

John Hobson memories of Southern Grammar 1950 to 1960

So much happened during those ten Portsmouth years that it may be difficult to leave anything out.

The Southern Grammar was next to the Odeon cinema in Southsea. I expect I cycled there because it was quite a long way to walk from the YM. Perhaps it was on a bus route. Whichever, I decided to move to a rented downstairs flat in St Ronan's Road, very near the school.

The Physics teacher at Southern Grammar, Ian Watson, had recruited me to one of the Portsmouth Rugby Club's lower teams. Still being a useful sprinter, I was selected to play on the wing at which I had some success. I remember (with some embarrassment) my first try. I ran the length of the field without being caught and dived spectacularly over the line in the corner. Puzzled by a mixture of smiles and scowls among my teammates, I asked Ian what I had done wrong. "I did that right didn't I, Ian?" He explained that you're not obliged to swan-dive if no opponent is near you and, in any case, it makes the conversion so much easier if you run in and touch down under the posts! "The conversion has to be taken from opposite where it's touched down, see John!"

Fear of big, ugly forwards lingered following the one occasion in the army when I had been ordered to play my very first game of rugby against a rival unit and was badly treated by their fierce front row. Speed was my salvation as I got better at the game and learned to be elusive too.

Following my wedding in 1952 we returned from the West-Country honeymoon by way of Portsdown Hill. Coming from a Berkshire village of a few hundred people it must have been quite daunting to look down on that urban sprawl of a quarter of a million! "See that church in the middle?" I asked Leila, pointing out St. Mary's. "We're going to live just between there and the coast at Southsea".

I was becoming established as one of the Grammar Schools' P.E. teachers. The three that competed each summer term in what was called the "Inter-Grammar" athletics meeting at Alexandra Park were Portsmouth Grammar, Northern Grammar and ourselves, Southern Grammar. Athletics being one of my favourite sports, I was always delighted when we won, which I'm pretty sure we did as often as not during my ten years there.



Athletics team 1955

Football was king in Portsmouth and I have fond memories of some of my junior teams, especially the early years. The Junior Colts and then, as the Senior Colts, they swept all before them and they gloried in their winning final matches played at Fratton Park.



Senior Colts 1954-5

Those players must now be in their early to mid sixties I suppose but as twelve year olds they enjoyed the end of season party Leila prepared for them at our flat in Albert Grove (near the Theatre Royal) in Southsea. We well remember the left-half, little Warner, finishing up the plate of cucumber sandwiches that no one else fancied. Afterwards we all trooped the length of Highland Road to the Odeon Cinema to see a film.

No. 4 Albert Grove, Southsea was our first married address. (We weren't to know there would be twenty more addresses to follow!). We rented the apartment from Miss Hastings for £2.10.0. a week and lived there for nearly a year.

It was just across the road from The King's Theatre and many a time we would decide at the last minute to go to a play, paying half-a-crown for seats in the balcony. It was so high that on one occasion we found we were able to see

over the flats and observe the actors waiting for their entrance cue. I think it rather spoiled the illusion at a tense, dramatic moment.

The old Southern Grammar School building was almost next to the Odeon (since demolished I understand) and, of course, there were no playing fields anywhere near there. Buses used to pick us up for games afternoons and ferried us along the Eastern Road to the playing fields beside Langstone Harbour. We also had the use of the pitches at Dundas Meadow but the changing facility was an old cowshed with traces of long-gone cattle still decorating the floor but the boys so enjoyed their sport that they didn't seem to mind.

PE specialists, fresh out of college nowadays would probably find that and the fact of the gym being a quarter of a mile jog from the school, rather less tempting than I did then but I reckoned I had landed a pretty good job in 1950. Certainly I stayed for the first ten years of my forty years' teaching career.

The gym was privately owned so I suppose the city education authority rented it. It was equipped with some old gymnastic equipment but again I didn't mind. I was as keen on gymnastics as on athletics so I taught most of the boys various vaulting and agility activities, even the fat ones. There must have been some though who didn't take to it, I'm sure.

The PE teacher I replaced had been an army PTI but, at that time, this was declared an inadequate qualification. He remained as my assistant for a year or two. Even though he must have been almost twice my age and had once been crowned 'Mr. Britain' at body-building, he didn't seem to resent my having usurped his position. He was hero-worshipped by Boggust, the oldest pupil in the school at age nineteen. He too took up body-building and was my best shot-putter in the Inter Grammar Sports but, sadly, I believe he died quite young. Had he survived he would now be 72 – my oldest pupil. Even so, whoever does claim that title will be a septuagenarian!!

