

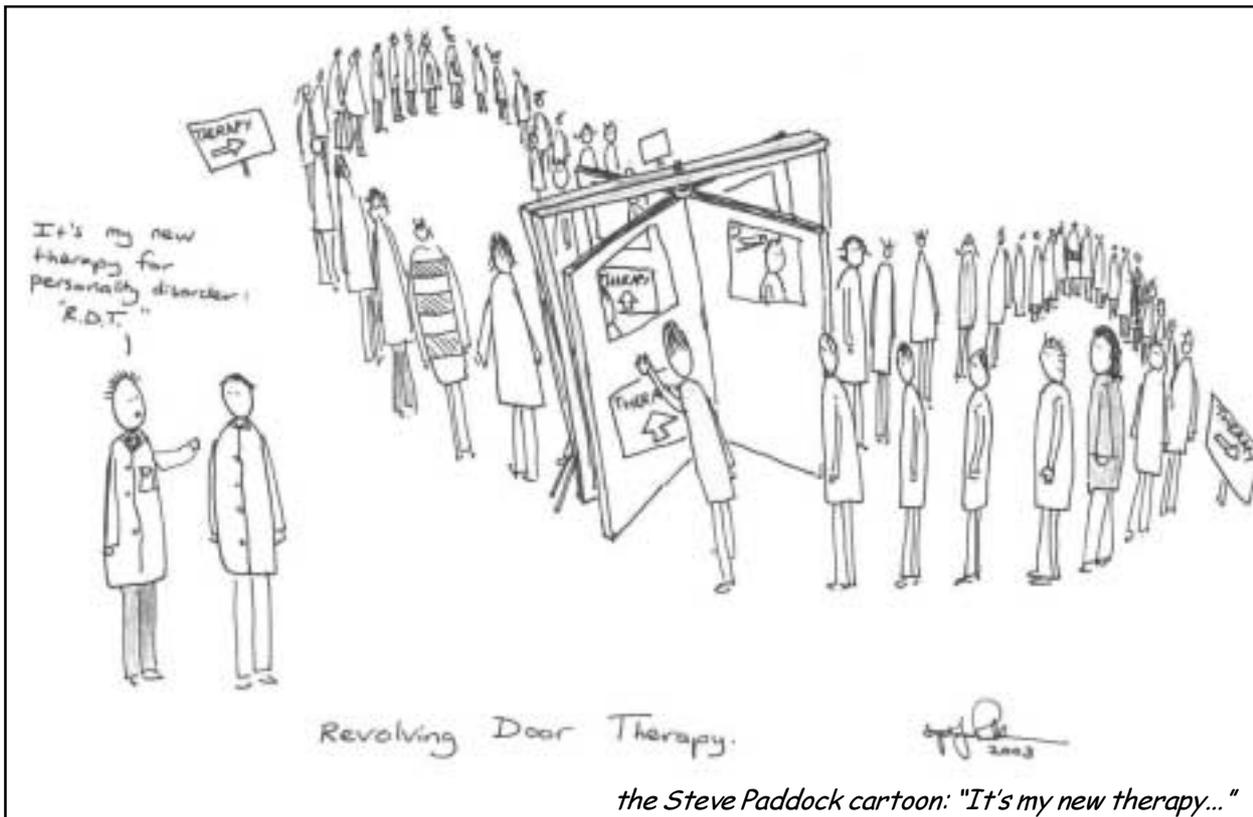
HAPPY
NEW
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SPECIAL SECTION: Children and Young People

BASICALLY I WAS REALLY, REALLY UP FOR THE WICKED TEENAGE WEREWOLF GENRE THING*

a personal rationale of Red Hill School [1947-53] by Ralph Gee

Red Hill School was a pioneering educational therapeutic community created in 1934 by Otto Shaw, a petroleum chemist profoundly influenced by A.S. Neill and Summerhill. The school moved from Chislehurst to near Maidstone in 1936. The author, sent there in 1947 through the Nottinghamshire Child Guidance Clinic, reviews his retrospective perception of his “maladjustment” and its conjectured roots in the Second World War; and the cumulative self-therapy over six formative years of adolescence in the company of other mentally disturbed boys of high intelligence. He considers the structure and philosophies of Red Hill both as a home and a school; and its specific contributions to eventual self-confidence, contentment and academic success. This article is offered as a tribute to all associated with Red Hill, and more particularly in light of its unnecessary closure in 1992 for the expediencies of political economy.

