

MORETON HALL

My elder brother and I started at Moreton Hall prep school aged nine and seven. We were Wells III and IV. Wells I and II were unrelated Wellses. Before term our mother sewed name tags on our clothes and got us each a tuck box with our school names stencilled on them.

The school, formerly a stately home, stands on the rise outside Bury St Edmunds in thirty acres of turf and woodland and at that time took slightly more than a hundred boys. The most interesting out-of-bounds place was an ice house from the 1800s in the woods, and we'd stand in hushed silence at the rim of this ruin contemplating the fallen masonry inside. The tallest tree was an American Redwood which some gentleman adventurer must have carried back by seed from the Americas and planted, its wood pulpy and russet-coloured, quite unlike all the other trees. On Saturdays we were allowed to make fires in groups and we dripped plastic, exploded asbestos fragments and toasted bread on the end of sticks while smoking cow parsley husks. Someone called Brandt tried to make a bomb. There was another out-of-bounds area concealing a mysterious, silent lake, its entire circumference bounded by thick woodland, a layer of thick algae on the surface, and we all had occasional wild dreams about it such as that it was depthless and that monsters slunk under its surface. At certain times of year a terrible stink settled on the whole grounds from a nearby sugar-beet factory.

Two headmasters were at the school. One was Mr De-Gang-Gong, or that's how his name sounded, it was actually Mr de Guingand and his relative, 'Freddie' de Guingand had been Montgomery's Chief of Staff during the war, to good press. De-Gang-Gong was unmarried, friendly, occasionally peevish, and in all seasons wore seven cardigans, one buttoned over the other. Because of these cardigans he was not my mother's sort of man. He was the only master who spanked us bare-bottomed. On hot sweaty afternoons in summer he would venture out of his rooms and find the nearest boy swinging from tree to tree in the Monkey Woods which were also out-of-bounds. There was a school ditty in his honour:

Bend over my bed, ha ha, ha ha

Slide down your pants, ha ha, ha ha

He was a good French teacher who worked from his own pamphlets and before we were out of long trousers we could all conjugate the irregular French verbs and greet theoretical visitors with *je suis enchanté de faire votre reconnaissance*. He kept a small library of novels for lending out, specially edited with neat pencil lines through all skippable sentences. We learnt to quickly trust this system and could race through big trilogies like *The Lord of the Rings*. It was widely felt his editions ought to be published or at least made available to other schools.

He was the academic headmaster and the second headmaster was Cmdr Hubbard, who was a quiet, powerfully-built man who retained his title from the war. He wore shirt-sleeves even in winter (and was a man more to my mother's tastes). It was he who presided over morning assembly, said grace in the refectory before meals and ate the same food as us. At breakfast the cook's maid brought him his large mug of white coffee. We all consumed our porridge as this cup of coffee slowly cooled and grew a skin. Cmdr Hubbard let it sit there until breakfast was over and it was cold, at last drinking it in three rapid gulps, skin and all.

His wife was Lady Miriam, who, despite an iron leg, was perpetually on the move, stamping across the parquet flooring of the main hall in a Lovat jacket and hunting trousers – an outdoor woman. They occupied the main rooms of the Hall and she took no notice of the school whatsoever. Her brother was the Duke of Norfolk and her life was also a whirl of unknown charitable or social engagements.

If Lady Miriam and Mr de Guingand met in the hall, he nodded courteously and asked if she was well, she stamped her iron foot, fondly clubbed his shoulder and said something like, 'Hello Geoffrey, I shot a great big stag in the summer.'

On my very first night at Moreton Hall, aged seven, I heard was a diabolical noise downstairs. It was Lady Miriam's corgis barking in the hall but, since we didn't have dogs at home, I took them for the hounds of hell. We were in narrow beds upstairs in what used to be a ballroom. In high winds the shutters would fly open and I would cry tears of misery. It was always freezing and I remember

huddling beneath the covers, under as many blankets as De-Gang-Gong had cardigans, and still not being warm.

They didn't feed us well either, but those who sailed with Cmdr Hubbard on Sunday got Sailor's Supper. Debating with myself whether to go, after mass I would take myself to the big chestnut tree behind the kitchen and inspect it. If its upper branches were thrashing about in the wind I would be terrified, but I usually went anyway. We drove by minibus to Woodford on the Deben, towing a Shearwater catamaran and on arrival launching all sorts of small craft into the river while some rowed out with Cmdr Hubbard to his yacht, Pinkfoot. In a flotilla we went out on the ebb and came back on the flood. I took every chance to speed around in the Avon dingy which left a clean white wake behind it and never capsized. The pack lunches were nothing but spam sandwiches and bananas. Cmdr Hubbard didn't eat a thing until the drive home when we passed him our by now bruised and blackened bananas and he ate them dexterously and with gusto at the wheel. To a boy we could think of nothing but Sailor's Supper waiting for us, that rare ten minutes in the school kitchens among the warm cooking ranges, with cocoa and toasted cheese rolls laid out by the cook before she went home.

