

The Old School Hotel

Up until 1976 this was the village school - the heart of the community. Today it is an Hotel and Restaurant. Attached to the Old School is the old Headmaster's House.

There was a charity school in Port Isaac in 1804, supported by voluntary subscriptions. In 1877, £2400 was raised by donations for the building of this new school on the site of the 'Good Intent' Fish Cellars. The Cornish architect, Sylvanus Trevail won a prize for the design of the building in a Chicago exhibition.

However, it appears that there was not enough money to cover the construction costs and granite was substituted with sandstone which has weathered badly on this exposed site. Who knows, if granite had been used for the mullions and buttresses the building would have been able to withstand the weather and it may still have been the village school today.

In 1901, Sylvanus Trevail, now internationally recognised and President of the Society of Architects, shot himself dead on a train near Bodmin Road Station.

Boss Richards - A Cornish Headmaster

by James Platt

Mr C Victor Richards was headmaster of the Port Isaac County Primary School during the post-war decade. Not a single one of his pupils had any idea what the initial 'C' stood for, but they were all well aware of what he stood for, and that was, put simply, no nonsense from any of them. He was authority personified and the nickname 'Boss' with which we had been dubbed, and by which he was universally known, fitted his pre-eminent position in village life like a well worn glove.

Assisted by a dedicated staff of three, Boss was, from nine to four, five days a week, the undisputed lord and master of the hundred and fifty or so children of the village and its surrounding district who attended the school.

Boss was of no more than average height and build and, compared to some of his heftier pupils, he appeared even slight, but he carried an aura of power about him which gave him a stature transcending mere physical size.

He wore authority like a royal cloak of rich purple, expected and received respect as his due and gave no quarter to the uncouth.

His voice was rounded and commanding, rich in self-confidence, short on sanctimony, rarely raised in anger. He could quell a riotous classroom with the tilt of an eyebrow or freeze a milling playground with a lifted finger.

Boss had the cast of a martinet, hallmarked by Brylcreem-slick combed back hair and a tight moustache bristling over teeth which he chose to bare with alarming regularity. A yard long whippy bamboo cane was customarily grasped in his right hand, like an extension of his arm. He habitually flicked the cane gently and rhythmically against his suited leg while his scouring eyes searched for miscreants in his domain.

The cane was carried as a promise more than a threat, as a deterrent rather than a weapon, its purpose being essentially ceremonial. It was employed primarily as a gadfly to maintain the crisp class-by-class assembly lines which formed by mandate in the playground at the end of each period of break, poised to march back into school in regimented style. Any random hands or prominent backsides which spoiled the symmetry of the

line were reasonably sure to be stung by the tip of that cane.

Boss and his staff were acknowledged by parents and pupils alike to have been placed in the school by divine right both to teach and to provide discipline and not necessarily in that order of priority. Yet no matter how severe the discipline meted out by their hands, the defence had no case to present and it was judged that the offending pupil had, beyond reasonable doubt, deserved every scrap of punishment received. For their part, the pupils understood and accepted that to attend school, to be taught while present and to be disciplined when necessary was their bounden duty. Fathers missed no opportunity to inform their children that the salvation of this duty was one (of many such) reasons why they had recently fought a war. Truancy was therefore unknown.

If a pupil missed school it was understood that he or she was either too ill to walk or otherwise unable to leave home owing to his or her boots being at the cobblers. Through all extremes of wind, rain and occasional snow the children filed daily in to school from all parts of the village and from the outlying farms and hamlets, doing no more than what was expected of them, meriting no praise. Boss received them with a pride he rarely showed and cherished their company from behind a wall of reserve. All of them learned through him and in spite of themselves. He entered their hearts and, although they may not have known it then, the time would come when they did.

They began school in Miss Smythe's 'infants class' when they were four and few of them moved on at the age of seven without being able to read, write, draw a bit, have a feel for the more interesting stories of the Bible, do tables up to twelve times, add, subtract and divide.

Mrs Morman, a terror armed with a one foot wooden ruler, spittle flying as she wielded it against outstretched hands, fanned the latent coals of intellect in the seven to nine year olds. She developed reading and arithmetic skills, basic dictation, religious instruction, formative handwriting and the art of imaginative compositions.

Mr Perry, a young man without rancour and with a flair for fun, took pupils aged nine to eleven, moving their minds a step further along the tunnel towards the light,



introducing them to arts and crafts, geography, history, decimals and fractions.

Boss Richards own direct charges ranged from eleven years old to the official school leaving age of fifteen. He taught geometry, classic literature, the human condition, honesty and humility to red faced farm boys, fishermen's sons and pigtailed girls. Boss prepared them for what lay beyond his classroom. He shaped brilliant cuts from many rough rural stones and opened doors of opportunity to so many who had been born outside the precincts of privilege.

The school building over which Boss ruled still stands but has now been converted into a hotel. Where Miss Smythe taught, the guests now dine. Mrs Morman's and Mr Perry's classrooms are part of the bedroom complex. The playground is a car park with a line of tables where tea can be taken on fine days.

Boss's classroom is the bar and lounge and to step in there is to turn the clock back to those years when rows of village youth sat behind hard desks on harder chairs reading aloud in turn from 'A Tale of Two Cities' or quoting by heart whole swathes of the Bible under the commanding scrutiny of Boss himself.

The original panelling covers the bar walls. The roof beams are unchanged and the slate floor still bears the mark of generations of hobnails. The essence of Boss Richards hangs in the air like a gossamer benediction and your first drink is always a toast to his inspiring memory.

Printed in Trio, 2001