



# A Collection of Memories from former Boarders and Housemasters

**DAVID WILDE (1951 – 1954)**

On the first day at Firth House I remember coming down the stairs after placing some gear in the Dorm. Several boys were standing there looking sad. I spoke to one and became quite friendly with him, after a few weeks we became adjusted to the routine.

We did have an older boy to help if we needed assistance. He would accompany us to town for the first visit as we were allowed to the city on a Friday night after school.

One of the popular places was the waffle shop to satisfy youthful hunger. The proprietor would call out *one of the best for a man from out west – a round or two for a pound or two* when you ordered one he would give you the choice of jam or syrup.

The House Master, Mr Holmes, was fairly strict and old-fashioned. Once he caught several of us fooling in the Dorm and sent us down-stairs. We thought for the cane. However, he told us to write a letter home and say that we were a confounded nuisance. We were to put it in an addressed envelope for him to post to our parents. I later enquired, and no such letter had been received. I am sure he must have read them to see what we had written.

In the first few weeks, new boys were asked questions by the older boys, one was *did they have any sisters?* This questioning was usually at the meal table. Nick-names were quite often created at the meal table also. One new country-boy was asked if his sister had any curves, he gave a blank look at the questioner who asked again in a firmer voice, he hesitated for a few seconds and replied *she has got round shoulders, is that what you mean?* which brought laughter to the table.

With the arrival of Sam Meads, a new era emerged. He was firm but was able to get alongside the boys. He was well respected by the majority. He had a few sayings, two of them were:

*Take your hands out of your pockets boy and give your belt a chance.*

*And you didn't stand very close to the razor this morning boy.* I remember him saying this to a boy who replied *I forgot to put a blade in Sir.*

Sam taught the General Science class I was in. After experiments in the Lab he would dictate the process, materials used and result. He would spell the difficult words. Sometimes we used a Pneumatic

trough. He would spell Pneumatic and say a *silent P like the P in sea bathing* which brought laughter to the class.

Unfortunately petty theft began. Sam was swift to act. During prep one morning one Dorm was requested to go back to the dorm. The corridor and stairs were lined with Prefects. The boys were to stand in a line in the middle of the Dorm. Starting from one end, as he came to each boy, Sam would ask him to empty out his pockets. After about four boys, the marked money appeared. The rest of the boys were sent back to the prep room. The culprit was dealt with by dismissal.

I received a Christmas card from this boy for a number of years. He said that Sam sent him a card each year for quite a few years which showed the softer side of the man.

On another occasion, things were going missing from lockers in the changing room. The culprit was caught by boring a hole in the wall of the cleaner's cupboard with a boy inside watching through the peep hole. The culprit was dismissed.

The Police were called on one occasion as one of the kitchen maids was entertaining men in her room at night. A stop was put to this by a Police raid.

Sam gathered a working squad once a week. They used the school tractor and trailer and were armed with picks and shovels along with a sledge hammer. They took off rough corners on the driveway banks. This was good for the boys and no doubt stress relief for Sam who wore boots, shorts, football jersey and army mess cap.

One day a boy locked the key in the music room after his piano practice. As I came along the passage a few boys and Sam were standing by the door. As I met up with them Sam was using an axe to get the door open the Meads way.

Some went on weekend leave occasionally. Those who were left did homework, wrote letters, played cricket or football on the ground behind the House and also basketball in the Old Boys Pavilion. Sam called for all fourth formers and above to go to the prep room. This time it was for a talk on sex - as when he was a junior master at least one boy nearly had a breakdown worrying about sex - he said he didn't want this to happen again. I found it helpful as all the official education by my mother was to enquire if I knew where babies came from, watch out for ladies who would lead you astray and never let your private parts touch the

public urinal along with what I had picked up at primary school.

Sam told us to keep quiet about it at the main school as there were some teachers there who would be against such teaching. He didn't want to cause a stir.

Sam called everyone to a special meeting in the prep room one evening. He said we had become careless and messy around the house. He referred to the weekend when he was showing three ladies around who were considering sending their sons to Wellington College. He said he had never been so embarrassed in all his life as they walked between the dorms he said that football shorts, jerseys and jock straps were strung up all over the place. *This is not good enough* he said, the lines were to be used and drying clothes were not to be hung out the windows or on window catches.

Dancing classes were held on Saturday mornings when the Ball season was approaching. Girls from Wellington East Girls' College were our partners. It was here that we were able to ask a girl if she would like to be our partner for the school ball. If we couldn't find a partner we could apply for a "partner required" which left it to chance. Occasionally other schools would contact the house master asking for male partners. On one occasion we were invited to Marsden Girls College Ball at Karori. Several of us went by tram. Before the dance started the head mistress welcomed everyone and made it clear that the noise level was to be kept low and there were to be no Haka's. It was a tradition that we performed the Firth House Haka at the end of the dance. The dance went well with everyone enjoying themselves. When the band stopped at the end of the last dance one of the boys ran to the middle of the floor and gave the Firth House Haka call, however, no-one else made a move and he quickly moved, red-faced, back to his partner.

After saying goodbye we made our way to the tram stop just in time to catch the last tram back to College.

A few boys were privileged to use the hobbies room. Some did woodwork others metal work, some made simple radios. One of the boys decided to make some plonk and had a recipe his uncle used. The ingredients were obtained as well as bottles. A bucket was borrowed from the cleaner, (this was returned after bottling, gleaming inside like a new bucket). The bottles were placed in the bottom of the cupboard then padlocked in. In the morning there was a big pool on the floor. Most of the bottles had broken in



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the night. One of the boys said he enjoyed drinking what was left.

What I always remember is that the gospel reading in Assembly that morning was about putting new wine into new wine skins because if you put new wine into old wineskins, breakage and loss could occur. I always associate this passage in three of the gospels with the loss of plonk as well as its true meaning.

Sam sent two boys with a suitcase to the bank to collect the pocket and church money. At the time we received two shillings and sixpence plus three pence for church. On this day the boys stopped for some refreshment on the way home. When they arrived back they reported to Sam that they had left the suitcase in the Milk Bar. Sam rushed to his house and brought his car down and took the boys back to town. Fortunately the case was still under the table so there wasn't any delay in receiving our pocket money. We always enjoyed receiving mail. It was always appreciated. I was fortunate my mother wrote twice a week so I was able to keep up with news from home.

