

BRETTON HALL

by

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Art Student 1968-71

PART ONE

The 18th Century Palladian mansion which today is the heart of the Bretton Hall Campus of the University of Leeds, was built by Sir William Wentworth, the fourth Baronet in 1720. Sir Thomas Wentworth, who was the fifth and last Baronet, was perhaps the most interesting Wentworth of them all. He inherited the Bretton Estate in 1763 on the death of his father, and set about creating the parkland and lakes which we see today.

Sir Thomas inherited the lucrative estates of the Blackett family in Northumberland. He used the profits of the lead [and coal] mines to add an office block, kitchens and stables at Bretton Hall.



Liam Arthurs – c. 1971

He was a rather eccentric personality who provided regular gossip for his neighbours. His orgies and drinking parties were well known and he entertained, hunted and raced when he was not travelling, and dallied with the young ladies. He entertained his fellow Lords in Waiting together with many other titled people, but just before the war Bretton Hall was mainly used for shooting parties and gatherings for race meetings. By the 1940s the family were mainly in residence at Bywell Hall.

Viscount Allendale sold Bretton Hall to the West Riding County Council in 1948 ending the estate's 700-year old history. He died in 1956 to be succeeded by Wentworth Hubert Charles Beaumont as 3rd Viscount. The new Viscount sold further land in 1958 and this ended the family's interest in Bretton Hall.

Alec Clegg, Chief Education Officer for the West Riding County Council, said in 1968 in a book about the early years of the College:

"We (WRCC) decided we must have our own college which would have as the basis of its studies - music, art and drama. We could not build, there was at the time a crippling shortage of money, labour and materials, but we could use and convert existing buildings."

Shortly after that, the doors opened and the common people came trolling in...and that includes me - and maybe you. Damn! that was 40 years ago. Don't believe it; do you?

So where do I begin? I am not a writer, never have been. I just daydream into words, so bear with me. No best-seller here, and not really a rant either – but, I did it. I wrote stuff down. Next it's your turn.

After the Bretton reunion in May 2007, the notes below slowly drifted onto the pages that follow. I had no idea that I would start to reflect on one of the most meaningful episodes in life from 40 years on.

So...

DAY ONE - What were we getting into?

Even now it is, very difficult to consider; what exactly were we getting into? What exactly was going to happen when a whole bunch of kids from all over the UK and Wales and Scotland got admissions and permissions to a decadent edifice such as Bretton Hall.

This massive mansion and grounds had been the refuge and playground for the rich and famous for a few hundred years. How could it be possible that this oddball assortment of kids were suddenly given the right of access and the opportunity to play in the playground of former kings and queens? This was surely kids in Wonderland!

Access to this playground was now mine (and yours as well) and it would be this way for three years. Day one - did anyone appreciate the dimension of what they had? Did anyone know the first thing about the ground rules for living in wonderland? Where do you begin the games in former royalty playground? This really was the fictional stuff that movies were made of. (Ken Russell had just finished one - weeks before we arrived in 1968 - *Women In Love*).

What did it all mean?

Excitement, grandeur, opulence - well for some! For me, it meant that I didn't want to think about it. I never actually wanted to reflect on the grandeur of the dimensions, the history behind those stable doors, the drinks, the dinner, the pheasants and the pregnant servants.

If I had thought about it, I might have felt some sense of responsibility or duty or worse - humility? At that time, No way! WORKING-CLASS HERO, PLEASE MEET THE BEAUMONTS! How do you get your head around the super-rich ostentatious assets right there in front of you - sweeping stair cases, cupolas, lecture halls, pillar rooms, portico rooms, orangeries, when you had just finished a summer in a steel fabrication plant? Enough of orangeries for God's sake! - I'm too busy dealing with my first taste of culture clash.

On first arriving at Bretton, it was very difficult to believe and accept that I would be welcomed in, allowed to sleep, eat, enjoy and even use the toilets. I wasn't the first, only, or the last working-class kid to have ever gone up in the world, so I knew I had to suck it up.

But daily grind, hangover permitting, was the conflict between the original me and this new association with grounds, gowns and leisure pursuits of the formerly rich and titled. It remained beyond my comprehension for at least half a year. That tension chewed at the belly and kept me awake for quite a long time.

I was not only one person hit by cultural upheaval. I could read people's faces - it was so beyond quite a few people's comprehension. Who as a new arrival could relate to such a place?

For a while it was scary; would things break if I touched them, or leave a mark or would people like me get hauled in to see the boss 'cos they had left a grubby working-class identifier on a wall or spilled something on a floor? Mud, booze or vomit that would point directly at the low-lives from the inner city? Flog 'em?

