

# Further Education



Teenage boys use welding equipment at Tottenham Polytechnic in 1944.

At 14 I had my first job, working 8–6, half an hour for lunch, and you were docked a quarter hour's pay if you were a minute late. Then to Pitmans College in a big house in Forest Gate, where I did shorthand, typing, English, and generally caught up on the schooling I'd lost being shunted around in the war...

In the pre-war years there were fewer than 20 universities in the whole of the UK, counting the ten separate campuses of the University of London as one. Five more universities were upgraded from city university ‘colleges’ by the start of 1960, then the number doubled in the next decade following the Robbins Report. Several of our group for whom university hadn’t been an option did a degree course, often after raising a family, at the Open University, which opened in 1969. Of our informants just ten went to university as young people. Our first reminiscence is from a girl who had been brought up in Bradford, but came to London to university in the latter stages of the war, and she gives us a picture of university life in wartime.

I’d come to London for the first time when I was ten. I saw Ellen Wilkinson in the House of Commons and did all the sights. The second time was in March 1944 when I came down for interview at London University. I’d barely left Yorkshire, but I’d had an RP BBC accent for reading out loud drilled into me at school. I had a choice of college, but picked Royal Holloway in Egham because I was sponsored by the Board of Education and it was cheaper. And I was delighted by the prospectus, which was a hand-drawn map with delightful illustrations, including a piggery; the competition’s prospectuses were on poor paper and skimpy.

When I came down to start my first term I stayed overnight with cousins in Sevenoaks – and was given a guilty gin and orange, unknown in our house because my father had signed the pledge at the age of seven. I met other RH girls and we saw some of London: Bedford College, one of the first women’s colleges, which had been heavily bombed, and St Paul’s, still standing, and we didn’t see the destruction all around it because it was hidden behind hoardings.

Royal Holloway had hoped to be affiliated to Oxford when it was opened in 1879, but was rejected, so joined London instead in 1900. I arrived there in early October 1944. Accommodation was down from two rooms each to one because half the college had been given over to the ATS [Air Transport Service]. You’d send your trunk ahead by train and with a bit of luck it would arrive first. Royal Holloway was competent, with a good reputation, but the teaching was generally uninspired.

This was a university in wartime, and ‘families’ formed readily. In the morning our rations were laid out – sugar, butter and tea. At 11 each morning ‘spotty’ was dished out, a slice of bread with raisins in. The morning break had been called TAXI the previous year, standing for Tea At XI. It was TCP in ours – teacups please. We had no air raids after the interview day, when we spent some time in the shelters. For your degree you had to sit eight papers in four days, covering Anglo Saxon, Middle English, Shakespeare, up to the 19th century, and one option – Modern, but you had to read for that in your own time.

Frankly it was more like an extended boarding school. Far more exciting was my subsequent teacher training course at the Institute of Education. We had lively teachers, it was learning with men for the first time, some of them ex-servicemen, more mature. It turned out to be a big influence on the rest of my life.

The Ellen Wilkinson she refers to was a hero to any girl from the north with socialist leanings, the only woman to be elected for Labour in the Tory landslide