

Some memories of PRS - Laurie McGarry

I'm afraid my reminiscences aren't very upbeat because I do have mixed feelings about my time at PRS. I wasn't really very happy there however I think that being there affected my life so I am very interested in it. I am even more interested now that I have learned a little bit about its early days.

I am sure that when I get my copy of the history I will learn why the authorities decided to have a school in Wilhelmshaven which was so far from where our parents were stationed. It could be that there weren't any other premises and they had to use what was available.

The fact that I wasn't happy there was my fault. I have known people who loved it. But it was my tenth school and I had probably had had enough of moving and trying to fit in. I was awkward, shy and not very good at games which were an important part of school life at PRS.

Here are some of my memories which probably aren't much different from a lot of others .

I was in Rodney and I remember it being a shock to have to share a smallish room with four others. A couple of us were new and homesick, one of my room mates desperately missed her baby brother. I don't think I'll ever forget the feeling of desolation on the first night that I arrived. I wasn't very tidy which was always mentioned on the dreaded house reports and often seemed to get into trouble for minor offences.

I didn't work hard during my schooldays at PRS so my reports generally weren't very good. At the time I blamed on it on all the cramming that was done for the eleven plus but now I must admit that it was due to natural indolence. I can remember that school holidays which were always blighted once my school report arrived. My father was a Regimental Sergeant Major at the time and would tell me off for my misdemeanours in the same stentorian tone he must have used when dealing with his troops.

Talking after lights out was something I was punished for on a regular basis. The theory was that if you were talking after lights out you weren't very tired so the duty mistress got all the members of the room up.. We then had to do something like copying articles from "The Times" in the prep room or sweeping the corridors which they hoped would make us sleepy.

Did other houses have "Fingernail and toenail inspection" which Matron carried out every Sunday evening? There was a girl in Rodney called Nancy who remained faithful to Cliff Richard when everyone else was in the grip of Beatlemania who always refused to cut her incredibly long fingernails and had something of the status of a heroine in the House.

My answer to the question "Where were you when you heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated?" is - lying on bed listening to Radio Luxemburg some time before lights out. We were told by the beautiful Bernice Doyle who was the running star of Rodney. She seemed impossibly glamorous to us. But I am always puzzled that I can remember nothing of the Cuban missile crisis since everyone else in the Western world was quite frightened at the time. It completely passed us by.

The senior mistress Miss Tebbs lived in a flat at the top of the stairs in Rodney. We were very much in awe of her. I saw more of her than many of the girls since I was a Catholic. During the time I was at school the language of the Mass changed from Latin to English or the vernacular as Miss Tebbs called it.

Then there were the extraordinary mattresses called biscuits which were in three parts. I can remember times when I woke up practically curled up in the middle bit because the top and bottom bits had slipped out of either end of the bed.. During the freeze of 1961-62 we put newspaper between the mattress and the sheet so that we could keep warm.

The netball courts were frozen in the winter of 1962 so that we could skate on them and as others have reported

the sea froze during that time. I remember being in the sick bay on the Fliegerdeich and watching it move very slowly – a magical sight. I have since learned that we were lucky being in Germany and able to see the sea. My Bavarian friend Martha's mother didn't see it until she was quite old, many native Germans are landlocked and in those days they didn't travel to the seaside as we did in the UK.

Of course I never mastered skating and wish very much that I had. I wasn't well coordinated and never could get the hang of the quickstep and the other dances that we danced at the school socials. It was a relief when the "twist" became popular because it didn't require the same skill.

I expect other ex-pupils have mentioned how double hockey periods always seem to coincide with the times that the glue factory was working at full throttle. The smell of the melting fish bones is with me still. We always looked forward to the "Easy Weekends" when our parents came up to stay in the local hotels and we were able to go out for Wiener schnitzels (with a fried egg on top) and pommes frites accompanied by those nice pickled salads.

I have attended other boarding schools and the meals I had at there could not compare with those I had at PRS. I loved the Tuesday egg and chip night. One Tuesday night the menu was changed and the cooks nearly had a mutiny on their hands. Those large bowls of chips would be refilled two or three times.

I enjoyed some of the school work particularly the English lessons with Mr Gibbons who unlike Miss Irvine quite liked my prose style. I was ahead in maths when I arrived but soon slipped back when I started not to apply myself to schoolwork. My maths teacher in the third form, Mr Sadler told me that the sound of my name reminded him of his Irish honeymoon. I had never known until then that my surname was Irish and I was pleased he liked it since I had lots of teasing because of my Christian name "Laurie". When I saw there was a part of the form that asked if I'd had a nickname I shivered because mine was a source of great embarrassment to me. I was given it during one French lesson in the classroom upstairs in Churchill. The teacher whose name I can't remember asked the class what pommes de terre meant. I piped up with the answer and then the row of boys behind me started mimicking me, chorusing "potatoes, potatoes" in a mock posh accent. After that I was known as "Spud" to them.

I also liked the music lessons with Mr Evans who was tall, Welsh and had a bushy moustache. He took great exception to the fact that Elvis Presley had sung a much changed version of Wooden Heart in the film G.I. Blues and got us to sing the original which still echoes in my head from time to time. He used to play us records of classical music. Art lessons with Mr Follows were interesting, he had a melancholy aspect and a good voice and used sometimes to look at my drawing book with a quizzical eye.

The two highlights of my PRS school career were getting a poem entitled November published in The Cavalier and winning the junior original writing prize in 1962. I still have the book I was given: The Country Life Guide to England. It's rather charming - full of black and white photographs of stately homes and ancient monuments. I was not pleased to find that sewing was compulsory. The agony of trying to master the treadle machine is a strong memory and it was something I never really managed to do. The blouse I was making became so grubby and tatty that nobody could ever have worn it. The sewing mistress, a Miss Washington (?) was always spurring us on. She had a catch phrase - something about "come on now girls let's get on like a house on fire". I can't remember it exactly. On the other hand, I loved the cookery classes that gave a good grounding in skills which have always stood me in good stead. We had a great time one session making bread and doughnuts something that I never done since.

I think the games lessons were a bit of a trial since as they pointed out in one of those infamous reports – "Laurie makes no progress due to the fact she makes no effort". I keenly remember being the last to be chosen for netball games.

It's odd then that I should end up working in that Mecca of sports science, Loughborough University where I have learned to enjoy some exercise – jogging and cycling.