The end of the term usually came quickly after the half way mark. Those of us who travelled by train went to the station by truck. The carrier arrived early in the morning; all the suitcases were loaded on. One or two would get into the cab the rest would pile on the tray with the cases. We would sing most of the way. One of the favourite ones was "so long, it's been good to know you" we also waved and cheered to the people walking to work.

At the last Assembly we sang *Forty Years On* we thought forty years was a long way off but it soon passed by.

I am please my parents made the sacrifice to send me to boarding school.

**ERNIE BARRINGTON (1964-1968)**  
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Greetings to all Firth House students who have made it to the reunion – especially those who have come from overseas. I hope that you manage to rekindle some of the friendships that you made in earlier days, and also have a lot of laughs – especially at the expense of the Masters and other staff, many of whom won't be there to defend themselves. Students get the last laugh!

There are some negative things about being a boarder, as I am sure Firth House Old Boys will be aware, but there are many positives too. Finding ways to assert your individuality in an institution

which seemed to want to crush people into conformity could be quite character-building. Belonging to a select group within the College frequently asserting its superiority and reminding day boys that the Wellington College spirit would be nothing without Firth House, could be very bonding. And thinking of innovative ways to circumvent Firth House rules could be regarded as good training for the 'bush lawyers' among you. Finally, having to live with people of diverse personalities and outlooks yet forging strong friendships with some your fellow boarders could be the most positive thing of all.

Wellington College was my first teaching position – 1964 – and in my second year I joined the Firth House staff and remained there until I left for the UK at the beginning of 1968. I returned for one final year in 1970 before I moved on to a Head of Department position at Wainuimata College.

Just before writing this, I took a look at the 1965 Firth House group photo which I still have, and there were very few people that I could not remember very clearly. It also made me realise that because I was just 25 years old when I started at Wellington College, some of my very first students will now be in their 60's and many will be in their 50's. It seems so long ago, but because staff interacted with students at Firth House more frequently than day boys, the memories of those students and times are very strong.

Living at Firth House had negatives and positives for Masters as well. The negatives are easy to recall; supervising evening prep and trying to do some marking at the same time; being the Master on duty in the weekend and having to deal with all the minor crises that occurred; supervising the meals in the dining room (and passing on food complaints from students to the Matron); and worst of all having to settle the 3rd and 4th form dorms after lights out.

On the positive side we had a lot of fun and much laughter at the foibles of fellow human beings. It also gave me experience with dealing with students who had a wide range of motivations – in other words, some that were bent on disruption. This stood me in good stead when I taught in North West London in 1968. The principal at the London school warned me that some of the classes were really 'tough'. Nah, they were pussycats compared to 4SHB, 1964, and Upper Five 2, 1965! In the latter classes there was often much sharp repartee, and a couple of experts in that direction was Tom Mark in 4SHB and Dougee Wright in Upper Five 2. Tom finally copped it from me outside in the corridor

after an infraction in the lab – but despite his very sharp wit he didn't try and talk his way out of it and took his punishment with courage. They were exasperating classes for an inexperienced teacher but a hellava lot of fun.

Getting used to speaking to and dealing with large groups also gave me valuable experience, and when I moved on from Secondary teaching to become a lecturer at Auckland University, teaching to a tiered lecture theatre of 200-300 was a pushover. Once you had learnt how to control a stropky Firth House dining room of 120 students who were disgruntled with the lousy meal they had just finished, one would find most large groups docile by comparison!

The issue of food was always a rumbling discontent. Students used to assert that the Masters got better food than the rest of the dining room – but in fact we got the same food as students, but the quantity was probably a little greater.

Insisting on silence in the dorms once lights were out did seem to be common sense since some students would talk for hours and stop others from sleeping. It was damn hard to enforce though. The common practice was to wait a while and then sneak up to the dorm and on hearing talking, ask for the culprits to come out. I can't remember a time when someone didn't emerge from the darkness to receive their punishment. Sometimes there was very obvious padding underneath the pyjamas – which they were asked to remove before getting their whack. This usually settled the dorm down for the night.

Some of the pranks initiated by the students were very clever. One April Fool's early morning a student said "look out the dorm window sir" – and down on the rugby pitch overlooked by Firth House all the Master's cars were lined up. The cars had been broken into in the wee hours of the morning and driven down to the field. I had a fairly clapped out mini which wasn't too hard to break into, but I was astonished that some of the newer cars had suffered the same fate. A brilliant prank, which showed what adolescent cunning and skill could achieve.

Other funny incidents and pranks are too numerous to mention except to quickly mention the attempts by students to stuff their beds with pillows to resemble a body and then skive off for the night. Some of these were discovered, but I am also sure that many weren't and some students managed to engineer extra leave for themselves.



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I am sure that before the Formal Dinner is over in The Brierley Theatre, Rick King and others, lubricated with an ale or two, will have regaled you with some of their very funny anecdotes and that you will once again, and maybe the last time for a while, get together to do the Firth House Haka.

I salute you!

## WAYNE BREEZE (1976-1980)

Firth House was our youth, and we had great times, as one would expect as most boys have great times in their youth. We have heard stories of escapades, masters and matrons. I would like to take this opportunity to now, even in the presence of a few scabs, discuss the seniority system, which was always under a cone of silence (even today it feels odd to reveal it), for our good times were a little unique as they were framed by the seniority system.

When I arrived at Firth House, the first thing I recall being told as my parents drove away was that I was now a GROT. I had no idea what a GROT was, but it didn't sound good. After a few days of running about like headless chickens we third formers were gathered together for our HOO talk.

The HOO talk took place on the pine covered slope next to the Governor Generals House, where the fourth formers, very strategically positioned up hill from us, proceeded to impart the law of the House. Brian Scott, Peter Hooper and Brett Winstanley and others detailed how things worked and what GROT's were.

GROT's were low life inferiors, the bottom of a year based cascading system of authority. You would open and wait at all doors for seniors, preface all speech to them with "excuse me", and most importantly do whatever you were told to do by a senior.

A hand was raised and a fellow GROT asked *what happens if a senior and a masters instructions conflict?* and the answer given *Grant Smith, Head House Prefect rules on such matters.*

So I got it, we were low life. House Prefects our High Priests. This did not seem too good to a boy who had just a few days before left the apron strings of a warm home behind...BUT there was one more piece of information **All BOARDERS, including GROTs, are SUPERIOR to all SCABS.** We were lucky to be a GROT!

We were told to stick together, as a year

group in the House, and as the House within the school. That House Boys ruled this school, day boys are called SCABS, SCABS were part-timers that ran home to their mothers in the evening, that the school was our place, we were the schools backbone and soul. It was our school.

