

## BEACON SCHOOL MEMORIES

By Iain Ward CPM

***What follows are extracts from a memoir that I have written purely for the interest of my family and interested friends. They are my personal memories and may well be inaccurate with regard to some dates and events. They may also read awkwardly in places because I have redacted material that strays too far from The Beacon into purely personal or family areas. I have also taken the opportunity to add material specifically about the Beacon that was not in the original, which may also read awkwardly in places. Obviously, opinions expressed are entirely my own.***

**Note:** The Beacon was not my first school; between 1948 and 1951 I was at 'Chesham Preparatory School' on the outskirts of Chesham. It was (still is, I presume) a coeducational school and the Headmistress at the time was Mrs Adlington. I was, apparently, a considerable trial to her and her long-suffering staff and her final report on me, at the end of the Spring Term of 1951, concluded: *"Although he now gets his own work done with more speed he is still a disturbing influence among the other children."* More importantly, she requested a meeting with my parents in which she told them (I found out years later) that Chesham Prep just wasn't the right kind of school for me. She wasn't suggesting Borstal as such, but felt that I needed "a school with a greater emphasis on discipline". I did not know any of this at the time as I saw none of my school reports until I went through my father's papers after he died some 40 years later.

Presumably my parents had worked out for themselves that I needed more discipline at school, because they had already been making enquiries elsewhere and I moved to the Beacon at the beginning of the Summer Term, 1951. My parents were no doubt encouraged to hear that standards of discipline at the Beacon were considered "high".

### **1. The Beacon: Introduction**

I arrived at the Beacon at the beginning of May 1951 and celebrated my seventh birthday the following month. I have no idea which academic 'year' I was in by today's reckoning of educational progress, the system (if there was one) was different in those days and appeared to vary considerably from school to school. I soon found out that the Beacon was very different from Chesham Prep but before going into that I should describe what my new school was like.

The main building – which I see is still there although somewhat overwhelmed by the buildings that now surround it – was quite large but by no means grand or even historic. I was told that it was built by Doctor Fieldhouse when he established the school in 1933 and can remember its 1951 layout quite clearly.

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From the front door (which I was permitted to use perhaps twice in the seven and a half years I spent at the school) a linoleum-floored corridor ran all the way to the back door, which opened on to an open platform from which a wooden staircase led down to a small courtyard. Opening off the corridor on the south side (to the left

of the front door as you entered) were a classroom (where school assemblies were held and which also contained the bookshelves that comprised the "School Library") and the Headmaster's study, separated by the stairs which led to the upper floor. On the north side of the corridor were a second classroom, the Staff Common Room and, at the rear of the building, a further classroom whose windows overlooked the jungle-clad ruins of Bois Farm (which was also part of the school, although none of us knew that then).

At the top of the main flight of stairs was a small landing where the staircase turned to ascend the last few steps to the upper floor. A door off this landing led to a bathroom (one toilet, one bath, one wash basin) which was the only toilet facility in the main building that I remember, although I think there was also a lavatory in the basement for the cooks. Use of the bathroom was strictly restricted to the teaching staff and to those who lived on the upper floor. This privileged few included the Headmaster and his family, who occupied the three rooms on the south side, and the boarders (yes, there were boarders) who occupied the dormitories at the northeast and northwest corners of the building. A changing cast of young men and women acting as student teachers or assistants sporadically occupied the two or three windowless cubby holes in between.

Below these two floors was a 'semi basement' reached by a narrow stairway leading down below the main stairs from the area outside the Headmaster's study. Here lay the school dining room and kitchen along with a number of store-rooms and such. We were only allowed down there for meals (two sittings for lunch) and it was all very basic. The dining room had been the school's designated air-raid shelter during the war and the window sills could be opened and steel splinter-screens lifted up and hooked in place if the sirens were sounded. They never were, of course, but we thought it was pretty cool that they *could* be if necessary.

