

FROM AUSTIN MITCHELL MP



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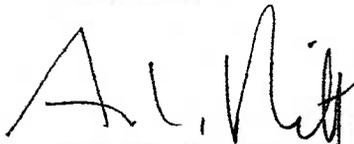
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Mrs M Taylor

Dear Mrs Taylor

I now enclose a piece on my Woodbottom Days and I'm happy for you to use it in any way you wish. It may be too long. I've a couple of photos but didn't carry a camera everywhere then!

Best wishes

  
AUSTIN MITCHELL

encl

Constituency Office:  
13 Bargate, Grimsby DN34 4SS  
Tel: 01472 342 145 Fax: 01472 251484  
Email: [mitchellav@parliament.uk](mailto:mitchellav@parliament.uk)

## WOODBOTTOM DAYS

AUSTIN MITCHELL MP

I'm proud to put "Woodbottom Council School" first on the list whenever I have to set out my qualifications. It was a good school in a pretty mixed area where a wide range of kids were brought together to have the rudiments of education pushed, sometimes bashed, into them. It stands out in my memory, much as the black, grime-encrusted, Victorian Gothic building built behind, its high, protective wall like a fortified castle stood out on the landscape. It was a dark, forbidding structure and I was never sure whether the big walls were to keep the kids in, or the world out. Still, it was a magnificent monument. Why on earth did they pull it down instead of leaving it to commemorate the generations of alumni. Of whom I'm (1939-44) one?

Woodbottom was good because it brought together the kids from three different areas: Woodbottom, the original village, a mixture of older terrace housing and back-to-backs built for the workers in the mills, C.F. Taylor's, and Baildon Combing, Charlestown, older, mixed and rural, with fields round about, and, between both the big, new estate of Ferniehurst, built in the housing boom of the early Thirties. Ferniehurst was new, more upmarket (our house cost an astronomic £350 which had my dad worried for years about whether he could afford it). It's semis were built for what we'd now call middle and lower middle-class families. I was one of the first generation of children of that estate. Woodbottom was my local school.

Higher Baildon was posher Baildon. Its kids went to Sandals school or, in the case of my friend Richard Whitely, who lived right at t' top o' t' bank, into the private

system. So class certainly existed though we never felt it as kids. Adults did though. My dad complained that he'd been asked where he lived at the Conservative club. When he said "Ferniehurst" the bloke never spoke to him again. So Baildon was John Braine's "Room at the Top" exemplified. The higher your altitude the posher your attitude, a sociology lesson which only came to me later when I delivered newspapers in the area. The higher you got the more Daily Telegraphs and Daily Mails you delivered. In the Ferniehurst area it was the Daily Express, in Woodbottom the Mirror, and for me personally, the Beano.

I don't think the adults from the three school drawing areas mixed much outside the pubs which were all in Woodbottom - my dad, programmed to Tetleys, went to the Queen - but the kids certainly did. I was in General Jagers Army, street fighting up and down the terrace alleys in Woodbottom, though, so far as I remember, Ferniehurst kids played in Woodbottom but the kids from there didn't come up to us. Our play was all battles and fortunately I was heavily armed throughout the war with a double barrelled pop gun and a black painted Tommy Gun. It was solid and made no noise so I made the necessary rat-a-tat vocally. That ruined my singing voice and ensured that I'd never do duets with Judy Garland.

Still, we managed to keep Woodbottom free from Germans and to protect the vital strategic tankers Butterfield's Tanker Works had parked in rows. We never considered the Japanese threat. Perhaps we knew enough geography to realise they were too far away, though one of our battle cries, in our street charges, was "Bataan!" Don't know why. The Methodist Sunday School, just under the railway arch, also brought us together. So did what I thought was called "the wreck" - really the

Recreation grounds with swings, see-saws and the chance to fish in the fishless Aire, which smelled more of wool than water. Until Mrs Thatcher cleaned it up by closing all the mills..

I began school at the same time as another, less epoch-making, event: the War. So my earliest memories are dominated by visions of us huddled in the air raid shelters at the back of the school on the allotments, sitting in the gas masks we carted to school with us every day. Modern kids carry huge satchels full of homework. We had tins of gas masks. I was particularly proud of mine: not the standard issue but a Mickey Mouse mask with little inflatable wings. Breather heavily and it made farting noises which I found endlessly amusing, though the teachers didn't. It was difficult to breath in (I'm surprised we all survived) like the standard ones, but more comfortable and, being bright yellow, more easy to identify if ever the bodies had to be collected. There were indeed a couple of bombing raids but at night . So we never used the shelter in battle and my prayers were never answered. School wasn't hit.