No day boy was ever to be allowed to pick on a boarder, no other faction to rule our roost, never were we to be called SCABS by day boys, and any offending SCAB was to be reprimanded by the House boys in the traditional manner. Wellington College was our patch.

Firth House in our era was a multicultural environment, with Maori, Polynesians and people of all backgrounds. All were together, simply as House Boys.

On reflecting about this I wondered if perhaps we were the fore runners of modern political correctness, but that may be taking it a bit far. I recall when we received our first two Chinese boys from Hong Kong, and immediately for ease of pronunciation renamed them "Ping" and "Pong". Thankfully this didn't cause too much harm as "Pong" went onto to be Dux.

The house then supported all winter sport, so long as it was rugby. Earlier speakers have mentioned changing times. We too had changing times with the departure of Seddon Hill and "G.T" Graeme Thomas at the end of 1978. With their departure came the introduction of soccer posts on the number 2. Well the posts went up, and were painted pink, only to be white washed, and then again painted pink. Harvey Rees-Thomas was understandably not too impressed and came to the Dining Hall and told the House as much. Then I believe it was Te Moana, who undertook a symbolic act, with an axe. Yes we were often irreverent, politely irreverent.

We were gutted when told of the decision to close Firth House. It was our fifth year in the House at that stage, and we believed its closure would remove the schools backbone and soul. We had come to believe much of that which we were told at our HOO talk. Looking around today at the sporting and cultural diversity within the College one could make a good case that we were in some ways holding the school back with some of our singular views and traditions, but that was not how we felt, nor what we intended.

We discussed the pending closure and realised there as nothing we could do to prevent it. We talked of having a party to celebrate, an extravagant party, perhaps even a Firth House Ball, with a free open bar, adults "skiffs" to clear our

tables appealed, live music.... were we dreaming or could we do it? So in the age old House tradition, using all of the collective emotional IQ Doug Lingard referred to as a boarders trait yesterday, we turned to alcohol.

No not the usual illicit drinking, rather the above table buying and selling of wine. At this point I should take a moment to thank so many of you for buying our wine, for much of it was sold to you, as we supplied the Firth House Wine at the Firth House Old Boys gathering to commemorate the House closure in 1980.

We knew we needed to raise a lot of money, well into the double digit thousands, to have a Firth House Ball. We undertook a road trip to see a House Old Boy by name of John Buck in his then messy little office at Te Mata Estate. The deal was struck and we ordered a lot of wine - I don't recall exactly but in the region of 60 dozen. Firth House labels were prepared for the wine by Martin Jarvis, and John Buck arranged to have them affixed.

The wine all up costing us about \$2 per bottle was then sold for \$10 a bottle. Again thank you. Memorabilia was indeed a profitable business.

We had a great Firth House Ball, with superior food, open bar, adult skiffs and music by the Roger Fox Big Band. It was an excellent night and yes numerous day boys also attended - for as was always the case in reality there were many day boys that were good friends of the House.

On the last night of Firth House, we had planned a final celebration, but the then Head Housemaster uncovered a very large stash of beer in crates. The first I heard of the discovery was when told it was all being taken to the masters lounge kitchenette, and being tipped down the sink. The master-boys relationship under the seniority system was always a balancing act, but now it looked like it would boil over into a riot on the last night. We went and implored that the beer not be tipped out, of course no one expected it to be returned, but please Sir, surely this isn't how it should end. The tipping out of the beer ceased. Twelve hours later we awoke and the House was over.

## MURRAY FERGUSSON (1947-1951)

Every week we were given two shillings and sixpence pocket money, three pence of this was to go into the church plate. Compulsory church service was each Sunday morning at St Mark's for the Anglicans. (A short cut to the church was via the number one football ground



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through a hole in the fence where someone had conveniently loosened a couple of boards).

Anyway one of my friends felt he could put his money to better use than in the church plate, this plate being passed around the congregation, 80% of whom were Firth House boys, by some elderly gent whose eyesight was not the best. So my enterprising friend bored a hole through the centre of a silver three penny coin, threaded an elastic band through the hole, and attached the other end on the stretch to a leather band under his shirt sleeve around his forearm. He would place the coin in the plate, let it go, and it would disappear up his sleeve, unnoticed by the elderly plate-holder. To my knowledge one coin lasted the whole of his five year stay at Firth House, thereby making him 10% richer than the rest of us slightly more honest blokes.

## HUGH WILLIAMS (1953 - 1957)

On a misty, drizzly Sunday afternoon in late October 1956, those peering into the gloom out of their "cell" windows overlooking the Top Ground saw Young (was he "JA"?) haring out of the murk towards the House, He had nearly regained shelter when there was an ENORMOUS flash from the far side of the Ground, followed a second or so later by a GIGANTIC explosion and the dilapidated Hockey shed which was just below Wellington East leaped several metres into the air, crashed back to Earth and slumped drunkenly to the side, all but collapsing.

It turned out that Young had Town Leave on the Friday, spent all his pocket money on fireworks, combined them all into one huge firework and took his handiwork over to the Hockey Shed on the Sunday to see if it would go off.

Go off it most certainly did !

The incident lead "Fishy" Heron to announce - with his characteristic dry understatement - at Monday's Assembly:

*In my time as a Headmaster, I have had to lay down some unusual School Rules. When I was Headmaster of Rongotai, I had to lay down a Rule that boys were forbidden from throwing rocks or kicking footballs over the incoming aeroplanes - as they were doing. [Rongotai was Rongotai Aerodrome in those days, Wellington International Airport lay a few years into the future].*

*Now, for Wellington College, I have to lay down another unusual Rule: - Boys are forbidden from manufacturing and*

*exploding Bombs at College. Young will report to the Headmasters Study after Assembly.*

## JEREMY COOPER (1958 - 1962)

I got a letter from Dougal McLean, before he sadly died in 2008. He was a chartered accountant, married to Lynne for many years, and left two daughters and a son (who also went to College). An enthusiastic Bridge player, even writing articles in the *NZ Bridge Magazine*. A couple of extracts from the letter might be of interest.

*The funny thing is that some of my memories of Firth House 37 years ago are sharper than what happened last week. Who could ever forget that phrase 'consistent inconsistency'? Or that mother of all rules penned by AG himself (By God, I can still picture how he wrote his initials at the bottom of every notice he pinned on the board!) 'No more than one boy in one bed at one time (signed) AG'.*

Memories from 1958 comes flooding back - playing rugby on the lower field - chasing after a long raking kick into the opposition's corner - Brent Swift overtaking me, slowing down so I could catch up and then taking off again - laughing at me as he looked over his shoulder and shouting 'Come on, speed up or you'll never get there.' My response was something like 'But I am running as fast as I can.' Fleet-footed I was not, and to think that's when rugby was a slow game.)"

