

Return to Epsom

by Hugh Kendrick (Propert 1953-57)

My visit in October 2007 had its origins in what was essentially a fundraising call from Rebecca Holmes of the Education Trust – clever idea to have an American call an ex-pat OE in the US! Since I was to be in London for a Squadron reunion dinner, I asked about arranging a visit. A calendar of events was duly forthcoming, and I indicated what I'd like to see and do, including my willingness to talk to anyone who wanted to listen about my life-after-Epsom. The appointed day began by travelling by tube and then by rail to Epsom, where Rebecca kindly met me at the station.

The first impression as you sweep through the main gates is that it all looks very familiar, and the buildings and grounds are as impressive as ever. That impression holds only for the exteriors – the interiors have all undergone a tremendous amount of refurbishment, and almost nothing is where it used to be in the 1950s!

After meeting Sue Croucher, OE Club Secretary, for a cup of coffee, we set off on our tour. It was not the first time I'd been back since leaving in 1956. So I knew there would be girls, but I still found their presence a bit of a surprise. I think my life at Epsom was so busy that I'm not sure I'd have handled the extra distraction well!

The building in the Quad that used to house Propert, Forest, Carr and Granville is now occupied by Physics (I think). The Propert dorms above the Main Entrance are no more: 20 bed dorms and cold water sinks have been replaced by suites holding four or less pupils! The Propert changing room and showers are occupied by metal workshops (I think). The Quad has been attractively upgraded with plantings etc. The old gym is now part of a modern Library.

I was shown the Chapel which has undergone considerable renovation. I noticed in particular that the organ on which Mr Crisp played Voluntaries after Sunday Evensong had been replaced by an electronic organ taking up much less space. I think attendance is required at three services per week now: it used to be daily, but three times on Sunday if you went to the Communion service!

There are new buildings that are stunning, like the Mackinder, and everywhere new facilities in old buildings – a superb Art Department that made my art teacher sister-in-law in Los Angeles green with envy when I described it, and the work on display there is impressive. The Chem Labs are sleek, clean, and modern. There are incredible Performing Arts facilities, full-scale studios and the like. And the athletics facilities boggled the mind: large, fully equipped work-out areas; flat, drained rugger pitches; an all-weather sports field, etc. etc.

Big School had just completed an internal refurbishment that opened it up, increased capacity, and improved comfort! I attended an A level Chemistry class: it was pretty informal, and I was able to chat with the lads there, some of whom were to be playing in the 1st XV rugger match that afternoon. I must admit, I thought it all rather easy-going and that it was being made pretty easy – almost to the point of spoon-feeding. ▶

◀ And not at all what I remember In Facer's classes! I certainly enjoyed the new version more!

And then we went to lunch in large cafeteria-style surroundings. The choices were attractive, with a very wide variety of soups, salads, main dishes, and desserts. Wow! A far cry from the old Dining Hall with its long rows of tables and benches and a single fixed meal!

Now all of this is not cheap – fees today are on the order of £25,000 per year, a sum my parents couldn't have considered even though I had a scholarship. At about \$50,000 a year (in 2007), it is equivalent to the fees for a pretty good US University.

In the afternoon, the Headmaster, Stephen Borthwick, kindly made some time available, and we had an interesting exchange of ideas. Then work intruded as a disciplinary case had to be heard. I spent some time in the Archives, and then it was out to to watch the 1st XV play Tonbridge (I think). A very well-played match, top quality rugby played by a very impressive Epsom side who eventually demolished a strong opposition. Terrific fun!

The Deputy Head took me in hand, and we had some very interesting conversation probing my recollections of Epsom – not always very happy ones that contrast with my gratitude for a very sound preparation for my career and life. Then it was back to the station for the train for London. But it wasn't all over yet! The following evening, I was able to attend Evensong at Westminster Abbey, and sit in the Choir there to listen to, and be with, Epsom's Choir, who were the guests for that Service. If you've never sat in the Choir at the Abbey, I can recommend it as a most wonderful and moving experience. Just show up early, and ask if you can sit in the Choir – as long as you promise to stay for the whole Service, there is a good chance there will be room for you.

It was a marvellous visit, full of old memories and now new ones too. A big thank you to Rebecca for arranging such an interesting and varied agenda, and to all those, including Masters and students, who made it such fun!