

THE HIGH WYCOMBE SOCIETY

newsletter

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In the days of “The Tech” ...



Photo Courtesy of High Wycombe Library – based on SWOP ref. RHW:43002

BEHIND THE RUINS of St John's Hospital on Easton Street in High Wycombe, the grand façade of the Royal Grammar School as originally designed by Arthur Vernon in 1882, and the later addition of the Physical Laboratory in 1891, can still be seen today. In 1960, around the time that the above photograph was taken, the school buildings were home to the High Wycombe Technical School.

Society member Stuart Rooksby was a pupil there from 1958 until 1963. In this “special edition” of our Newsletter he presents a personal perspective of his school days. Adolescent memories are delightfully recalled in eight short sections, bound to evoke nostalgic recollections for some readers and fascination for others. Together they help to fill a gap in our understanding of our town's narrative.

To illustrate, I have selected additional photographs from the Bucks Free Press and High Wycombe Library collections within the SWOP (Sharing Wycombe's Old Photographs) archive which the High Wycombe Society now maintains. I have also included some reminders of other online resources that are available to us all.

Relax and Enjoy!

Jackie Kay

...caring about our town: past, present and future

Patron: Lord Carrington

Registered Charity No. 257897

Honorary Secretary: Steph Osborn, Pann Mill, London Road, High Wycombe HP11 1BJ. Tel: 07724 881440

High Wycombe Technical School

A personal perspective by Stuart Rooksby

1. A New Start

WE STOOD IN A ROW against the wall of the toilet block in the school yard like freshly taken prisoners. Nice new caps, ties and blazers; squeaky new shoes and satchels; nicely combed hair; PT bags with new shorts and plimsolls - all smartly turned-out new boys in a sea of complete strangers. Top class at primary school six weeks ago, bottom class today. High Wycombe Technical School had claimed its new intake on the first day of term in September 1958. Each of us about to be taken on a bumpy ride to Reality.

"You will wear uniform at all times. Caps will be taken off indoors and worn whenever you leave the school grounds and will be raised whenever you pass a lady or a master in the street. Within school you will not remove your blazer without the express permission of your teachers, nor will you remove or loosen your ties or collars. Teachers will be addressed as 'Sir', not by name. The Headmaster will be addressed as 'Headmaster'. When a teacher enters your classroom at the beginning of a lesson you will immediately stand and remain so until you are given permission to sit. When the Headmaster enters your lesson at any time you will stand."

The list went on.

Antecedent of the present-day John Hampden Grammar School, 'The Tech' as it was known, was situated on the north slope of the Wye Valley, in Easton Street. Formerly the site of High Wycombe's Grammar School, a sprawl of out-buildings and workshops had spread up the steeply wooded slopes to the rear of the Main School building as far as its boundary with Station Road and Birdcage Walk. Here, at the top of a precipitous flight of concrete steps was 'Top Gate' - which served as the school's rear entrance.

So now, instead of sitting in our own dedicated primary school classroom with our class teacher all day, a timetable dictated that we were to dart from one room to another (Chemistry or Physics Lab, Woodwork or Metalwork Shop, Geography room, Drawing Office, Craft Room and others) and to be introduced to the new and somewhat daunting prospect of regular homework being set for us most nights and weekends.



The Swings on the Rye - an assortment of devices which would be considered highly dangerous today. SWOP BFP:63391

In compensation there was, however, the unexpected bonus of being permitted to leave the school grounds at lunchtime and the freedom to walk into town or visit The Rye and 'The Swings' - an assortment of devices which would - by today's health and safety standards - be considered as highly dangerous. Far across the other side, at the foot of Keep Hill, were the boating lake and the swimming pool (newly opened in 1957). There was just time on summer lunchbreaks to run across the Rye, get changed, have a swim and still get back in time for afternoon lessons.

Eight or nine different teachers took us - one for English, one for Maths, one for this, one for that subject or other - but we had our own Form Room: a place we could call our own, with our own Form Master. In the case of my first form, '1B', it was to be 'Frank': just as it ever was, all teachers had their nicknames - in the main these were affectionate and innocuous - one or two perhaps less so. Best loved of all was 'Chick,' the Deputy Headmaster. This pipe-smoking, avuncular, elderly man had acquired his sobriquet on account of his surname being Fowls. We liked Chick. We especially liked visits to his office, which was on the first floor of the Main School, next to our 1B Form Room. With its

sash window invariably tightly shut, the air in there was so thick with smoke that not only could you hardly see him at his desk, a mere six feet away, but a couple of minutes spent in there was equivalent to smoking several cigarettes.

In common with most English primary and secondary schools of that era and not outlawed in State Schools until 1987, corporal punishment was available for any member of staff to apply, summarily, whenever they considered it appropriate. The hands and backside were considered legitimate targets for this, and strokes could be delivered by a variety of instruments which included steel rules, tee-squares, slippers or - so it appeared - anything that conveniently came to hand at the time. The cane, however, was reserved for the privileged use of 'Harry', the Headmaster and, accordingly, brought with it a level of disgrace only one step below that of expulsion.

But allow me to dispel the notion that we were a group of simpering defenceless children beset by a band of retaliatory savages. Far from it. We knew the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and the consequences of over-stepping the mark. Only a minority of teachers ever resorted to the practice and an encounter with the tee-square from 'Henry' (more of whom later) was usually delivered at the front of class with something approaching ceremony, good humour, a round of applause from the class and was almost taken as a badge of honour. More commonplace and perhaps more effective was a well-delivered verbal reproof, a spell of detention, lines or some other uncomfortable sanction.

Frank led us through our first year with kindness and empathy and an insuperable enthusiasm for life and his subjects. A popular figure with the teaching staff, he was popular with us, too. Where an injustice was done, Frank was our champion. In addition to his role as our form master, Frank took us for English and History. When reading aloud from chapters of any book we were studying, he would enter into the spirit of it to such an extent that he would pound from one side of the class to the other, banging his hand on the table, thumping the board-rubber against the blackboard with zeal and shattering pieces of chalk to

smithereens in his eagerness to deliver a point. The distinctiveness of his gestures, speech and enthusiasm left him wide open to imitation, something I found hard to resist, especially with an appreciative audience.