Brent Swift probably has a lot to answer for. I remember some boarders in the hobbies room running a Crown and Anchor school. Brent and I figured that if we put 3d in and then doubled up each time (sticking to the same symbol, anchor, I think) we were bound to get our 3d back, and if we got a double we would make a very tidy profit. The organisers had not put a limit on the game, unwisely so. We were doing OK until we had a run of bad dice., 3d, 6d, 1/-, 2/-, 4/- (4 shillings was our weekly pocket money) , 8/-, 16/, 1 pound 12/-. Eight Losses. We had to put on the table 3 Pounds 4/- which we could scrape up, but could afford no more. Tensions were terribly high on both sides of the board. We all realised that stakes were far higher than either side intended. No anchors, we lost a total of 6 Pounds 7/- 9d. Two anchors, we made a profit of 3 Pounds 4/- 3d. Three anchors, would cost the organisers 6 Pounds 8/- net loss. The dice were rolled - one anchor. Thank God. Overall gain 3d. We were all able to walk away, our honour/mana intact. Needless

to say it never happened again, for a betting limit was quickly placed on the game. Brent went on to be a very capable stockbroker, no doubt his skills having been finely honed by incidents such as this.

## JOHN BULLEYMENT (1979 - 1983)

One of the memorable escapades we used to undertake was carried out after dark.

After lights were out we would carefully plan our stealth mission, from one dormitory to another, where we would destroy as many of the other boys beds as possible.

One dorm raid in particular stands out as the greatest one of all.

We quietly snuck out of our fire escape, down and around the whole building even past the masters lounge window, sneaking a quick peek as we passed.

We climbed the fire escape of the dormitory on the far opposite corner of firth house from our own, where one of our boys had quietly sneaked into their dormitory and opened their fire escape door for us to burst in and get about our business.

We pulled mattresses with boys on them off the bunks, destroying their beds as best we could.

The recipients of the raid could only fight back using their pillows, these were Firth House rules, past down through the decades of dorm raiding.

However the odd book sometimes found their way into the pillow case, which made for a healthy blow to the head.

I remember bunks being pulled over and crashing to the floor, mattresses and bedding going out the windows, and down to the road leading up to the back field.

One of our boys, MacIndoe, took a healthy blow to the head, leaving him dazed and confused.

Part of the mission was to get back to your bed without getting caught by the Masters as this would only result in leather on bum.

As we ran down the upper corridor back to our dormitory, the matron came out of her room wielding her horse crop, catching Paul McLauchlan in his nuts.

By the time the masters had come upstairs we were tucked up in our beds, hearts



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beating out of our chests trying not to pant with heavy breath as this would be a giveaway sign.

However, Paul McLauchlan's panting was more of a low groaning noise, which Matron easily picked out as her victim and hence we were marched downstairs and received two of the best from Mr Albrey, which was bad planning on our behalf as he was a squash player and had a great backhand swing.

During those years at Firth House we would compete for the most strapping in each term, I won that particular term with 42, something I am very proud of as it's always nice to be a winner - (yeah right).

## **KAHU PATTISON (1953 - 1957)**

### **Welcome to Cell 6B Sir!**

I am Meads the senior Housemaster in our time had a knack of knowing what was going on all the time at Firth House. This was done in a variety of ways such as very quietly slipping into a dorm after lights out and lying quietly on the Prefect's bed to listen to what was being said, being in the House at all hours of the day or night or setting traps for the few culprits. You could never guarantee that you would not run into Sam at any hour or minute of each twenty four. He would also hear the odd comment not for his ears and then would then proceed to extract the information that he required from the poor student who usually caved in and confessed to what was going on. Sam was extremely well regarded and was very hard to lie to. In fact he used to go around saying he knew everything about Firth House and what went on within the four walls. Mostly he did, but one J K Watson always used to say to him, *You don't know Cell 6B Sir*. Sam told me later that he always took this with a grain of salt and considered it just a wind up.

I think it was in the fifth form that four of us had the job in the boiler room. It was a place that we could call our own and during the winter was a warm and cosy residence if only a little dusty. The boiler room was the base for the water heating in Firth House that had many water radiators for heating the lower floor. Prep Rooms, Studies, Master's room and office amongst others. It was driven by a coke (the other variety was unknown to us then) boiler that needed to be stoked a few times a day. The great benefit of running the boiler room was that at any time of the day or night toast could be made. If you had a good relationship with the kitchen staff and we made sure we did, there was an endless supply of bread and butter.

One of the drawbacks of the job was you had to maintain the radiators in going order. No plumber was called in as Sam expected us to be self sufficient. If there was an air lock and some of the radiators went out we had to fix it usually by bleeding some units to get the air out. It was on one of these missions that the fault was proving hard to locate that we pulled back the lino in one of the Prefects cells to get a better look and found a trap door. Unfortunately at exactly the same moment that we pulled the trap door up and were looking down into the darkish depths Sam made his presence known. He was obviously in a rush with something on his mind, but made the comment *What's down there*. We replied *not very much* and he took off. Knowing Sam, at some stage when he had more time to think about it, he would be back to check it out.

As soon as he had gone we went to one of the seniors that we could talk to and left it to him. There was a hurried tidy up down there and a check to make sure that nothing personal was left to incriminate anyone. The risk was too great to try to clear it out.

Sure enough a couple of days later Sam decided to explore where the trapdoor lead to. Firth House was built on a sloping hill, three stories at the front and one at the back. The bicycle shed was here with a brick wall behind acting as an earth retainer. The trap door led into the cavity directly behind this wall which had been excavated to form a room about ten feet by ten feet and with about an eight foot ceiling. Here was the answer to where the glass ware out of the school labs had been slowly disappearing over the last few months. It was known that it was disappearing but where had been the question but with no answers. In one swoop Sam had solved the riddle, for in front of his eyes was a full-blown still. Try as he might he was unable to discover who was responsible, for it had been arranged that if he did find out, nobody knew anything.

After a lot of trying Sam knew when it was time to give up. Welcome to Cell 6B Sir!