So, what was this all about? What was this dream that Sir Alec Clegg had set up in his mind - with the best of intentions? Was this the local example of Labour Party sixties -think, trying to revise history and right the wrongs of the past centuries? Was this the gift of peace after WWII? Was this a classic Marxist social-engineering project with me as guinea pig? Was the main objective to take kids like me - knock the Geordie crap out of them? Make a better world? Who knows?

Where was our reality to deal with all these excitable kids in wonderland? There was no road map as to what to do and how to do it and how to understand it all. These were socially turbulent times and many young people were pretty *anti* anything. So watch out!

Regardless of the what and why of Sir Alec and his intentions, there were little thanks from me to the Wentworths or Sir Alec, 'cos I had walked in with one secret card up my sleeve. I had done my homework! I knew before I got there where the money came from for his playland. That knowledge fuelled my hostility nicely.

The Wentworths and Beaumonts had been coal owners. It was no great stretch as a socialist lad to understand that these were the people whose behaviour to attain a lavish lifestyle had fucked over my father - a miner - and thousands like him. Pick a decade! Pick a strike! Pick a nasty mine manager! Pick a corrupt police force in a mine-owner's pocket! Then comprehend a mining community's experience and resentment. No affluence or decadence there! No pheasants or grouse! But the irony was their son was sent to hang-out in a stately home. Wash your hands before you touch anything! The grudge stayed for quite a while.

Yeah but, but, where did the time go?

Lots of my own time and energy was spent specifically not believing in any of it. Yes, I know I should have spent more time considering the content of the lectures, taking the time for designing, drawing, illustrating, painting - stuff that I had started getting good at and already done quite well in a local regional art school.

I have no hesitation saying that, instead of focusing on the study or even the notion of my long-term investment in a career, the whole thing just wasn't real and was not to be taken seriously.

It also took a while to realise that it was not easy for many people to see the big picture. With so many new, lively and talented people around from so many different backgrounds and cultures, it was extremely difficult to get your head around how the whole place worked. What was it for, and what was my role in the middle of it all?

On some long, adolescent self-absorbed evenings, I asked the first-ever deep questions of my life up to that time:

how does an institution like this run?
how much money does it cost?
why are they doing this?
what's in it for me?
why is Brixton burning?
why does Paris stink of CS gas?

IT WAS, AFTER ALL, THE SIXTIES!

Deep as they are, these were not the important questions.

Serious, important things were, and remain, universally important.

The real important stuff was to find people who could sing "House of the Rising Sun" by the Animals, and know every verse. Who had screwed Joan Baez? who was turned on to John Mayall, Jimi Hendrix and Cream? Did anyone ever meet Jim Morrison (The Doors)? Someone said they did! Who had already been to Mexico? (Lying bastards!) Who had the leb-red? This was the real deep stuff!

My own investment of time and energy went into exploring people (and also selective parts of people - mostly female - ***IT WAS, AFTER ALL, THE SIXTIES!***) and getting to know those around me. It took time to work out who you trust and who you don't trust. Who you like and where you get approval. Such shallow youths!

How was it possible to find time to study and also find the time for so much social networking? It was very important and time-consuming to know who one was going to be associated with. Who have you found that is charismatic, and how quickly can I get to know those drama-rama charisma people (who are - well - loud)?

Years went by, the grant was drunk, Kennel Block and ENTS took my money, summers were a frenzy of jobs of despair to get some dough - and then? Do it again (Steeley Dan, I recall).

The time did go by fast; nights and lovers came (sic!) and went. There were mistakes and tears.

LAST DAY - It's all over.

The final essay, the ball, the exams, the futile exchange of addresses (Thank god for the Web and Facebook!)

I graduated and left feeling TOTALLY unprepared for a world of education in the 70s which needed my blood, sweat and tears as the currency of survival in the noble profession of teacher. (Even then they had the sense to look at the birth rates in rapid rise. We were the 'boomers'.) That's why they put up with all the adolescent crap. You were a *needed* commodity, and part of the required social order with an almost command economy.

IT WAS, AFTER ALL, THE SIXTIES!

So goodbye-----

After leaving the incredibly over-stimulated world of Bretton, I went on the dole, got depressed and moved to a war zone in the middle-east for half a decade - the only catharsis I could find.

None of you ever wrote to me!

I did the job of teacher in various countries and in various languages 'til 1989. I can say, I admire teachers and I can say, I never want to be one again. Thanks, Bretton Hall! You were my Harley Davidson kickstart! A bloody good kick, and then I was started!

PART TWO

So what in fact was the point?

I have tried to fathom the value of the learning within the whole experience and can't seem to separate that from the recollections of the dark side of Bretton Hall College of Education - the FACULTY.

