

Marcus Swan Remembers...



Here, past-pupil Marcus Swan takes a stroll down memory lane, recalling DGS life in 1954!

(Please see the school photo and maps for illustrative purposes!)

Like so many DGS students of that time, when my parents were at home, I bicycled to school, rain or shine. It was about six hilly miles from Ravensdale to the Grammar School on the old Dundalk to Newry road. It seemed the wind was never at my back. It blew in my face on the way to school and it blew in my face all the way home. But when my parents were not at home, I boarded at school and didn't have to brave the weather. I have marked the boy's dormitory on the front view of Hanbridge House which, in those days was the entire school. There were 65 pupils and seven teachers. The Rev. Hanbridge (The Boss) was about to retire, turning over headmastership to Rev. A. J. 'Bart' Finnamore (seated together in the front row, in the school photo of that year).

What was a school day like for us boarders? Our lives were happy enough if somewhat primitive. Breakfast was served at 8 AM in the dining room indicated on the plan view of Hanbridge House. Minnie brought us our food from the adjacent kitchen. I was hungry all the time, so I thought the food was fabulous. But my younger brother Laurence, who obviously was not so hungry, says I am wrong! DGS dinner rissoles quite defeated him, and sometimes even I let the lumps of luke-warm porridge at

breakfast pass me by—if 'Eggy-Bread' was on the menu!

The plan view of Hanbridge House shows you the layout of the classrooms in 1954. Morning break was at 11 AM. In winter, a group of us would stand around the pot-belly stove in Classroom—warming our hands and sometimes riskily putting our wet gloves to dry on the top. Once in awhile, Mick Goss would appear with a coal scuttle to stoke the stove and clean out the ashes. On the front of the stove was a stoking door with a mica window through which we could see the reassuring fire within. In warmer weather, we'd gather at the Bell Door, leaning against the wall, discovering who we were. Sometimes, I would go to Dougy Grimson's pigeon loft, on the top floor of the adjacent building (until recently games togouts - see Fig. 1) where Gray Court is now, and admire the plumage of the several varieties of bird he kept there. He raced these birds, but I never understood how he got this unique privilege.

Before returning to class, I might visit the open-air 'slate slab urinal,' regularly washed clean by rain, and located next to the west boundary wall of the property behind in what is now the Harper Building. The slabs were massive single pieces of slate and seemed at least eight feet tall, so I was never tempted to climb up and over. Beside the urinals was a low 'slope-roof' building that housed ten to twelve outside toilets, where daring students often gathered for a clandestine smoke during break. In the corner of the main classroom, 'Bart' had his office, a wooden structure (said to have been salvaged from the nearby jail) with many glass windows from which he could observe what we were doing without being noticed. Periodically he would charge out of the office, gown flying, to discharge some duty about which we knew nothing. But his haste told us it was important. His departure was my cue to install a sharp pin through the rubber tip of my right shoe, with which to prick the bottom of any student sitting in

front of me when Bart was out of the office. Honest, quiet Bobby Creane sat beside me in the back row of desks and I always hoped he would take the blame if I was caught. But I don't recall being caught! I think the others cottoned to my master plan and knew not to sit in front of me.

All the kids except me had to take Irish. At the time, Irish was mandatory and many job applications required it. I understand that the rules have changed over the years, but for me compulsory Irish instruction was waived because I was returning to Ireland from overseas and it was thought unreasonable that I catch up with so much, so late in my basic education. This suited me down to the ground—the less work the better! I was being groomed for Dublin University, Trinity College, and they did not require Irish for admission. So, from the back row, I laughed at my fellow DGS pupils in Irish Class. Now, sixty years later, I wish I had learned at least a little Irish. The others have the last laugh!

In the afternoon, when weather permitted, Maurice 'Molly' Purvis, Chris Taylor, Ted Bourne, a few others and I, would gather some meagre, battered school equipment and play cricket, hockey or football on the uneven playing field opposite the main entrance. Molly was agile and fast at football and I could never keep up. Taylor was a speed bowler to reckon with—especially because the ground had not been levelled and was full of dips and depressions. I never knew where the ball would bounce, but Ted's enthusiasm was infectious and kept us focused on the game whatever the hazard. Having a small pocket money allowance, I would slip out the small side/back gate (see plan view of school property), past a defunct vegetable garden on the right, no longer occupied by a cow and now largely replaced by Finnamore Hall. I crossed the Ardee Road to Hamill's little store, where I would buy gourmet items like 'angel wing' cakes, filled with artificial cream, as well as basic essentials like Rountree's Fruit Gums and glass bottles of fizzy pop drinks. On rainy days, I played table tennis in the main classroom with Maurice Sirr, who said 'Got It' every time he landed a shot. That drove me crazy, so I'd slam the ball back at him, miss the table, and he'd say 'Got It' again.