### **The Explosion of 1956**

During my years at Firth House the "Army of Meads" was always at work most weekends. Sam spent hours with compulsory volunteers, (you, you and you) digging out banks, shifting dirt, trimming trees and shrubs, planting the same and generally tidying up. He did a fantastic job of improving the grounds. He had a uniform that he always wore of hobnail boots, usually old rugby socks, shorts, old singlet and a sweat band. When we saw

these we knew that work was going to be on again.

After four years there, I knew the signs well and had often partaken in hours of hard work. At this stage, Sam had taken an intense dislike to the bank opposite the back of the Cleaner's Flat. It was a blind corner on the way around to where his house was. Since the two prefabs had been erected at this level there had been more traffic around this corner and I believed he thought that it could be a risk to Mrs Meads as well as himself going in and out.

This bank became a project to "day light". On memory it was at least two meters in height, was fairly wide as well of consisting of "hard rock". We had been on this project for about three of four weekends and could see further blisters and sweat yet before it was finished.

One night lying in bed in our small first year sixth dorm I formulated a plan to hasten this bank's demise. Since a small child I had watched my father split wood in the old fashion way, with a blasting gun, and from about fourteen had used this blasting gun myself. I knew where there was some blasting powder in a shed as well as a coil of fuse needed to set it off with safety. The next few days was spent in the hobby room and collecting the materials needed. A piece of  $\frac{3}{4}$  pipe, a broken broom handle of the correct size and a few steel drill bits and the first raid on the shed had to be made to obtain a piece of fuse cord to size the hole needed. After four years of intense training there were very few sheds or rooms that we were not able to get into. We had collected a large range of keys, were able to pick most locks if they were not too expensive, and had learned to open most combination locks by feel and sound. Getting the cord proved easy one dark night.

Straight back into the workshop to put the gun together. We rammed a piece of broom handle down the pipe and crimped the end off in a steel vice to our satisfaction. Then drilled the smaller hole through the pipe at the correct place and after doing a couple of test drills in wood to get the correct size, drilled the hole that would hold the fuse in place. Of course this hole only went part way through. At this stage only two of us knew what was going on. A very reliable mate and myself. Another raid on the shed was successful and we obtained the amount of powder that we needed. All was hidden through a hole in the brick wall of the Hobbies Room through to under the Prep Room made the year before for a hidey hole for things that were better not found. This was behind a loft that held all sorts of timber and other



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such things. We had obtained a jar with lid to keep the powder in and dry.

We soon had our opportunity to operate. It had to be around December because Sam was involved in marking School Certificate Papers in his office at the House and his wife and children had gone out in their car. This quiet Saturday afternoon when most of the boys were out for Saturday leave, we quietly got our gear together. It had to be as safe as we could get it. The extras were an old "Horse Cover", a sledge hammer out of Sam's shed behind his house and some blocks of wood to protect the end of the gun while we were driving it in. We got the rest out from their hidey hole and loaded and tampered the gun and blocked it with the usual paper wad.

Up to the bank we went and we had certainly picked the right time, not a sole around. Even the Irish cleaners appeared to be having an afternoon nap in their flat at the end of the Sick Bay.

We drove the gun carefully into the rock using several pieces of wood to protect the end. Finally we were there and then fitted the fuse. The old horse cover went over the gun to slow its progress down when the gun blew out of the ground and then we lit the fuse. We had given it plenty of length as we wanted to be well clear and up in the gorse below the Observatory so that we could plan our next move depending on what the result was. If necessary we could get up to the top ground unseen and at an opportune time come back down from a long walk and know nothing. There was one hell of a bang. We waited a time and slowly made our way back under cover of the gorse. The only ones around were the cleaners. We had been right; they were having a nap and had been rudely woken up. They were very superstitious and thought that something terrible had happened. They were standing outside just staring at the bank as though it was going to spring into life and "get" them. We could see the gun still firmly imbedded in the rock, the pipe at the end was split wide open with a jagged split down from the top, an old horse cover lying further over with a burnt black hole in its centre and smoking slightly, but nowhere was the piece of broom handle to be seen.

Still no one else had come, unbelievable, we had a chance! First to the cleaners who we had always kept a good relationship with. We were able to explain it was critical to our futures that this was kept quiet and they fortunately agreed. Down to Sam's shed for a pick and back to furious digging to get the gun out.

It took a short while to get out and still nobody had come. Collected the evidence, returned the tools and back as quickly as possible to the hobbies room to put everything back in the hidey hole. At last with this done we thought we had a possibility of getting away with it.

With no mention, we got gamer over a day or two and put out a few feelers to find out if any had heard the bang. One chap came up with the information that he had just arrived in Sam's office on an errand when the bang went up. *What the hell was that* was Sam's exclamation. A quick thinking Firth House boy as most soon learnt to be came up with *Just one of the doors slamming in the wind Sir*. For once Sam didn't check it out any further.

That year when I left Firth House for the end of the third term I loaded the gun into the boot of dad's car but when I unpacked it was not there. I forgot all about it.

Many years after, Sam retired in Greytown and lived next door to my Aunt and Uncle. As was his habit he would get up very early and wander around his garden in his pyjamas and often came over for a yarn, particularly if he had news of a Firth House Old Boy. This morning his comment was *By the way, I found that Blasting Gun you made lying just outside the hockey ground door just after everyone left*. I was sure that he had no idea who was involved at the time, but being Sam he would have worked at it, talking to Old Boys until he had unravelled the mystery. Such was the man. He used to say *I know everything that goes on around here and only over my five years there it was only once he found out too late.* "

[Horse Cover:- Bed Spread on our beds. Sam Meads :- Senior House Master and a real Legend in his time].

## Unusual Phone Numbers

During my last year at Firth House, the placard that told you how to ring home and get the charges reversed back to your parent's account was the worse for wear. Sam decided that a new one was in order and he proceeded to order a new copy from Joe Wong, a Hong Kong student in our year that could produce beautiful copperplate writing.

Three of us were thinking about this and saw this as a chance to see how observant Sam was. After much persuasion we got Joe to use the number we gave him. He duly presented Sam with the finished product which was a work of art and Sam commented upon the unusual number he had used when instructed to give the number you wanted it to be charged to.

However it was duly hung up on the wall for all to see and copy. Some worked out the unusual number but said nothing to Sam. About three weeks later at about 9.00pm there came this huge bellow from Sam's office. *WONG WONG*. Joe duly fronted and Sam didn't mince words. He was smart enough to know that Joe had been put up to it and wanted to know who the culprits were. Give Joe his due, he held off but Sam had a fair idea who was responsible. He ended up at our cells and demanded to know. We confessed after a while and got dressed down. The problem was that Sam had sat there and looked at it for so long without working it out, the number was not the trouble, and it was only secondary.