Where we were merely “maladjusted”, today’s confused teenagers are more likely to be interviewed by the media as dysfunctional victims of a Post-Traumatic Personality Disorder Syndrome. Fifty years ago the Maidstone Fourth Estate, alien to our founder’s “Special School for Maladjusted Children of High Intelligence”, lost the last three words of that title – alluding to us as crippled lepers. They scarcely saw us as children, and “political correctness” was a social sensitivity awaiting the Millennium. It will surprise many social workers today how isolated children were made during the war, when it was felt essential to make us refugees, even sending thousands overseas – on at least one liner sunk by a U-boat’s torpedoes. Our elders and betters had real grown-up problems. We were to be seen but not heard, and the less seen the better – and our social status, under fire, cannot be compared with today. It took many years into the new Beveridgism for children to be noticed.

So, for whatever intensely personal reasons, many my age became candidates for Red Hill. The war was behind the breaking of their homes. In my case, my father had been reported killed in action in 1941, a report that was kept from me by those who fostered me (and my ration book), as my mother was conscripted into munitions work a hundred miles away. In reality, he was a prisoner, in Austria, beyond the war. I went through the rest of that war bundled from pillar to post, and those in charge of me were often told nothing about my father. They passed me on when they found I was no bargain angel, testing them with tearful questions they could not answer. No local authority cared where I was – but that was hardly unique.

Five days after my ninth birthday the total war ended. I had ended up in Norfolk, at a truly dismal small boarding school in Diss. My father was convalescing from TB with other repatriated POWs, not yet having learned that my mother had sold the house. Possibly because of her adultery, reported to my imprisoned father by “a family friend”, they had been divorced through the Red Cross in 1943.

My father got me, recovering from my war. And after four years in a prison camp, divorced, still recovering himself, and without a house, that was a step more than he could cope with. As one amongst thousands of children uprooted by the war, abominably treated because their parents were not there - some “orphans”, press-ganged to the edges of Empire to work in farms in Australia and Canada, never returned - it is a marvel that my little miseries became known to Nottinghamshire Child Guidance Counsellors. I trusted no adult (because with no parents around, no-one patted my head for being a clever boy); and at ten years old I failed the grammar school 11-plus entry exam. Perhaps they were alerted by a combination of teachers expecting better of me, and genuine friends concerned by my alien attitude. In any event I was discovered, and sent to Red Hill School, in Kent.

**Or how to grab the attention of a young and modern audience, but confuse abstractors and indexers.*

**Noverim me, noverim te; ut mihi despicciam**

The war had been over for 2 ½ years – a quarter of my life – but Attlee’s Labour government was still fighting with an austerity that included a dismal Jacobean dower house under the skies of the Battle of Britain of just seven years before. This environment – Red Hill School - will at best be hearsay to most readers of this, inexperienced in the effect of the war on what Churchill thunderingly called “The Home Front.” However, I recollect my part in this environment as a tribute to the school’s motto, inflicted on Red Hill by its founder, Otto L. Shaw:

Noverim me, noverim te; ut mihi despicciam

The source of which he said was a prayer of St Augustine, and imaginatively translated as:

[O Lord] let me know myself and let me know thee, in order that I may know myself better.

It also allows a possible comparison with me, 55 years down the line. So what, apart from introducing me to myself, did Red Hill do, and how?

