Wellington Boys’ Grammar School (WBGs) opened in 1940.

It had been built on agricultural land off Golf Links Lane in Wellington, Shropshire (now part of the conurbation of Telford), having moved from a site originally shared with the Girls’ High School (WGHS) on King Street, at which time one half of the premises comprised Wellington Boys’ High School. Boys and girls, were segregated, a situation reflected in mutual antagonism between the two head teachers.

Strictly, the Boys’ Grammar School came to an end in May 1974. There was then a joint Boys’ and Girls’ Grammar school ‘run-off’ (for First to Fifth year pupils) on the Golf Links Lane site, which subsequently continued as Ercall Wood Technology College (EWTC) and operated there for about 35 years.

The first year of my Sixth Form (1974/75) was on the original site; a few girls were admitted. The second year, Upper Sixth (1975/76), was at the former WGHS where boys and girls combined to constitute a Sixth Form College under the name New College, Telford.

A small reunion (or site visit) for WBGS Old Boys was held at the Golf Links Lane site in July 2014, shortly before the old buildings were demolished to clear the ground for replacement premises and sports grounds for EWTC and a number of small housing estates.

The history of schooling in Wellington makes a fascinating read.

Looking back fifty years (to 1969) I was about to enter WBGS. Looking back a further fifty years (to 1916) the picture is quite different.

And a further fifty years (1866) the educational landscape is completely unrecognisable with accounts of ‘gutter children’ and children withdrawn from school in winter or removed at fourteen, so that their incomes could supplement strained household budgets. See:

http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/salop/vol11/pp245-251

Enormous strides have been made to spread knowledge throughout the population … and in the latter years without regard to the ability to pay.

Shortly before I went to WBGS in 1969, the UK embarked on the path of joining the EEC (EU); grammar schools were being phased out at the same time (a policy then shared by both Conservative and Labour Parties).

The UK is now on the verge of leaving the EU (about which there is still a huge legal and political debate, and now a parallel debate about membership of the European Economic Area, previously the European Free Trade Association) and there has been talk of expanding the number of grammar schools … a curious turn of events.

It is forty years this year since I left the grammar school, and nearly half a century since I first went there, which gives pause for thought. Temporal and physical distance lends perspective.

This article focusses on the final days of WBGS, in particular 1969 to 1974, and touches on aspects of historical and geographical context. In many ways it was an astonishing time; and the school was, in many respects, remarkable.
I am looking first at the place and then at the time. This was the layout of the land and buildings as I remember them, described first as if standing in the middle of the Quadrangle and looking north, south, east and west. I also set out the location as if looking down from the air. There are some splendid photographs now readily accessible at libraries and on the Internet.

The original school buildings, built nearly eighty years ago in 1940, were something of an architectural gem, beautifully aligned in a plot that sloped gently from south to north at the foot of Ercall Hill; largely symmetrical and built around a central quadrangle. It was probably modelled on a cloister; perhaps a subtle reference to the monasteries that had preserved education and learning in much more distant and unsettled times and where, among other things, Latin was spoken. Indeed, there was something monastic about the place in that there was hardly a woman to be seen, particularly in the early years.

Standing in the Quad on the grass and looking to the north was a pitched-roof central block, containing the art room with a huge glass-roof on the northern face, clearly visible in old photographs. The glass roof was sheltered from direct sunlight in the summer by the pitch of the roof, and still flooded with light in the winter when the sun is at its lowest. It was later tiled over.

On each side of that northern block were two short flat-roofed sections. When I attended the school (1969 to 1975), there was a staff room and headmaster’s study to the east and a music room (where Eric Cliffe would rapidly identify those who were tone deaf), a tuck shop and a small class room to the west.

There were roughly symmetrical entrances either side of the main block, the eastern set for use by the headmaster and staff and the western set used by pupils (in earlier times, this situation was reversed). At break time the boys’
entrance would be piled knee high with satchels crammed with books, while we played soccer with a tennis ball on the play-ground which doubled as staff car park, or spot kick against the wall of the gym.

To the south, backing onto Ercall Hill, one of the cluster of hills scattered around The Wrekin Hill, was a flat-roofed two-storey art deco-style block of class rooms. At that time the school grounds were not bounded to the south by the M54 which runs east-west from the M6 towards Shrewsbury.

The external east-west corridors of the class room block, facing inwards into the Quad on the upper storey, were originally open to the weather. Although they were hardly exposed, they were enclosed by glass long after I left.

There were symmetrical left- and right-handed open staircases at the east and west ends of the block, each end featuring an elegant, two-storey curved tower-like walls with windows. These curved walls faced due south, admitting sunlight into the stairwell all year round. The south-facing classroom windows (effectively all along the back of the building) were from shoulder-height to ceiling, whereas those on the Quad side were almost floor to ceiling in all rooms.

Someone had clearly thought very carefully about the proportions of the building and the use of light. The doors were painted dark blue. There were steps down onto the immaculate lawn which occupied the entire centre of the Quad with a few flower beds at the edges. No-one walked on the grass.

Behind the class room block, to the south west, were two single storey structures initially used as common rooms for the Upper and Lower Sixth, one later used for Art (which I recall using for Art lessons); to the north-west of those small buildings were cycle racks, behind the hall.

On the eastern side of the Quad was a two storey pitched-roof library (originally the gymnasium) with an elegant metal spiral
staircase and beautiful wooden floors; crowded bookshelves floor to ceiling and a respectful silence (but with few occupants). The sports fields were further due east, behind the library and invisible from the Quad.

On the western side of the Quad was the original pitched-roof assembly hall, the external structure almost a mirror image of the library though slightly longer, aligned north-south with a stage to the south, and dining facilities on the northern side (and kitchens to the west). This was cleared one lunch time in something of a panic when mercury was spilled onto the floor by some miscreant, and drained through the floor boards causing chemistry masters to arrive in great urgency equipped with sulphur.

On the wall at the northern wall of the hall were Honours Boards, although I do not recall any entries made on them in my time (and we had moved buildings anyway by the time I reached the Upper Sixth). There were also smaller boards showing the Captains of particular sports (cricket, rugby, etc.). They gave a glimpse of a time long passed; the institution was by 1969 nearly thirty years old. And under the stage, at the south end of the hall, was what had also been the Prefects Room which was relocated elsewhere in the late 1950s following complaints about behaviour (such as excessive noise disrupting music lessons conducted in the hall, and the smell of cigarette smoke drifting through floorboards on the stage).

At one time the kitchens experimented with reconstituted potato, no doubt some ludicrous cost-saving idea, and only worth mentioning here because it brings to mind 'For Mash Get Smash', the most inspired piece of advertising of the era, with real potatoes mocked by convulsing Martian marionettes with the voices of Daleks (the kitchens did not necessarily use Smash, incidentally). The Martians had the jerky articulation of demented descendants of The Flowerpot Men (to which they had a vague passing resemblance, but no Weed, of course), rather than the smooth, faux American glamour of Supercar, Fireball XL5, Stingray, Thunderbirds and Captain Scarlet in which the main heroes seemed to have the look of James Garner or Sean Connery. CGI had not even been imagined at that time.

In the centre of the Quad stood a white geometric statue in limestone (not Henry Moore or Barbara Hepworth but rather by a student in the 1960s) standing about six or eight feet tall, made in a series of horizontal blocks, isolated and untouched in the manicured lawn. As I recall, the Upper Sixth (when I was in my Second or Third Year) removed it by some means after A Levels. Quite how, and where to, and how it was recovered was never explained but, at the start of the new term, there it was.

Photographs taken from the air in the 1940s and 1950s show that the configuration of school buildings remained the same for almost thirty years; the pictures still breathe elegance, newness and optimism. It is particularly striking how open the site seems.
THE EXPANSION

There then followed major extensions due east of the original buildings, disrupting the architectural harmony of the original but providing functional and essential amenities for an increasing intake and improved facilities for sports and subjects associated with science and technology.

