a wooden high desk and chair for the teacher, a wooden-framed blackboard on an easel and two-seater desks for us children. The teacher's desk was exactly the same in the 1960s.

I asked, as a young teacher, why the desks were much higher than the children. The answer was so that the nits could not jump from their heads into your hair. The "nit nurse" would also make regular visits to check for head lice. We would line up to be



► A thing of the past? A mother walks her child to school

examined in turn, our hair being combed carefully with a nit comb to see if there was any infestation.

Things were learned by rote and the tables test, once a week, was a nightmare. I always hoped not to be asked a question. I have always been anxious about maths as a result of the way in which we were taught. No one questioned authority then, but it didn't mean to say that we weren't resentful at times. In the winter I had chapped knees from wearing short trousers.

I do not recall ever using paint, glue, coloured card or crayons. I vaguely remember using chalk on slates, which were then cleaned with a cloth. I hated the squeak of that slate pencil; it made my teeth go on edge. We had to copy letters from the blackboard. We weren't allowed pencils and proper exercise books until we could read and write. When we eventually arrived in the junior school we were given desks with inkwells and wide-nibbed pens and learned "joined-up" writing.

The School Broadcasting Council for the United Kingdom had been set up in 1947 and the wireless or radio played a great part in my education. "Music and Movement" was one such programme. We would stretch, jump and crouch to the commands from the radio. I distinctly remember being a "tree" and waving my arms when the radio announced it was windy. We also sang folk songs from

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around the British Isles such as Loch Lomond, "Oh no John" and "What will we do with a drunken sailor?". There were no instruments for us but our voices.

Many years later, the Two Ronnies would do their version of Drunken Sailor: "Hoorah! And up she rises, she's got legs of different sizes. One's very small and the other wins prizes." I wish I had known that version when I was six.

Morning playtimes were milk times. The caretaker would wash the milk beakers, which always stank of sour milk. When we eventually got the milk in small 1/3 pint bottles with foil tops, we would drink directly from them using drinking straws. In the winter, the milk would freeze and the bottle tops would stand proud above the bottles on a column of frozen milk.

Dinner hour lasted an hour and a half. We ate our pease pudding, cabbage and stew, followed by tapioca pudding (or as we called it — frogspawn or fish eyes and glue). Years later, in the 1960s, I taught in a small primary and those who stayed to school dinners made up a crocodile and were daily chaperoned by me and other teachers to the central kitchen about 15 minutes away.

We had no lines drawn on the playground or any climbing apparatus but we played with balls and ropes. Anyway, we had plenty of war games to act out — like being aircraft and dropping bombs, or shooting with a machine gun or, more constructively, playing at nurses and doctors and operating on the wounded. The impact of the war was still there.

Most of my memories of this time are vague. There is one that I cannot erase from my mind — strapped with a leather tawse at the age of five years old.

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