

## **'The Braithwaite knock'**

### **Remembering ER Braithwaite and other teachers.**

**By Alfred Gardner. (November 2016)**

I was a pupil at St. George-in-the-East, Secondary Modern School, Cable Street, Stepney from 1952 until 1956. Stepney is situated in London's East End. My brother and three sisters also attended the same school.

During May 1954 ER Braithwaite, a tall humourless disciplinarian with a fiery temper, began teaching at my school

Although Alex Bloom our revered head master had banned corporal punishment Braithwaite favoured its use. On more than one occasion, I had seen him manhandle a boy in the gymnasium. Braithwaite was also prone to throwing missiles at pupils whom he thought were not paying sufficient attention to the lessons he was giving; chalk, keys and wooden-handled blackboard dusters or any other object that was handy on his desk were hurled at us. John Smith a twelve year old boy in my class was lucky to avoid being injured. Braithwaite had thrown with great force an inkwell at him. Fortunately, John had seen the inkwell coming towards him in line with his face; instinctively he lifted the lid of his desk that acted as a shield.

Braithwaite's geography lessons were usually restricted to tales of his native Guyana. A typical story was the time when he and his father went hunting in the jungle. To reach the hunting grounds they travelled up river by canoe. Their sport went well; they shot a wild pig. Fearing that the heavy carcass might cause the canoe to capsize, they tied a rope to the carcass, placed it into the river and attached the rope to the stern of the canoe before rowing home. When the father and son eventually disembarked they discovered that only the pig's head remained at the end of the rope; the trunk and legs had been devoured by the piranha.

It soon became noticeable that Braithwaite liked the girls in our class but not the boys and we certainly did not like him; it was mutual resentment. He neither approved of me or the poem that I had written about him.

When it was suggested by my teacher Mrs Dymphna Porter (she had taught me how to write poetry in an italic text) that I should write some poems about the teachers and read them out on stage in the auditorium at the end of term concert, I readily agreed. All of the teachers with the exception of Braithwaite found my poems amusing and they laughed and applauded along with the pupils. To this day, I can recall glancing down at Braithwaite when I had finished reading; he was sitting at the back of the auditorium at the end of a row of teachers, unsmiling, silent and aloof. His cold, penetrating and disapproving stare is ingrained in my memory.

During my four years at St George's I can only remember one teacher who seemed impatient and annoyed with the boy pupils and that was the martinet ER Braithwaite. His methods of coercing pupils into understanding the subjects that he was teaching rather than being patient and approachable as required by Alex Bloom was best suited for a borstal, certainly not at St George's.

Braithwaite remained at my school for 3 terms. His tenure was not successful and subsequently, to the delight of many of the pupils, he vanished from the school's precincts. Why he left, I never knew or cared.

News of his departure caused some boys in my class to shout euphorically 'good riddance'. On his final day at St George's Braithwaite was given a parting gift inscribed 'To Sir with Love'. The gift was a packet of expensive cigarettes.

After leaving St George's, Braithwaite began teaching at Chapman Primary School in nearby Bigland Street where I attended as an infant from 1947 until 1952. Braithwaite would have felt at home at Chapman School; even though the infant's ages ranged from 5 to 11 corporal punishment was on the agenda.

The Guernsey-born headmaster of Chapman School Christopher Wyatt, was a six foot five tyrant. (He was reputed to be the tallest headmaster in East London.) It seemed hardly a day went by without Wyatt having to use the cane on young boys. I was sent to his office to be punished: my grave offence, I giggled during a lesson. I will never forget the smirk on this brutal mans face when he brought his cane down hard six times across my fingers.

Given carte blanche to beat infants; Braithwaite would use his knuckles to knock the back of a boy's head. This knock was to become known as the 'Braithwaite knock'. My younger brother Brian, who was a pupil at Chapman School during the mid-1950s and had witnessed Braithwaite's rage, thought that the teacher struck the infants because he had become frustrated and impatient with their inability to understand his Guyanese accent.

The brothers Colin and Michael Berry who were pupils in Braithwaite's class also felt Braithwaite's knuckles strike the back of their heads. Another pupil, Ingeborg Beck remembers Braithwaite, 'I think Mr Braithwaite was a cover teacher for a while at Chapman School. I remember being frightened of him as I heard him shouting at the class as I was walking down the corridor to go into the classroom. He had a very loud voice. However, I soon found out that he was very nice. I remember him helping me with some sums.'

Worse than Braithwaite was Miss Dixon a crazy, neurotic teacher who terrified the Chapman School infants. Unlike Braithwaite who only punished boys Dickson also punished girls. Ingeborg Borg recalls 'Miss Dixon was very fierce. I remember her smacking me with a ruler once and making me stand in a corner for a long time and forgetting about me.'

Whilst Dixon was giving a lesson 5-year-old Colin Berry raised his arm as an indication that he wanted to ask a question. Dixon became annoyed at being interrupted by Colin and promptly caned him.