At the rear of the building, on the south side of the 'courtyard,' was the locker room, a concrete-floored space with benches and a wooden pigeon-hole and clothes hook for each day boy. This room also housed the school toilets, consisting of two closets and a urinal. A couple of steps beside the urinal led up to a doorway into the final part of the school facilities: the garage. It was a double garage with a concrete floor but no vehicles were ever housed there. It had tables, benches and a blackboard and easel, so it was a classroom. It was freezing in winter but quite pleasant in summer with the big doors open.

And that – three classrooms, two dormitories, a dining room and a semi-converted garage – was essentially The Beacon School in 1951. I should also mention the playing fields, which not every school had in those days (or indeed in these days). These consisted of 'The Front Field' bordering the main road (today a car park and school buildings) and 'The Back Field,' a larger space carved out of the wild woodland at the back of the school. The only sports I remember playing there were cricket in the summer and football ('soccer') in the winter; although beside the back door at the end of the corridor in the main building stood a rack full of hockey sticks, which I never saw in use the whole of my time at the school. Echoes of more exciting days in the 1930s perhaps?

But there was another, important part of the school that I have not yet mentioned: 'Winterbourn.' Today I believe it is known as 'Reception.'

## 2. 'Winterbourn'

Winterbourn was the Beacon's own pre-preparatory school and it was run separately from the main school. It was also geographically separate. Most of the boys who attended it were delivered by their mums, who would drive or walk them there via Chiltern Road and Oakway Avenue, from where there was no sign of the Beacon at all. From Oakway, Winterbourn was just a largish house in a row of largish houses set in woodland with no obvious link to the main school. I was one of the few boys who made their own way to school, however, and we did not go anywhere near Chilton Road or Oakway. I used to catch the 353 bus from Chesham and get off at the stop near the front of the school on the main road. From there I would enter the school grounds through the bicycle gate or the main gate then walk round the side of the previously mentioned garage/classroom to join the winding, muddy path which led off through dense woodland to the back entrance of Winterbourn. The path was probably only a couple of hundred yards long but at six years old it seemed longer and the woodland was full of wildlife. I loved my daily journeys to and from school.

Winterbourn was much smaller than Chesham Prep; there was only a dozen or so of us there but it covered much the same sort of stuff. In one respect it was very different however: this school was for boys only, and when I tried to behave as I had at Chesham Prep I got a swift clip round the ear from the affable Mr McCaughtrie, who handled sport and discipline while his wife ran the department (which was essentially a private house with a big garden room) and did most of the teaching.



**New boy at the Beacon (1951)**

Because of my late arrival at the Beacon I only spent a year there but it undoubtedly did me some good and my memories of both Mr and Mrs McCaughtrie are certainly very positive. It was at Winterbourn that my love of reading, implanted by my mother and much encouraged by Mrs McCaughtrie, blossomed. I then went on to use my newly-acquired skill to read nearly every book in the house, including some that were probably not intended for children.

Another memory from my time there is the first time I saw a grownup person cry. This was one morning in 1952, when the assistant teacher (can't remember her name) came into the classroom in floods of tears to tell us that "the King is dead!" This was highly unusual in the 'stiff-upper-lip' Britain of the 1950s and most of us were too embarrassed to know how to react. We saw a lot more of it in the days that

followed until the national emotion subsided; I remember that at Christmas dinner that year my father proposed the loyal toast to "our beautiful young Queen" with tears welling from his eyes, something else I'd never seen before. This may not seem worthy of comment to a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader; people produce oceans of grief at the drop of a hat these days and risk being excoriated by the press and the social media if they don't. But back then the death of King George VI felt personal; there had been a bond between the people and the Monarchy because of what they had gone through together during the Second World War that is impossible for people to fully comprehend today. My generation was the first to grow up without any direct experience of the war (I was born in 1944), and those who had been through it were members of a sort of 'club' that we could never join. Of course, nowadays there are not many members of that 'club' left, but back then it was an unspoken fact of life.