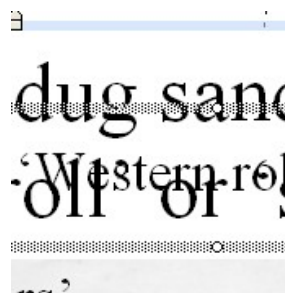
June and July saw the boys jogging in the opposite direction from the gym for their PE lessons. I would station myself on Southsea beach for the day and wait for each class to arrive for their swimming lesson in the sea. Just across from The Boating Lake, they could make it in under five minutes from school. That idyllic arrangement continued until we moved to the new magnificent building on the Eastern Road in 1955.

With only a year to go before we were to move into the new building out beside the Eastern Road, my teaching routine continued as before. Competitively, my football and athletics teams did very well.

I enjoyed teaching the jumping and throwing events even though my own achievements, such as they were, were in running. High jump teaching and coaching especially fascinated me, so much so that I even made a little model with bendy pipe-cleaners in order to explain how they should do the 'western roll' or the 'straddle'. This was before the introduction of the 'Fosbury flop'; which we couldn't have done anyway in our old-fashioned sand pits. Landing on the back of your neck without the modern crash mats would have invited forced flexion and serious damage. With a well-dug sand pit you were quite safe with the one foot and two hands landing from the 'roll' or 'straddle'. "Cut downwards with your leading arm and with your head", I told them, "and your hip will clear the bar. Newton's third law of motion; for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction!" I don't suppose that bit of science impressed my high jumpers but they loved it when it worked. The old-fashioned 'scissors' style was too inefficient to talk about.



Scissors



Western Roll

I tried demonstrating the 'Eastern cut-off' too but that never produced any success so I abandoned it. My best sprinter and long-jumper was David Ashby who had won the 'All England under 15 long jump' the July before I had arrived. On one occasion whilst coaching him up on the old playing fields, I left Leila to act as starter while I timed him over 100 yards. When I signalled that I was ready with the stop-watch Leila said "Ready, set, go" all in one word, at which David stood up from his 'on your mark' position with a wide grin, politely explaining to Leila how to space the commands.



Dave Ashby



My son-in-law, also a P.E. teacher, enjoys the joke I tell against myself in the very early days as a 'green, new broom' fresh out of college. Having been told by the Headmaster, Harry Mills, about Ashby's prowess as a 21ft long-jumper, I knew that by changing his technique from the old-fashioned 'sail' to the modern 'hitch-kick' to counteract forward rotation on landing, so recently learned at Loughborough College, I would soon have a world-champion on my hands. In no time I had him down to 17ft and I suspect the Head, Harry Mills, wondered whether he had been wise to appoint me!

Nevertheless I became established in Portsmouth Schools athletics circles as well as providing several athletes for the Hampshire teams at the All England Athletics meetings in various venues throughout the country.

Ernie Tranter, a middle-distance runner of local renown was a good friend and fellow coach in those days. We learned a lot from the coaching clinics run by National Coach, John le Mesurier, with whom Leila and I also became good friends.

September 1955 saw me back at work, but in the new school. I find that my recollections of the five years in the new building are barely as clear as those at the old one. Certainly, it was a well equipped gym and the playing fields were right there behind the school. There were several tennis courts marked out on the front playground so one could hardly wish for better.

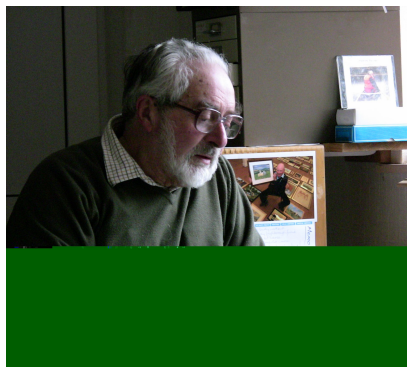
I now had great facilities for a pretty full PE programme.

I had been fortunate in my assistants since Rick Ford (the Army PT1). First, it was a county standard hammer thrower from Durham, then a county footballer from the Isle of Wight and, by this time, another highly regarded footballer with a famous name from basketball history – Brian Naysmith. He took charge of the football teams and I started a rugby team. Although we had plenty of space there we still used Alexandra Park athletics track for our Sports Day until our ground was considered good enough.



This photo of the year when we were rained off still makes me smile – if not then! My colleagues were obviously less disappointed than I was.

I resigned from my PE post at Southern Grammar School in Portsmouth and in August 1961 we emigrated to Canada.



John has since returned to the UK and lives in Rugby – see also his entry on the Message Board (Ed).