

The school train to New Mills in the 1950s.

In the days of selection and the 11 plus exam, children from Bradwell and other villages who got to Grammar School underwent a profound change in their lives. It wasn't just the daunting transition to big school - no, what loomed equally large was the added challenge of simply getting there!

New Mills Grammar School was located in a small mill town on the Derbyshire-Cheshire border. Only 20 miles from Bradwell, it was nevertheless in another world: separated physically from the Hope Valley by the Kinder plateau, and connected with Manchester rather than Sheffield.



Ladies trip with the Pashley bus in the background

We got there in three stages- first, Pashley's bus which left from Town bottom at 7.30am, and picked up children from Bradwell and Brough as it jolted towards Hope Station. There, clutching our contracts, as we new ones learned to call our season tickets, we waited with pupils from Hope, Castleton etc for the train, already laden with children from Bamford and Hathersage. Then off we went into unfamiliar territory – picking up more pupils at every stop: Edale, through Cowburn tunnel to Chinley Junction where we were joined by a huge contingent from Chinley, Chapel-en-le- Frith, Whaley Bridge, then tiny Buxworth and finally New Mills. Then began the walk- about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile in all weathers, several hundred pupils streaming through the centre of the town and unnerving the residents. Later we discovered alternative routes for this walk, riskier because passing through the territory of the local secondary modern pupils who sometimes chased the 'Grammar Grubs'.

We left our homes shortly after 7am and got back after 5pm in winter, so we rarely saw Bradwell in daylight! I little realised on that first morning, in September 1954, how large this journey would loom over the next 7 years. It helped a bit that many years before my father John Hall had made the same daily journey, and a few of my teachers even remembered him. His main memory of the train, or perhaps the only one suitable for sharing with his daughter, was of eating marmite sandwiches- made by liberally plastering two pieces of toast with butter and marmite, putting them together and- this was the important bit- squashing them hard to a wafer thickness. Delicious, even when put in a paper bag and eaten later, cold and greasy, on a train!

For the first few years, the train was pulled by a glorious steam locomotive, sometimes with a name. Here the glory ended: carriages were small, grim and corridorless, divided into compartments holding about 10 pupils, or in pairs linked by a connecting door. They were old fashioned even by the standards of the time- lots of dark wood and shiny hard upholstery, adorned with gloomy etchings of the Lake District. We didn't have free access to toilets until the advent of diesels. I suspect the railway sensibly used their oldest rolling stock for the school train!

There were no teachers on the train and supervision was theoretically in the hands of a few older pupils and in an emergency, the guard. Girls and boys were separated and civilians, as we called ordinary mortals, travelled in their own section, in better carriages. Locked doors maintained the segregation. Inside our little enclosed world a tribal society ruled, mainly benign, but occasionally for younger members reminiscent of the Lord of the Flies. I soon realised that it was important not to stand out, so I decided to discard the thick dark brown lisle stockings which my mother had me wear for warmth in winter, and a pair of cotton ankle socks was smuggled into my pocket for changing into en route.

Terrifying tales circulated of 'new bugs' being hung out of the window by their ankles in the tunnel. They was mostly apocryphal, but I did undergo the lesser ordeal of having my head, trapped by the window, outside in the tunnel- soon learning to keep my eyes tight shut against the shower of fine grit. Sometimes the lights went out in the tunnel, which added to the fun.

The journey gave great opportunities for eccentric behaviour, and feuds and strange crazes ran their course. As today there was a lot of eating and drinking, usually of innocuous sweets and soft drinks bought at the tiny shop on the hill down to the station, though one girl solaced her journey home with a bottle of orange juice heavily laced with vodka, selling sips to her cronies. One term some of the girls learned how to make themselves pass out by hyperventilating. Less pernicious activities included card schools, doing homework, (there was a brisk trade in maths answers), jacks (tricky in the moving train), reading and gossiping. There were no mobile phones or MP3 players. But listening was very instructive, and I learned a lot of new things, some frankly unbelievable, and some interesting new words.

The journey in Winter held extra excitements. Huge icicles hung down in the mouth of Cowburn tunnel and drifts of snow sometimes built up in the entrance. Occasionally, we would be waiting and shivering on Hope station when a message that the tunnel was blocked was phoned in from Edale or Chinley, and we'd go gleefully home. If no bus could get down from Bradwell, we'd form a single file and forge through the snow with the little ones in the rear like the page boy in Good King Wenceslas. Once we all got off at Edale, having convinced ourselves that the snow was so heavy that though we might get to New Mills we wouldn't be able to get back!

Being on opposite sides of the Kinder plateau, the weather in New Mills and the valley could be very different. If the weather deteriorated in the valley during the day, trusted parents would phone the school and the exciting message would come round the classrooms that all travellers on the Hope Valley train should get to the station as soon as possible, as a train was coming to take them home before the line was blocked.

If you were involved in after school activities like the choir, drama productions or sports, it was necessary to take the second train. Not a special school train, so boys could sit with girls, to the enjoyment of some and the consternation of others. Very few exploited the extra freedom. One boy used to abstract underwear from his sister's room, and wearing it over his clothes, would rush down the corridor flattening himself with a terrible grimace and a yell against the window of any compartment containing a girl. It could have been much worse. There was a lot of talk of pulling the communication cord to stop the train, but I don't remember that anyone did. No Bradwell bus met the second train at Hope so once again it was the long plod up Streatfield, often in the dark.

I was lucky on these journeys. My grandfather, Charles Bradwell Ashton, worked on the railway, and it was amazing how often Granddad just 'happened' to be on Chinley station as the school train drew in, nodding and smiling through the window in his flat cap and old tweed jacket, a Woodbine in his hand. He sometimes worked in Cowburn tunnel and I hope he never saw his granddaughter's head sticking out of the window! If he knew I was to be late, he'd try to be at Hope station and take my bag on his bicycle while he rode it very slowly and I trotted at his side. I was always so pleased to see him, and never thought how much this must have added to his long hard day.

Looking back, these journeys (2800 of them, over 7 years from 1954 to 1961, adding up to 60,000 miles) seem to have been one of those defining experiences in my life. Twice a day, a large group of children from different villages were confined unsupervised in a small space, being taken to an environment very different from the valley. Corners were rubbed off very quickly as we learned our position in the pecking order, how best to survive, and what other people thought of us. It was a bit of a shock to hear the widely held opinion that everyone in Bradwell was a. mad, b. lived in caves, and c. had TB. This latter misconception arose because when we had the Heaf test for TB antibodies, Bradwell children, brought up on unpasteurised milk, nearly all came up strongly positive!

All secondary school pupils experience such things, but the long journey to New Mills increased the culture shock and a lot of growing up was done without adult interference or help. The school train was an important part of our lives. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.