

Memories of first staffroom filled with characters



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THERE were two main challenges as a new teacher in the 1960s: facing the classroom and surviving the staffroom.

In 1966, as a newly qualified teacher, I applied to Durham County Council for my first teaching post. I was then placed in the 'pool' and allocated three interviews. In June I was appointed to Blaydon East Secondary Modern right next to the graveyard where my father and sister were buried.

My first school had two staff rooms. One female and one male. The male staff room was a place of wonder, shrouded in tobacco smoke which billowed from the various pipe-smoking and fag-puffing men.

The headteacher was a firm believer in discipline and the cane. He was ably supported by his deputy, who never caned and believed it was by providing an exciting education that self-discipline would emerge. This balance of 'imposed discipline' and 'learning centred self-discipline' was to be a central theme throughout my career. Like all balancing acts it was hard to get right.

The headteacher rarely entered the male staff room and almost never the ladies' room. There was one memorable visit when he inquired as to what was the smell in the staff room. He commented that it smelled like someone had 'peed on the fire'. When challenged how he could tell the fragrance of electrified pee he admitted he used to pee on electric fires when he was in the army. My admiration knew no bounds!

When I first entered the male staffroom I met the most peculiar bunch of teachers I have ever had the pleasure to work with. 'Jumping Jim', the weakest link in the discipline hierarchy, always wearing a gown, running around his classroom, hopelessly trying to keep the kids in order. The one science teacher would sit in the corner by himself. Everyone would try to avoid him. As one colleague would say, 'He bores for Britain'; on the other hand the behaviour in his classrooms was immaculate. Basically he bored the kids into submission.

When a tall, good-looking track-suited PE teacher took the place of Jumping Jim, the science teacher then became the weakest link. Quite simply the pupils then targeted him. I



➤ Times in teaching have changed since there were separate staffrooms for male and female members of staff

also was a little put out because when I did the odd PE lesson my gear of choice was wellies and an umbrella.

There was also the art teacher. The most brilliant art teacher I have ever known. His lessons were simply a haven for pupils who loved to be creative. When we later introduced monthly folk evenings he would cover the walls of the school hall/gym with newsprint and on the day of the folk evening the walls would be transformed into Paris, the Arizona desert or an African jungle. The 'Folk evenings' were an example of how the school had successfully merged formal with informal education.

Sitting in the corner of the staff room was Jack Royal. Jack was a quiet pipe-smoking man. Both Jack and his classes were always in control. Years later Jack would be twice tried and acquitted for murder and manslaughter and then, at the age of 57 was himself murdered.

Then there was Decimal Bill, who led the charge to convert the staff and students to the new decimal coinage introduced in 1971. Following a big publicity campaign, Decimal Day went smoothly. The pupils took to the new money very easily. It was much harder for the staff who, like me, would say for many years - "How much is that in old money?"

The mathematics teacher was Don Robson, who many years later as leader of Durham County Council, was approached by a Chester-le-Street farmer, as Don searched for a home for the Durham County Cricket

Club. There were others formidable characters in the staffroom - the head of Maths, who was lined up to be the head of the local primary school, a normal career move in those days. John the 'Hippie' and Don the 'Ladies Man'.

When Don heard that the 'senior mistress' in the ladies staff room had been passing comments about his night-time adventures in the Newcastle Oxford Galleries Ballroom, he did the unthinkable. He entered the ladies staffroom and challenged the senior mistress directly. On his return he described how he was thrown out with 'the violent sound of knitting needles clicking in the background'.

The female staff room was a terrifying place, dominated by 'the senior mistress'. She would visit my lessons with her twelve-inch ruler (Decimal Bill had 0.0 effect on her). She would measure the indentations of my pupils' paragraphs. If they were more than ¼ inch then my pupils would have to rewrite the paragraph. How many senior members of staff today would be so concerned with hands on quality control!

As a young twenty-one-year-old innocent I at least met my two new best friends, Ian and Maureen. The three of us ran a weekly youth club, organised skiing trips, weekend camps and basically lived for the kids. I think we were a breath of fresh air in a school, which was dominated by older much more experienced teachers, many of whom had served in the forces during the war. At break, Ian and I would be out playing football on the sloping yard. To be a young teacher was the greatest thing on earth.

I remember those staff for their professional and committed dedication to their craft. Would they have survived or even want to live in our present data-driven, inspection-dominated world? I wonder.

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