Few of us formed by Red Hill could ever conjecture our alternative developments, had the war’s circumstances proved less harsh. I could have metamorphosed into a really bitey non-furry werewolf. Perhaps I was too cowardly to become a juvenile delinquent; or perhaps the acids of war had tempered me. Perhaps I turned out nice, after all. Can we ever measure change in ourselves, once we have changed? So much for Latin tags.

Red Hill was my fourteenth school since my first in a village infants’ six years before. Had I not gone there – had I been sent to yet another conventional school, having failed the 11-plus - my education would have been a leading under, rather than out. In the mucky mining town of my junior school we all took the 11-plus at ten, and were not given a second chance; so no-one from it ever went on to a grammar, unless his parents moved to a leafier avenue, with garages, where the exam was taken at the proper age. Before the Era of the Comprehensives, that’s how the forelock-touchers were kept in place - and why “comprehensive education” was always a political statement far deeper than arguments about the exam syllabus. To be fair, official powers of observation were better then - and without the benefit of remote management designing league tables for minions to compile.

This cynicism indicates the respect I hold for Red Hill’s particular and partial pedagogy. Following the

1944 Education Act it got Grammar School status, meaningless to us at 11. I will even air a heresy by seeing it in retrospect as one of Shaw’s fund-raising confidence tricks. I assume, without researching past political devices, that Red Hill’s status as a grammar school ensured that its charges would not be whipped away at 14. In the days of military conscription, fewer universities, and meaner county grants, academic opportunities were more selective than today. I am of that generation whose parents did not go to university, and any exam results merely kept us out of the coalmines. With many boys prised from loveshorn homes, providing no clothes, we wore no uniforms at Red Hill - in fact, we were dourly clad. We queued in the Butlers’ Pantry for cod liver oil and malt, and at the kitchen door for dry bread – but we still impressed the Ministry Inspectorate, who probably saw Shaw as Bing Crosby. Since its inception in 1936, Red Hill had sheltered children as young as 5, including some girls. In return for the Butlerian state support, the girls and boys under eleven were removed from the repertoire in 1947. One girl missed by all became an Arthur Rank film starlet. Some boys were Jewish refugees from Hitler’s invasions of Poland and Czechoslovakia, brought out under the Nazi’s noses by Shaw himself, in the false role of a salesman. By 1947 the total intake was made up of those whose fees were paid by local authorities. Unlike Neill at Summerhill, Shaw took no boy whose parents were all too eager to pay to put him there. Of course, that could be because LEAs were guaranteed to pay the school bills - traditionally an area of middle class lethargy.

Through hard work and bitter experience, Red Hill gradually earned a reputation, attracting the respect of County Halls grappling with examples of juvenile maladjustment all over England: but not Scotland, nor Wales, nor Northern Ireland. Some counties were too mean to be represented, while others, mainly London and the Home Counties, were commonly met. Juvenile recalcitrance was not more endemic in some areas than others, but some authorities were more open-minded. At Red Hill it was also unlikely for boys to be tormented for regional twangs, but after a year or so we all spoke like Men of Kent and Kentish Men. We even had two boys from the Isle of Man, one from about four years old – and that was not then an authority thought to be the country’s most liberal, as it was still birching adults; but it had no Borstals either. At least the Menavian House of Keys, unready to cope with delinquents in conventional schools, but not able to justify creating devoted facilities within its administrative boundaries, could turn elsewhere. The expedient refusal of Thatcher’s government to allow LEAs to finance “shared”



establishments in other counties signalled the end of Red Hill - school, home, or therapeutic community. Let politicians of all parties consider that there must have been many cases like my own, where proper attention by local authorities in the first place could have avoided consequent miseries: and consider that subsidised support of therapeutic communities should, in the end, offset the official negligence that makes them necessary in the first place.

But what did Red Hill, Shaw and his staff do to earn that massive official respect? The school's publicity - when not too amateur - was very low profile, relying on the professional child psychologists in the Child Guidance Clinics, and support through such as the Tavistock Institute and one or two other provincial university departments. In an otherwise bleak area there was a tight consensus of hearsay amongst the cognoscenti, sufficient for Shaw's benevolent purpose.