The offending number **Give your home number - O410E**.

## MERV CROCKER (1942 - 1946)

The year 1942 was a very eventful year for the College as firstly the NZ Army had taken over the whole School. It was also my first year as a Boarder at Firth House coming from a primary school in the King Country with a roll of seven. The Army had not taken over Firth House so we were the only College pupils on site. All pupils were sent to various nearby schools such as St Pat's, Wellington Tech, St Mark's and believe it or not- the third formers were sent to Wellington East Girls' College. We were all too shy to have much to do with the girls at their College except we later discovered that the girls used to look down to the College swimming pool after school and during the week ends. They had a bird's eye view of activities at the pool.

We were often able to chat with the soldiers who were fully armed and on ready alert because the Japanese were rumoured to be so close to New Zealand. The first term quickly passed by, the Army vacated the College and we were all able to start functioning as the whole College with morning assembly, cadets, pipe and bugle bands etc.

I wind the clock forward to a number of years later when my wife was associated with the Inner Wheel Organisation in Auckland. We were both at a social function and I was introduced to this lady who was an Old Girl of Wellington East College. I told her the story of the third formers of that year attending Wellington East so I said jokingly that I could claim to be an Old Boy of Wellington East. Again I roll the clock forward several years to when I cleared our mail and lo and behold there was the invitation for me to attend the Wellington East Girls' College Jubilee as an "Old Pupil" No doubt this story was



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circulated around the Wellington East organising committee. I often wonder how many third formers of that time received similar invitations! I was so disappointed that I was unable to attend due to being overseas at the time of the Jubilee.

Life during the middle of World War II was quite difficult at times for Boarders at Firth House. We all had ration books for clothing, sugar, butter, petrol etc which must have been a nightmare for kitchen staff and Housemasters to cope with these extra problems.

During this period, the Government introduced legislation to prevent civilians from travelling more than 100 miles against the rail. My parents lived in the Taumarunui area which was approximately 250 miles from Wellington. A group of boys from Firth House lived north of Palmerston North so to circumvent the problem we caught the Dominion paper car which left Wellington at 2.00am. We stayed overnight with one of the boy's parents, then next morning we were collected by another boy's parents who took us to Hunterville in his gas producing car where we stayed another night. Our last leg of the journey was by "slow train" which was a goods train with one old carriage to our destination at Taumarunui. The whole journey took us three days as well as three days for us to return to College. In total we travelled six days of our fourteen-day school holiday. Quite an undertaking for a growing lad aged thirteen.!

## **RICK RONALD (1958 - 1962)**

Really, I did feel a bit of a fraud. After all, home was at most an hour's walk away across Mt Victoria to Roseneath. What sort of a child must I have been to have gone to a boarding school in my home town?

Easy - a child requiring some manners being battered into it. I remain proud to have been the most caned, in both the third and fourth forms as witnessed by notches in the belt. Douglas King, of the pink calamine lotion face of an evening, was a distant runner up.

One particular flogging stands out. We had observed that Mr Gough went through the homework room, once we were up in our dorm, lifting each desk lid to inspect the contents. We could see this from our blackened out dormitory window. I took some exception to this travesty of privacy and taped "F\*\*\* OFF GOUGH" to the underside of my desk lid. The inevitable explosion happened and the rugby player Tony was tasked to dish out six of the best. Should the event have taken place today,

I would have of course still placed the notice, but on someone else's desk lid.

Tom Cockburn was slightly evil. Mentally and neurologically stained by a threatened castration as we understood it, in a previous year. His sadism extended to landing each cane stroke in exactly the same spot despite the repositioning of one's posterior all the while having ones head under an extended drawer.

My own cruelty in stringing a girl from Taumarunui along (in the fourth form) so we could all enjoy her love letters. Come the Ball that year, her parents came down as well which terrified me, at the time. To be wed, prematurely?

Fish deliveries that came on the Thursday night and consequent discarded condoms slung out of the cooks quarters the next morning. Food that mostly tasted of gas that leaked out and into it. Now, how did they manage that?.

I only in later life worked out why the custard was called jerk. At the time I was convinced it had something to do with being thrust around.

Movies night included some weird and continuing episodes of something that must have predated *Star Wars*. Family-sized coke bottles plus aspirin. A crude hallucinatory fix that could have hospitalised us.

With our shoes, writing naughty (from a distance) messages on a frosty early field, early in the mornings.

Making a series of model airplanes over two or so years, each of which only lasted for one maiden flight.

## **BRENT TUOHY (1980 - 1982)**

still clearly recall the winter mornings, climbing out of our bunk-beds onto the hard cold wooden floor of our Dormitory as we made our way downstairs to the shower block.

Upon dressing and readying for school, our Dormitory Prefect would conduct the inspection of our beds, uniforms and of course polished shoes. If they weren't up to standard, there would be consequences. These consequences often included the likes of cleaning the senior's shoes!

As a 3rd former, we had very few privileges. Seniority ruled at Firth House and as a junior one soon learnt their place within.

I recall one example when our parents

came to 'Firth House' during the week one evening and collected both myself and my brother, to take us down-town to the mighty 'Athletic Park' to enjoy the 'Kiss' concert. The concert was great and we all had a wonderful time. After the concert, Mum and Dad dropped us back to 'Firth House' that evening and waved good-by.

What my brother and I didn't anticipate was the welcoming party waiting for us behind those doors. We were marched off to the senior's dormitories where we received a rather stern reminder of senior's privileges. Needless to say, that was the first and last time we ventured out for the year to enjoy such a privilege!

Despite what seemed to be heavy handed tactics at times at the hand of some of the seniors, we very quickly learnt a greater respect of our elders, with untold manners inherited. No regrets, nor ill-feeling. Care of this discipline, we all took enormous pride in our uniform and association with 'Firth House'. This was evident when slotting alongside some of our fellow day-boy counterparts. 'We felt special'.

One of the best examples of this special feeling within 'Firth House' was that of our very own Haka, 'Firth House, Keo-Rere', and the manner in which we performed it.

The drum that exploded from our 50 something strong Haka often drowned out that of the school Haka which at time had as many as 200 or more, boys chanting.

Our Haka practices took place after school at the back of the House track which leads up to the famous 'Gut-Buster'. [A hilly track we would run frequently which indeed busted one's guts!]. The Firth House Haka practices were not half-hearted and if you didn't give it 120%, needless to say you soon learnt about it from all of the seniors!