Sometimes Cmdr Hubbard's daughter Lucinda came sailing, driving in her own car, a Citroen *Deux Chevaux* whose roof came off, and she would take two boys in the back. She was the most beautiful of apparitions. Her blonde hair blew about in the wind and we had thrilling wafts of the shampoo she used. She was eighteen and no one was not intensely in love with her.

In class I drew clipper ships and sold them to Van de Burgh for licorice. My main obsession was the displacement the Avon dingy made, its ten horsepower outboard creating a lovely bow wave and a wash which tossed other boats about, and I rendered this in the margins of all my exercise books.

When Cmdr Hubbard beat a boy he did it with a gym shoe at school assembly. The school was divided whether the sole of the Dunlop Red Flash or Dunlop Green Flash was more painful. On these occasions we lined up in four packs on the cobbled tradesman's entrance, looking up at Cmdr Hubbard and the punished boy on a small landing.

There was no sex of course. A boy named Constantine who was half-Greek used to like to link arms with his friends. The rest of us found this very peculiar and he learnt not to.

In art class the Art Master told us we were descended from apes and could find vestigial tails if we looked down the back of our shorts. No one could find one, even when he lent a hand.

We were prepubescent, the same age as Rousseau whose 'hot blood was inflamed with sensuality almost from birth' (so he says in relation to Mademoiselle Lamercier who used to put the nine-year-old Rousseau over her knee until she noticed he exhibited more arousal than pain). In St Joseph's dormitory – I think we were both nine - I used to make a tunnel under the bedclothes of a boy named Murphy, by torch-light, using hard-back books without their dust jackets as supports. When I reached his willy I let the books collapse and started again. This was a game for summer nights when it hadn't drawn dark at lights out and no one could sleep, a game forgotten by winter.

We slept in the main house for three years and in outer dormitories called The Stables for the remaining two. The older year were in charge of The Stables which were lawless. A common punishment dished out was running the gauntlet, which meant charging up the dormitory through an assault of pillows. One time I crashed against the wall and hurt my knee. For some weeks I had to limp. Years later at my next school, in a routine examination, a doctor mentioned that my left patella was displaced and he grimly predicted arthritis while making indignant comments about the negligence of Moreton Hall.

Then it was our turn to be in charge of The Stables. I remember singing a pop song at the top of my voice, aged twelve, after lights out. I was not a good singer but the six boys under my charge did not complain. McCloud and I had two separate dormitories and we had a competition who could claim the most notches on his bed-head, one for each blub. There was even esprit de corps in my dorm to win although this meant voluntary suffering, the gauntlet or the slipper. It all seems strange now but perhaps at that time tears were easily shed, easily dried.

I started giving out a piece of light verse for punishment because Mr De-Gang-Gong had made me memorise it. He discovered what I was doing and called me to his rooms in an extremely agitated state. He had a small flat in the main house, with his notorious bed in the centre next to his desk. 'Punishments given by staff are not to be copied by boys,' he said. I suppose I was a born imitator. My brother and I returned home one summer and tried spanking my little sister.

Being a Catholic school there was grace at every meal, there were school prayers at assembly and Sunday mass in the chapel. We all said our prayers at night too, kneeling besides our beds. On one occasion in The Stables after lights out I happened to be prancing between the beds singing a pop song at the top of my voice and the master on patrol, Colonel King, caught me with the beam of his torch. 'Go to bed, Wells IV,' he said angrily, 'and you'll hear more from me in the morning.' I was afraid and decided to whisper the entire rosary before I went to sleep. Colonel King was a slightly feared teacher. He insisted, when boys were doing nothing, that they should stand with their hands behind their backs, perhaps a protective measure in his own case on account of a war wound in Burma which was supposed to have left him with a plastic bottom. The rosary was a long task but it seemed to work because the next day Colonel King didn't call me up. Encouraged by this, at the next school chapel I asked God to remove a stain on the windowsill, with no result. Up to then I had said my bedtime prayers enthusiastically like everyone else and enjoyed the feeling of chatting. Now I experimentally stopped all prayer to see if God would resume the dialogue himself. He didn't and I immediately became an atheist.

There were afternoon games in all weathers: rugby in winter, football at Easter, athletics and cricket in the summer. I don't think Moreton Hall was particularly competitive but one master had played full-back for Celtic Football Club in the Scottish League and he brought some professionalism to our defence, encouraging the backs to hack the shins of attackers, painful for the rest of us when we played intra-school.

