

Malcolm Bidgood

1944 to 1946

Biography Extract

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I will also, for what it's worth, extract and enclose a few pages from my autobiography as Part II – the Story of the Redbridge Music Centre, deals with my life as Music Adviser and is already published. I don't think the Shoreditch chant has any meaning or for that matter how to write it – but I will try! It was, to the best of my recollections sung/performed/chanted at the end of social occasions. A circle would be formed with linked arms and accelerating with more and more volume until the final explosion of SHOREDITCH – (spelt out to fit the rhythm of the chant) and then shouted – or has my imagination got the better of my memory?!

"Ee Nicker Dee-mi, Dee-mi, Dee-mi,
 Ee Nicker Dee-mi, Dee-mi, Doh
 Who, who, who are we
 We are the STC
 S-H-ORE-D-I-TCH!!” SHOREDITCH (shouted)

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Shoreditch Training College

Consequential to the change of direction which Mr. Wilfred Joseph, my Headmaster had initiated for the Summer Term of 1944, September found me walking down Pitfield Street to my new place of learning, Shoreditch Training College, that was part of London University. Following my hastily arranged interview with Dr. Bradley, the Vice- Principal, I had been required to undergo a period of student teaching practice in Dane Secondary School, to assess my worthiness for financial support, by way of a loan. There was at the time no student grant towards fees or subsistence, as was to happen when the 1944 Education Act was implemented, but the County would loan me the money to pay my college fees. This was a very modest sum and contracted me to work for the Essex Authority for two years by which time the loan would have been reclaimed from my salary. There was no subsistence and my father would have to keep me fed and watered whilst I lived at home. This did seem a little hard when a year later, all these costs would be met by Government. I was however in no position to argue and grateful for the crumbs being offered.

I think I must have still been a little uncertain by all that happened so quickly but was undoubtably flattered by the interest and intervention of my Head to whom I believed myself virtually unknown. The thing that appealed to me most was the idea of a career that offered very good holiday prospects of the kind I had enjoyed that summer. I had never heard of Shoreditch College where my Head had managed to secure my 'last minute' place. In hindsight it was rather surprising to find my College, along with Loughborough, was a college that specialised in the training of teachers of Arts and Crafts for whilst I had secured a Credit for Art I had little knowledge or expertise in either wood or metal work as both had been taken off the curriculum at the Wanstead Centre. It had been for me or rather my Head more of another case of Hobson's Choice. In any event the decision had been made.

The College, as I was to discover later, was named after its location in Shoreditch, London, which was at the time a centre for the cabinet making industry. Part of London University, it was on first sight a most impressive building with tall colonnades rather like the British Museum. Beyond its misleading façade, the building had suffered serious bomb damage and its ceiling was no longer where it should have been. The college itself was now housed in a smaller annex that was alongside the main building and was preparing to meet its second intake of demobilised servicemen and students graduating from craft courses run by 'City and Guilds'. I have no real knowledge of the details and can only report the situation as it appeared to me. Whatever else the college had excellent workshops for both wood and metal craftwork. The Principal was a Mr. Scrivens, known to all as Scriv! The teacher training course was under the direction of the London University and by no means limited to craftwork but embraced all the usual professional subjects such as Maths, English and Physical Training plus the theory and practise of Education. The only subject missing was the one that I was eventually to practise i.e. Music, although I believe this oversight was remedied in my last term.

I/YNDDD

I/YNDDDO

Who, who, who are we

We are the STC

S-H-O-R-E-D-I-T-C-H

Thus ran the College chant that always concluded social occasions. We would gather in large or concentric circles, arms entwined at shoulder height, torsos bowed as in a scrum. Slowly the chant began as the circle moved first one way then another gathering in momentum and volume until the last shout of Shoreditch! It all worked very well and was great fun.