And what of all those bearded professors, with third-class honours degrees - refugees from Cambridge? And dull tutorials in halls and rotundas, with pillars and frescoes? Many were just a time-filler, ahead of great egg and chips dinners.

I have to ask myself - was any of it any good?

What did they do right and what did they do wrong?

I think BRETTON HALL COLLEGE and its collective staff did lots of both

There have been plenty of 'decades'; a few more qualifications from institutions on three continents and plenty of 'chalk face' and university comparisons to help me reflect on the question and..... I have a few real conclusions. - just warm fuzzies.

What did they do right and what did they do wrong?

On the DID RIGHT side, there was a safe, growth-community for developing kids, some good lectures, some caring people and the vastness and beauty of a rambling estate with lake, all rescued from down-on-their luck former upper-class millionaires. This was an environment that allowed growth opportunities, mistakes, outrageous self-indulgent expression (i.e drama students), some crap poetry, some OK good lectures, lots of parfum de leb-red, ENTS and other social high-points understatement.

There was a no to low-stress atmosphere, a tolerance for bad fo-ne-tic spelling, bonding, coupling, rolling and tumblin' all night long.

But probably the real gift to all came from Bretton's philosophy and raison d'être:

"Get people ready to go off with their innocent and blind motivation - to do good for small children."

" OK. Wake up! Three years of debt, squalor and debauchery is up! Off you go into the heart of darkness, it's pay-back time!"

The Wentworths and Sir Alec always got the better end of the deal sooner or later

What for me was the most shocking fact was the unwavering faculty belief and the doctrinaire attitude that the three SHORT years were supposed to take students from "kids in wonderland" to "kids as professionals". That was just plain silly!

The career was as tough as hell - you'd better be prepared - try Tyneside and North London! It is a profession that either eats its own young (teacher burn-out/drop out/push out) or throws them to the beasts - usually clumsily disguised as third and fourth-form girls. I guess that firm commitment by the institution that they were 'getting it right' was grounded in economics, not in reality. To this day I deal with teachers and faculties of Education, and I believe that it was a bizarre and unreal concept to go from street kid to 'urbane professional' in 1000 days. Silly!

Also WHO did it right?

I do have respect for some of the Faculty. I have to mention Joe Briel who did Ed Philosophy - I had time for him and his old-school European thinking. The boss, Dr. Davies, got me out of a jam. After that, were few other faculty who really made a mark on me, and I probably did not make a mark on them.

Hey Ex-Faculty reading this - who is this guy? What did he look like?

Sad but true, there were some real wankers living off the public payroll and hiding from real life in the valley by the lake. (There are names!)

I should give the organization something more on the credit side - maybe they really *did* know that a cluster of witless 18-24 year olds had some serious growing-up to do, and they needed the time and space, the booze and the hash to do it.

Thanks for that!

What did they do wrong?

I would suggest that what was wrong was the combination of myopic naivety about life in the 60s and a significant REAL EDUCATIONAL VALUES OMISSION. This was also crippled by the local requirement to follow blindly the partisan POLITICS of the day - including a lot of dopey post-World War II euphoria: Building a Better Britain etc; all the while, everything and everybody was hidden away in a Yorkshire dale.

Due to subsequent years of poundings within the education industry, I can suggest that the learning programme in Bretton Hall was missing SO MANY COMMON-SENSE CORE ESSENTIALS of educational thought and principles that it was somewhat a swiss cheese of a program. All the stuff from DEWEY and TYLER on up - missing! (No, I didn't miss the lectures, nor fall asleep; I went to most and threw out the notes in about 1997.)

There were huge essential knowledge gaps or missing 'cornerstones' that teachers would need on a RIGHT NOW IN THE CLASS basis. They would have at least given them a fighting chance at being a part of, and staying with, a tough profession. It was simply not there! I have often wondered if doctors, lawyers and engineers got such a thin start-up package. Are bridges falling down yet?

Ah but, maybe the programme core was not built to answer the deep questions of the day. Or maybe it was built to give out 'just enough' shallow stuff, as an introduction to an extremely complex world – not too much; don't scare them – just enough to keep you in, but not enough for you to see ahead. I guess the core of the strategy was – "get them out there and let them take a few years of body punches"; to "hone their craft"; – sink or swim; only the strong survive!

Becoming a good teacher took years; it hurt! It was tiring and thankless work, but, in hindsight, what didn't get into my skill-pack during training years was absolutely scary.

What was OMITTED?

I am rather resentful of what was omitted. I think there were *huge* OMISSIONS. How many people went into this career WITHOUT the right frame of reference to teach kids? Oh, what a price those kids paid for us to learn!

New teachers need to have their knowledge, skills and attitudes in good shape as they begin their day – every day - so they know what they are facing right there in a classroom. Add to that the required multi-dimensions of knowledge needed to survive in big schools, small town staffrooms, ADHD, education-deficit parents, shallow politicians and the tyranny of the 'head-master' – (better get a good one!)