Since these are the moments I remember, I suppose lessons didn't hurt too much. In French we studied 'Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard,' by Anatole France, a book my understanding of which has deepened as a grown up!

In the evenings, the small contingent of boarders, perhaps ten boys and girls in all, did our assigned homework in classroom No. 2 (see Hanbridge House, ground floor plan). One day a week, hot water

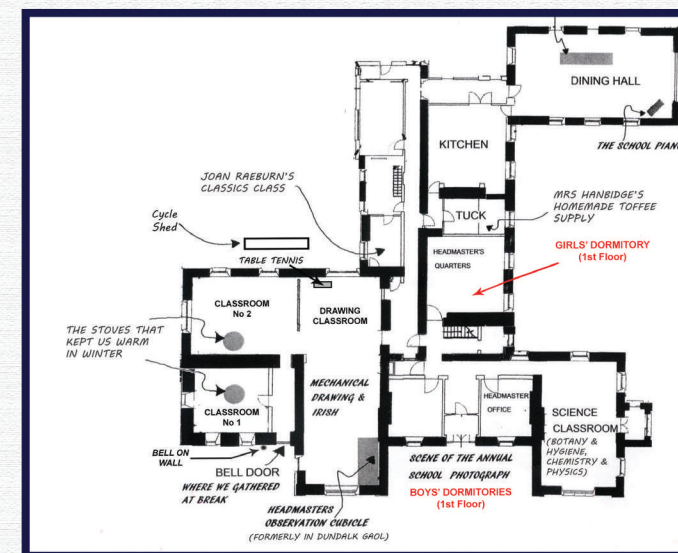


Fig. 2 - DGS Ground Floor Plan
(1st Floor details shown in red)

NB: Dormitories were changed around to reflect overall student numbers and the ratio of boys to girls.

was turned on and there were baths. One at a time, we went up to bathe in the large tub and returned to call for the next volunteer. Bath day was an escape from homework and the hot water was grand. The temptation to dawdle in the tub was irresistible! If the radiators in the boy's dormitory were ever warm in winter, I don't recall it. But there was a sniff of gas in the air, so I must suppose town gas supplied whatever heat the Headmaster allowed in the building during the winter!

One summer night Headmaster Bart Finnamore came into the boys' dormitory, looking for a stick to prop shut a sash window with a broken cord. Bending down to look under a wardrobe, on standing up he bumped his head on it and all our disallowed empty glass fizzy-pop bottles fell over. They made a terrible racket and there was no doubt what they were. We expected immediate and royal punishment, but the headmaster, deciding our miscreance was inconsequential, picked himself up, and strode out of the room without a word!

When we were in bed, all night long we heard the puff, puff of steam locomotives and the clanking of freight cars being shunted in the GNR rail yard on the other side of the boundary wall in front of Hanbridge House.

Life was rough and ready—no shiny floors, no brightly lit classrooms, no media centres, no personal lockers, no interior climate control—but we survived, and it hasn't hurt us—much! Most—hopefully all—of us emerged as young adults making useful contributions to society!

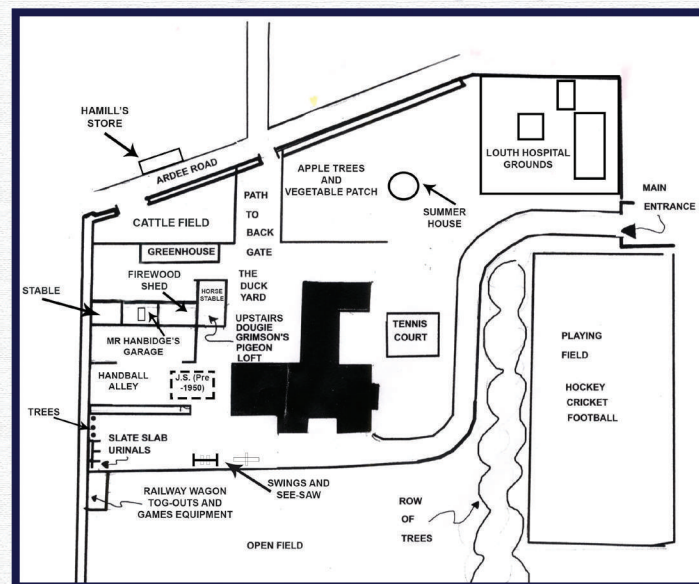


Fig. 1 - DGS Grounds, 1954
(Central 1817 Georgian building now named Hanbridge House.)