The windows of Form 1B overlooked the School Yard. Part of this quite small space was taken up by two 'Fives' courts. Each was an open-air version of a squash-rackets court (without a rear wall), topped by high wire netting. The game was played with a tennis ball and, instead of a racket, the ball was hit with the hand. Being in a uniquely strategic position, our 1B Form Room was the chosen place for 'booking' fives court games for players at the following break. Anyone wanting to play had to get their ball on to the court before the start of a break period. You couldn't simply leave a ball there after an earlier game as these did not qualify and were confiscated by 'Biskit' - the PT and Games Master. This gave rise to the unusual practice of 'windowing' balls down on to the courts during lesson-time by whoever sat next to the enormous sash windows (invariably me). Usually, under threats from older boys if we didn't, we contrived to deposit the marked balls on to the courts whilst 'Sir' was giving a discourse on the niceties of Pythagoras or the Corn Laws. In summer it was a simple matter of enhancing ventilation, but in the depths of freezing mid-winter it was sometimes difficult to justify opening the window.

"What on earth are you doing, lad?"

"Just feeling a bit stuffy, sir."

Frank left the school at the end of Summer Term 1959 and we lost a friend.



The old Physical Laboratory is the extension nearest to the camera.

Photo: JK

2B or not 2B

IN OUR SECOND year, our form room moved to a separate building: the old Physical Laboratory (still visible to the left of the Main School). We were now Form '2B'. Visiting teachers, on entering our class - in the mistaken belief that they were the first person ever to think of it - would pause theatrically in the doorway and deliver the line:

"2B or not 2B?"

Groans. (Only funny once, sir.)

'Gonf' (a contraction of 'gone for a Burton') took us under his wing as our Form Master: a kindly, open-minded and good-humoured man who took us for English, Geography and History. From his personal stock of truisms and proverbs, one in particular stuck with me: "If we learn one thing from history, it is that we learn nothing from history." (The saying is usually attributed to the German philosopher, George Hegel.) He gave us challenging essay topics, too: one notable suggestion being - "You decide to practice cycle racing in your loft - describe how you achieved this. 400 words."



Headmaster, Harry Ward, is in the middle of the row of seated staff. Immediately to his left is 'Chick' Fowls, the Deputy Head.

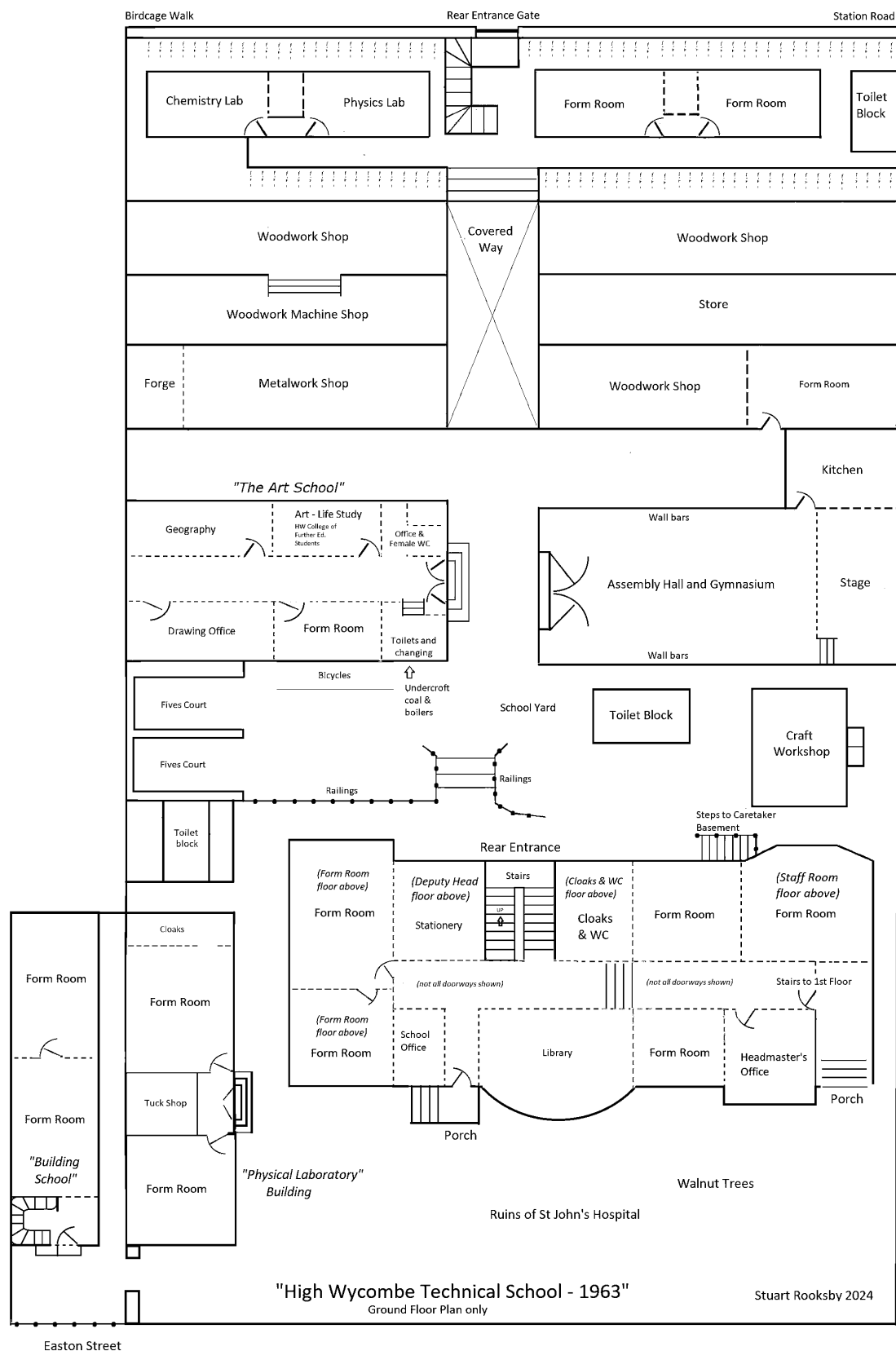
On the western boundary of the school grounds there was an ancient sagging-roofed hovel of a place - ironically referred to as the 'Building School' - for a less exemplary piece of construction would be difficult to imagine.