If you hadn't lost your voice afterward, or had red raw thighs from slapping them so hard, you simply weren't giving it 120%. We all gave it everything we had.

I can still recall some of the day-boys coming to me after we performed our Haka during a sporting event and commenting, *Wow you guys are so loud and good at your Haka!* You could taste their envy.

Once again; 'we felt special'.

There are so many fond memories I will always carry of 'Firth House', with none greater than the special bonds we forged with each other as close mates which for many of us, continue on today ...



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## DEREK BOUND (1962)

In the lower sixth dorm upstairs one night, some of the boys were mucking about after lights out.

The night was cloudy and the moon was up. Sometimes the dorm was bathed in light other times it became black when the moon went behind a cloud.

Gebbie from Levin and someone else grabbed Ussher's mattress and put it out the window propping it against the concrete ledge that ran along the front façade of Firth House just under the windows.

Ussher (from the rural metropolis of Whiterock) went out the window to get it. As he did the moon went behind a cloud and it went all dark inside the dorm.

When the moon came out from behind the cloud and brought the light back into the room, we found to our consternation both Ussher and his mattress had disappeared.

Fearing the worst we all ran downstairs in our pyjamas expecting to have a lot of explaining to do to the powers that be with Ussher in a mangled heap on the ground.

When we got there he was lying face up on his mattress with a look of triumph on his face. *Fooled you Bastards!* He said.

## JOHN SHERRING (1942-1946)

During WWII, at the start of Term One 1942, the College and Firth House were occupied by Army Units. The need to find class rooms at nearby schools such as Wellington East Girls' College resulted in a late start. Firth House became available about two weeks later, but the military presence remained until the May holidays.

Into this situation came eight 'new boys' as we were called, from a variety of places around the lower North Island, to meet up with one other who had spent 1941 there as a pupil at St Marks School.

During that first year one of us passed away at the House, but the remainder grew up and onto their various careers. Contact was maintained to the extent that we each knew where we were and did, though and we met at the odd college reunion.

In 1993 seven of the nine got together at Taupo, missing one who had died only months before. Ties were renewed and made more frequently. In February this year, we met again, along with our wives, at Waipawa, where David Wilson,

wife Elizabeth and family were the most marvellous hosts. Since 1993 we had lost Quentin Angus, and another, John Roake, was somewhere overseas.

Sixty-two years seemed to have passed very quickly but the memories and friendship over that time brought back many thoughts and stories; sentries at the gates to check passes whenever boys left or entered the College grounds; the fact that we considered ourselves to be Old Boys of Wellington East Girls' College along with about 150 others; the introduction of women teachers. Then there was Jimmy Hall, in command at Wellington East... At Assembly, to the boy who had carved his initials on a desk top... *It's yours; it has your name on it... Take it home and bring it back on Monday, dressed and stained properly!* ... Noted by all present. Today's discipline seems to be different.

## THEO SALT (1956-1960)

As Firth House no longer exists except in the minds of the old-boy boarders, I can now break the unwritten "Code of Honour" and reveal some of the Firth House secrets. Some of the details and names have been changed to protect the innocent and the guilty and to respect their privacy under the Act.

### Laundry Changes

Sunday: socks, towel, grey shirt, white shirt, underwear.

Wednesday: pillowslip, sheet, serviette, underwear, socks.

These were the laundry lists for changing twice a week. All items were labelled with name and a laundry number, 40 T. E. SALT [name rank and serial number]. Articles for laundering were placed in the appropriate wooden bin, were bagged up and sent to a commercial laundry. After an unspecified period, usually after our reserves had run out, the laundered item would be returned to the owner's storage space.

Note that there were only two changes of socks and underwear per week. Changes could be made more often but the supply would run out even earlier. Boarders with parents who lived locally sometimes took laundry home for mum. Fussy people could do their own laundry in cold water and risk getting it dried in the primitive drying rooms.

The only laundry that boarders had to do themselves was washing and drying sportswear and sometimes if pride dictated, white shirts. We accepted our lot and got used to being smelly wretches.

However our white linen serviettes always came back beautifully laundered and starched and enhanced our impeccable table manners.

### Cavemen and Church

"Cavo" was a hardy individual who came from somewhere in the Marlborough Sounds which was very remote. There was no piped running water, no sewerage, no electricity, no telephone, no roads, and no people. The only contact with the outside world was the mail-boat. Cavo entire previous schooling was done by correspondence. Not unexpectedly he was self-sufficient and had some rather eccentric habits, particularly he detested going to church. After being checked out at the Presbyterian Church parade [Presbyterians had further to walk and departed 15 minutes earlier] he would mingle with the Anglicans, who were still getting ready and dash upstairs. Unobserved by the duty Housemaster who was watching the lines of boys heading down the drive to church, he would climb into his corridor wardrobe. He had found a way of locking himself in, from the inside. There he would remain, upright, with the emergency rations of a supply of stale fruit cake, saved from the previous Sunday evening meal. With no room to sit he would stand for an hour and a half. This was an easy task for a rugged "Sounds Man". When the church goes returned from their morning devotions he would emerge, mingle once again and go to lunch.

### Another Church Variation

As a privilege, the Anglican boarders were permitted to visit a nearby milk bar before church. This was "Robins Dairy" which was just outside the Government House gates [it is a vacant lot now]. It was, run by Robin, who was rather good hearted. Business was generally quiet on Sunday morning and he enjoyed the company of the church goers. Just before the time that church was to begin, a House Prefect or the duty Housemaster would check the dairy and hurry along stragglers to make sure that everyone had gone to church. However the back room was never checked. If you count those going in this should equal those coming out. Some of us spent many an enjoyable church hour washing dishes and being paid with milk shakes.

### The Telephone

In Sam Meads' time as Head Housemaster at Firth House, boarders were permitted to use the only available telephone which was in the spare office next to the Library. If the phone rang as you were passing, you were expected to politely answer it and get the person who was wanted. The



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phone was only for emergencies and then only if a Housemaster gave permission. Invariably a Housemaster could not be located, so a with a quick look to see if all was clear you would sneak into the office, make your call and depart as quickly as possible. In hindsight, I think that this was part of the Sam's cunning scheme and had the effect of limiting the purpose and length of time on the telephone.