It was easy for those unfamiliar with its tasks to scoff at the place as a loony left experiment, as such now defunct tabloids as the *Daily Sketch* frequently did. (Neither was the *Kent Messenger* very friendly). When it became a grammar school it could no longer take boys under 11, by which age spiritual damage had cumulated; but unlike capped and blazered grammar schools, probably about only half eventually sat examinations. Thus, many left by 14, when their LEAs pulled the plug, leaving Shaw with less than three years to identify and alleviate maladjustments. In fact, he had to do it within the first two years; and in most cases, but not all, he succeeded. After which, we followed that motto and did it for ourselves. Then awaited national service - a doddle after Red Hill.

Most may think that any boarding school with one teacher per half-dozen residents, and adequate support *in loco parentis*, cannot go wrong; but my time at Diss before Red Hill, and the fictional miseries of Dotheboys Hall, belie that. A few Red Hill boys had come from similar hells, proliferating after the war. Neither did Red Hill succeed by over-coddling, being a rough and tough platform, and at times bitterly lonely: recognized in the title of an unpublished book by ex-pupil Leonard Bloom, from Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" from *Recollections of Early Childhood*: "Too deep for tears". Red Hill hosted examples of most causes and symptoms of

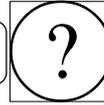
"maladjustment".

We had arsonists and the sexually abused. Destroyers and the destroyed. I suspect at least one murderer, although such epithets should not be applied to juveniles - whatever the media reporting the Jamie Bulger case thought. The two offenders involved there would not have been out of place at Red Hill, but very little of such pasts was manifest after new boys had settled in. Some mental disturbances were very plain, becoming less so in time. Stammerers who could not talk, becoming fluent debaters - and all that sort of stuff. Many arrived because they had disrupted classes; but in six years I never knew of any class disruption: Any antisocial offender was shown the classroom door, to choose his own therapy by breaking windows on his own. He would probably have to repair them later. We got used to draughts.

The popular press had field days with us, when Shaw desperately tried to stop copies of the papers getting in. We were the shocking "Do-as-you-please-school", where lessons could be foregone at will, and teachers addressed by nicknames and fined by the boys. But we did not do as we pleased. We obeyed our own rules, punishing those who broke them, whatever their rank. We missed classes only rarely, and then only with prior permission, when we could prove we had better things to do - unless we had the Ministry Inspectorate, when a little showing off was

"It is cold comfort that Red Hill is going in the same year as Chalvington and St. Francis and that others in the independent and non-maintained sector are uncertain about their futures. It now seems possible that whole sections of highly specialist provision may be lost and with them an important if relatively tiny level of service to disturbed children. It would be encouraging to be able to conclude that the children are being successfully retained within their mainstream school and their community but the current evidence seems against this." Allan Rimmer, Red Hill's last Headteacher, in "Death of a School", *Therapeutic Care and Education* 1:1 (1992), 55-59.

practically encouraged: The last thing the staff wanted in those circumstances was the school appearing too conventional, destroying their purpose. We swore like troopers, but never in class. We also had more class time than in conventional day schools, as - although the courts and sports took a couple of afternoons - we had classes on Saturday mornings. The top class, once called "Matriculation", had unsupervised two hours Prep every evening, the formal lessons having finished only 90 minutes before. Those taking exam subjects outside the regular curriculum, such as Latin or Advanced Maths (I did both), had to find their own time on top of the timetable. After my GCEs I never had any trouble with any exam for the rest of my life - and I sat enough to furnish my handle with a cluster of knobs. Not that we had anywhere else to go, money to get there or to spend when we got there. Most important of all, we enjoyed lessons. Being ejected from them was a true



punishment; and it was by no means unusual to see boys doing maths and other subjects as a hobby. It was difficult to see art as a formal classroom activity. Some did withdraw completely, replacing the class with the garden, and the teacher with Ted Brown, the country's nicest gardener. One, an undiscovered dyslexic contemporary of mine, whose father was Director of Education of a large city, is about to retire from a lifetime of successful agricultural consultancy – having put himself through a leading agricultural college. When Ted taught gardening, it stayed taught, and those who learned from him could run farms.