It had a precipitous, creaky, wooden staircase rising immediately from the entrance. At the top, there were two classrooms which were linked end-to-end. Despite its impracticality, its saving feature was the boundary railing near the Building School's entrance, set above the pavement of Easton Street. Here you could stand at break times and survey the world. At that time Easton Street was still the busy A40 trunk road to Oxford. We gazed with curiosity at the maroon and grey uniformed 'unattainable' members of the opposite sex who plied their way to and from St. Bernard's Convent School nearby. Girls, we observed, always clutched their satchels and bags in front of them.

In June of 1960 'The Photographer' arrived with his amazing revolving camera. Harry had made it clear the day before that anyone not wearing tie and blazer would be excluded from the picture. At eleven-thirty the masses assembled at the front of the Main School building and fortune had it that the sun shone brightly through the leaves of the walnut trees amongst the Ruins. Those at the front sat cross-legged, seniors at the back stood on chairs. When all was ready and Harry had taken his seat in the centre of the line of seated teaching staff, the order was given to "Keep Still!"

The contraption rotated through an arc and laid down an image in black and white of all four hundred boys and twenty-five teaching staff; a singular photographic record of the school as it was. Boys' schools, it seems, are bereft of photographs taken by the pupils, whereas girls' schools (my wife's senior school's website and others - such as Beaconsfield's former Oakdene School) show many pictures of friends, teachers and school trips. Apart from that one official photograph, I can offer you none.

I have, however, from memory, and with the assistance of two old school friends, sketched out a rough plan of the school's buildings which I believe to be unique.



3. Home & Away

A REMARKABLY BRAVE enterprise undertaken by the Tech and an unforgettable event for us third year boys was the French Department's school trip to Paris in the summer of 1960. Our teacher-guardians, Gonf, Froggy and Bilko, took the calculated risk of taking thirty or so fourteen-year-olds by train to Southampton, Channel ferry to Le Havre, then steam train to Paris Gare du Nord.

It was on this trip that, while leaning on the ferry's deck rail with a friend watching England recede, with no warning whatsoever, we found ourselves surrounded by a pressing group of French girls all chattering away excitedly. They were the same age as us and were obviously returning home from a school visit to Britain.

"Will you come and speak wiz us?" one asked us, standing very close. (One should bear in mind here, that at this point in our lives - isolated as we were in our all-male environment - we had hardly ever spoken to any girl, let alone been approached by one; and certainly not a French one!)

"Err... *oui mademoiselle*," I attempted, self-consciously.

"Oh, sank you! But speak English wiz us, please! We learn to speak English." Then looking at me, "My name is Nicole, please what is your name?" My friend and I introduced ourselves nervously and politely shook hands.

"Ah *bon*, Stuart!" and with that, they took our arms and led us both into the main cabin out of the wind where we sat down together - what a culture shock this was turning out to be! They asked us where we were going and where we lived and after a few minutes we were getting into the swing of it, chatting away like crazy and enjoying every moment.

"Now! I give you my address, please to give me your address," Nicole said and the two girls handed us their notebooks and a pen. "So now we write letters, I sink, yes?"

And on the train to Paris the *entente cordiale* continued, helped along by bottles of French beer sold by a vendor plying his trade in the corridor. The contrast with travel on a British train was startling.

During our week in Paris, we were taken by Metro and overground rail to Versailles and to see the sights in this amazing city, increasing our French vocabulary daily under the tutorship of Froggy and Bilko. Beset then, as one is today, by street vendors trying to sell you junk, we were advised by Froggy one day in the Tuileries Gardens that "... you should ignore them, they are

basically thieves - *voleurs!*" he said, supplying the French plural noun. But on hearing us using this new term freely shortly thereafter, he warned us not to use the word within earshot of anyone we suspected of being one - for the sake of our own well-being!

Most vivid were the cultural differences between our two nations: manners, attitudes and tastes. French driving rules (or the apparent lack of them) were conspicuous and we watched in fascinated disbelief as little Citroen 2CVs were brutally shoved this way and that to make a parking space large enough to squeeze into. Trying to cross 'Place de la Concorde' on foot was only ever attempted once; your life expectancy improved by an order of magnitude if you took the far longer route around the perimeter.

After communal dinner each evening, our time was our own, allowing us unsupervised freedom (remarkably) to explore the streets of the 'Left Bank' around Hôtel de l'Académie, Rue des Saints-Pères and to walk by the Seine into the early hours. A small breakaway group of us quickly adopted a little corner bar near our hotel as our evening venue of choice where Monsieur le Patron had no hesitation in serving us beer; he and his assistant, Adrian, enjoyed our conversations in broken (but rapidly improving) French. And when we weren't sitting chatting at the bar smoking *Disques Bleus*, there was the pinball machine to play (we'd never seen one of those before).

To its credit, the Tech came up with some very excellent trips closer to home too.

It may sound odd to today's younger generations but back then most boys had a keen interest in railways: the many thousands of steam locomotives especially, which still formed the backbone of British railways' motive power. Hiring special trains on each occasion, they took hordes of us to the Great Western Railway (G.W.R.) works at Swindon and, a year later, the London North Eastern Railway (L.N.E.R.) works at Doncaster. Memorable visits in the twilight years of British steam.

Closer still to home, I recall the first school trip was only a few yards away along Easton Street, to the long-lost Taylor's Sweet Factory.



The frontage of Taylor's Sweet Factory in Easton Street and neighbouring buildings

SWOP HWS:32064



Inside Taylor's Sweet Factory in Easton Street

SWOP RHW:12023

4. Fun and games

"BUNKING OFF GAMES again, I see," Biskit's Welsh tones echoed in the empty school corridor one Wednesday lunchtime. "You can't help having asthma," he went on, grudgingly, "but you certainly make the most of it, don't you!" I was reluctant to give voice to my agreement.

It was bad enough that the Games Field was nearly two miles from the school, perched at the top of Marlow Hill. Straight after Wednesday lunch in the School Hall, we had to drag ourselves up this mountain and traipse across a muddy field to what was no more than a cow shed, in which we changed, shivering, into our white shorts and tops. Once there, we (and I was far from alone in my view) would spend the whole miserable afternoon running round aimlessly in the drizzle after a sodden leather ball for two hours. Such a delight.