### **3. Introduction to 'Big School'**

I transferred from Winterbourn to Form 1 in the main school in autumn 1952, when I was eight, and found myself in a whole new world. Here, indeed, was the discipline Mrs Adlington felt I needed so much. I wouldn't say that it was up there with Dickens's *Dotheboys Hall* but to me, after my so far comparatively sheltered life, it seemed very much like it. Every teacher had complete freedom to punish whomever they liked, however they liked, whenever they liked. Not that they all did, to be fair. The only woman on the staff was Miss Skelton, the Art teacher, who joined at the beginning of my second term. She was actually very nice (and a very good teacher) and had a South African accent that fascinated me as I had never heard one before. Monsieur Gerard, the young French teacher (he was actually Belgian), was essentially a nice guy who gave us a good grounding in the French language even though he sometimes gave the impression that he was more scared of us boys than we were of him.

The rest ranged from the 'strict but fair' types who only caned us when we deserved it (which, I admit, I usually did) to the ones who were somewhat... *unpredictable* in both their manner and the forms of punishment they employed. No, I'm not about to produce revelations that will send the Police off to destroy the lives of yet another bunch of ninety year olds: I'm talking about the neck-pinchers, hair and ear twisters and knuckle-rappers; although the guy who used to make us put our heads between his legs when he smacked our bottoms used to worry me a bit.

The worst of them was Mr D\*\*\*\*s, who was simply a violent, nasty bully. I haven't named him because there seems no point; he's probably dead by now but if I didn't mention him at all this account would be dishonest. Not that I had by any means the worst time with him compared to some of the other boys. I hasten to add that I was just as scared of him as the others were, but was constitutionally unable to prevent myself from answering back and infuriating him. I became quite adept at anticipating him and ducking the blows he aimed at me to the extent that he sometimes lost both balance and 'face.' Not that that helped me much; the follow-up blows were always bang on target. But he was never able to make me cry, unlike a lot of the other boys. Some of them used to be physically sick with fear every morning at the thought of going into his class.

Obviously, I had no way of knowing what the other members of the staff thought of him but with hindsight perhaps I can guess at what at least one of them

thought. One day Miss Skelton, the art teacher (possibly the school's first), was trying to explain to us how human physiognomy worked and how our eyes and ears are actually half way up our heads instead of at the top as we usually depicted them. As she spoke I did a rough drawing of an imaginary head to see what she meant and, quite by accident (really!), managed to produce a very recognisable caricature of Mr D\*\*\*\*s: thin, ill-shaven face, mean little eyes, narrow twisted mouth and all. Miss Skelton came over to see what I had drawn and stared at it with an odd expression.

'And who,' she said in that delightful South African accent, 'are you trying to depict, exactly?' As I have said, I really had produced the likeness by accident (I've never been able to repeat the feat since) but I was all too aware of who it looked like and assumed I was in the poo again.

'Er – no one, miss,' I said innocently, 'I was just following what you said.'

'I know,' she said to my surprise, 'I saw you drawing it. But this is... striking. I think it would do for the end-of-term exhibition.' And she did put it up – prominently – in the art exhibition (in the garage, which doubled as the 'Art Room') at the end of term; the only artwork of mine that has ever been exhibited anywhere as far as I know. She even left the black frame I had drawn around it and the caption: **WANTED: £100 REWARD.**

I was only too aware of what was likely to happen to me if Mr D\*\*\*\*s ever saw my great work of art, but perhaps Miss Skelton already knew that change was in the air for the school.

#### **4. Enter Pip Masters: my first guru**

I have already mentioned Dr Stanley Fieldhouse, who founded the Beacon School in 1933, and he was still nominally the headmaster when I arrived there in 1951. I say "nominally" because he was a sick man even then; we only caught an occasional glimpse of him through his study window and at assembly from time to time and he did no teaching that I recall. I don't know what his illness was but on the few occasions I interacted with him he seemed a nice man. With hindsight I suspect he had probably hoped to achieve more with the school he had founded but the occupation of 75% of the grounds by the Government during the war must have dealt any such hopes a considerable blow. Now he was tired and ill and, again with hindsight, I realise that I arrived there at what was probably one of the lowest points in the school's history.