Even for experienced action-oriented teachers, Monday mornings gives them stress. The exiting toolbox from Bretton was almost empty. (Don't hide behind 'well it was offered' - that's a crap argument). Even a thin toolkit was no basis on which to start a career.

SO WHAT WAS NEEDED ?

First piece of missing knowledge needed by any emerging Bretton new teacher would be the highly politically-charged question of "WHY ARE YOU HERE? "

Well the answer is simple... you serve as a cog in the political purpose of supporting the school system and the goals of its long established agents of control. When you submit to going into the classroom there is no doubt that you are sucked into the objectives of the organization above your head - cheap human control and the production of a few talented folks for the work force. Education of small minds per se was a lowly second-place value.

FIRST JOB

The game plan on the first jobsite was to work out how you would get some degree of compliance and social order from your students. That's the deal, that's how you pay the mortgage. Secondly, get the kids motivated to do anything of purpose in school, and thirdly make sure the headmaster knew you could cut-it. Fourth: show up every day. Achieve those and you've won—you're a professional.

Did no-one tell you that, just before you left after the 1000 days?

All you needed was one simple sentence.

The most frustrating illusion of all was that newbie teachers felt there was the capacity and requirement for imparting that special knowledge about your special subject area to these empty vessels. I believed it – for a while. So treasure that belief, and then deal with urgent special needs and ESL students – oh, oh! wheelchairs stuck again- and "Harrow, do you speeky any Chinglish?" The home lives of these kids were shocking enough to send Dixon of Dock Green into retirement. Hmm, now Sandip, sit still, I'm here simply to teach you about History of European Art!

Four months as a teacher in North London – Crazy! Within the ONE SCHOOL - the blacks hated the whites, the Irish were becoming more unpopular, no-one wanted to talk to or about the Ugandans, Black or Asians who were displaced from Africa, the Greeks hated the Turks and nobody could get through to the Jamaican / Caribbean kids – least of all whitey from the land of brown ale and mushy peas.

Of course there were some successes along the way, there was the occasional university entrant and then graduate who came back to say hello, the occasional successful entry to art school, but the majority of the time, the 70's and 80's teachers in my sphere of knowledge were there to play their minor role in the system.

Take the money and run! Mix that attitude in with the oppressive nature of decisions based on declining budgets and add a little shake of local petty politics, a drop of little town catholic school attitude - you see the picture. If you're still a teacher at 55 – you clearly did *not* see the picture.

Slowly and sadly it became clear that the system was fundamentally run by the tyranny of accountants in the LEA office, the comprehensive-school maths department glory boys and national, high-stakes exam results.

Because of the educational strangle-hold of these high-stakes exams, it was also difficult to understand where artsy subjects would fit in terms of the operation and credibility in the school. Who was interested in the fine arts? Even now it is tough to accept that in this culture, arts are considered to be somewhat of a cultural frill.

MOVING ON - AS WE ALL DID

There have been some benefits to getting a Masters level qualification through Newcastle Polytechnic, as it was. That was 10 years after leaving Bretton and after getting bruised for a few years in the chalk trenches. Later, a Masters Degree in Education from the University of Victoria BC Canada in the early 80's took me "out of the classroom"- (another day for that)

There! That about ties it all together; 15 years in classrooms and three countries later - I left teaching.

Thanks! Goodbye!

Dylan was right – did you learn the words? Times of rapid change they are?

Recent years have brought a change in societal functions, operations and values based on the many facets of technology including applied educational technology, especially in North America where I've been since about 1982.

This entire concept of technology and rapid societal change and related affluence has blind-sided anyone hanging-on to their underdeveloped assumptions and nostalgia of the world from the sixties. There are still people who believe that the agrarian societal model of education would go on forever. Change was not on people's radar and certainly not in the last days of "kids in wonderland".

Did the Bretton toolbox have a section called rapid adaptation to change? You will all need this – I did not see it in mine.

Just around the corner, humankind will be confronted with a barrage of problems unprecedented in the history of this planet: Climate change and overpopulation, food shortages and pandemics, urbanization and pollution, financial meltdown and mass-unemployment, and armed conflicts over even the most basic of our needs.

No more chalk and talk! There are bigger issues right now – real important ones.

Adapt to change or go under! I mean it!

I thank Bretton Hall and Sir Alec for my 1000 days - it was fun, but that's all it was.

I wish you all the best – write here and tell me how wrong I am.

Remember, I am not a writer, never have been - I just daydream into words, so bear with me.

Liam ARTHURS

Far Away

Left Coast

Canada

[Article written c. 2007]