Shoreditch was a fortuitous as well as expedient choice for being in London, it enabled me, whilst living at home, to continue my hobby of breeding and showing my blue beverens. I don't think this had been part of the considerations when the choice was made although the fact that it was near enough for me to live at home may have been a financial factor. Each day I would travel to and from College either by train to Liverpool Street or by trolley bus, changing at Aldgate East for Pitfield Street. The main building with its colonnades stood behind a park square and was just as one might have imagined a prestigious college building. It was however something of a façade because behind these columns the Great Hall was in a state

of dilapidation and ruin – a product of the Blitz. Beyond this a more modern building formed an annex and a home for the College. I cannot remember much of the day to day routine but will record what I can. The 1944 intake consisted of about 40 students some of whom were mature students recently demobbed from National Service; Most were young men like myself who had been taken into college a year earlier than was usual and given deferment from military service at 18 so as to meet the necessary two years course for teacher training. A college book list had been sent before term commencement and many of the books had been obtained for me via Uncle Harold's bookshop just off the Charing Cross Road. I had met Uncle Harold on more than one occasion previously and his sons Norman and David who were second cousins. Uncle Harold's bookshop primarily dealt with antique books, his business and interest evolving from Uncle Ben – the grand old man and elder statesman of the antique book world. (See separate entry and press cutting).

Unlike most of my fellow students I possessed no tools and as these are a necessary pre-requisite for a craft student, I made my way to Parry's to purchase a basic set. Each student was provided with a large wooden chest for storage purposes in addition to his bench. The College Principal was a Mr. Scrivens who each week delivered a lecture on the theory and/or philosophy of education, our bible being a book named after its authors 'Hughes and Hughes'.

I well remember my first afternoon in the woodwork shop. Along with a number of other students I was presented with the drawings (plans) for the first course-job. We were in the scheme of things expected to complete six woodwork and six metalwork course jobs in our first year and to design and make what was loosely termed our 'final job' in the second. Each woodwork course job embraced different woodworking skills and encompassed a stool, a cigarette box, a bathroom mirror frame and stand, a fire screen, a book rack and a tea tray. I still have the stool, and Vanessa has the bookrack and cigarette box with its exposed dovetails. I am not sure what has become of the fire screen, originally passed to my mother or the mirror frame and stand. It was however either on that first afternoon, possibly the second, that our instructor Mr. Lumley became aware that I really had not the faintest idea how to set about planning and squaring up pieces of wood required for the legs of the first job – the stool. It is to his credit that he quickly recovered his composure and solved the problem by giving a demonstration lesson to all and sundry finally leaving me to continue the destruction over the next months. My progress was slow and I think that by the end of my first year I had just about completed the first job. Much the same happened in metal work except that in this field I was not the only inexperienced student; once again there were six course jobs to cover the basic metal working skills.

Summer '45

As well as heralding a slightly more serious approach to life for my last year at Shoreditch, August '45 saw the end of the war. Victory in Europe had come earlier in May and been celebrated with street parties and bonfires as well as the more formal celebrations. In August the war against Japan was brought to a sudden end by the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima (6th August) and a few days later another on Nagasaki (9th August). Although even these bombs were relatively small compared with today's nuclear weapons the scale of destruction in '45 was devastating; some 70,000 people being killed in Hiroshima alone not to mention the subsequent deaths from the long term effects of radiation. At the time however the success of the Manhattan project (the code name for the programme concerned with the development and use of this new weapon) was received with great joy; not only did it mean the end of a war in which we were still engaged as America's ally, but also the satisfaction of defeating a nation which had started a war treacherously with the surprise bombing of the American fleet in Pearl Harbour and also earned an ignoble reputation for both ruthlessness and cruelty. I don't think I would have minded if the whole of Japan, let alone its cities, had been blown to Kingdom come. Even so, this ending of war did not bring many changes on the home front for although there was no longer a blackout, all the shortages remained along with rationing. Victory felt 'empirical' I think is the word. Apart from all the organised street parties and celebrations, such as the Victory March in London that followed, there was much spontaneous celebration by everyone. I remember joining the crowds milling around in the High Street. People just gathered to greet each other and be happy. There was singing and dancing over the whole road outside the Town Hall; everyone was everyone's friend. I cannot remember a more joyous occasion. A large street bonfire had been lit at the bottom of Empress Avenue and it was on this occasion that I decided to contribute one of the incendiary bombs I had at home in the shed. Not too sure what would actually happen I made my contribution quite discreetly. Nothing did, for some time, then it started with a vengeance spattering white

flames everywhere and causing a deal of alarm; I had however chosen the moment to withdraw equally discreetly. Just in case!