All my reports at the time were signed "pp S.W. Fieldhouse" by Mr Middleton, one of the 'strict but fair' types, who was my form teacher for the whole of my year in Form I. This was quite a good year for me and he deserves the credit for much of what I achieved, although I suspect I was not his favourite pupil. At the end of my first term (Autumn 1952) my position in the class was 15<sup>th</sup> out of 15. By the end of my second (Spring 1953) I had risen to 6<sup>th</sup> out of 14, which he acknowledged approvingly in his report while adding that I still sounded like a "noisy little sparrow." But he didn't write the third (Summer 1953) because by then everything had changed.

During 1953 a new face had appeared around the school, a stocky, ruddy-faced man who, we learned, was called 'Pip Masters.' He sat in on lessons at unexpected times, ate meals with us and would often be there at school assemblies. The teachers all treated him somewhat warily and even Mr D\*\*\*\*s didn't hit anyone when he was in the room (although the way some of the boys flinched when he

walked close to them must have been a bit of a giveaway). Slowly the word emerged: Pip Masters had bought the school and was to be our new Headmaster. Everything was about to change.

Oh yes, and my third term of that first year? I was top of the class, the only time I achieved that position in my entire school career. Mr Middleton was still my form teacher but the overall report for the term was the first written on me by Pip Masters, who was to become my first true *guru*: "*Excellent work has been maintained throughout the term; he is a delightfully alert and eager worker but must try to curb his tendency to chatter all the time!*"

Dr Fieldhouse made his last appearance at the school he had founded at the end of term assembly but it was Pip Masters who handed out the year's awards and shook the recipients' hands. I received a lovely leather-bound copy of *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson for 'consistent improvement over the year,' at least I believe that is what it was for. We were told to hand our prizes back in at the end of the ceremony so that they could be properly inscribed in copperplate but I couldn't bear to part with it and rushed off home to read it. It was the only academic prize I ever won (I still have it) and now I rather wish I'd waited to get it inscribed, but there you go.

Pip Masters was more than a 'breath of fresh air' blowing through the school; he was little short of a hurricane. He was a former naval officer who did not suffer fools gladly and Mr D\*\*\*\*s and some of the others had disappeared by the beginning of the next term. By the end of his first year he had made an almost clean sweep of the staff with the exception, I'm happy to say, of Miss Skelton. The newcomers were all well qualified and an entirely different breed from most of their predecessors. Also, they were no longer allowed to physically punish anyone: that kind of punishment was now solely in the hands of Pip Masters, which was not necessarily an improvement if, like me, you were a regular collider with the system.

Pip Masters was married to Claude, a lovely Canadian lady, and they had three children: Jonathan, who was a year older than me, Paul, who was a year younger and Sarah, who was almost exactly the same age. All three, logically enough, joined the school, which made Sarah the only girl among 60-odd boys (the only girl who ever attended the school as far as I know). Pip Masters prepared us for her arrival by telling us that she was to be treated the same as any other boy which meant, as she obviously *wasn't* the same as any other boy, that when she joined no one had the faintest idea how to treat her and at first she was left severely alone. We were in the same year so it was hardly surprising that we became friends I suppose.

I should emphasise that Sarah and I were *friends*: she was never my 'girlfriend' and I was never her 'boyfriend' (we were only eight or nine, for goodness sake), even though people (mostly grownups) started making heavy-handed jokes about it after a year or two. I simply found her good company; we sat together in the choir (I was quite a good soprano and a regular soloist) and occasionally shared a desk at evening prep. My parents became friendly with Pip and Claude Masters so we would regularly meet up out of school hours; I stayed at the school a few times for various reasons and she came along on my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday 'treat' when my father took us to the Royal Tournament. We also used to get together in the holidays and do stuff with her brothers like putting on impromptu plays in the new school hall when it was built and playing hide-and-seek in the derelict buildings in the grounds that Pip was busily

restoring (it was quite fun having a whole school, half of it in ruins, to play with). If that all sounds a bit innocent or even 'Enid Blyton' that's because it was.

