

School Days

The Editor looks at his script and realises, with horror, that he can put off the moment no longer: it is time to introduce Sam Heckmondwicke. Sam wanders on.

SH: Evening all.

E: Mr. Heckmondwicke, I understand that you've come to tell us a little about the early years of Dolphin Camp.

SH: Aye, that's right.

E: And you've come down especially, all the way from the north of England. Tell me about the north: is it really as bad as we've been led to believe?

SH: I suppose you expect me to tell you that north is full of run down woollen mills, redundant black pudding factories, closed down collieries and towering slag heaps.

E: (Apologetic) No, no, not at all.

SH: Well, it is mostly, which is why it's so nice to come down here every August.

Let me tell you a little more of history of Dolphin Camp: well, not so much about Dolphin Camp: more how I came to be at that very first camp, back in 1919. I heard about camp being set up while I were at school. I didn't go to one of those namby-pamby southern schools, like you whippersnappers...oh no..I were sent, at the age of two, to one of the north's most famous public schools, Grimstone Hall, set amongst the desolate Foulridge Moors, up on t' North Pennines.

For hundreds of years there had been a school there: I can still picture, even now, that old, moss-covered ruin...the headmaster, Dr. Scarcroft. I remember my first day: the school were reached only by a winding, single track road across the moors, made impassable by the snow for months at a time; so much so that we only had the one term each year: it lasted from September 'til June, with just an afternoon off, weather permitting, for Christmas.

I arrived at the gate that first day and walked up the long drive to the front door, where there were a notice reminding the reader to keep the door shut on account of the wolves. I know what you're thinking: there can't have been any wolves out on the moors...no, there weren't: they were inside. The headmaster kept them for amusement: he'd set them on the matron now and then, for a laugh.

I were greeted by head boy, Spofforth Major, who showed me to my room. It were a single room but he said I'd have to share and hoped I wouldn't mind: the other 25 didn't. As the rain beat down and the wind howled across the moors, I lay awake that first night, looking through the dormitory window: and wishing I were inside.

It rained for weeks at a time but luckily the dormitory were dry: at least it were after 10:30 pm.

They were grand chaps in our dormitory...and I can still recall the friends of my youth who stood beside me in times of trouble...and never lifted a finger to help. We had midnight feasts in dormitory and one of my fondest memories were of cooking by log fire: until I were quite done on both sides.

The days always began the same way: we were woken by alsatians at four-thirty; there would be a six mile run across the moors and two games of football, before breakfast, lessons on Latin, Greek, Difficult Sums, history of the Empire, the Playhouse and the Palladium: rugby before lunch, more lessons in the afternoon, making tea for the prefects, cleaning your boots, scrubbing floors and four hours Prep. every night, except Saturdays, when, for a treat, Dr. Scarcroft, a keen observer of the weather, would give us the week's rainfall readings, taken from various points around the school.

Once a year, on Wigtwizzle Day, whole school had to turn out for the famous Grimstone Hall "Wall Game". Each competitor had to carry an eight foot section of brick wall, strapped to his back, over a twenty mile course covering some of the highest and most inhospitable moorland in the country, including swimming the entire length of Beckwithshaw Reservoir (most boys held their breath and did that bit underwater). Last few stragglers were chased back to Grimstone Hall by the school leopard and anyone who failed to complete the course were sentenced to two weeks detention in the school maggot pit.

'Course it weren't all fun.

Each year we had to endure school Speech Day, when a famous Old Boy would come and drone on and on about what life were like "in his day" and then present inscribed copies of Driffield's Illustrated Logarithm Tables for academic and sporting achievements.

One year, however, we had a right interesting speaker. It were the famous Rear-Admiral Higgins, celebrated polar explorer, whose daring deeds were known throughout the land. There were proper excitement at the thought of his visit: on Speech Day itself, whole school were in a fever...mostly dysentery and beri-beri but with a few cases of blackwater fever and scurvy amongst the older boys. Rear-Admiral Higgins gave a fascinating account of his recent exploration of the enormously interesting polar ice caps. He told of how he had explored for over 3 months, eight hours a day, exploring from nine 'til six, with a one hour non-exploring break for lunch. He explored every weekday and alternate Saturdays and created several exploring records.

You can imagine the excitement in the school hall: less than a dozen boys and four masters had nodded off when the Rear-Admiral mentioned that, instead of presenting customary books as school prizes, lucky pupils would win places at a new summer camp to be set up on part of the Higgins Norfolk estate, at West Runton.

I were overjoyed to discover that I had won a place, due to the high marks achieved by my essay, "The Place Of The Cloth Cap In The Industrial Revolution", (which were later adapted as a musical by George Formby). Well, that were 1919 and that's how I became one of the very first campers here, all those years ago ...