First, to the east, behind the library was a new small enclosed garden with paved pathways and bushes, surrounded by a two storey maths block to the south (at least one room set up theatre style) and a two storey science block to the east, always with a faint whiff of Bunsen burner gas (out of the upper windows of which (Biology) one in my year was ‘suspended’ by his ankles).

There was then due south a single storey science classroom (used for Physics, which brings back sharp memories of the Van der Graf Generator and modest water battles over the ripple tanks); a technical block further south (in which was made a splendid working man-sized hovercraft, that later glided over what remained of the eastern sports fields) and a much larger new hall to the north, aligned east-west, with the stage due east and an elevated section the full length on the south side, on which sat a full sized grand piano.

On one occasion, someone with a shaven head was summarily ejected from assembly in that hall.

Right, top: Construction work on the new Assembly Hall and Gymnasium (in the background). On the right is an entrance to the new Science block, 1962.
Centre: Building work on new classrooms and Technical block, 1962.

A FLOATING SUCCESS

Boys from Wellington Grammar School, whose light hovercraft (Atlast2) came second in the Hover Club of Great Britain Schools’ Hovercraft Contest, held in Gloucestershire at the weekend, talk to Mr. Ronald Philliskirk, industrial regional manager, BP Marketing Ltd.

They are Laurie Cartwell (15), Stephen Woodland (16), Geoffrey Farnham (19) and Mike Liebman (15).
before proceedings could start and obliged to stay at home until it had regrown. Judging from where I was sitting, I must have been in the Second or Third Year at the time; he must have been in the Fourth or Fifth year, so some time in 1970-1972, say.

Shaven heads now grace some of the boardrooms of British business but at that time the school had certain standards: short hair was permitted, perhaps encouraged, a legacy maybe of war and conscription (we were not long out of the era of ‘short back and sides’, a standard instruction to barbers on Saturdays).

However, shaven heads were not. Skinheads were the new face of anarchy, as a DA and winkle pickers had long since become old hat. However, completely bald heads amongst the staff passed without comment (well without formal comment, let’s say). One had an uncanny resemblance to Davros, the head of the Daleks.

Last, there was what seemed like an enormous new sports hall, aligned north-south, due east of the new hall, with a zigzag roof, the verticals in glass (on the south side) and the slopes to the north of what was probably steel sheets.

It had a full length basket-ball court (north-south) and several badminton courts painted out laterally on the floor and was, for sport, superior in every way to the original gymnasium it replaced in the early 1960s, which was originally the large room on the eastern side of the Quad, which became the library (i.e. opposite the old main hall/dining room).

This development programme, built over part of the upper sports fields, commenced in 1959 and concluded in 1962 or thereabouts. You could see it in the architecture. The new buildings were plain and functional but not ungenerous and, although in some parts much larger, were, in some subtle way, not quite of the same grade as the original. Or is it my imagination?

The work commenced just before the commencement of the latest programme of railway cuts, following the publication of Dr Richard Beeching’s first report in 1963, and shortly after the commencement of the new trunk road programme, new motorways, the first of which (M1) opened in 1959.

There had, of course, been huge cuts before Beeching but it seems curious that the task of brutal rationalisation of the rail network had been allocated by the Minister of Transport to the chairman of ICI, a chemicals business.

There are, incidentally, magnificent photographs of the testing of the E-Type Jaguar on the M1, which was practically empty, in 1961. The E-Type was tested there to see if it would, indeed, do 150 miles per hour, long before the 70 mph speed limit was imposed.

Perhaps at this point the school had hit its apogee, in the surge of optimism that greeted the start of the 1960s, coinciding with the second post war baby boom.

This was notwithstanding the effective post war collapse of Empire (most starkly illustrated by independence for India in 1947), the ominous humiliation in the Suez Crisis in 1956 (a devastating demonstration of Britain’s then military and economic weakness), and the haste to de-colonialise (notably in Africa), substantially completed by the early 1960s; all of which may have influenced the decision to seek membership of the EEC/EU. Indeed, there were several applications to join during the 1960s, which might lend some perspective on the present intention to leave.

The retractions from Empire were increasingly obvious (to adults) where I lived in Albrighton, by the military families repatriated from abroad to RAF Cosford, notably from Yemen (Aden) in 1963 and Malta in 1974.

Their children were enrolled in Albrighton County Junior School which was built on Newhouse Lane in 1952 (four years before Park Junior, now called Wrekin View, opened at North Road in Wellington in 1956) and which I first attended in 1965.

We watched the eclipse of the sun through tinted glass (just as Macmillan had observed the world through rose-tinted spectacles a few years earlier) when I was still in the First Year at Albrighton in 1965 or 1966.

That school was one of two, the Juniors’, then the Infants’, built in Albrighton partly to complement the minute Victorian school (built in 1856, I believe) which I attended between 1962 and 1965. My mother was headmistress there in the early 1960s.

SPORTS FIELDS

The new extensions constructed between 1959 and 1962 at WBGS had been built on part of the sports fields to the east. There remained only a rugby pitch on the higher ground behind the Physics lab and Technical block (aligned north-south), and a football pitch behind the gym (aligned east-west) where we would play Sag or soccer at break time (and return somewhat muddied).

At breaks we went outside, largely whatever the weather (so no opening the classroom door locks with a set of dividers, then).

Looking at old photographs and listening to Old Boys, the sports fields were created to the north on land previously used as wartime allotments: a cricket and another football pitch were first to appear around 1953, and fenced tennis courts soon after.

When I attended the school, a first team soccer pitch lay to the north east on this lower lying ground (to the right, standing with your back to the school) and rugby pitch to the extreme north (dead ahead as it were) which I recall being water logged (not that it mattered much) up to the gardens of the houses abutting the Holyhead Road.

There was also a soccer pitch immediately dead ahead due north (abutting the car-park/playground longitudinally), part of which doubled as cricket pitch and athletics track in summer, not that much used in my time (at least by me), unless you count vaulting the
(very solid) steeplechase fences and crashing into the water. This soccer pitch was divided from the playground by a row of trees, a kerb and a low fence (really only a white horizontal bar, rather like an extended scaffold pole) the full length of the playground and supported by short curved-top wooden or concrete posts about eighteen inches high. This was a comfortable but potentially hazardous place to sit.

To the north and west was the long jump pit and then, over on the far left, abutting Golf Links Lane, a netted set of black (shale) tennis courts; again hardly used in my time for tennis but rather for hockey, and falling into disrepair in the mid 1970s with the odd tuft of grass at the edges. Perhaps this was an early sign of decline and fall.

This was the configuration of the land and buildings when I first arrived in September 1969.

**NUMBERS, TEMPERATURE AND CURRENCY**

In 1969, England had yet to join the European Union (EU, or the European Economic Community (EEC) as it then was). Outdoor temperature was always in Fahrenheit, not Centigrade (except for ice).

We also still had at that point a baffling array of numbers and measures in multiple different bases (12 (inches/foot), 14 (pounds/stone), 16 (ounces/pound), 20 (shillings/pound), 21 (shillings/guinea)). We had (or had had) farthings, groats, pennies, threepenny bits, shillings, sixpences, florins, half crowns, crowns, pounds, guineas, inches, feet, yards, chains, poles, perches, rods, furlongs, miles, acres, ounces, pounds, stones, hundredweights, tons, gills, cups, pints, quarts, gallons. Perhaps this was why we chanted times tables up to 12 but, if so, why not 14 and 16 at least?

In the period up to 1969 when I sang solos (usually Oh, for the wings of a dove) at Albrighton church (built in beautiful Shropshire sandstone and already nearly 800 years old) when married couples were signing the register after the ceremony, I would be paid one crown in a velvet box. Crowns were, strictly, no longer legal tender. That church was originally built a few years before Richard the Lionheart came to the throne in 1189 (in other words, before Time Immemorial), with further works in the nineteenth century. For the first 400 years it must have been ringing to the Latin mass.

