OUT of BOUNDS
from No. 13

It was the greatest thrill, it was the biggest adventure, and short of setting fire to the school buildings, it was the gravest crime to commit. Going out of bounds.

Of course we were allowed sanctioned trips outside; on Friday evenings there was 'library leave' when we were allowed down to the village, ostensibly to make use of the public library. I don't know how many boys actually made it to the library, I think most of them were too busy using and abusing the village shops. I wonder how some of those shops managed to stay in business – there were times when the shop-lifting reached epidemic proportions. (Instead of going along the Uxbridge road and over the road bridge that crossed the railway and into Hatch End, you could turn right and walk a short distance along The Avenue until you reached a footpath on your left. This ran parallel to the main road and crossed the railway line via a steel footbridge. The path then continued and brought you out in the village. Standing on the footbridge you didn't have to wait long for a passenger or goods train to appear in the distance and as the great chuffing engine passed beneath you, you were enveloped in a great, damp and tepid cloud of steam and coal dust).

Sunday morning there was the compulsory visit to church and on Sunday afternoons the boys were allowed out for two hours for 'walks'. For obvious reasons boys were not allowed out alone, nor were we allowed out in pairs (too intimate?), and so off we went in threes or fours in our 'best' suits. Old Redding was a favourite destination.

Old Redding was a road that ran from the top of the Harrow Weald Common hill-line down to Oxhey Lane. It was so steep that it was best to approach it from the far side which was a gentler incline. The route followed was that of one of the cross-country run courses. You turned right out of the school gates and walked along the Uxbridge Road. You continued straight over the roundabout that joined Oxhey Lane to Headstone Lane to the next roundabout, then turned left. This was Brookshill (A409) and this road wound upwards to the 'Hare' public house where we turned left onto Old Redding. Then we passed the “Case is Altered” pub. The road went through woodland and off to the left there was a transmission tower which we nicknamed 'the Loch Ness Monster'. (close by was Grimstoke Lake, which was great fun when it was frozen over but not such fun if the ice was thin!). Once out of the woods, Old Redding descended into a steep and undulating downhill road that ran for half a mile to the T-junction at the bottom, which was the main road (Oxhey Lane). As with all good country roads, a ditch ran alongside Old Redding (I've since found out it was actually called Grims Ditch!), and as with all good ditches, it was filled with the debris and detritus of passing traffic, including vehicle tyres. It was a hot, summer's Sunday afternoon and we each dragged a tyre out of the ditch. We started to roll them down the hill in time-honoured fashion, using our hands to propel and guide the rubber monsters on their way. One by one the tyres outran us and bounced out of control into the side of the road and back into the ditches. Except mine. Mine kept running straight and true. I sprinted after it and tried in vain to kick out at it and try and deflect it but I couldn't keep up and staggered to a halt, puffing and out of breath, and watched horrified as the tyre accelerated away and began to bounce ever higher with each of the road's undulations. It must have been travelling at 60 mph when it reached the bottom of Old Redding and flew across at head height over the junction at the main road. Thank goodness it was a Sunday and the traffic was light!
Other excursions outside included Visitors' Days, when friends or families took us out to have a meal (Brunch at a Lyon's Corner House?) followed by a trip to Madame Taussards, or the Planetarium, the Tower of London, or one of the Kensington Science museums, and there were sometimes class outings with the English or History teacher to the Old Vic to see Shakespeare performed on stage, or to Greenwich to walk aboard the decks of the Cutty Sark.

I don't know whether the girls had Sunday walks, I don't ever recall seeing them or bumping into them.

But it was the illegal trips outside that were the most challenging, especially when you arrived in the 4th and 5th forms. Most of the boys that I knew were experienced and adept at travelling on public transport. After all, six times a year we dragged suitcases twice our body weight onto local trains and then onto mainline stations to travel the hundreds of miles to and from the school. Trains were the preferred mode of transport. Buses were too local and had conductors. London Transport operated the green commuter trains and London Underground operated the tube trains. London Midland Scottish provided the passenger and goods trains. I frequently travelled to Watford (usually to go to the cinema) but sometimes went to Carpenders Park or in the opposite direction toward London. Any ticket was better than none, even if it was only a platform ticket or a 'single' to the next station down the line. At your destination it was best to get off the train and go and sit in the Waiting Room, until the ticket inspector had left his gate and you could sneak through, or cross over the footbridge onto the opposite platform and make your escape that way. Underground stations had Victorian spiral-stair fire escapes which led out into the station entrance hall, on the outside of the ticket barrier. I remember I had to re-sit my Geography 'O' level. GCE’s were held in the school gymnasium but these re-sits were held at a college in Belsize Park. I was able to travel from Hatch End (overground to Euston) and then underground on the Northern Line to Belsize Park and back without spending a penny, .... and I passed the exam!

In the 5th form you dropped certain subjects so that you could concentrate on your chosen 'O' level subjects which meant that there were enough free periods to allow you to take a trip to a coffee bar or a cinema. (I recall going over the wall to go to the cinema in Watford. In those days there was always a supporting feature, the 'B' movie, that preceded the main feature. It was often better than the A film! The films were in black and white and the main feature was called “Hell is for Heroes”. It was a war film and it starred a very young Steve McQueen in one of his first films. I chain-smoked my way through the movie, which I thought was fantastic, and I and couldn't wait to get back to school to tell everyone at the dinner table all about it, which I did. Last year I saw “Hell is for Heroes” for sale in the Amazon.com catalogue and ordered it. What a load of crap!!).

Sometimes boys made a real bid for freedom with a one-way trip in mind. They tended to be newcomers who couldn't adjust, or boys who were heart-broken with homesickness. I remember one boy who lay in wait on the railway embankment, down by the bridge to the farm. There was a set of railway signals alongside the track and the goods trains often staggered to a halt there, and had to wait for a train to pass by in the opposite direction. The boy climbed up and hauled himself into one of the trucks. Another boy went to London, boarded a train at Euston and got as far as Crewe before the railway police caught up with him and sent him back. I seem to remember that one boy made it all the way to Glasgow.
But the nocturnal escapades were the most daring and the most risky. During the dark, winter nights there was a window of opportunity between 7.30pm and 'lights out'. We had to replace jackets with dark sweaters and leave the school grounds by scaling the perimeter fence that surrounded the playing field, or scramble up the railway embankment and walk alongside the tracks. The name “Leaping Bar” and a road called “Long Elmes” seem to stir my memory when trying to identify our destination. The biggest risk was being missed during your absence. If a master or a prefect sent a runner to find you for some reason and the search was unsuccessful, then the alarm bells would start to ring in their heads. Returning from our escapade we had to get back across the girls' hockey pitch and dart back into the main building without being detected, and then mingle with the rest of the boys in the school. I remember coming back one night and we were running in crouched positions across the hockey pitch when HFD, alerted to our absence, had driven his Ford Anglia down onto the yard and was steering his car in a zig-zag fashion, his headlamp beams traversing the pitch like searchlights. We lay on our stomachs in the cold grass until he drove off down to the bridge to search the approach from the playing fields, then we fled back to the warmth and safety of the main building. We each insisted we had been around in the school all the time.

I am convinced that if there had been a more liberal regime at the school; if they hadn't treated the school like a prison and not treated us boys like convicts, we would not have been so rebellious. Our only 'crime' was to have been separated from our families.

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