I don't think it was until the second year of my course that realisation of possible failure began to dawn. Many of my fellow students were now engaged in making their final jobs such as wardrobes, sideboards, carver chairs and such like whereas I had so far not even completed half of my first year's work. I decided my 'final job' would have to be a little less ambitious; I was in any case hardly likely to achieve a distinction – so why bother? I drew up plans for a simple bedside cabinet in oak and mahogany encompassing two drawers and opening front doors. To purchase the timber, i.e. planks of oak, one would go down to Mallinson's wharf at Old Ford, Bow, where by special arrangements students were afforded the opportunity of buying hardwoods direct. Here I selected two or three planks of 1" sawn oak for delivery a few days later – I have no idea as to the cost. It was now a matter for saw, plane and chisel – plus hopefully a little skill.

By the end of year one the whole of the great Hall had been cleared and the floor re-sanded. This was important in that it provided for me an introduction to the game of badminton and a venue for college dances and a show. To mark the re-opening of the Hall the Students Union decided to build a stage and mount a pantomime at the end of the Christmas Term 1945. It was perhaps the latter which allowed me to come into my own as I could virtually recite the lines of at least two pantomimes, picked up whilst working as a stage hand during the pantomime season at Finsbury Park Empire, so at the time it was not difficult to write a script for Cinderella. Naturally I did not reveal my sources so quickly became recognised for my creative genius. Furthermore as one of only two people who had any musical (pianistic) ability I became, not only script writer, but musical director, producer, choreographer and half of the orchestra. Thus that Christmas, Shoreditch students presented their own version modelled on Cinderella, as last seen at Finsbury Park Empire starring George and Nat Jackley. If unknown for my skills as a craftsman, I was at least now a force to be reckoned with.

1946 – A Change of Tune

1946 saw a different attitude in my approach to work although I can only speculate as to what brought this about. Essentially I think it was my own growing up and the sudden realisation that time was running out and failure looming on the horizon. Perhaps it was a growing confidence generated by my teaching practices and/or the success of Cinderella. Although teaching practices were intended to widen experiences, all of mine had been in Loxford Secondary Modern. Mr. E. Lower, the Headmaster, was very supportive and I believed he thought well, possibly highly of me. During my various teaching practices each of a month's duration, my interest in music had come to the fore and I often chose to teach the subject when visited by college tutors. I remember the Head asking his staff for volunteers to take morning assembly. I don't know whether anyone else offered but believe my willingness to do so, and to present a number of scenes from Dorothy Sayers 'the Man Born to be king' did me no harm. It may have been the termination of my romance with Renee and a feeling of being alone and insecure but whatever the reason I now determined to pass at least if only to ensure the holidays and an income and thereby the ability to repay my loan. A superhuman effort had to be made to complete both the course jobs and the bedside cabinet in time for the external assessment that accompanied the final exams. The Easter vacation of '46 saw me in the college workshop every day; not only were the jobs coming together, but better still, they were coming together faster as skill increased. I had of course cut things rather fine to the extent that I remember arriving at the college, early on the day all the masterpieces had been set out on exhibition, so as to fit the walnut handles and ball catches to the cabinet's doors while it was in situ; unfortunately there was not time to complete both operations and to this day, the cabinet still has no ball catches on its doors.

Another achievement, if that is the word, was to be secretary of the fencing club but in spite of my efforts with epee and foil, this never amounted to much primarily because there was no-one around with the necessary expertise; I did at least get half colours for my organising efforts. In my last year I had joined a music society with the object of listening to both recorded and live performance. It was also opportune' even if too late as far as I was concerned for the college engaged a music lecturer sometime in my last term although for what reason I can only guess. Towards the end of my final year I remember playing the first movement of Grieg's Piano Concerto, assisted by my fellow pantomime duettist. It must have been a ghastly performance as I had simply taught myself and bodged (as in the craft shop) anything I could not

perfect; fortunately to an audience of non-musicians who could not tell the difference. It was well received. Finally came the exams that seemed to go on forever.....the long wait.....and finally the results. I had made it! I was a qualified teacher at the tender age of 19; made possible by the early entry, and deferment of National Service, and trained for appointment in a secondary school as a specialist in art and craft.

Sometime that summer I was called for interview in the County Offices in Chelmsford – Ilford being at the time only a division of Essex. Imagine my surprise when my posting finally arrived to Newbury Park Junior School as a general class teacher. There was nothing I could really do about this because the terms of my loan had been a commitment to serve Essex for the first two years. In any case my appointment would be short lived once His Majesty's Armed Forces learned that I was now available. I was urgently conscripted to help win the peace!