

HILLSIDE 1939-2000:
Remembering a Changing School in a Developing Community
The current Exhibition at 96 Shenley Road, Borehamwood

Yes, this Exhibition is well worth a visit from all who have their own memories of the School building on Hillside Avenue; and yes, it vividly recalls a local institution that touched many lives in many ways; and yes, it is about secondary education in a now past century. But does this story of Hillside School have lessons for teachers and parents today? For 17 crucial years I was in the thick of it, and I believe it still has messages for politicians, educationalists, parents and teachers, now.

If the town's local historians have had difficulty in summarising the history of secondary education in Borehamwood from 1939 to 2000, it is not for lack of material, it is for lack of space. They have a new home in the splendid new Community Building at '96', but it is hidden two floors up and beyond the new Library's quiet room (which means the volume has to be turned down when they play the 1970s recording of Hillside's first and finest brass and wind band); and the wall displays for short-term exhibitions are insufficient. One good way to get round this was to select much evocative archive material – photos, extracts from documents, film clips, music, etc – into an exciting film-loop playing on a screen. Another was to select readable material - photos with dates and captions, written evidence of how things were at different periods – and display these on wall-panels and in display cabinets. This exhibition makes good use of both these approaches; but the subject-matter for a 75th anniversary is still too vast to be clearly displayed in such a small space.

However, this Exhibition does try to relate every stage of the development of secondary school education in Borehamwood to the dramatic changes in the village, as it rapidly grew into a town. This development is related to the pace of change in society and technology in the second half of the 20th century. And all this is of course related to dramatic changes in education nationally and in Hillside School particularly. The history of these changes is spelled out in more detail in written documents, available to be read then and there, or on-line (at <http://robertnewson.co.uk/hillside>), and the Exhibition remains open until the end of December.

Reading between the sparse lines handwritten by the first Head, Mr Gernat, in the School Log Book, during that ominous September in 1939, it becomes clear that the school staggered into life, with teachers preparing as much for Hitler's 'Blitzkrieg' as they were for the arrival of about 250 bewildered 11 to 14-year-olds from the local elementary schools. On the day war broke out, and put a stop to normal life, the hamlet at Boreham Wood - and the villages of Elstree and Shenley – were just poised for a spectacular makeover of the centuries-old fields between the railway and the A1 Barnet by-pass; the LCC plan to provide new 'country-cottage homes' for some 28,000 people (in families moving out from inner London's post-recession slums) was already on the drawing board. The war also stopped the rapid expansion of the film studios, which were about to transform the village of Boreham Wood into Elstree: the new 'country home' of British films and BBC TV. This was not the best of times, then, to launch a new kind of school in a new kind of town, catering for the vast majority of the boys and girls who did not qualify for (or whose parents could not afford) grammar school education up to at least the age of 16. Tucked into the Log Book, there was an HMI Inspection Report dated October 1947. The Inspectors' remit (unlike today's Ofsted) was to understand a school's problems and weaknesses, and encourage the Head and the Staff to do better. Again reading between the lines, it is clear that the Inspectors are concerned that this School has not yet recovered from its war-time problems, and that it is as yet quite unprepared to become a neighbourhood secondary school for all local boys and girls of 11 to 14, and also to offer educational opportunities – i.e. qualifications – to some pupils of 15 and 16 years. It is short of any specialist subject teachers, especially for music, art and crafts, physical education, the sciences and mathematics.

This Exhibition has drawn on memories and memorabilia from ex-pupils, as well as the sparse school records. Keith Kiff left Hillside at 14 in 1944 (after just 3 years of this new "secondary education for all") and emailed a scan of his "Leaver's Certificate" (from Ottawa, where he had emigrated to, in 1962). It was the local firm Elliotts who taught him Computer Design, that, and his service in the RAF, fitted him later for a responsible job in Canada. But Keith Kiff's email still expressed his gratitude for the good start the school had given him. Keith's school-mate, David Tomblin also left school at 14, and worked his way up through the local film studios, to become an award-winning assistant director on films like *Gandhi*. These are only the earliest ex-Hillsiders the

Exhibition has revealed; hundreds more, from the later phases of the school, have added to the evidence that this school was a truly neighbourhood school, which evolved into a forward-looking Secondary Modern School. By the 1960s, it developed its own 6th form, and was ripe for development in the 1970s as an all-ability, mixed 13-18 Upper School - still as a neighbourhood school, open to and catering for any and all of the local 13-year-olds, whether they were aiming for university, or even for scholarships to Oxbridge colleges, or for a sound, all-round preparation for life and work. Those good times remembered by ex-pupils are about activities: acting, filming, dancing, games and competitions, writing, painting, making things in the workshops, playing musical instruments, school journeys at home and abroad, and exchanges or work experience. These are as much part of education as are preparations for tests and examinations: and they all feature prominently in this show at the Museum.

Sadly, this is a valedictory exhibition, a celebration of a school community that was truly part of the town community: and not only because of its outstanding work for drama and in its Community Theatre. Yet this successful comprehensive upper school was well and truly dismantled, 14 years ago! It will be a hard act for the town's new secondary school, Hertswood, to follow, as they set out on yet another educational experiment, "*to transform secondary education in Borehamwood, Elstree, Shenley, Radlett and surrounding areas, by building a brand new Academy*".

K.N.



Two (of four only) Headteachers: Keith Newson (left), welcoming his successor, Tim Westrip (right). With them is Barry Smallwood, Hillside's first Head of Music, who set up the fine Brass and Woodwind Band in the late 1960s. They were reunited at the Exhibition in the Elstree & Borehamwood Museum, in October.

(This exhibition is open until the 16th January, 2015)