

Ivan the Terrible, Arthur the Great and Gentleman Jim



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

DURING the 50 years I have spent in the teaching profession, I have had the pleasure of working with thousands of children.

There are very few I would like to forget. There are many I remember. There are some who are simply unforgettable. Like Elsie, the child carer, whom I wrote about a few months ago; Ivan, Arthur and Jimmy will always be etched in my memory.

In my first school, the children ranged from the studious and delightful to the quite simply 'off the wall'. Ivan, the first skinhead in the village, regularly skipped school to ride around the North East on the back of lorries. On the rare occasions he popped into registration, he was always greeted with cheers from the other pupils. We all liked Ivan, because he was so much fun.

I taught a geography course called The Land of the Three Rivers, about the North East. The school curriculum was very heavily regionally centred, with major projects on the Roman Wall, Bede, local industrial archaeology and geography.

Ivan was my best visual aid. He had been to all the places highlighted in my lessons. His vivid descriptions of north Northumberland and industrial Middlesbrough added a great deal to my lessons.

One morning in June 1969, Ivan entered registration in a state of shock. The night before, he had seen Sam Peckinpah's classic western, *The Wild Bunch* at the local 'picture house'. The *Wild Bunch* began and ended with two of the bloodiest battles in screen history. 'Ah've just seen slow motion killin,' proclaimed Ivan.

I also had something to announce. I would be off school that morning and the Deputy Head would be taking my lessons. I was actually going to the local law courts, where I was facing a driving charge.

As I was walking down to the law courts, Ivan caught up with me. He was also required to attend court. We both wished each other 'best of luck' as we entered the building.

For a few moments, there was genuine warmth and comradeship between us. I was expertly defended by a very good Automobile Association lawyer and the driving charge



► "There is no perfect child." Dennis Waterman as Just William in a BBC series

was dismissed. Ivan ended up in an approved school. I never saw him again.

'Play Week' was the major event of the school year. Every teacher in the school had to produce a play with their own form. We were issued with books of short plays. My most memorable year is when I produced the 'Red Barn Mystery', starring Arthur.

Without doubt, Arthur was the most disruptive pupil in the school. I couldn't believe my ears when Arthur offered to take the lead as the despicable 'cad' that wanted to seduce the beautiful heroine.

I thought he wanted the part because of my brilliant skills as a motivational teacher. The real reason could have been that he would be able to dress in a black cape and wear a false moustache. We were to perform the play five times in one week.

The Monday play went very well and Arthur thoroughly enjoyed the applause. On the Tuesday, just as Arthur was to make his entrance, he refused to go on. When I asked him why, he said he simply didn't want to.

Arthur had got what he wanted by being the centre of attention and now he knew he had total control.

I reacted by picking up Arthur and throwing him on the stage, and in my best stage whisper said 'Act, or I will kill you.' Arthur looked at me momentarily and then proceeded to act his heart out.

I think I had secretly known for years that not all children are perfect. Without doubt, whilst Arthur was difficult, part of me secretly admired him. When the school reopened as a comprehensive school, Arthur continued to cause havoc, but on a much bigger stage. His

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favourite phrase, when being sent to me for fighting with the former grammar school pupils, was "It's a class war, sir." He was to die of TB at the age of 27.

Jimmy was very different from Ivan and Arthur. His behaviour was exemplary and he attended every day. Following a ferocious row at home, Jimmy was thrown out. For a week, Jimmy waited until dark and then returned to school through the window he had left partially open. He then crept into the Home Economics area, where there was a replica flat. He stayed in the flat every night, eating the food from the freezer.

Each morning, he would leave just before dawn, having washed the dishes and ensuring everything was spick and span. Jimmy chose this existence to avoid the violent, miserable life he led at home.

When the Head of Home Economics found out, she left a prepared meal for him in the flat and a note suggesting that he should come and see her the following morning. They then agreed to seek support from social services.

TV recruitment campaigns depicting willing children, keen to learn, present a carefully selected image to our future teachers. The reality of the absconder, the disruptive and the alienated is ever present. Schools are not neat and tidy organisations. Disaffection is part of the everyday reality of schools.

The greatest lessons I have ever had are those given by the children I have taught. So often, you find that the students you're trying to inspire and challenge end up inspiring and challenging you.

There is no perfect child. No child should be considered superior or inferior to another. All have different skills and abilities and each provides us with different challenges.

Every child is unique. Ivan, Arthur and Jimmy constantly remind us that being unique is far better than being perfect. It is their distinctiveness we celebrate, not their perfection.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.