Quite often and for no apparent reason, Dixon would scream out loud; her incessant screaming took place in the classroom, along the corridors and even in the dining hall; other teachers had to be summoned to restrain her. It was rumoured that her mental condition was caused by the shock of losing her fiancé who was killed whilst on active service during the Second World War.

It could be a testing time for children at lunchtime when Dixon was on duty in the dining hall. Some of the children's behaviour and habits seem to infuriate her. If a boy was not sitting upright as he ate his meal she would stand behind him, place her arms around his waist and with great force jerk him upwards. Any child who was laughing or talking too loud would receive one of Dixon's vicious stares, sarcastic remarks or a finger pressed hard between their little shoulder blades.

Dixon often singled me out at the dining table. I am left-handed when eating. My 'bad habit' made her extremely cross; she would grip my wrists very tight until I dropped the knife and fork onto the table.

Patty my shy, younger sister also became one of Dixon's victims. Patty was so petrified of being shouted at yet again by this sick, often cruel teacher, that when she arrived at the school each morning, she would stand by the gate and refuse to go inside. On hearing of Patty's situation, my firebrand mother hurried to the school and attempted to throttle Dixon.

At the age of eleven in 1955 Patty left the dreadful Chapman School and spent four happy years at the wonderful St George-in-the-East.

At the end of the 1950s Braithwaite gave up teaching and became a welfare officer for the London County Council. In 1962 he wrote about his new career in a book entitled 'Paid Servant'.

In his first book *To Sir With Love* which was published in March 1959, ER Braithwaite implies that he remained at St George's for a period of seven years. This claim is a fallacy; Braithwaite was a teacher at my school for about 10 months that began in May 1954.

(In TSWL Braithwaite prefers to call St. George's 'Greenslade School')

Braithwaite's entire East End teaching career lasted approximately nine years and can be divided loosely into three periods: Period A was from 1948 until 1954. I have yet to ascertain how many Stepney schools he taught at during these 6 years, but I know for certain that one of those schools was Cephas Street School. Period B was his tenure at St George's 1954-5. Period C that lasted from 1955 until at least 1958 was spent at Chapman Primary School and other schools in the area.

Rather than write a book about the three periods in chronological order, Braithwaite for reasons known only to him, decided to utilise personalities, incidents and episodes from periods A and C

and to incorporate them into period B. There is ample evidence in *To Sir With Love* to suggest that this juggling occurred many times. Unfortunately, brevity does not allow me to give examples here.

On 2 May 2007 Braithwaite gave a talk to the English Speaking Union at Washington University. Without a blink of an eyelid, Braithwaite told his audience that St George-in-the-East School was considered unsavoury and that the youngsters who attended the school were not accepted by other schools because they were viewed as undesirable. He also said that an English MP described St George's pupils 'and others like them as the great unwashed',

These aspersions are without foundation. I can assure ER Braithwaite that never for a single moment did I or my brother and sisters believe that our school was unsavoury. And to put the record straight we were not refused entry into other schools because we were considered undesirable; we gained entry into St George's because we lived within the school's catchment area, as James Porter, a former teacher at St George's can confirm.

In December 2010, I managed to contact Keith Harmer an Australian born teacher who taught at St George's during 1955. Harmer was unable to remember me, but he stated unequivocally that 'St George's pupils were well behaved and eager to learn.'

Regarding the 'great unwashed', this famous remark was never uttered by an English MP to describe St George's pupils during the early 1950s. In fact, the remark was made by the Scottish-born Lord Chancellor Henry Brougham. Perhaps Braithwaite should be reminded that Baron Brougham died in 1868.

Another fallacy and one which I think is an insult to the memory of Alex Bloom, the head master of St George's, is this ghastly blurb that can be found on the back cover of a 2002 publication of *To Sir With Love* (Center Point Publishing, Thotndyke, Maine, USA.)

'Their vocabularies consisted mostly of four-letter words. They made love in the corridors. Many were thieves and some were prostitutes. And they were determined to destroy the new teacher. The rookie teacher threw out the lesson plans and took command. He shamed them, enlightened them and loved them.

Braithwaite taught defiant, hard-bitten delinquents to call him 'Sir' and to address the girls who had grown up beside them in the gutter as 'Miss'. He taught them to wash their faces and to read Shakespeare. When he took all forty-six of them to museums and to the opera, riots were anticipated, but instead of a catastrophe a small miracle occurred.'

If Braithwaite could have prevented this tissue of lies being included in his book and chose not to, I think he should be eternally ashamed of himself.

In 2016 exactly 61 years after ER Braithwaite ceased teaching at my school St. George-In-the-East in London's East End I learnt why his tenure had come to an end.

At a meeting of St. George's School Governing Body dated 23 February 1955 it was decided that 'because of the preponderance of men teachers now on the staff at St. George's, the governors think it desirable that the present divisional staff teacher Mr Braithwaite be replaced as soon as possible by a woman teacher qualified in physical education.'

Alfred Gardner has written 2 autobiographical books '*Watch Your Fingers!*' Published by The Merlin Press (2011) & '*An East End Story*'. Published by Fonthill Media Limited (2013).