It is curious how the move to metrication has become conflated with membership of the EU in the public mind. In fact, proposals to metricate weights and measures in the UK were initially wholly unrelated to membership of the EEC/EU, going back to 1862.

This was part of the Victorian urge to systematise and rationalise which touched not only numbers and counting but also on the structure of courts (in the great Judicature Acts), on the foundations of legal commerce (in the laws regulating the sale of goods, bills of exchange and, latterly, insurance) and on the rule books of multiple sports (including badminton, tennis, cricket, rugby and football).

Finally, after a struggle of one hundred years and shortly before I went to the Grammar School, around 1965 the Board of Trade decided to metricate by 1975, about the time I was due to leave school. A Metrication Board was set duly up in 1968; before accession to the EEC.

The UK then finally joined the EEC in 1973, previous applications in 1963 and 1967 having been vetoed by France. Some sort of formal commitment to metricate weights and measures was certainly made then, on joining. Metrication was to be taught in schools from 1974.

But the subsequent process was muddled and slow. As a result, those from my era can probably visualise weights and measures far more easily in imperial rather than metric units (and, for that matter, outdoor temperatures in Fahrenheit, not Centigrade). Decades later there were still prosecutions threatened in the UK for those who wanted to sell bananas (it would be bananas, of course, straight or otherwise) solely by the pound, as some sort of protest against creeping European integration.

As to decimalisation of the currency, the UK was also a late convert although proposals to
decimalise went back to the 1820s. The UK finally converted to decimal currency on 15th February 1971. By way of contrast, Russia introduced decimal currency in 1704, the USA in 1792, France in 1795 (as part of the earlier Napoleonic fervour to modernise and rationalise), Sweden in 1855 and Austria-Hungary in 1857.

RULES, HOUSES AND LANGUAGE
Life at school was, even by my time in 1969, still modelled on a minor public school, presumably the ideal when it was first built but with perhaps less overt emphasis in the curriculum on sport. We had just one period (about twenty minutes) of PE in the week and an afternoon of sport on Wednesdays.

It was a different world: uniforms, a full sports kit, and four houses to instil some competition (Ercall, Lawrence, Maddocks and Wrekin, named after nearby hills). In winter, often when the pitches were too icy or waterlogged to use (the northern parts had previously been wartime allotments) we would shiver in striped house vests (yellow, green, blue, red) running cross-country, around the edge of the pitches, gasping up Ercall Hill, through the mud, trees and rock-strewn paths on the hills, along Limekiln Lane then back along the Holyhead Road, usually in the rain.

The Holyhead Road was part of the ancient Watling Street, so we were running along the route used by Roman legionnaires 2,000 years previously (which certainly did not occur to me at the time). Rugby was compulsory, at least in the first few years I was there, but somewhat withered away in later years.

Incidentally, we had the same system of Houses in junior school at Albrighton County Junior: (Admiral) Rodney, (Sir Philip) Sidney, (Charles) Darwin and Clive (of India). It certainly never occurred to me that any of these might be a real person; looking at it now they were a curious grouping.

At WBGs there was a strict rule book, to be signed by pupils (I still have mine somewhere, though some of the stricter rules perhaps honoured in the breach), a school badge, blue blazer, cap and tie (both of mine have been eaten by moths) and Latin (at least for those whose misfortune it was to ‘pass’ the linguistics test which I have a vague recollection of sitting).

There was also a motto (above) inevitably in Latin, extracted from the poem De Rerum Natura by Roman poet Lucretius (c.99BC–55BC). It means, ‘Like runners, they pass on the torch of life’.

There was no Greek, although one of my contemporaries can recall being offered the opportunity to study Greek. Like most, I was then oblivious to the many thousands of Greek words that populate or contribute to the enormous modern English vocabulary, with its complex etymology (quite apart from the catalogue of neologisms and the expansion of the language through ‘linguistic miscegenation’). Not surprising for such a group of Philistines, as we were. There was no easy path to Greats at Oxbridge from WBGs. A view had taken root at that time that there was little to be gained in the study of ‘dead languages’. How wrong we were.

Those who ‘failed’ the linguistics test (if, indeed, they did) were ‘relegated’ to German, which might well have proved far more useful in later life. Even in 1969 there was still some antipathy towards the Germans, real or otherwise, nearly twenty-five years after the Second World War ended.

As I recall, comics such as Topper, Hotspur, Beano, Hornet and Dandy were full of war stories. This included Second World War stories, such as I Flew with Braddock and, incredibly, First World War stories with Tommy’s wearing mud-encrusted khaki outfits, their calves wrapped in puttees. Because of them, many schoolboys had a smattering of German; for example ‘Achtung!’ and ‘Hände hoch!’ (and just a few more words, unlikely to be useful in German lessons, nor in modern business for that matter), but that was about it.

But who knows? Latin may have been a pre-requisite for entry into the legal profession, part of the arcana of Law, but I didn’t need it in 1981 when I entered the profession. One year’s Latin left most with only ‘amo’ (a source of huge amusement to many), ‘amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant’ to show for it, which we had learned by rote (incantation by rote really works, as times tables prove); and a vague recollection of not only conjugating verbs (wholly unrecognised by most of us in our learning of English grammar) but also declining nouns (something of a novelty: nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative and ablative have really stuck in my mind).

Those who managed two years could regale others with incomprehensible insults (‘sordidus senex’ comes to mind) and perhaps a stock phrase such as ‘radix malorum est cupiditas’; although on reflection that was from Chaucer (and from the King James version of The Bible). Who would think that such would be fixed in the memory?

The Prologue was dull and impenetrable, but for some reason there was quite a bit of interest in The Wife of Bath, even for those of no academic inclination. What I do remember is that, on account of his passing resemblance to 1950s pop singer Adam Faith, the gentle and scholarly Latin master Ray Horton was nicknamed Adam.

Talking of Chaucer and where the pilgrimage of The Canterbury Tales begins, I now pass Southwalk Cathedral every day, with a glimpse of the roof from the Victorian viaduct at London Bridge. One can imagine the pilgrims gathering below.
I think we were streamed at the point of entry into WBGS, but this wasn't the case for newcomers in earlier years. First years were divided into Forms 1X, 1Y and 1Z, although I don't recall academic competition as such. Whichever named stream you were allocated to on entry, you stayed there for 5 years. I entered in 1Y, by which time my brother was in 3X; I'll leave you to guess how the system worked; although we were later streamed by results, but only for some subjects (certainly for Maths but not, from memory, Chemistry and Physics).

For my year, original streaming on entry at 11, may have been done according to pass mark in the 11-Plus taken, without coaching or preparation (nor, perhaps, much inkling of how important it was) in the last year at junior school. In my case this was at Albrighton County Junior School in the spring of 1969, a little while before we had made a papier mâché model of Caernarfon Castle, situated on the south side of the Menai Straits, to mark the investiture of the Prince of Wales in July of that year.

I can remember the day of the test vividly: small desks originally set in pairs were simply separated into lines of single desks facing the front. I think that there were about forty in the class. There was a magnificent elm tree in the school grounds, on a ridge outside the windows to the left (now long gone), many years before the devastation of Dutch elm disease.

At that time, classes were still oversubscribed by the post-war baby boom which had led to a frenzied scramble to build a new school on Shaw Lane in Albrighton, backing onto the railway line, after the planning or valuation battle between the local authority and the then nationalised Gas Board.

The old grey and rusted gasometer, a feature in many villages, towns and cities at the time before coal gas was replaced by North Sea gas (which in turn is now being progressively replaced by Liquid Natural Gas imported from Qatar, Algeria and Nigeria), sat on the land immediately adjacent to the railway, also then nationalised. To protesting adults (I was blissfully unaware of it at the time) there was incomprehension that two (or perhaps three) nationalised bodies could not find a simple solution to the need for building land. The problem was even raised in Parliament, as a quick look in Hansard will attest (August 1965); quite remarkable for a village with a population of just 4,000.