An afternoon's swim would usually include at least one 'dare' to jump from a high board

SWOP BFP:67984

In summer, however, Wednesday Games afternoon offered the tolerable options of cricket or, if you preferred, an afternoon swimming at the pool on the Rye. The clear advantage of the latter was that no teachers were sent to the pool to supervise us so this was relative freedom which you could take at your own pace. An afternoon's swim would usually include at least one 'dare' to jump from one of the high boards - long since removed - then, sitting out on the stepped terraces smelling of chlorine and drying off in the sun, the main area of study became Lady Verney High School girls in their swimsuits. But anyone thinking that swimming was the soft option and would obviate the need to trudge up Marlow Hill was in for a disappointment. First, you were obliged to go up the hill to the games field; once there you could ask permission to go swimming and go all the way back again. But it was a small price to pay.

Under the Art School, a modern-ish six roomed block, halfway up the rise of the school, were the coal-fired boilers. In a cavernous cellar lay heaps of anthracite - fuel for the furnaces, which sent hot water to the cloakrooms and radiators throughout the site. Our PT supremo's approach to those with exemptions from Games was:

"Well, if you can't play games, you can shovel coal instead."

I confess that to this day I have failed to see the logic in this statement, but there it was. The 'walking wounded' shovelled coal from

one side of the cellar to the other. It's blindingly obvious now that what was at stake here was our beloved Games Master's pride; no one was going to get the better of him.

It was on one such winter's Games Day in the coal-hole that I spoke to a first-year new boy on our elite team of 'invalids'.

"Hello there. What's your name?"

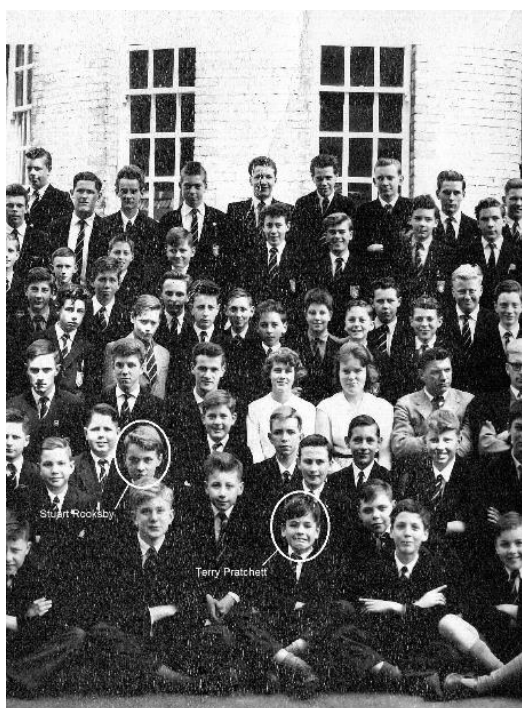
"Terry."

"Welcome Terry."

"Thank you."

"Want to earn yourself a bob?"

"Err, yes please."



In the school photo new recruit, Terry, is in the front row – his first taskmaster on the row behind

"Right well there you are, sunshine," I said, handing him my shovel, "get shovelling that lot," whereupon I and a couple of other senior walking-wounded retired to Top Gate to watch trains till quarter to four.

It must be said that the boy did a creditable job and received his promised cash payment of one shilling (five new pence). To give this seemingly trivial amount some historical perspective, you could buy four Mars Bars or four packets of Smith's Crisps for a shilling in 1960 - and they were considerably bigger than they are today.

I didn't get to know the lad well, although I saw him in Beaconsfield Library on a number of occasions at weekends, but I think I can

probably lay claim to having given Terry Pratchett his first paid job - and it's fair to say he went on to do pretty well for himself later in life.

Despite the foregoing, the reader may be surprised to hear me say that I actually enjoyed PT: that is to say PT in its proper place - indoors in a gym. Put simply, it was my lungs that let me down; running anything over fifty yards was a serious problem - there were no such things as Ventolin inhalers in those days. Regrettably most PT teachers of that era (focussed entirely on the physical aspect of life as they appeared to be) seemed to lack the ability or willingness to discern the difference between technique on the one hand and endurance on the other: anaerobic vs aerobic I think we'd call it today. So, in their rather narrow view, if you failed at one, you failed at all.

An alternative to a PT period in the gym was the 'Cross Country Run' which, with the exception of a few dedicated athletic types, was another universally unpopular activity.

"Right! Up to the American Base (at the top of Keep Hill) and back," Biskit would announce, jogging on the spot.

Three-quarters of an hour of foot slogging beckoned. Off we all went - out of the Gym, down through the school, across the main road (traffic permitting), past the tea kiosk and on to the grass of the Rye. Like the tail of a comet, the straggling mass of pupils wound their way behind their leader. He ran with us all, but he ran alone. He chased his former self that had run this path a year ago...

... and the year before

...and the years before that,

age tightening its unremitting grip.

Slower each time.

There was a time when he came in first by a mile but, with the passage of time, his lead was cut.

Second.

Then third.

Now he was lucky if he came in sixth.

But for 'bunkers-off', the strategy was a simple one... first, fall back far enough and you were on your own. Our leader's struggle with his former self had taken over, his gaze fixed on the ground ten feet in front of him.

A small diversion would bring us close to the boathouse and a clump of covering trees.

Thirty minutes later, down they would all come, a panting mass of red-faced hypoxic adolescents.

Where was Sir?

There! Tenth now!

Stub out the fags, break cover and slot in exactly where we were expected to be:

Last.



Close to the boat house, clumps of trees provided cover for bunkers-off. SWOP BFP:70048



A small doorway to the El Palma restaurant near the extreme left of this photo provided an escape route.

SWOP BFP:68172

In the interests of variety, however, a Cross Country Run would sometimes require us to take another route. Instead of the open spaces of the Rye and Keep Hill, we would be sent through the middle of town. Imagine the embarrassment: running in our vests and baggy shorts past shoppers, dodging dogs on leads, prams and lampposts. We were sent thus, pounding up Easton Street towards the crossroads and told to turn right to make our way up Amersham Hill. What escape now? None you might think, in the centre of a busy town, crawling with witnesses. But you'd be wrong; there was a small doorway near the crossroads in Easton Street which led to Freedom - a little door that belonged to the 'El Palma' Cafe.