In many respects the staff, invariably addressed by surname outside the classroom but by Christian name within, were genuinely at our behest; so, inevitably, previously disturbed children evolved into confident adults. Not being a lunatic asylum, borstal, nor concentration camp, that was all Red Hill needed to do. Most everyday discipline was in the charge of the boys, and not as a game over by 4pm. The twice-weekly school court was a rotating tribunal of boys, with staff sitting amongst the body and not in reserved enclosures. The functional committees that reported to the fortnightly Community Meeting, and responsible for everything from catering to cricket, were boys, aged 11 to 16; with occasional staff elected for expedient influence. They were often kicked off as quickly as they had been co-opted – one when he missed the first committee meeting. Although it was not enforced, few of us avoided a social contribution. The most significant tribute to Red Hill's self-discipline is that the smoking endemic in my day was stopped by the boys themselves, who also applied the embargo to the staff.

All too obviously, in spite of the unfortunate intervention of Eric Forth, Thatcher's minister who closed Red Hill, present society needs such homes as never before. But the problems are not comparable. However "politically correct", this is not a tolerant society under austere post-war reconstruction, and the new danger is drugs –

completely alien to us. We were also unmaterialistic, buying enjoyment with 10d a week. Even upgraded into the 21st century, that holds little water. A third of a pint of Guinness then – or 70p today. A bag of crisps, or the lowest bus fare . . . The child return fare to Maidstone on the 12a from Grafty Green was 10d.

Two essential words excluded from the vocabulary of Red Hill's external observers were "home" and "non-competitive". That it was our home is statistically proven by our being within its Jacobean walls 24 hours a day for 46 weeks of the year; and within that, in classrooms, for just 30 hours a week. So it was a conventional school for less than 18% of our time; we slept there for nearly twice that! That it was non-competitive, except amongst ourselves and on our very scrubby sports fields, is another unrecognised factor in its success. There was no artificial divisiveness to help the pathetic ambitions of house masters. Genuinely, we shared our creative triumphs, enjoying and improving each other's art and literacy – although limited resources had my generation thin on music. We often shared our class work - not to cheat anyone, but from genuine interest in another's aspect. We were a very co-operative society. Staff never imposed one boy as a model for the rest. Praise was implied through love, not enforced as example; and thus there was rarely any humiliation. Remorse, perhaps. We were a household, and the family name was Red Hill. Perhaps we didn't always love each other, but to some it was the only real home we'd ever had.

I certainly found no shame in having once been "maladjusted".

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A Sutton Valence reunion in October 2003 gathered together some 150 Red Hill boys and staff, including a couple from pre-war years; about 25% of the conceivable total. Few schools anywhere, without an established old boys' network, could achieve that. Most significant was the final career positions of my generation, having retired or about to. They included company directors from both sides of the Atlantic; university professors; professionals at the tops of their specialisations, and self-employed consultants across a range of such as agriculture, aviation, and information technology. I'd be disappointed were there no yachtbuilder and zoologist to end the alphabet. Many have been published. We even produced actuaries, accountants and librarians. It was a question we failed to ask, but if pursued, the results would show Red Hill School in an impressive light compared with others lacking our maladjustments. Another unrevealed statistic is the many living abroad, as far as Australia; and, less fortunately, the dead. There must be old boys in penury or prison, and hermits practising ultimate isolation; but that doesn't make them "failures" (or - as in Shaw's annual reports - "not quite cured"). Between us we got this far without necktie nor formal society. But to those of us who knew Otto Shaw, the end of the line is near.