

CHAPTER 1

First Impressions



New boys at the old school in 1905, some with Eton collars, some in cadet uniform – the Corps was optional then but boys joined much younger.

In a house like that your Uncle Dick was born;
Satchel on back he walked to Whitgift every weekday morn.
Boys together in Coulsdon woodlands, bramble-berried and steep,
He and his pals would look for spadgers hidden deep.

FROM CROYDON BY JOHN BETJEMAN.

MEMORIES OF WHITGIFT

If John Betjeman's Uncle Dick had walked to Whitgift every weekday morn, it would have been to the old school in the centre of Croydon, about the time the boys below went.

One glorious May morning I found myself among a group of rather forlorn little boys standing under the giant elms that lined the playing fields of Whitgift. Overhead the rooks wheeled and dipped and cawed. For a few moments I was lost in a sense of abstract beauty. In recollection I regard this as my first aesthetic experience, which is why it remains so clearly etched in my memory.

Whitgift, in stately Victorian Gothic, with playing fields and fives courts, occupied a splendid site in the very middle of the town. Brighton had toughened me up, and I enjoyed Whitgift from the very start.



I suppose it is a most rare occurrence for a small new boy at a public school to cause even a ripple of interest on the surface of a large pond, in which he was such a small frog. But when Arthur Tedder arrived in IIB (Mr Bailey's form in 1902) he certainly caused a mild stir, coming from some obscure fastness in the Highlands, with an almost unintelligible Scots accent and wearing a kilt. The first we could take in our stride, but the latter, I'm afraid, caused much juvenile ribaldry, which Tedder took in perfectly good part and with philosophic calm; in fact in all the years I knew him at school, I cannot recall that he was ever at all disturbed by any untoward event.

I arrived there in the summer of 1922 when there was a special form created for the six or seven newcomers, called 1B2. I was appointed head of form, I suspect because I was tallest. There wasn't a classroom available so we were put in a corridor and a young lady teacher taught us.

I was astonishingly lucky to get into Whitgift at all, for my father was broke and I was thick. These problems were miraculously overcome, the first by my maternal grandmother, the second by a tutor with a shining bald head and white walrus moustache. I managed to scrape through at the third and last possible attempt. When I arrived, too old for the first year, I joined form 2B2. Forms 2A1, 2A2 and 2B1 contained boys of gradually diminishing brightness. However, while I wallowed happily in the bottom form, good teaching enabled me to keep afloat in its lower reaches. I also got my hands on a rugger ball for the first time, to be launched into this lion of games.

We never used Christian names, and indeed tried to keep them secret.

He has no proper sense of shame;
He told the chaps his Christian name.

The New Boy, from E Nesbit's Railway Children.

Two of my best friends at school were Jewish. I had been brought up in that pre-war period, like the vast majority of my contemporaries, to be a snob and a racist. It was