Mr X

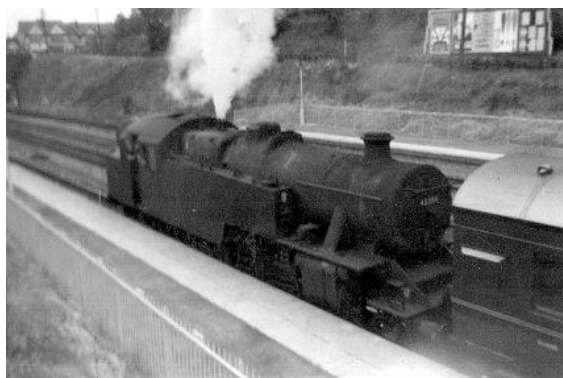
THERE WAS a stone staircase in the Main School building between the high first floor landing and the flagstoned floor some two dozen or more steps below. None of us knew the circumstances which led to the events of one particularly fateful morning, but the fact was that a small, quiet, boy aged eleven or twelve, with down-at-heel shoes was torn from his class by the PT Department's newest recruit, whom I shall refer to only as Mr. X - who (it later transpired) had been recruited direct from the Redcaps - the British Army's Military Police. (Just what the PT department needed: he would knock us into shape, alright!)

Having committed some offence or other, the boy had allegedly been dragged through the school to the first-floor landing where he was picked up off the floor by his ears. Screaming in anguish, he was lifted to shoulder height by the aforementioned Mr. X who then swung him out over the rail and suspended him in space with a twenty-foot drop below him, shouting abuse at him. Unsurprisingly the doors of the three adjacent rooms, including that of the Deputy Headmaster Chick, had flown open at the clamour and the child was quickly and safely delivered from his tormentor's grasp.

It need hardly be said that if Mr. X's grip - between finger and thumb on the terror-struck child's ears had slipped - then the Thames Valley Constabulary would have been investigating a fatality. The offending gentleman was frog-marched to the Head's office, whereupon he was instantly dismissed. I don't think charges were ever pressed, but the unfortunate boy concerned probably never recovered.

5. Train culture

TRAIN WAS the mode of transport used by many students at High Wycombe's secondary schools who lived at various points along the line: from Princes Risborough in the west to Denham in the east. The morning train services carried pupils not only for the Tech but also boys for the Royal Grammar School and, of course, girls for Wycombe High School, Lady Verney High School and a minority of day girls for St. Bernard's Convent.



*The morning train from Beaconsfield
Photo: Stuart Rooksby with his Brownie camera*

Modern diesel trains, with their passenger compartments linked with gangways, were introduced in the Autumn of 1961; but until then a train consisted of six coaches, each comprising seven twelve-seater, isolated, slam-door compartments with no interconnecting corridor and no WC.

There was usually one 'Ladies Only' compartment at each end of the train and a few 'No Smoking' compartments scattered throughout. There was, perhaps not surprisingly, a rather loose interpretation by students of some of these official restrictions.

All trains on the line then were pulled by steam locomotives, most of which - together with the coaching stock - were relics of the 1940s and were approaching end-of-life - the sort of quaint attractions we now ride on with glee at the country's many tourist-oriented preserved railway lines.

Like the schools themselves, the trains had their own unique and distinctive culture (if that is an appropriate word to use). Here, after day-long separation, the sexes were thrown together. The 4:10 pm to Marylebone, which departed from High Wycombe's bay platform for Beaconsfield, Seer Green, Gerrards Cross, and Denham, was undoubtedly the embodiment of this. It owed its particular reputation to the existence of the 'White House Farm Tunnel' a 350-yard absence of daylight in the isolated compartments, made total darkness simply by the removal of the two low wattage lightbulbs set into the compartment's ceiling.

Part of a new boy's initiation was to have

various items, such as one's cap or other accessory thrown from the train window as it passed through the tunnel. For a minority - probably those destined to become the wife and child abusers of tomorrow - this behaviour came under the general heading of 'a jolly good laugh'. It happened to me twice. But on each occasion, a friend and I rode our bikes near to the tunnel's eastern portal and, equipped with a torch, walked through the tunnel (dodging passing trains as we went) and recovered jettisoned items - not only school caps but books, satchels, scarves, a tee-square and one or two items of underwear. I make no further comment.

So it was that on arrival at High Wycombe station each afternoon, the prime objective of all student travellers was to secure a compartment classed as an 'Empty'. This could be any compartment not occupied by a member of the travelling public or one only occupied by one's friends and allies. An Empty could still qualify as such even if it contained as many as fifteen plus.

On various occasions, certain Lady Verney girls, hanging from the window like sixth-formers from St. Trinian's, would shout something like "Hey you two, we've got an Empty!" and we would make our perilous way along the coach's foot boards far beyond the platform end to the open door of a Ladies Only compartment packed with at least a dozen girls. Light bulbs had, of course, already been removed.



*The 4 10 afternoon train to Beaconsfield
Photo: Stuart Rooksby with his Brownie camera*

6. Girls

IN THE MONTHS leading up to our GCE 'O'-Level examinations, Henry, the elderly Daimler-driving and somewhat intimidating head of the Maths department, gave us lectures on women. We think he was ex British Army - certainly officer class.

"Got a girlfriend, have yer Rooksby, what?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't be bothered with 'em, boy. Waste of time and money, there's plenty of time for them when you've left school, what?"

That annoying word went at the end of all his statements - clearly an affectation - some sort of hang-over from the eighteenth century, methinks.

"Fool, boy." (Today it was my turn, tomorrow someone else would get it.)

"Carry on lead-swinging like you are and you'll fail the exams. What?"

"Yes, sir."

Things were certainly slipping. Homework was left until the last possible moment - usually the morning of the day it was due to be handed in. Maths, among other subjects, was washing straight over my head.

It's a commonly held view that most of the teachers taking the practical subjects such as Woodwork, Technical Drawing, Metalwork, Art and especially PT were not graduates but had been recruited from jobs in industry and the armed forces after National Service ended.

Some of the graduate teachers, however, stood out a mile. 'Barry' was one. He made Chemistry real. We liked Chemistry because of him and did well at it. Barry had humanity, fallibility and humour. We respected him and his long outrageous sweaters that hung a foot below his jacket, his love of cars and Trad Jazz. He played a five-string banjo. I and others played guitars; with his motivation we formed an after-

school music club. The age of the party and barbecue had dawned. Life outside of school was beckoning with a seductive flutter of her eyelashes.