The whole area, Woodbottom, Ferniehurst, Charlestown, was a natural playground. Not big city, it wasn't rural either, but bounded by the river and the canal (fishing with jam jars) woods and a quarry (exploration), ponds (frogspawn), and the moors (mines, kites and dodging golf balls). It was a kind of wonderland. In those days, before telly, kids played out all the time and throughout the year. So in Woodbottom, the world outside school was far more interesting, active and enjoyable than the time in school itself. Once in school there was no escape. You couldn't see the tempting world outside through the school windows. We were detained and discipline was tough and backed by the cane which I don't think I ever had. Lessons in the junior

school, which was the downstairs part of the building and the lower playground, fortified against the bigger boys in the upper playground, seemed more religious than they would be today. So I remember a lot of Bible stories, but apart from the names of Hengest and Horsa (which we memorised) not much else. There must have been some Robbie Burns in there, too, because I once went home and cried because I wasn't Scottish. The daftest thing a Yorkshireman could do.

Except for the two days a week my mum worked in Bradford market, I trailed up the St. Aidan's Road hill for lunch. I don't remember school meals, or even if they were provided. It was quite a hill and I remember the clatter my new clogs made as I ran up and down it, though I was so embarrassed by the din that I refused to wear them after a week. Besides, they hurt my feet. Harold Wilson was ridiculed for claiming to have gone to primary school in clogs. I actually did, but not because they were standard footwear any longer, rather because mum was always on the look out for a bargain and they were cheaper than shoes which were rationed. Thank God she relented and let me stop wearing them. Otherwise I'd have had to take them off and go down St. Aidan's in bare feet.

I do remember running home on D Day to tell my mum that we'd landed in France. We were sent home early to spread the good news (on the assumption perhaps that no-one had a radio). Mum was at work. So she never got to know and I sat on the doorstep refusing to tell anyone else. You never know, there might have been enemy agents about. Indeed, the Misses Murgatroyd next door – they owned the bakery in the bottom road shops - were a bit suspect. I was shocked to be told by Emma that the King and Queen, George I and Elizabeth (who'd driven past Woodbottom School

in their Coronation tour, though they may not have noticed it, assuming that it was a prison) were “a stuttering king with a drunken queen”.

At lunch times we could escape down to the river, though that became more difficult to get to when the recreation ground became overflow accommodation for tankers produced at Butterfield's Tanker Works (R.I.P.). I assumed at the time that these were vital to the war effort, perhaps in the desert, though with hindsight, they were more likely to be milk tankers. Woodbottom also provided another escape at lunchtime, with mill lasses in cotton uniforms sitting on walls or on the pavement edge, eating fish and chips from either Crabtree's or Wood's (the posh one). The sons of both chippies went to Woodbottom. They smelled more interesting than the rest of us.

Eventually came the day for my class's great move upstairs. Here was a new world, past the Headmaster's study where the Head, Mr. Hawkesworth, was rarely in since he seemed to spend most of his time in Shipley at the Education Office, past the big hall used for assemblies and exams, and into one of the four classrooms on the top floor. Here the big kids lived.

The education and the discipline upstairs were more straightforward though the playground was more brutal. In those days of through schools some kids stayed on to the age of fourteen. This was before the 1944 Education Act which only came into effect in 1945. After it the 11-14s no longer stayed on in primary schools praying for the day they could leave. They were transferred to “Modern” schools which became the dustbins of the system but left primary schools much happier places. Before it we

little creeps were chucked in with a lot of big brutes which always increased my enthusiasm for going home for lunch, or dinner, as Yorkshire calls it.

In lower school I remember one lesson which isn't on today's curriculum. It was about the Demon Drink. The Band of Hope came in and dropped worms into a glass of alcohol. The worms died, causing one of the kids from Woodbottom to say he now knew what to drink if he ever got worms. At the end we all signed the pledge and I never saw booze in quite the same light again though I'm not sure how many years my signature was binding, I was a bit young to make a life time commitment I've not kept.

Woodbottom school days weren't the happiest days of my life. This was before the days when educationalists had decided that school had to be happy to work.

Woodbottom wasn't the best education for happiness. School was a matter of duty, not enjoyment. I liked it but I was a bit overawed by it. Education was more pedantic then and Woodbottom School was a dark and brooding place, not the airy, light, bright place today's schools are. Yet it was the best grounding anyone could have, because kids from all kinds of backgrounds went there, so it was a good, social mix. Much better than today's segregation.

I don't say that I enjoyed it. I wasn't too upset when I won a County Junior Scholarship and was carted off on the daily school special all the way to Bingley Grammar. After all, what's education about? For Public School chaps it's a privilege to be paid for, to buy the charm and the confidence to get to the top. Out in the real world, for us ordinary mortals, it's to give us the skills and education to face the world

and teach us to live together as a community. Can't fault Woodbottom for that, and the legacy it leaves is strong. So you can take the boy out of Woodbottom but you'll never take Woodbottom out of the man. Thank St. Aidan.