After lunch one afternoon a coach drew up conveying the neighbouring school who were to play us at football. As the boys came off the coach they turned on me, who was minding my own business standing nearby in the school grey and pink uniform and yelled 'Snob!' and 'Toff!' at me. I was perplexed. During the journey they must have been worked up into a competitive frenzy by their sports master and I was the unwitting first target of their hatred.

Our First Fifteen was once beaten 96-0 by Holmwood House, a nearby school. Our opponents were as puny as we were except for a Nigerian who scored all the points. It was the heaviest defeat of the year and though we all threw ourselves at least once at that Nigerian we also spent a lot of time just watching him storm past. Strangely, after the game, Cmdr Hubbard took the entire team for

fish and chips in town. He seemed to be fond of us despite our embarrassing defeat and far too rare moments of bravery. Perhaps he was worried we would take the defeat badly, but I don't think any of us really cared.

In those days my parents loved us very much and we loved them very much. Once a term they came to take us out for the weekend. Once I was in a curry restaurant in Bury St Edmunds with my father and nearly breathed my last. A morsel of beef had got lodged in my throat. Then it flew out and my father caught it neatly in his napkin the other side of the table.

They had been through private schools themselves and what they thought of Moreton Hall with its bad food and negligent tendencies I don't know, but they were both a little Puritan: my mother kept the house cold and without carpets and my father went for outdoor trials in the Hebrides on his holidays with John Ridgway who had rowed across The Atlantic.

My mother wanted us to be happy and if possible bi-lingual. Having no confidence in multiple-cardiganed De-Gang-Gong, she knew she would need to send us on French Exchanges. She always experienced a slight hysteria whenever she re-encountered us at the end of term, feeling the school was failing to teach us anything or that we were unschoolable.

My father wanted us to become the right sort of people, rounded in character and capable of enjoying the good things in life and to that end gave us diluted wine at supper.

If united about the big questions of life, they were very different in the small things. She took no pleasure in spending money, would drive for miles to a second-hand shop to equip us with school trousers just too long or short, and greatly approved of the School Nurse's darning on our socks. He was known to come home from work after a good day and in a fit of munificence buy us all new bicycles.

My elder brother was popular at school and talkative at home. I think the whole situation of being the eldest brother souped him up like a race car. He had early obsessions with the Army, Punk and Left Wing Politics. The greatest moment of his childhood, to my mind, came when he brought home a new found enthusiasm for Classical Music after a Music Appreciation class at Moreton Hall. While I was shut out to play with my air-fix models, he and my father sat down at home to listen solemnly and with great appreciation to Tchaikovsky's Piano

Concerto Number One on the record player. My mother in the kitchen clucked away with satisfaction. Her brother could play the same tune with four jazz fingers. But later, he got into all sorts of trouble at school and they received grave telephone calls from Cmdr Hubbard.

With the exception of the Tchaikovsky episode, I was the more comprehensible to my father and he always bought me exactly the right gifts. He gave me a Harrods cricket bat and one of the first skateboards from America, carried back from a Washington business trip. Certainly no one at Moreton Hall had ever seen one and the entire school had a go, until the hard translucent wheels were worn to nothing on the tarmac square. He also gave me one of those versatile new kites controlled by two strings, whose swoops and spins were picturesquely recorded by the long tail.

Anyway, it seemed we were both unteachable or that Moreton Hall was not quite right, and my parents took another tack with our siblings. My younger brother went to Westminster Cathedral Choir School which would at least mould him into a proficient musician and near-virtuoso at piano or violin. My sister was the last chance saloon for a French speaker. My mother had gone to Ascot, run by The Sisters of The Blessed Virgin Mary, where she had been so traumatised by forced freezing-cold swims as to have a positive phobia about swimming pools. The sixth form girls, afraid of the cruelty and social irrelevance of the nuns, prayed not to have a vocation and become of their number. So my sister went to New Hall, where it was hoped the nuns, Canonesses Regular of the Holy Sepulchre, would be nicer, and amazingly there she did become a fluent French speaker. My father was unlucky, his old school, Beaumont College, had shut down, so none of us could be thrust into an interesting Jesuit experience.

I think there was a question of school fees from time to time. Four children in fee-paying schools was no picnic for my father. Early on I recall a discussion if they shouldn't trade in Moreton Hall for a swimming pool and foreign holidays, but I don't think they were ever really serious. In a way it was the major work of their lives putting us through those schools.

For us, being packed off to boarding school was an estrangement. Whatever dramas and difficulties my brother and I had, they happened a long way from home and we learnt to be self-reliant and to have close friendships instead of close parents – which may be the point of boarding school.

The day before we left, Cmdr Hubbard gathered our year for a friendly talk about the future and said, 'Beware of scout masters.' And then it was on to the next school.