### **5. Lessons heeded and unheeded**

Despite all that, the fact remains that I was not one of the greatest scholars to pass through the school's portals. The promise I had shown in my first year did not last and, before long, I seem to have managed to bring just about every member of the staff to the point of exasperation. They all seemed to think that I was intelligent enough to do well but simply did not care; as one of them said in 1956: "*He is not a true scholar.*" He was right there, if something didn't interest me – *really* interest me – I was simply incapable of listening to what anyone had to say about it. This attitude to 'study' of any kind has stayed with me, to my detriment, for the rest of my life. It was later to hold me back when I studied for 'O' and 'A' levels, my navigation exams when I was at sea and my law studies when I eventually moved to Hong Kong to join the Marine Police.

The only subject that I studied with real interest was History in all its forms; an interest that was to remain throughout my life. This is almost entirely down to Pip Masters who, apart from having a deep understanding of the psychology of small boys (he used to call us 'squits' which I suspect is not encouraged these days), was also an inspirational teacher. I remember that when he was taking us through the Battle of Poitiers he had us all spellbound to the point that none of us wanted him to stop when the bell rang for the end of the lesson.

There was one particular lesson I learned at The Beacon which is worth recounting as it was to stand me in good stead throughout my life in many different ways. As I have already said, after Pip Masters's arrival, all physical punishment was in his hands only; which was fine unless you happened to be one of those who were constantly in trouble and regularly found themselves waiting outside his study because of discipline or disobedience offences. People like me, for example. Pip didn't like beating boys but was certainly not one to hang back if he thought a boy deserved a 'short, sharp shock.' Various experiments were tried in forms of discipline that the staff could hand out themselves, such as 'credits' for good work or behaviour and 'debits' for bad. Too many 'debits' and it was a trip to the study for a warning from Pip himself, followed by a 'stern warning' the second time and a walloping the third. This worked for most of the boys but not me, unfortunately, and I got to know the waiting area very well. After the first year or so 'debits' were dropped and a new system was introduced: 'Detention' for bad work or behaviour, usually issued in units of 10, 20 or 30 minutes. Anyone who managed to accumulate 60 minutes in one week found himself outside the study at Friday lunchtime waiting for the dreaded interview.

As my readers will be unsurprised to hear, I very soon fell foul of the new system. At the first interview I was thoroughly told off but allowed to depart in peace. The following week I was back but this time there was no further warning, just six of the best and a promise that if I was back the following week it would not be six of the best, but seven. Food for thought, you might think. But no, by the following Monday afternoon I had already 'achieved' a total of 65 minutes detention; so even if I was a perfect saint for the rest of the week I could still look forward to seven of the best the following Friday, which was still four days away.

This daunted even me, and at home that evening I was so distracted that my mother asked me what the problem was. I told her, hoping for at least a little sympathy. This was not forthcoming but she did give me some advice: "Go to Mr Masters's study first thing in the morning," she said, "explain what you've done and ask him if you can be beaten straight away so that you don't have to wait until Friday." This was hardly what I was expecting, but she was my mum and I was ready to try anything. The following morning I followed her instructions and, looking thoroughly (and genuinely) woebegone, went to the study and politely requested my beating. Pip heard me out and then turned away, his shoulders shaking. At the time I thought he must be *really, really* angry, but in hindsight I suspect he was holding back laughter. He turned back with a straight face and announced that I would not be beaten this time and, provided that I didn't get any more detention that week, need not attend his study on the coming Friday. But BY GOD if I ever came to his study with more than sixty minutes detention again I would regret it. Now GET OUT!

So out I got, having learned a lesson in the application of the 'pre-emptive strike' that has stood me in good stead many times since. For the record, although I did get detention again from time to time after that, I never again went over the fatal number of minutes for the rest of my days at The Beacon.