French, as it turned out, happened to be one of my best subjects at the Tech and Bilko, our French teacher, expected me to pass my GCE with a good grade.

As with most languages, the examination was conducted in two parts: written and oral. We'd completed the written part a day or two earlier, then on schedule, a sweet little old French lady came to the school to perform the oral exam and I thought I'd done pretty well, (beer-assisted conversations in Left Bank Parisian cafés can have a beneficial effect).

But due to circumstances beyond everyone's control, every one of us failed.

How so, you might be wondering.

Well, it turns out that the lady concerned - her briefcase now filled to the brim with our papers - returned to London that breezy evening by train. But on disembarking, she had only taken a few steps towards the ticket barrier, when the said briefcase burst open, sending its entire contents flying across the station platforms, under the trains, out into the station concourse and the streets beyond.

With our oral section papers irretrievably lost, our examination was declared incomplete and as a result - with no opportunity given to re-sit the oral exam - no French GCE 'O' Levels were awarded to the Tech that year, leaving a hole in my and many others' GCE certificates.



EAGLE-EYED readers may have spotted that the school photograph on page 8 included two female sixth formers seated behind the younger boys. A third, seen here, was seated beside a female member of staff. When asked about this, Stuart Rooksby recalled the staff member was an art teacher who spoke with a very strong Scots accent that was sometimes quite difficult to understand.

The boys were conditioned to address all teachers with "Please, Sir" to the understandable occasional annoyance of the one female teacher in the school who, he remembers, retorted loudly: "Madam! call me madam!"

7. Disappointment, fame and notoriety

IN THE LIGHT of the foregoing, it came as no surprise that my summer GCE results were disappointing, so I and a few others took the option of staying on in the fifth form to retake important subjects.

That Autumn we at last got down to some serious revision. We, the 'stayers-on', sat as unobtrusively as we could at the back of the new fifth year's form room wading through pages of formulas, dates, diagrams and other things we should have known three months before but didn't. Part of our day, too, was spent on bell duty - patrolling the school's premises with a brass handbell sounding break and lunch times. In addition, we undertook register duty where we visited every class on a morning round, collecting each day's completed registers from every form's teacher.

Now, I believe it is true that wherever we go and whatever we do in life, each of us leaves our mark. We all achieve notoriety (or even fame) for something or other - some particular academic, sporting or social achievement - so that our reputation follows (or occasionally precedes) us wherever we go. In my case, however, my claim to fame and notoriety at the Tech was none of the foregoing, but was merely a three-inch diameter hole in the Physics Laboratory's plasterboard ceiling: a testament to my interest in pressure vessels - model steam engine boilers to be precise.

It was during one of my registration rounds, early that new Autumn term in 1963, that I entered the Physics Lab and said good morning to the teacher taking the lesson that day. Handing me the completed register he said, "Stay where you are a minute, Rooksby." Then, addressing the class, "Right everyone, just cast your eyes to the ceiling above my desk, will you?" They did so. "Tell me what you see."

"There's a hole, sir!"

"Yes, a hole. And what is more, the architect of that hole stands before us at this very moment. Do you not young man?"

"Indeed I do, sir," I replied, somewhat self-consciously.

He went on: "So since we are currently studying Boyle's and Charles' Gas Laws, I think an account of how that hole got there will be of interest to us; wouldn't you agree, Rooksby?" I nodded. "Please continue." Being unprepared and unused to addressing a class I hesitated. "Just begin by saying what you were doing before the hole appeared."

"Right... well... a few days ago me and some sixth form boys had brought in some of our model steam engines from home and we were trying to get them running during lunch break."

"Here in the Lab."

"Yes, sir. And... well... one of them had a vertical boiler so we half-filled it with water and stood it on its end on a retort stand and lit a Bunsen burner under it and... err... waited for it to get up steam and for the safety valve to blow off."

"And did it?"

"Afraid not, sir, no."

"No. So tell us what happened instead, if you will."

"Well, we waited and waited and... as it was getting close to the end of lunch break... I turned away to look at the clock and there was suddenly a very loud bang, and I felt a spray of surprisingly cold water on the back of my neck. And when I turned back again, the boiler wasn't there any more." (laughter) "Then we saw that it had taken off and finished up stuck in the ceiling." (more laughter and some applause)

"Mmm. The reason being?"

"Well, the safety valve was stuck shut so the pressure inside became very high indeed. The temperature rose too, of course; high enough to soften the solder holding the boiler's lower end plate. And when it came away, the boiler... erm, took off."

"Took off."

"Yes, sir. Like a rocket."

When the merriment died down, there was a discussion as to why this exploding boiler full of superheated steam (probably a hundred or more degrees above normal boiling point) didn't scald me very badly, standing as I had been a mere three feet away. But there I stood: living proof that the Gas Laws were absolutely correct! Simply put: when gasses expand, they cool - I'm very pleased to say.

"Thank you, Rooksby."

"Thank you, sir."

I was free to go, my 'fame and notoriety' having increased immeasurably.

8. Looking back

CALL ME SENTIMENTAL if you like, but indelible vignettes of the old High Wycombe I knew as a boy persist in my memory. Among them is the picture of clouds of steam drifting across Station Road from the little shunting engines that busied themselves all day in the station's goods yard, accompanied by the sound of whistles, clanking buffers and couplings. There too was the day-long sound of machinery emanating from furniture factories and a picture in my mind of the two old boys in Lunn's newsagent's shop in Saffron Road where we bought magazines and tiny Domino cigarettes. And on leaving school by the Top Gate for the 4:10 train to Beaconsfield on dark winter's afternoons, an occasional glimpse of that solitary, enchanting Lady Verney girl who floated along Birdcage Walk in her green and grey uniform, on her way home every evening to her house in Railway Place.

Having lost their original purpose, all the former Tech's school buildings and workshops have, of course, now been demolished, save for Arthur Vernon's impressive façade. So too the sloping streets to the east of the school: Railway Place and Saffron Road are no more and I can't help thinking what a loss that community - with its Victorian dwellings and corner shops - is to the character of that part of town; that they were replaced by a windswept featureless car park seems like rather a poor exchange to me.