In fact, the village had grown substantially in two recent phases: firstly, because of the building of the adjacent Cosford airbase which opened in 1938 (immediately before the outbreak of war) and secondly in the construction of the Bushfields estate in 1959-1962 or thereabouts. What was particularly noticeable in the 1960s and 1970s was that there were (or seemed to be) children everywhere. And, given the pressure on school places at the time, this was real, not imagined.

After the 11-Plus results, those who had passed were solemnly gathered in the office of the headmaster, Ron Mathias (who with his wife Gwen was a stalwart of the local Gilbert & Sullivan Society; my father was in The Pirates of Penzance), who advised of our good fortune. I can remember standing there, and can remember his face, although nothing of exactly what was said; but we were certainly told not to make a fuss about it.

OLD BOYS

There were about 600 boys in total in WBGS while I was there (including Sixth Form) and, if I recall well, the mysterious Fifth Remove (possibly the ‘victims’ of the increase in the school leaving age from 15 to 16 in September 1972 but more likely unfortunates required to retake failed examinations). So, in 34 years (1940 to 1974, say), with School Certificates followed by Higher School Certificates at 16 and 18 (and, later O, A and Special Levels at the same ages), some three thousand boys must have passed through the school, a fair number of whom must still be alive.

But, quite unlike ex-pupils of the Girls High School, who have their own separate association, there is no longer an ‘Old Wellingtonians’ – the name of the former WBGS Old Boys Association; perhaps we are simply too far scattered to the breeze?

TRAVEL TO SCHOOL

I left WBGS 40 years ago this year, but many memories are sharp and clear. For a period, a small flood of pupils (like me) took the train due west from Albrighton (the most easterly village in Shropshire), then Cosford, Shifnal, Oakengates, New Hadley Halt (almost a bare assembly of railway sleepers constructed on overgrown waste land adjoining the line, with no shelter) into Wellington. This was along the line built over 100 years earlier (1849). Telford Central railway station was not constructed until years later, in 1986, adjacent to the new shopping centre previously constructed in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, not far from the headquarters of the Telford Development Corporation at Priorslee.

For some of us, this was early training in commuting. The trains were also packed with pupils going daily to Shifnal, to The Blessed Robert Johnson College, to Wellington Secondary Modern and to WGH; and on one occasion, travelling back towards Wolverhampton (one afternoon after school), Enoch Powell, M.P for Wolverhampton West, sitting in First Class. He was a well-known Classics boffin; he of the infamous 1968 Rivers of blood speech, an allusion to Virgil’s Aeneid, unknown to other than a tiny minority at the time I suspect, the majority may simply have taken him literally.

For five years (1962-1967), the house where I originally lived in Albrighton was close by the embankment bringing the train up the hill from Cosford going east to
The quantity and variety of subject matter in photographs of WBGS varies considerably from one decade to the next.

Much seems to have depended on each headmaster’s perception of what was absolutely necessary and his attitude towards taking pupils away from important lessons, while at the same time acceding to a greater or lesser degree to the wishes of parents and guardians.

Few photographs from the Boys’ High School period at King Street survive (panoramics of the whole school in 1927 and mid 1930s, for example).

The 1940s saw the beginning of ‘regular’ panoramic photographs ... sometimes they were taken in adjacent years (as in 1946 and 1947) but there was a tendency towards leaving a gap of a few years: the 1960s saw full-school photographs in 1962 and 1965.

Between 1969 and 1971, probably due to increased annual intakes, the one-Form-only photograph was reinstated; it had been popular during the late 1940s and early 1950s but, in 1969/70, such was the size of Forms that photographs had to be taken as panoramics, as in the one for combined First Years below from March 1970.

Thereafter, again probably in view of the growth in pupil numbers, 1972 panoramics were taken for Lower, Middle and Upper School groups.

The final panoramic taken at WBGS was that for 1974/75 (above) showing the combined Wellington Grammar School, which included both girls as well as boys.

Joint theatrical performances combining the talents of WBGS and WGHS students had occurred many times from the late 1940s. Some were operatic (The Gondoliers, 1965), although many were performances of Shakespeare’s plays, always popular with the paying public. All presented opportunities for public appearances and undoubtedly boosted confidence. Right: the cast of the 1972 production of Henry V.
Wolverhampton. I could hear the steam trains labouring at night, the note dropping and the rhythmic pace of the steam being expelled as the trains tackled the incline. These would be freight trains; steam had been phased out for passengers from the early 1960s.

Later, on journeys to school, we would take diesel multiple units (DMUs) which must have been nearly new. These were anonymous and soulless, compared to steam trains which have a certain life and vitality yet still attracted a dedicated group of train spotters, gathered at the end of the platforms at Wellington (who feverishly wrote down numbers in notebooks), several from WBGS.

Off the trains, we would stream through Wellington town centre, up Tan Bank, past the record shop (in the window of which for years sat an unsold Isley Brothers record (Who's that Lady?), past the cinema, snooker hall and the police station, then up the fenced alley between the houses and the allotments on the right and up to Holyhead Road.

This was the same alley that we then ran back down on days that we had swimming at the 1910 town baths, demolished in 1981. Then we crossed the horrendously busy Holyhead Road (before the M54 was constructed) into Golf Links Lane to the school, joshing and joking, frequently getting soaked in the rain. The road layout at the southern end of the Tan Bank is traversed by part of the 1970s ring road. Much of the rest is just as it was.

In the crowd going to school one day in Lower Sixth, my group of friends followed a girl, a recently converted self-avowed bible basher (newly admitted in Lower Sixth) up the alley; we were absolutely staggered by the range, depth and filth of her slang. She was taken to task by one, who later became a famous journalist and author: how could she say such things? 'It's my day off,' she replied, lifting her snub nose indignantly.

On half days at the start or the end of each new term (or year), another legacy of the public school model, we would slink into the immense, dark snooker hall in our uniforms and, in my case, shorts (in the First Year) to play at the tables before wending our way up the hill to school or down the hill to the train.

THE STAFF
The headmaster in 1969 was Mr. J. L. Morgan-Jones (the ‘Beak’ or the ‘Morg(ue)’), a tall, rather gaunt, dignified, kindly but somehow rather intimidating individual, who wore a black university gown to daily assemblies which always had a religious component. The tone and atmosphere of the school was set by his personality.

The names of many of the staff are grafted into the memory:
- Kenny Cole (who preferred soccer; (PE),
- Webster (who preferred rugby; (PE),
- Powell (Chemistry, and rather fond of dictation, but left me mystified by gram-moles),
- Bardsley (Physics),
- Bloom (Physics, the magician of the Van Der Graaf Generator),
- Phelps (Biology, not Mission Impossible),
- Williamson (Biology, who supervised the famous bulls eyeballs test),
- Armstrong (Metalwork),
- Hughes (Geography, an enthusiast of Arthog field trips, when I recall we ran up Cadair Idris),
- Brown (Geography),
- Horton (Latin),
- Charles (History), Hartley (History),
- Cliffe (Music, imprisoned by the Japanese during WWII), Brown (Chemistry),
- Dr Heath (French),
- Mrs. Marsden (French),
- Frank Arkinstall (French and originator of the fabulous exchanges with the Orleans Lycée),
- Collins (German, who also taught Russian to some in the Sixth Form),
- Pierre Jackaman (French),
- ‘Kiri’ Kaye (Maths, lethal with the blackboard rubber),
- Francis (English, and always the same tweed jacket),
- Broome (Maths),
- Johnson (English),
- Ackerley (Economics and Law, but new at the start of 1975),
- Hammond (RE),
- Stephenson (who taught Physics in his first year, but had joined as the new Head in about 1973, left, and Mr Cyril Bardsley, who are both retiring from Wellington Grammar School at the end of this term.
1973 to lead the new Sixth Form College, New College, Telford) and, of course,
- Roger Sykes (English and History, the highly regarded Deputy Head). To many of these we owe a huge debt of gratitude.

Few were known by their real names, needless to say.

There was a notable change of atmosphere when Stephenson took over as head and, in my brother’s year, a prefects’ strike (1973/74); the two were connected in some way, I think.

