

Into Double Figures



Evacuees picking plums on a farm in Cambridgeshire in the summer of 1940.

On Saturday morning I'd push the pushchair up the hill to the gasworks with my cousin for coke or coal, then he'd push it back down with the coal sack on. We'd do it for neighbours and get a penny a run.

Those of our informants born before 1935 went to an ‘elementary’ school at age five, and about 80% of all children stayed there until 14. They then left for work, to apprentice schemes for boys, or for girls to take commercial or shorthand/typing courses. Those who were able to pass a ‘scholarship’ exam at 10 or 11 could have their education (but not their uniform or extras) paid for by their local authority. Only a minority of pupils took the scholarship exam, and teachers decided which of their charges should do so. Evacuation disrupted education for some, so there were periods when they weren’t at school, and some who should have done were unable to go to a grammar school. Very few of our informants went on to university, entrance to which depended on success in a Matric(ulation) exam, usually taken two years after the School Certificate taken at 15 or 16.

From 1944 for the first time every child was entitled to free secondary education. The Butler Act brought in a so-called ‘tripartite’ system, with your destination after 11 decided by a successor to the scholarship exam, called the 11+. At that age you were sent to a Grammar school, a Secondary Modern school, or to a Secondary Technical school. The Act allowed for the creation of ‘comprehensive’ schools that combined all three strands, but few were formed at first, and not many Technical schools were set up either. Grammar schools and Secondary Moderns were so different that the trajectory of most people’s lives was set by how you fared in an exam taken at 10 or 11. Grammar school children took the School Certificate and Matric until 1951, when GCE O and A levels were introduced at age 15–16 and 17–18. Most Secondary Modern children took no school exams at all until the 1960s. This meant that only children from the 1200 Grammar schools could go to university, plus those at nearly 200 ‘Direct Grant’ schools, around 20 of them in the London area, fee-paying schools that took a limited number of children paid for by the local authority. Thus the so-called tripartite State system to all intents and purposes between 1944 and the 1960s had only two parts. The standard of exams to fee-paying schools varied, and it was possible that parents who could afford to pay the fees could get a child in who had failed the 11+, and escape the branding of that word ‘failed’.

Let’s look first at the girls. For a girl from a poorer family, uniform was often a worrying expense, and the shortage of money could dog her throughout her time at school.

When my turn came to take the Scholarship exam I didn’t pass. We had had no training in this sort of test and only one very bright girl passed, to go to Kilburn and Brondesbury Secondary School. This was a disappointment to my parents, but the headmistress received an invitation to enter a pupil in an exam for a free place for Kensington High School, and I was given the opportunity. I found the exam quite difficult as I didn’t understand some of the questions, but surprisingly, some time later, I was offered a free place. There was a small group of us who had won scholarships or free places. Those of us who came in at 11 had to attend speech training classes.

The uniform was strict and elaborate. It was expensive and had to be bought from Daniel Neal, so it was a big outlay for my parents. We had to wear a velour hat with