In 1990 the original former Tech's school buildings were demolished, keeping only the Vernon façade. This scene of work in progress was captured in a documentary called "Wycombe World 1990" by John Smithson of the High Wycombe Film Society. The film can be viewed on YouTube (see p14).

So by the end of the Christmas term in 1963, the wish to make the best of six good grade 'O' Levels and start earning money, drove me to pass up the opportunity of staying on in the 'Sixth' and then studying further for a degree. It simply wasn't in the culture of our family - and most others at that time - to do so and was not an expectation, nor was it discussed as an option, either for me, my sister or most of my friends. In the early sixties, only around four percent of students in the UK went on to take a university degree, whereas today I believe the figure is in excess of thirty-five percent.

I began my working life as a projectionist at 'The Picture House' in Beaconsfield (later renamed 'The Chiltern Cinema') and drifted, purely by chance, into very early computing at the RAF's Bomber Command HQ up at Walter's Ash. Thereafter - studying as I went along, for an HNC in Electronics on day-release schemes - my career took various twists and turns in industry, finally turning full circle with a return to computing, this time at Jaguar Cars in Coventry, where I wrote software and at

Gloucester's College of Art and Technology, where I taught it.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, computers (except for a few massive mainframe machines) were non-existent, as were electronic calculators, so that schools and industry alike used slide rules and logarithm tables to make calculations. Reflecting social and industrial change in the intervening sixty plus years, our old Tech subjects such as Metalwork, with its centre-lathes, coal-fired forge and copper-beating hammers, have gone. So too the traditional form of Technical Drawing, with its heavy wooden drawing boards, pencils, erasers, tee-squares and drawing instruments, which has been superseded by new computer-aided design (CAD) technology.

Looking to the present day, having browsed its website, I must say how remarkably impressive I find the John Hampden Grammar School's curriculum. In addition to core subjects, it offers students Biology, Computer Science, Drama, Religion and Philosophy, Physical Education (reassuring to see the word

‘education’ appearing here!), Citizenship, Enterprise, Relationships, Sex and Health Education, not one of which was available then. An enviable curriculum for any school.

But in closing, let me say that having glanced back sixty-five years as I have here, I realise - now more than ever - that there will always be a

place of affection in my heart for those five formative years I spent at ‘The Tech’. I wish High Wycombe Technical School’s successor and its students well.

“From little acorns mighty oaks do grow.”

Stuart Rooksby

You, too, can YouTube!

IN 1963, around the time that Stuart Rooksby left “The Tech” and went to work as a projectionist in Beaconsfield, the High Wycombe Film Society had already earned a reputation for producing award-winning 16mm amateur ciné films. That year their film of West Wycombe won the prestigious gold star award in the Amateur Cine World “Best Ten” competition. It has been shown in film shows on many occasions since, but it had to wait 40 years for YouTube to come into being, providing a means for everybody to access digitised videos on demand, and another decade or so for the High Wycombe Society (as part of the SOFA – “Save Our Film Archive”- project), to create a digitised copy for the Wessex Film and Sound Archive to include on their YouTube channel.

If you’re in the mood for a little light entertainment and have WiFi access – whether at home or out and about - why not head over to [YouTube](#)? Put “West Wycombe 1963” in the search box and you should get taken straight to the above film, or if you are reading this electronically you can click on the link here: [West Wycombe 1963 | High Wycombe Film Society | AV1664/B10](#).

If you want to see more of the SOFA films, just put “High Wycombe Film Society” into the search box instead and click on “View full playlist” to browse what’s available.

YouTube is the largest video-sharing platform in the world. It now hosts billions of publicly viewable videos, and that number is climbing at an estimated rate of hundreds of hours of viewable material being uploaded every minute. So it is hardly surprising that it can be difficult to find what you are looking for. There are in fact very many films connected to High Wycombe’s local history of widely varying quality, most of which are rarely viewed.

Anyone can set up their own channel and load video content and/or create playlists. But YouTube’s algorithms will tend to favour popular channels so niche submissions can get overlooked. The High Wycombe Society does not have its own YouTube channel, but I’m beginning to think that perhaps it should, just to collate High Wycombe related films. Is there anyone reading this who would like to set one up and curate a list or lists that we could then recommend to others?

In the meantime, I have been exploring what is already on there. It’s a time-consuming process, the challenge being to find those of good enough quality and substantive enough content to recommend to others.

So, what would I put in my “playlist” were I to create one from what I’ve seen to date?

I would begin with the Pathé newsreels. Just put “High Wycombe Pathe news” into the search box on [YouTube](#) and you will be rewarded with a lot of short films. They include several vintage views of the mayor-weighing, and a “Farewell to Strike Command in 1968” plus some less-predictable items such as that of “BEA air hostesses” taking it in turn to ride on the wing of a Tiger Moth aeroplane for an air display!

If you know the exact title of a film, it’s usually straightforward just to put that into the search box. I often suggest people watch “Portrait of High Wycombe 1951”, but I have sometimes told people to look for “A portrait of High Wycombe” which I have only recently discovered is a completely different film which probably wouldn’t make it to my playlist.

Recent additions to YouTube include many films giving aerial views of our town. Just put “High Wycombe drone” into the search box and you will find several delightful films posted by local photographers including drone footage. Some of these have made their debut via social media but the films remain accessible on YouTube. One I particularly enjoyed shows Wycombe under a light covering of snow accentuating the shapes of the roofs on the buildings.

Putting “High Wycombe” followed by any keyword of interest such as “High Wycombe chairs” works well, too. Or if you have a particular location of interest such as “Castle Hill House High Wycombe” or “Pann Mill” you may be surprised by the number of videos. I was particularly pleased to see a talk I had been unable to attend four years ago and also to find a film taken at a recent Pann Mill Open Day.

So, what’s on your playlist?

JK

Delving into Newspaper Archives

HIGH WYCOMBE LIBRARY has recently de-commissioned its micro-film readers. Equipment that was once indispensable for a wide range of research purposes is now considered surplus to requirements. The gradual growth of online applications has resulted in diminishing demand for access to microfilm and in recent times the most common (but not quite the only) local use of microfilm has been to view past issues of the Bucks Free Press (BFP) that could not be viewed online through resources such as the British Newspaper Archive.

But, earlier this year, the BFP announced their own new digital archive created in partnership with Newspapers.com (by Ancestry).