Maths was not my forte, although I did find myself in the Advanced Maths group, by some odd quirk of fate, with the awesome Kiri Kaye and driven to understand Differentiation and Integration. Homework was, in my recollection, relentlessly tough. I became very familiar with the letter E in end of term reports.

Kiri would mark books and throw them with astonishing accuracy at each pupil (at about head height) the following day, having first shouted out the result. Having ground through one set of questions at home and obtained a rare, genuine and rather good result he threw my book at me with something of a theatrical sneer: ‘Clift, I see your brother is home for the weekend’.

Mr. Geography Brown ran the soccer team (in the Fourth Year) he would walk round the silent class looking at books as we worked, occasionally offering comment or constructive guidance (‘excellent, Griffiths’, he would say). He would stop by me: ‘Fit for Saturday, Clift?’ he said, ignoring my hopeless drawing of some unrecognisable escarpment.

FOOTBALL AND GRASS
I can hardly remember England’s victory in the 1966 World Cup but, having won, expectation at school was high for Mexico 1970.

Needless to say England lost, eliminated by the Germans (who else?).

But that was not the most memorable part of that tournament. That was the astonishing ability of the squat, muscular Brazilian, Roberto Rivelino, to bend the flight of the ball, especially at free kicks.

At the time, the ball I had at home was a case ball, a leather ball containing an inflatable bladder, sealed with a six inch laced seam. It would inevitably absorb water. In 1969 a size five ball would half way up my shin.

If waterlogged, it would barely be possible to hit the ball hard enough to lift it off the ground. When dry (or dried out) it could be as hard as stone. When kicked it went dead straight. It was lethal to head the ball and, if you were unlucky, it left a red welt in the shape of the seam and lace on your forehead.

Little wonder that some professional footballers of that era, whose heading of the ball would sound like the crack of a cricket ball on willow, now say (or their relatives now say) that this has caused brain damage.

In the first few years of WBGS I played not only for the school (that year group had a strong team) but also for Hartshill Park Rangers (as they were then called) in Oakengates. The coach used to dry the ball out in the oven in his kitchen before games. As a result it was hard as a pebble at the start and waterlogged later while we churned through the usual quagmire.

All pitches we played on were mud-baths by mid-season (some at the start of the season), as were the pitches of First Division teams and Wembley. The 1969 League Cup Final was one where the pitch was effectively a ploughed field, the appalling playing surface blamed on the fact that the Horse of the Year Show had been held there just one week earlier; incredible. Imagine dressage or, worse, showjumping at Stamford Bridge today.

I played one game where I recall chipping the goalkeeper only for the ball to fall in the muddy pool behind him and stop dead before crossing the line. Typical of club football maybe, but the same quality of pitch could be seen everywhere in professional leagues.

The game has been transformed beyond recognition, probably by lightening the ball, making it waterproof, including a whole range of plastic and foam technology and converting the pitches to the condition of manicured lawns. When struck now, the ball will not only curve predictably but also seem to dip and swerve unpredictably like a balloon, and skim across the perfect surface like a stone skimmed on water.

And the ball struck by Rivelino was not the historical pebble but the new Adidas Telstar (named after the satellites) first introduced for the 1970 World Cup; there was certainly strength, art and skill in abundance, but the underlying change was scientific.

COMPUTERS AND CONNECTIVITY
As to computers, at school in 1969 and indeed up to 1974 there were none. It is now said that the computing power of an iPhone 6 is greater than all the computing power available to NASA in the Apollo11 project which put a man on the moon in 1969; the hardware superior to the Apollo Guidance Computer designed by MIT, using built in code operated using a compiler called Luminary (apparently).

But it was not just a matter of computing power; it was the rocket power that launched Apollo 11 into the atmosphere and beyond. I do not recall that it was ever discussed at the time that NASA was launching Apollo 11 with the Saturn V rocket developed with the knowledge and expertise of Werner von Braun and his team; the same team who had designed V2 rockets at Peenemunde which had rained havoc on London in 1944. They were captured by the Americans at the end of the Second World War in Operation Paperclip.

The Russians captured another part of the team and a large part of the equipment. I am not sure that this was well known in the UK or at least not much discussed until Tom Bower’s expose in 1987, but all the Allies were seeking to capture German technology.

Modern computing power
would have seemed impossible to believe in 1969. At WBGS we saw the first primitive hand calculators that could add, subtract, multiply and divide, but nothing else. Using calculators in exams would have been treated as cheating; modern open book exams would have been considered bizarre.

We had slide rules for Maths (for, I am told, roots, logarithms and trigonometry). These were made obsolete by the first handheld scientific electronic calculators in 1972. We also had Napier’s Bones (designed by John Napier about 400 hundred years ago and used for similar purposes to slide rules). My brother made a set but I cannot ever remember using them. These would be practically unrecognisable to a modern eye.

I visited my brother at Manchester University in 1974. At that time Manchester had one of the very few supercomputers in the UK. I went with him to see it. It was vast, filling a whole room; and noisy. Looking back, I see that the very first Computer Science students were admitted by Manchester in 1968, shortly before I went to the grammar school. One can now carry more computing power around in a pocket.

And as to phones and telecommunications, the change is equally stunning. When my parents moved house in 1967, even though we remained in the same village and wanted to keep the same number, they were obliged to wait six weeks for a line to be installed and a grey-green circular dial telephone delivered. Not much had changed by 1969. Unthinkable today when one can order a Samsung 7 Edge for delivery overnight by courier. However, in getting the new line we no longer had to share it with our next door neighbours. Party lines at that time were still quite common. Who would share today?

The capacities of the iPhone 6 would, in 1969, have seemed as improbable as the handheld communicators seen on Star Trek, first shown on BBC in July 1969. Star Trek was a mythological concept, each programme something of a morality play, with cardboard sets, generally a poor script (‘It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it’) and concluding with some quaint homily or worn out cliché, but absolutely compelling nonetheless. This is what filled our TV viewing, along with such gems as The Magic Roundabout, a French children’s programme created by Serge Danot which, when converted (rather than translated) into English, attracted a huge adult cult following, just before the Six O’clock News. My father was a devotee.

The prevalence of mobile phones has utterly changed society. One of the great advantages of not having a mobile phone when I was at WBGS was that no one knew where you were at any given time and no one fretted about it. No one walked in the street reading their phone. No one played a tasteless ring tone at 100 decibels. No one listened to tuneless music, played at full volume. No one could hear just the bass line or drums ‘leaking’ from headphones without the ‘pleasure’ of the rest of the band, the melody, the voice and the words.

Harry Parr had been a gifted pupil at WBGS who courageously fought a crippling illness which resulted in his premature death in December 1971.

A Memorial Cup was awarded to the Sixth Former who made a significant contribution to the life of the Senior school. The first recipient, seen receiving the trophy in June 1973 from Headmaster Robert Stephenson and Latin master Ray Horton, was Geoffrey Farnham.

We can now access, at the touch of a button, knowledge previously locked up in dusty tomes or piles of unread scientific journals. We can even look at the Dead Sea Scrolls on line; the arcane has become freely accessible. Perhaps it is no longer a matter of learning much at school (and fixing it in the mind learning by rote, chanting tables, reciting conjugations, memorising formulae) but rather learning where and how to find information, on line.

But perhaps we are also now living precisely the dystopian nightmare predicted by Alvin Toffler in Future Shock (1970), where inanities can be re-tweeted, frenetically, into the ether and the most unpleasant cyber bullying sent invisibly across a classroom without the need to throw a rubber, pencil or punch. The existence of mobile phones has also made the plots of thrillers incomprehensible and taken the bite out of isolation as a literary device, precisely the mechanism artificially engineered and then resolved in many episodes of Star Trek.

The disadvantage of the lack of mobile phones is also obvious, the inability to contact anyone if you wanted to unless at home in a house that had a phone (and many did not), or unless you could find a red phone box that had not been vandalised, and had the right coins to make it work.