## 6. Developments

Pip did not just set out to change the ethos of the school; he also had ambitious plans to improve its fabric and it did not take him long to start implementing them. The first evidence of this was a brand-new, state of the art urinal complete with modern wash basins in its own little annex at the western end of the main building accessed from the little courtyard that led to the locker room. This was followed by a new school hall-cum-classroom block, built on to the old garage and changing room at the side of the school and cunningly designed with folding partition walls so that it could be used in different ways. With the partitions closed it was divided into four modern classrooms, one of them with a floor level about three feet higher than the others, while with them open it became a spacious hall with a useful stage at one end. The new block was (literally) rounded off at the southern end by a semi-circular room with huge glass windows, which became our new art room. The block was built in two phases, so that the first two new rooms were already in use while the last two and the art room were still being built.

During the brief hiatus between the two phases Pip turned his attention to the parts of the school grounds that had been neglected for so long that most of us did not even know they *were* part of the grounds. First to be attacked was the area of wild woodland that lay between the main school and Winterbourn, which I had traversed twice a day while I was there. Pip assaulted it with, as he put it, 'fire and the sword' with the intention of doubling the amount of playing field space at the back of the school.

His method was unconventional – and probably would not be allowed today. In (I think) the summer of 1954, when I was ten, Pip put out a call for volunteers from boys and parents to come to the school during the holidays to help with the clearance. I was one of the first to turn up. The tangled undergrowth between the trees was dealt with by big, wheel-mounted flame-throwers, after which we dug trenches round the bases of the trees to cut the roots and then tailed on to ropes,



twenty or thirty of us at a time, to pull them over. After that we would swarm over them with billhooks and axes to trim off the branches so that the trunks could be hauled away. I still regard that summer as a highlight of my education and, thanks to my experience then, am still pretty handy with an axe. At the end of the summer all the volunteers were invited to a barbecue followed by a showing of the (comparatively) new film *The Lavender Hill Mob* in the completed half of the new hall.

The stony waste that remained was then bulldozed flat but was still a long way from being a games field. This was addressed by means of volunteers again, this time not entirely unpaid. Pip obtained a load of battered wheelbarrows from somewhere and offered us a shilling (5p) for every barrow load of stones that we collected. As most of us averaged about a shilling a week pocket money this seemed a pretty good deal; but we soon found out that it takes quite a long time to collect a whole barrowful of stones and the work is back breaking. Nonetheless by the time we had all lost our enthusiasm the field was cleared, and after a further year of rolling and seeding you could hardly see the join between it and the old Back Field.

## **7. Bois Farm**

Until the 1890s, when the railway reached Amersham, the town now known as 'Amersham-on-the-Hill' did not really exist. Most of the land that now comprises it was still part of Amersham Common; the wild woodland and open country that stretched between what is now 'Old' Amersham and Chesham. 100 years before that it was even wilder; the only substantial buildings within it being four tenant farms. One of them, half way along the rudimentary road that connected the two towns, was 'Bois Farm', built sometime in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or possibly earlier. It was evidently a successful farm as its principal buildings were well-built and substantial: a comfortable and commodious farmhouse, two large barns, cottages and other outbuildings.

This must have changed as the new town grew around the railway station and began to bite into the common, and after the First World War building land was at a premium. Clifton Road to the east of the school and Chiltern Road and Oakway to the north and west were presumably all built on the farm's former fields. Dr Fieldhouse must have thought he had a good deal when he bought the remaining twenty acres or so that formed the core of the old farm to found his school.

Apart from erecting the main building and clearing the two playing fields that I remember, however, he did nothing with the ancient farm buildings. He must have had plans for them though, and when the Second World War loomed and the Army announced that it needed most of the school's land to establish 'Beech Barn Camp' it must have been a blow. He clearly did some nifty negotiation with the Army, however, because he managed to keep the school and its playing fields in being right in the centre of the camp. The southern area (where 'The Leys' is today) therefore became 'Top Camp' and the northern area (including the farm buildings and the area around them) became 'Bottom Camp.'