415,000 pages of news are available online, starting with the contents of the very first edition in 1856 right up to and including 2023. Subscribers to the digital edition of the BFP get full access to the archive for free (which works out significantly cheaper than taking out a subscription to Newspapers.com).

The new archive is a delight to use. Tasks which previously have demanded time-consuming trawls through many editions of the newspaper, with a risk of missing an item of significance, can now be undertaken relatively reliably in minutes by using the search box.

Recalling that my first camera was a Kodak "instamatic", I entered this single word into the search box just to see what if anything the BFP had to say about it. I found numerous adverts. One in 1963 (the year in which it was launched) was for the Crendon Camera centre where you could reserve one for £2 15s 3d. Another that year for Keen's photographers included an illustration of a camera quite like the one I remember.

In those days film was expensive, and a cartridge would only allow 12 exposures, which then had to be developed. There was no way of knowing how good a photo was going to be until the whole film had been developed – and paid for.

Putting "Brownie" into the

search box, I discovered that, as early as 1928, Brownie cameras could be purchased in High Wycombe from J M Hughes, the Dispensing Chemist at 7 High Street or from R P Bristow, the

Cash Chemist at 17 Oxford Street. Adverts appeared regularly in the Bucks Free Press. The price was 10s 6d.

In 1929 J M Hughes obtained new premises on the London Road for their "complete modern pharmacy" and started describing themselves as Photographic Specialists. A distinguishing feature of J M Hughes, Ltd., was their pride in a dispensing machine for Kodak film. In a 1930 advert they boldly proclaimed to offer service AT ANY HOUR on Sundays or at Nights. The films dispensed were for 8 exposures at a cost of 1s.

Developing and printing were carried out on the premises and there are many adverts which show keen competition over turnaround times.

I have searched in vain for a photograph that shows the dispensing machine on the outside of the shop.

There are some photos of the High Street accessible online via SWOP (Sharing Wycombe's Old Photographs) where it is just possible to see a banner outside J M Hughes advertising Kodak film with "developing and printing – 24 hrs". (See SWOP references RHW:10012 and MHW:08647 at www.swop.org.uk).

Where would you like to delve next?

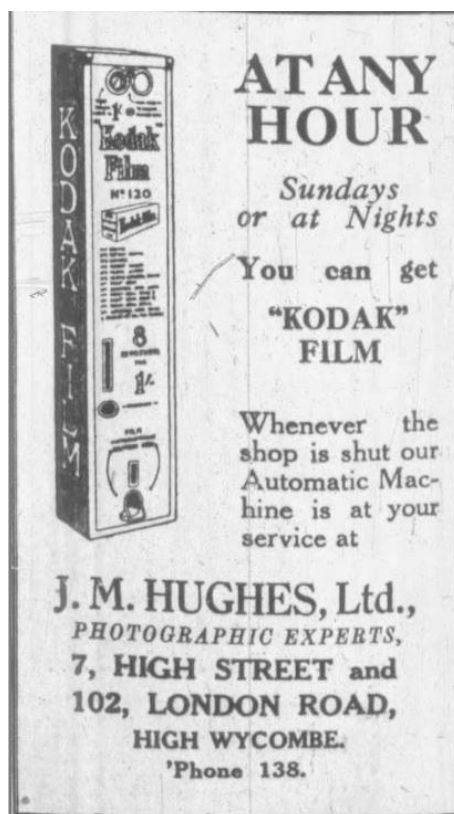
JK

Images on this page courtesy of the Bucks Free Press archive



Above: A 1963 advert for Keen's included a picture of an Instamatic camera

Below: A 1930 advert for J M Hughes featured 24hr service from a dispensing machine



All things Wyrd and Wonderful

Mark Page and Stevyn Colgan of Wycombe Creatives, are organising an event in February 2026 which promises to be “A Spectacular Celebration of Local Myth and Community Creativity.”

Mark openly admits that they have set out “to create something joyful and slightly mischievous to remind everyone of the strange and wonderful stories buried right beneath our feet in High Wycombe.” Stevyn says: “Expect colour, noise, a bit of theatrical mayhem, and a dragon you won’t forget in a hurry!”

Wyrd Wycombe will take to the streets on Sunday 1st February 2026, and everyone is invited to join in the fun. There will be a parade in the High Street followed by a live performance: of a battle between the legendary Wycombe Wyrms – a mythical water dragon said to lurk in Hughenden Lake – and a fully armoured knight.

The dramatic reconstruction will unfold in front of the Guildhall and the ‘Pepperpot’ and include specially commissioned music and original poetry.

The Wycombe Wyrms costume will take centre stage in a related supporting exhibition at the **We Make Wycombe Hub** in the Cornmarket from 20th January to 3rd February 2026 (open Tuesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays).



An exclusive limited-edition 2026 *One Wyrms* commemorative metal coin is being created featuring the above design by “[L127](#)” and a more traditional view of the guildhall by [Griff](#) on the other side.

Visitors to the exhibition can expect to see newly commissioned photographs that bring local myths and Wycombe folklore vividly to life – and a related book, which will be available for purchase.

Wyrd Wycombe aims to combine creative talent with community spirit and chase away any winter blues. Look out for further details in the local press.



The High Wycombe Society Newsletter is produced four times a year and usually contains articles relating both to the Society’s activities and of more general local interest.

Membership of the Society is open to all who care about our town: its past, its present and its future. Society members pay a small annual subscription which covers the cost of communications including this Newsletter. Details can be found on our website and any enquiries about

membership should be sent to membership@highwycombesociety.org.uk.

The Society organises talks and other events which are open to the public and are FREE to attend unless otherwise advertised. Up to date programme details can be found on our website: www.highwycombesociety.org.uk

The Pann Mill Group hosts 3 open days each year in May, July and September. The May Open Day is arranged to coincide with the Sunday of the National Mills Weekend so in 2026 this will be on **Sunday 10th May**.

Past editions of the Newsletter can be viewed on our website at [Newsletter Archive - The High Wycombe Society](#)

Contributions Invited.

Please send material for consideration for inclusion in future editions addressed to me, Jackie Kay, as The Editor at 19 Hepplewhite Close, High Wycombe, Bucks HP13 6BZ (Tel: 01494 534876), or preferably by email to: newslettereditor@highwycombesociety.org.uk All contributions to the next edition must be received by **20th February 2026**