The iconic red phone boxes, incidentally, were designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in the 1920s, grandson of Sir George Gilbert Scott who designed the Albert Memorial and the magnificent Midland Hotel at St Pancras Station (a masterpiece of Victorian neo-gothic later refurbished with the station a vast expense as the new terminus of Eurostar). Perhaps these two were an illustration of the theory that genius might run in families. Design of genius or not, the routine experience with the black phone in the red box would be bent coins, or whatever, stuck in the slot making it impossible to get the coins to drop for a call by pressing button A, or to get the cash back by pressing button B.
Even if there was a phone, it might not work and you were on your own.

**The Atmosphere in School and Social Change**

Single sex grammar schools were (at least between 1969 and 1974) the accepted model, if WBGS was any indication.

Some recall that there was, perhaps, a hidden undercurrent of thuggery, but I saw hardly any sign of physical bullying. Although, in retrospect, some people were wincingly cruel, verbally, to anyone who was small, weedy, didn’t play sport, liked art, (Classical) music, literature and was not obviously heterosexual (political correctness was then unheard of, quite apart from any change in the law which may since have proscribed such behaviour). Participation in sport, and membership of school soccer teams, granted some sort of immunity.

For the most part, the atmosphere was (at least on school grounds) reasonably respectful and (self) disciplined, in a somewhat relaxed way, if you discount the throwing of bulls’ eyeballs at the blackboard in History (brought in for weight testing (don’t ask) in Biology – they would stick to the blackboard and slide down slowly); the mercury incident; the window hanging; fags (cigarettes) behind the gym; the disappearing statue; the heavy wood-and-felt blackboard rubber that would hit the odd chest in an explosion of chalk (and the skull of a fellow commuter in my year with a dull thud); and the odd thick ear administered in History to one with a spectacular cascade of curls (who is now a train driver, if he has not retired, and was then a great motorbike mechanic; we used to drive his ancient BSA 250 and AJS 350 round the deserted railways sidings in Albrighton). True, in some lessons there was relative chaos but there were relatively few fights.

It was the era of platform shoes (for boys), Ben Sherman shirts, cheese cloth shirts, tank tops, penny round collars, Doc Martens, Oxford bags, huge ghastly trousers with side pockets and six button waists, long hair, centre partings, the scent of Brut (‘Splash it on all over’, said Henry Cooper) and the sound of T Rex, The Eagles (One of these Nights), Motown, Cat Stevens, Jethro Tull (Acquallung), Creedence Clearwater Revival (Proud Mary), Roberta Flack, Stevie Wonder, Lindisfarne (Lady Eleanor), Marvin Gaye (Grapevine), Diana Ross, James Taylor, Mud, The Sweet, David Bowie (Jean Genie), Cream, Blind Faith and the first emergence of Elton John (Your Song); few of which were seen (or heard) in school; and just before the dreadful cacophony of Punk Rock.

In a sense, my time there began with the end of the optimism of the 1960s (we were not of the Woodstock generation), immediately after the so-called Year of Revolutions, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and the explosion of the Troubles in Northern Ireland (all in 1968); the Beatles split, the convulsions of the progressive dismemberment of heavy industry and mass employment (shipyards, mines, railways, steelworks), the 1972 dock strike (the consequence of containerisation), endless other strikes, the 1973 OPEC crisis (the first major peace-time shock at the loss of cheap power, which had been the foundation of the Industrial Revolution, later alleviated by the discovery of North Sea Oil), the shock of rampant inflation triggered by that crisis, power cuts and the three day week in the miners’ strike (long before the 1984 Battle of Orgreave), homework by candle light (nearly 100 years after Edison invented the electric light bulb), the shock of elimination by Poland from the 1974 World Cup (after the drama of Mexico 1970 and the arrest of Bobby Moore), the slow-motion car crash of the car industry; later plunging into the Winter of Discontent in 1978, following the humiliation of the IMF bailout.

At home, there was a catalogue of IRA bombs on the British mainland. Abroad, there was the Munich Massacre (1972), the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians (1972), the Six Days War (1973), the assassination of Salvador Allende (1973), and the invasion of Cyprus (1974). But for the most part we hardly noticed domestic or foreign problems. We were having a great time: the heedlessness of youth.

Indeed, things we may forget in adulthood are the huge exuberance and joy of youth, particularly in the pleasure of jokes (heard for the first time). We would laugh until our ribs ached and we couldn’t breathe. We also forget the staggering strength, vitality and optimism of youth. We could shrink up trees without difficulty (my brother used to hang in the dangerous upper branches on Kingswood Common) and easily pull ourselves up onto the garage roof at home to recover a shuttlecock or tennis ball. We walked, ran and cycled everywhere. Few, if any, were ferried to school or to sports events. We found our own way.

It was obviously a time of considerable industrial unrest. With frequent strikes, trade union leaders were often on the evening news and seemed to go in and out of 10 Downing Street with what now seems astonishing regularity. One such was Len Murray, an Old Boy of WBGS, born in Hadley to a single mother in 1922 (which probably carried quite a stigma at that time).

He took part in the D-Day landings, was injured and invalided out. He was a man of very considerable ability; he later went up to Oxford to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, something about which he said very little in the mid 1970s when, for the most part, trade union leaders spoke with strong regional accents (think Derek Robinson at the height of the British Leyland strikes), while BBC reporters spoke in Received Pronunciation (RP; about 3% of the population spoke in RP in 1974). Listening now to the narrators on Watch With Mother, Watch With Mother or Andy Pandy, the piercing tones and strangled vowels we heard in childhood would be hard...
to believe. RP has since somewhat evolved into so-called Estuary English, which would have been ridiculed at WBGS in 1969.

Indeed, there has been a huge change in pronunciation since the end of the 1960s, as is apparent even in The Queen’s Christmas Address. And, going further back to 1945 (almost to the building of the school), the language is almost unrecognisable. For example, Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard in *Brief Encounter*; did anyone ever really speak like that? There was certainly no elocution at WBGS.

**Military Conflict, War and Conscription**

The twentieth century was also a period of widespread military conflict, and of conscription in the UK for much of the duration of the First and Second World Wars. But it lasted far longer than that. Conscription initially for the Second World War continued right up until 1960, and conscripts served until 1963, including in the Cyprus emergency (EOKA and the struggle for enosis), at Suez, in Kenya, in Malaya and, perhaps more controversially, in Korea.

Throughout my time in WBGS, the war grumbled on in Vietnam. Colour TV was almost completely implemented for BBC1 and BBC2 by 1969 (although at home we watched the moon landing on a small, portable, grainy black and white TV in the summer of 1969). By 1969 the horror of Vietnam was there in colour on the news for all to see (the first news of the notorious 1968 My Lai massacre emerged in late 1969).

Going backwards and forwards on the train, attending school or watching the news at night, Vietnam seemed distant and almost an irrelevance to us. We did not realise at the time that the Wilson Government had apparently resisted the many demands and entreaties of the US Government for armed support (whereas New Zealand and Australia had complied, just as they had for the Korean War). My contemporaries and I might otherwise have been eligible for conscription to fight in the mud of Vietnam, bombed into a quagmire, its foliage stripped by Agent Orange.

In the event, US direct military involvement ended in 1973, the war only finally ending in 1975 (twenty years after the defeat of the French in what was then called Indo-China). This latter phase took place against the backdrop of Nixon’s impeachment in the Watergate scandal and, before that process was concluded, his resignation in August 1974 (following his 1973 appearance on US TV: ‘There can be no whitewash at the White House’).

There were documentaries of war on TV, especially *All our Yesterdays* (shown in black and white) and most particularly *The World at War* (1973/74), in colour. In retrospect, the juxtaposition between these latter two and the gentle and whimsical *Dad’s Army* (commencing in 1968) is remarkable.

As to *The World at War*, the Second World War seemed distant and somehow unimaginable but in 1969 in Albrighton and Wellington and, indeed, all over England and Wales, many in their forties or fifties (hardly old I would now say) would have fought in that war or lived through it as adults and many more, of course, as children. For them *Dad’s Army* would have had a particular resonance. It was almost certainly true of many staff at school. And a period of twenty-five years now seems a very long time … but also curiously a short time.