The Army used the farm buildings as well as erecting numerous Nissen huts in the grounds (one of which later became the school's first gymnasium) and then, later in the war, handed the whole lot over to house Polish Refugees. There is lots about this interesting period in the Amersham Museum and the Poles left plenty of signs of their occupation. When I and some friends went adventuring in the ruins in the jungle

(which the buildings rapidly became after their departure) we found some of them. They used the big barn attached to the farmhouse (which later became the Headmaster's house) for dances and concerts, and we found the tattered remnants of posters and notices in what was to us an alien language pinned up next to the big stage; all very exciting. We also found some amazingly colourful murals inside the cottages which later became staff quarters; we daren't tell anyone about them because we would have been in deep trouble if anyone had found out that we used to go there. But I hope someone photographed them before the buildings were refurbished.



**Some of 'the ruins in the jungle'**

### **8. Other developments in the 1950s**

The new space meant that new sports could be introduced to keep us healthy in body and mind. These included athletics (which I enjoyed) and Rucker, as Rugby Football was called in schools in those days. I enjoyed Rucker more than I had enjoyed Association Football ('Soccer') but was never an enthusiastic player of team sports. This did me no favours, either with the staff or with my father when he read my end of term reports. Those were, after all, the days when, no matter how useless you might be in the classroom, all was forgiven if you showed yourself to be a good team player on the sports field. The fact that I was good at athletics and in the gym didn't count: I was not a good team player and 'sport' in general didn't interest me. It still doesn't. Then, in 1955, Pip Masters decided that it would be good for the souls of the squits under his command to have drama in their lives, so the concept of 'school plays' was introduced in the autumn of that year. This did interest me.

The plays were put on in the new school hall, and the old garage moved on to a new phase in its life as the props room. It was then down to us to learn how to be actors while the staff learned how to be producers and directors. Obviously no one consulted us about the plays that were put on and I don't remember any such niceties as 'auditions.' A bunch of us would be told to be in a certain room at a certain time and one of the staff would meet us there and pass out a bundle of scripts. We would then sit in a circle and take it in turns to read them and, depending on how we performed, the teacher would decide who would do what in the actual show. In the first production I was in the group directed by Pip Masters himself. I have no idea whether this was coincidental or a deliberate ploy to try and get me interested in something that required effort but, if it was, it worked.

The play we were to do was called *The Ministering Angel*, and I was cast in the leading role as the Nursing Sister. I took to the whole thing like the proverbial duck to water and it was a great success. On the last night we had two curtain calls and

then went backstage to find Pip waiting there to congratulate us himself. I remember feeling a great glow of pride that, at last, I seemed to have done something right in his eyes.

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My time at The Beacon was, after Pip Masters had taken over, a happy one on the whole. It was actually quite a surprise to me when, many years later, I saw the reports that my father had carefully kept and discovered just how much of a challenge my teachers had found me. In my final year at the school I at least settled down enough academically to pass the 'Common Entrance' exam and was therefore qualified to go to Berkhamsted School. But I could have done better: my earlier reports make it clear that – at first, anyway – I was considered to be potential 'scholarship material,' which would have saved my father a lot of money in my secondary education. I don't think either my sister or I realised just how hard it was for him to keep us at good schools at the time. I like to think that I made it up to him in later life (not that he ever mentioned it, I only found the reports after he died) but I wish I could have thanked him properly to his face.

In hindsight, the only thing I might hold against The Beacon and its dedicated staff is the fact that the things I was good at (drama, athletics and gymnastics) were not highly regarded and thus hardly featured in my reports. But academic priorities were different in those days and the things they did succeed in teaching me were well taught indeed. I hope Pip Masters's last report on me in December 1957 went some way to convince my father that the money and effort that he had put into my education there was not entirely wasted:

*"An excellent term as far as work is concerned; and a very good one in most other ways. He still remains uncontrolled and (though scrupulously honest always) unreliable. But I shall be sorry to say goodbye to his cheerful countenance and I shall not soon forget his unswerving loyalty. I shall watch his future with most affectionate interest."*

He did, too.