

Days in Wilson so long ago

These reminiscences are from Geoffrey Grogono, who was at Epsom from 1936 to 1939, following the Wilson House reunion in June 2009. Sadly Geoffrey passed away in January 2010, aged 87. Following Geoffrey's article, there are reflections on life in Wilson by Geoffrey's twin brother, Basil (Bud).

There was cold comfort when Bud (my twin) and I came here in 1936 as new boys and boarders. The building was rather stark. All boys slept in 'dorms', unheated. Beds had iron frames and hard mattresses. They were in rows each side of the room with a central line of water bowls.

A simple basin and a jug of water made sure that you were clean and, joy of joys!, a 2ft bath of cold water was compulsory come Summer Term.

Each day you woke at 7 am and, by rota, you had to wake more senior boys, who often made a fuss. Then you scampered off to make some toast for prefects. Then, hurry to tie your plain black tie with stupid stud and hard collar. Breakfast was adequate, held in the big dining room.

Then morning prayers or Chapel with some singing (unbroken voices, so Bud and I enjoyed each note).

Our first lesson was Greek. We soon learned the alphabet, but our teacher was unpleasable. He made sure that we suffered and thus destroyed my chance of learning more of this wonderful world. But our Maths Master was wonderful. Not only did he produce problems that we could solve, he broadened out horizons about everything mathematical and scientific. So much did Bud and I like all this that we won the Maths prize for two consecutive years. (No cheating, no conferring, no calculators, we used logarithms and anti-logs. Bud



Geoffrey (right) and his twin, Basil (Bud)

even learned to use a slide rule.)

A break for milk taken in the Quad, and a quick look at the notice board to see about world events (so threatening). Then more lessons and lunch in the dining room. College pudding was horrid, but date pud was OK.

A short rest, then compulsory games in the beautiful grounds. Rugby second row – ouch! – kept us moving, but sorry, tackles only, no tries for the Grogono boys. Summer Term brought cricket, compulsory for all. The school did well, but Bud and I dropped catches, could not throw, and made few runs (not like our father, who was Captain in 1899).

We were good at golf, played only in the hols. Hockey was played in the Spring Term, squash when chance arose. When wintry winds did blow, or snow was on the ground, we had to run over and beyond the Derby racecourse.

After this we had a hasty wash (no >

showers) and down to work to do everlasting 'prep'. Evening prayers and a bugle sent us to bed by 9.30. A late turn to bed was rewarded by a small slipper administered by a prefect.

Time out was limited to three to four weekends per term when parents came to take us out for treats in town or country. Saturday evenings were enlivened by a cinema show given in Big School. Mick Walker (our Housemaster) let us listen to his gramophone. Thus we heard classical music for the first time, or elsewhere heard him play his oboe (Bach melodies).

For a real treat he took a selected group to Brighton in his open Austin (12 horsepower). Forget the cane! Mick made us the best House in the College.

The years rolled on, and Bud and I had

learned enough to gain our 'Matric', so essential for our careers,

In the hols the world woke up and Mr Chamberlain, our PM, announced that we were at war with Germany.

Epsom prepared for air raids, but carried on so bravely. Bud and I left to go to St Mary's Hospital medical school, to start our careers in medicine (General Practice and Orthopaedics).

Wilson House and Epsom College had taught us how to endure, to trust and care for others, but most of all how to learn.

So sad to leave our friends behind. I wish all Wilsonians, past, present or future, well. We were a special lot!

Geoffrey Grogono
June 2009

Wilson House recalled

By Basil Grogono, who was at Epsom from 1936 to 1939

Memories of Epsom College never fade entirely. It's seventy years since I left its historic portals. I live some two thousand miles away in Halifax, Nova Scotia, with my wife. I have retired from a busy life as an orthopaedics surgeon. Just down the road lives an Old Epsomian friend, Christopher West, who also experienced the challenges of Wilson House in the years just preceding the Second World War! He was the youngest of three West brothers who attended this unique establishment.

My brother, Geof, and I arrived as new boys in 1937. We entered the precincts of the smart Victorian building and were allotted places in the classroom downstairs. A corner of the room was curtained off where, in a separate compartment, a

prefect held sway. This space was known as a Ptoyce. The prefect on that first day was Philip West, the eldest of the West brothers.

Geof and I were soon exposed to the usual indignities of new boys. Initiation required adaptation. You must have three buttons of your coat done up; you must not transgress certain areas of the room; you were allotted a time when you would act as fag to the prefects; you could be subject to beatings by prefects. All these customs were similar to the traditions of the English public school system.

Geof and I adjusted. We enjoyed happy hours – Mathematics, but not Greek, rugby, but we did not excel, Music, and we sang in the Choir. We made friends. We gained a good education to become doctors, after >

gaining entrance to St Mary's Hospital Medical School.

Our family were real Epsom College supporters. Epsom Benevolent College was the school where our grandfather, Russell Steele (my mother's father), studied in 1860. Two of his sons, Russell and Basil Steele, were both at Epsom. Our father, Jonathan Grogono, and his brother, Walter, were also pupils. Jo was captain of the cricket and rugby teams in 1899.

Geof and I were often together as twins, but went our separate ways. Our Housemaster was Mr Walker, who often could be heard playing his oboe. He tolerated the physical discipline his prefects administered. We had happy moments in Wilson House, particularly when a benign head prefect was appointed.

In 1938 I was in the Wilson House group that won the singing competition. I spotted a large silver cup when I visited Wilson House many years later. "That's the cup we

won in that competition in 1938," I told the charming young girl student who was showing me round my old school room. Wilson had become coeducational. I was thrilled.

I have not forgotten Founder's Day 1938 when Hugh Walpole, the famous author, delivered the Prizes (Geof and I shared a mathematics prize). His speech was controversial, as he had written the story Mr Perrin and Mr Trail which concerned many varied aspects of life in public schools. Well worth a read, even today!

Wilson House Reunion Day 2009

I am glad my brother Geof was with you to celebrate the Wilson House Reunion and regret that I could not be part of the historic occasion. Without my Wilson House experience I could not have become a surgeon! Best wishes and remembrances to all. Floreat Epsomia!!!