We barged along the Shropshire Union canal in the summer of 1972, with my parents and French and German exchange partners on board.

We turned west into the Llangollen canal where there was a short flight of locks and a lock keeper’s cottage. The lock keeper, who seemed to teenage eyes to be quite ancient but might have been about 55, seemed particularly interested in our boat for some reason … and suddenly addressed us in perfect, fluent German, directed to our German passenger, Burghart. He was greeted with incomprehension and a stuttering response in English, the lock keeper persisted, several times, and then, finally, in accented English said: ‘But, my boy, I AM
German’. He had been a German Prisoner of War who had decided to stay in England.

There were many such men all over the UK and in Wellington for whom the war must have seemed quite close and immediate (in the way that 1990 seems to me now).

The First World War, by contrast, was impossibly distant, something for museums. Yet in towns and villages all over the UK, certainly in Albrighton and no doubt in Wellington, there were still widows who regularly wore black (and spinsters who had never married). In post-Edwardian England, attitudes to mourning were quite different to those which prevail today, but still quite strict, even though not quite so rigid and restrictive as Victorian attitudes.

Rules on wearing black and being excluded from society have now disappeared. In the early 1970s, when we walked past them unaware in our school uniforms, they might have been in their mid-seventies or younger, hardly old, some never having married or remarried having lost a husband or sweetheart in the mud and blood of the Somme or Passchendaele, more than fifty years earlier.

I have looked at the statistics: about 380,000 British military men were killed in the Second World War in contrast to about 880,000 in the First World War, with a devastating impact on the breeding population. Quite a contrast to about 1,000 killed in Korea, 750 over twenty-one years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland (although, shockingly, more than double that number of civilians) and 250 in the Falklands War (1982). It is no surprise that, in the and 250 in the Falklands War (1982). It is no surprise that, in the 1920s or 1930s, for some there were simply no men to marry, an astonishing thought now. Instead, their names are engraved in the long lists of ‘Glorious Dead’ on memorials up and down the country, great long lists in alphabetical order, especially of brothers and cousins. And their bodies buried in huge cemeteries under serried ranks of white gravestones, such as those just off Vimy Ridge.

By contrast in the 1970s, we hardly ever saw death nor anything on that scale. Death was somewhat hidden away. Certainly we saw little or nothing of the catalogue of deaths in childhood, youth and young adulthood that my mother’s generation witnessed on the South Wales coalfields; deaths underground and death by illness or injury, when some inoculations were in their relative infancy and before the development of antibiotics. When death did occur in my youth, it was shocking.

**TV: SCIENCE AND ART**

Some remarkable TV programmes were shown on during that period. *Civilisation* (Kenneth Clark, 1969), the great art anthology and its later science companion piece *The Ascent of Man* (Jacob Bronowski, 1973) are two of the most remarkable. I have the books issued to accompany the series.

The science writer Nigel Calder also created a whole series of programmes for the BBC. He made a remarkable contribution to writing about science in an accessible manner (dying in 2014). The memories of two made in 1972 and 1974 are particularly vivid, and both foreshadowed in *New Scientist* (of which he was a co-founder). The first (1972) popularised the theory that the earth was divided into large ‘plates’ that moved around on the surface of the planet, crashing into one another creating mountains and causing earthquakes and triggering tsunamis (supported by proof of ocean floor spreading in the early 1960s). ‘Plate tectonics’ seemed then an astonishing idea, but has subsequently gone through the typical cycle for the acceptance of new ideas: first ignored, then treated with contempt and hostility and finally becoming part of mainstream thinking.

The programme, looking back now, was transmitted on 16th February 1972. I was fascinated by it. I have the book on which the programme was based, transcribed by my father as a gift on 10th March 1972. It includes photographs of sandstone in Scotland that had clearly originated as an enormous sand dune in some great desert.

The Severn Gorge is cut through a similar antediluvian sand dune of great depth, dating back to the Triassic Period (250 million years old). Many of the churches along the Severn Valley in that part of Shropshire, for example at the villages of Albrighton and Beckbury, are also cut from stone made from a great Triassic desert. The sandstone is a deep dark red, permeated and bound together by iron oxide. It has a particularly familiar smell when wet in the rain.

The second programme would now be considered heretical. In 1974, Calder suggested that the direction of travel in the earth’s temperature was downwards and that we should be preparing for a new Ice Age. He was (deeply) hostile to the so-called global warming consensus, now referred to as climate change. Anyone who had lived through the winter of 1962 might find this entirely credible.

When I first lived in Albrighton, Humphreton Brook (behind our house) froze so hard you could walk all along it, most of the way to Donnington pond. That pond or small lake was created by the installation of an earthwork dam and sluice gate between two churches. The sluice gate was built to create a head of water for a mill race down to a mill (long gone) located somewhere near Clockmills (the clock-making works also now long gone), shortly before the brook merges with Cosford Brook to form the headwater of the wandering River Worfe. (The ultimate origin of the Worfe is said to rise at Watling Street, just north of Shifnal).

The mill race, then much overgrown, cut through the edge of a paddock where I raked hay one hot summer, opposite the land where the local football club was subsequently based. Views of some impending global freeze might, however, have changed later after the long hot dry summer of 1976,
which exposed the sad remains of flooded villages at the bottom of dried out reservoirs.

Perhaps there is now a greater body of scientific evidence available. In the early 1970s there was no discussion of ice cores or of dendrochronology (Exodus to Arthur was not published until 1999). Shropshire had a warm temperate climate, largely cool and wet.

But it was not always that way. Even when the Severn is swollen by roiling brown flood water (and Shrewsbury and Tewkesbury are flooded), it does not seem big or powerful enough to cut the Severn Gorge through sandstone. And it wasn’t; the gorge was cut by meltwater from the end of the last Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago.

What had previously been a great desert, just a few miles south of the site of WBGS, was then cut by glaciers and melt-water; probably the ice had advanced and retreated several times. One reason to go on school field trips to Arthog was to see Cadair Idris, not the seat of King Arthur but a cwm or corrie, the root of just one of these glaciers. Past extremes make the current changes seem insignificant.

**Telford and the Industrial Revolution**

The period 1969 to 1974 was also the beginning of major renewal, of which the M54 was a key component. The Telford Development Corporation was established in 1968 (just one year after Milton Keynes), named after the great Scottish engineer Thomas Telford. Telford was appointed surveyor of public works in Shropshire in 1786 when he was just 30.

His works still grace the British landscape, notably the majestic Pontcysyllte aqueduct (the foundation of his international reputation) due north-west on the Llangollen canal, just 40 miles from WBGS (we took a boat over it with my father in the summer of 1972), and the huge works built on top of the Roman remnants of Watling Street up to Anglesey. Among his other achievements are the bridge over the Menai Straits, the Caledonian Canal in the Great Glen and St. Katherine’s Dock in London (next to Tower Bridge and close by where I have worked for the last thirty-five years).

Although at the time I suspect we hardly noticed that we were sitting near the cradle of the Industrial Revolution. This is perhaps because the canal network largely to the east had fallen into decrepitude, filled with supermarket trolleys, dead dogs and plastic bags which would foul the prop-shaft (well before the surge in leisure use, following pioneers like L.T.C. Rolt); the now elegant Birmingham Gas Street Basin was still black with the grime of the Industrial Revolution.

The Ironbridge Gorge museum at Blists Hill was muddy and empty, except for the modern archaeology of the blast furnaces built into the hillslide and the sad relic of the Hay Inclined Plane. This was before blast furnaces were transferred there from Priorslee. In the early 1970s, there was little sign on Blists Hill of the eclectic gathering of industrial Victoriana and kitsch now located there, still less had the astonishing collection of Ironbridge Gorge Museums, of which it is now part, been recognised by UNESCO on its World Heritage List.

The List also includes the Pontcysyllte, which opened in 1805, by way of context ten years before the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo. How were the great cast iron troughs raised into place?

I walked the grounds of Blists Hill in the 1970s with my brother and my father (who had an enduring fascination with industrial archaeology) and whose paternal family had moved from Wellington due east to Cannock in the eighteenth Century. My father’s maternal relatives (Wedges and Griffiths) had also been living in the villages of Tong, Pattingham, Patshull and Albrighton (all just a few miles east of Wellington) for nearly 300 years when I lived there.

One Wedge was apparently even christened in Albrighton church about 170 years before my father was choirmaster, and my family and I all sang there in the choir. At the time, we had no idea that our connections to the area were so strong, and so long standing.

From school, we went on French exchanges taking two full days by train to get to Orleans at Easter. The older boys played three-card brag in the compartments, my brother smoked a briar pipe charged with Balkan Sobranie (just as he did later on the quayside at La Rochelle in a kaftan and sombrero, sipping a Pastis on a school cruise to Ireland, France, Portugal, Madeira and Morocco in 1973).

In a London gym, we slept overnight on camp beds on metal frames supported by inverted washing-up bowls, one at each corner. Huge crowds of us arrived late at night in Orleans, via Fleury les Aubrais.

Our spending money was restricted (or at least noted in our passports) because of foreign exchange control (abolished in 1979). Just a few years later (19757) a bare handful of us went to Orleans by plane, to Charles De Gaulle airport, I think, which had just opened. The mass French exchanges seemed to have evaporated.

We also went down by train to the Science Museum in London in 1969. The Kensington museums were also then still black with the soot of the Industrial Revolution and dreadful London smogs of unrestricted coal-burning fires. I thought that the Natural History Museum was black. Only very much later, when it was cleaned, did the pink and blue Victorian bricks emerge in all their glory, just like the yellow bricks of Liverpool Street Station.

When I started work in London in 1981, that station (built right at the eastern edge of the old Roman City) was also black. Taxi cabs descended into the Stygian gloom, down a ramp at the front originally designed for Victorian carriages.

But for the most part we didn’t, through school at least, go five, ten or fifteen miles down the road to
look at the majesty of our industrial past in Shropshire. It might have been mentioned in school, but if it was I don’t remember.

We did, however, learn a bit about Egypt and the Romans, and we were (vaguely) aware of ruins of Viroconium, the fourth largest town in Roman Britain, just seven miles west down the road from WBGS at Wroxeter. Viroconium was built on Watling Street, the ancient British road improved to support the Roman conquest of Britain, including the destruction of the druid stronghold on Anglesey (Ynys Mon).

Roman soldiers must have been going up and down Watling Street (passed the school grounds, visible perhaps from the top of Ercall Hill), first for consolidating the frontier running from Gloucester (Glevum) to Chester (Deva), and later for the initial attack on Anglesey which was rapidly followed by the rush back to the Coventry area to quash Boudicca’s revolt, and then returning to complete the final conquest of Anglesey in 78AD.

By way of context, this would have been at about the same time that Vespasian and Titus were conquering Jerusalem (booty from the raid on the Temple is carved on the triumphal arch near the senate in Rome: the Menorah is clearly visible).

SECURITY AND OPENNESS
I went back to see WBGS in early 2014, one Saturday, to look at the place before the imminent final closure and demolition. In the 1970s the school gates, hung on substantial brick pillars, were always open and, even if they were not, in my recollection the footpath to the left of the gates was always open. However, by 2014 I was saddened to see that the grounds were heavily fenced and the gates locked with a code, perhaps because it was by then a building site for the new school.

In 2016 I went to see the site of the Infants School at Teagues Bridge in Trench where my mother was headmistress from 1967 (I think) to 1986. Throughout her time there, the entrance was open with a drive sweeping down from the road, open playing fields on either side. Now there are the same green six- or eight-foot fences that I saw at WBGS in 2014.

On the school trip to London in 1969 we also went to Downing Street. At that time you could walk along the street off Whitehall and almost right up to the door of number 10.

While we were there, a woman came into the street in a cab, got out and threw a tin of baked beans at the window. It just bounced off. Perhaps the glass was bomb proof? She was promptly arrested. Perhaps that’s why the railings were installed at the end of the street (to the subsequent misfortune of a Tory Chief Whip?).

THE FOCUS OF STUDIES
Great fortunes had been made close by during the Industrial Revolution, albeit it moved away as local coal and iron ore were exhausted or difficult to extract, just as my father’s family moved due east.

But at school, those who were genuinely interested in making things in wood or metal were (I would guess) in the minority. Or perhaps that was just in my experience. At home, by contrast, my father was an assiduous builder and serviced his own cars (a Thames van, a Ford Anglia, an Austin 1100, a series one Land Rover, an MG Midget, two Austin 1800s and an Austin Maxi), as did many others.

Cars were simpler then, but probably far less reliable. Engines would turn over lamely and cars would cough and choke on starting, especially on cold winter days. A patch of oil under the sump was a common site on roads and drives. But at least if you opened the bonnet you could recognise (and moreover get access to) the spark plugs, carburettor, coil, brake and clutch reservoirs, fan belt and radiator. You could bleed the brakes (if so inclined). You could grease the bearings (not that you need to now). There would be no air-conditioning, of course; indeed, I recall my father had to pay extra for a heater to be fitted in the Austin 1100 (in about 1963). Were others really driving round in the cold?

Even though the school had been deliberately developed, ten years after it opened, apparently to give greater scope for science and technology, we were subtly directed away from Woodwork, Metalwork and Technical Drawing and towards purely academic subjects (though some certainly worked on the hovercraft or left school clutching lost wax castings of copper or brass poured into sand moulds or cuttlefish (as my brother did) or a bike chain link extractor).

Later, Maths, Physics and Chemistry were the preferred course for the really clever ones (perhaps); Geography, History and
English for those who were perhaps considered less gifted (or maybe not). Very few took modern languages after sixteen (we were just four in French); vanishingly few took Latin A level (in fact, I think none).

**CONCLUSION**

The Jesuits may have said, ‘Give me the child until seven and I will show you the man’. But for me it was the period between 11 and 18 in which I experienced greatest change. It was a transformative experience and probably true for many of my contemporaries, though I am sure that did not occur to any of us at the time.

We were all enormously fortunate. My mother had grown up in South Wales, in a small house on a street cut into the hillside on the edge of a valley outside Merthyr Tydfil, with no indoor toilet. Anyone who wanted a bath would do so in an enormous tin bath in front of a cast iron range in the kitchen.

We visited the house in the 1960s. The rooms were freezing in winter, the beds heated by bricks which had in turn been heated in the ovens of the range. The towns and villages all around cowered under the lowering shadows of the black/grey, flat-topped spoil heaps. This was six miles north up the valley from Aberfan, where collapse of one such spoil heap caused death and destruction in the village school in October 1966 (one of the survivors was later in my class at Aberystwyth University).

My mother went to Cyfartha Grammar School in Merthyr and my father to Wednesbury Boys’ High School but, on the strength of schooling in Wellington, my brother and I were the first in our family to go up to university (at least as undergraduates rather than as mature students). And after that there was state support for Law School and then financial support from the French State for postgraduate studies in Aix en Provence (with a good knowledge of French-based on lessons at WBGS, but most especially learned on French exchanges with Orleans).

One of my close friends, also from Albrighton, had a family with a similar background. He took a First at Oxford in Mathematics, again after going through WBGS.

Many others must have similar experiences to relate. WBGS undoubtedly opened the door to opportunities we would not otherwise have had. It was, in many respects, an astonishing time and, although we might not have been aware of it, the school was in many ways remarkable.

The 11-Plus system undoubtedly favoured a small percentage of the population and afforded an enormous privilege. And I enjoyed it enormously, most of it, especially the football (other than when I put a ball through one of the louvered windows in the Physics lab).

I look back now on that time with enormous gratitude and great affection.

**Rhys Clift**

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