Some of us had pooled our savings and were planning to buy a 1934 Austin 7 tourer and had already checked it out. Of course owning a car was strictly forbidden, but then what the heck, as long as we kept it quiet and hid the vehicle at a local's house we thought that no harm would come of it. As I had just got my diving licence, it was my job to make final arrangements for the payment and delivery of this fine gazelle of the road. Checking that the coast was clear, I sneaked into the office, shut the door and closed the deal. Just as I was putting down the phone I heard a faint click from the ear-piece. When I opened the office door, there was Sam blocking my exit. I then realised that the telephone had an extension in the Housemasters' lounge. Sam gave me a stern glare but said nothing. We had been sprung. The sale did not go ahead.

Under the succeeding Head Housemaster's regime, a conventional telephone box was installed for the exclusive use of the boarders and to free up the Housemasters' phone line. Thus the ability for Housemasters to gather intelligence on boarders' activities was lost. This new phone was always in constant use. The local communist Social Unity Party was a favourite target. It was also the era of the new [Wellington's first] and rather wonderful "leave a recorded message after the beep" after hours services. We all had to try it out. Wellington residents may have been mysterious the delivery of a load of gravel, or why a man arrived to pick up their clothes for dry cleaning or what the taxi was doing honking its horn outside their home in the middle of the night. The things you get up to when you do not have TV, Play station or caller ID.

## **WM Takes Leave**

W.M. was in his final year at Firth House. He had had enough of the post Sam Meads' regime. To maintain control, more and more unreasonable physical restraints were being imposed. If the minds of the boarders had been won over, it would not have been necessary to employ less effective physical restraints. Incarceration at Firth House was tiresome and did not challenge the intellect as it once had done. W.M. decided to bail out and carried out the ultimate escape and evasion.

W.M.'s parents had previously departed on a trip "home" to Great Britain. A trip home took six months in those days and you travelled by sea. Travel by air as a commercial passenger was by flying boat at least to Australia and was generally unavailable and very expensive. W.M.'s much older brother and his wife who owned a small house nearby, were also travelling with the parents. During the absence of his brother it was organised for W.M. to visit his brother's house to mow lawns, clear the mail and generally keep and eye on things. W.M. parents had departed, confident that W.M.'s care and welfare would be managed by Firth House until the end of the year.

W.M., by timely interception of mail and replying on behalf of his parents, somehow convinced the system that his parents had instructed that he be withdrawn from Firth House but that he would continue to attend Wellington College as he would be living in zone with his brother down the road. He arranged that the refund of his pre-paid house fees was to be made to his parents' bank account. Wellington College did not realise that this account had been set up for emergencies for W.M. to operate in the interim. Originally the account had only a rather modest balance. W.M. continued to attend classes at Wellington College for the rest of the year. I visited him on occasions and he was living a reasonably normal and sober existence. He had developed a high degree of self reliance and independence at Firth House. He had a reasonably successive academic record for the rest of the year. If the speedy air travel, efficient electronic communications and data matching of today had existed, he may not have been able to carry out his plan. W.M.'s subterfuge was never discovered by the school or parents. W.M.'s care and welfare had been managed by Firth House, but not quite in the way that his parents had expected.

## **Bed Checks, Talking in Sleep, Leather, Rubber Soles and THE Boat Shed**

After "lights out" at 9.00pm we were permitted to talk to each other for another 10 minutes. At 9.10pm, the duty Housemaster would do his rounds and tell us all to be silent. Depending on the psychology being applied, the duty Housemaster would either do his duty in loud leather soled shoes or rubber soled slippers. Both systems had the effect of demanding silence in the dormitories but the silent system singled out late night talkers and a punishment was usually given.

I suppose that some sort of bed check was also carried out during these rounds as

the Housemaster would often announce his presence by flashing a rather dim torch around the dormitory. This was an opportunity for some of the wags to pretend to talk in their sleep and make disparaging remarks about the Housemasters or to confess to a heinous crime.

I was one of those who could never go to sleep this early. With my headphones on, I would listen to a concealed crystal set until midnight when the last of the radio stations closed down. The duty Housemasters generally stopped doing the rounds of the dormitories when they thought that we were all silent and asleep, usually well before 10.30pm. Then they retired, never to reappear. This was a chink in the armour. About 11.00pm, once it was verified that there was no light coming from under the door of the duty Housemaster's bedroom, was a chance for the undetected night escapes and evasions. These escapades were never any more adventurous than a midnight swim in the school swimming baths [once tried, never repeated, the water was far too cold] or observation of the path of "the sputnik", or a quick cigarette smoke up the hill.

The champion of escapes and evasions was J.R., working alone. He was an "out of zone" local Wellingtonian who boarded to enable him to attend Wellington College. He also made use of this chink. I had noticed that at least twice a week, about midnight he would get out of bed, already dressed in his running kit. He would make his bed and not be seen again till morning "prep" [supervised homework period]. If questioned on why his bed was made and he was absent before the morning wake up bell, he would reply that he had gone for an early run [a permitted activity before prep]. There was no restriction about getting up early, although if the administration had realised just how early this was, there may have been. He did not run all night and was not a champion athlete. He went just as far as his family's boat shed in Oriental Bay. I can only guess his reason for these visits. He smiled a lot. He was never found out and continued this activity for most of his time at Firth House.

## **Dancing Lessons**

In the fourth form we enrolled for dancing lessons which took place in the college Social Hall. This was where the school dances were held and drama productions were carried out. Most of the fourth form and many of the fifth form assembled once a week along with a similar group of girls from Wellington Girls' College but not Wellington East Girls' as it was feared that liaisons with them would have detrimental



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connotations. The hall was usually packed full, probably about a hundred of us. Miss Laws [?] the dancing teacher would muster us into two concentric circles, boys on the inside, girls on the outside. Music would begin; one circle would rotate clockwise and the other anticlockwise. When the music stopped we would turn to face each other and that would be our chosen partner for the dance. Like musical chairs there was usually a bit of a scramble. This would be repeated many times in the session. The theory was that we would not form any durable relationships and we did not. Perish the thought.

The lessons then continued with the dancing teacher calling out movements like a square dance crier. "Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow" and other less memorable calls. I do not think that many of us learned to dance very well but it probably enabled the dance teacher to live in a style to which she was accustomed.

For the Firth House boarders, learning to dance was never the prime objective. One of the benefits of this "Rite of Passage" was that we gained the qualification to go to school dances at other schools. We would regularly apply for invitations to the dances of any schools that were offering. A number of printed invitations were always issued to make up a balanced gender. By showing our invitations to the duty Housemaster we would be granted extended Friday or Saturday evening leave. There would be no further checks on our attendance at the dance. However we were prepared to offer the excuse of, "I got lost," or "I took the wrong bus."

Although a supper may have been an enticement, we rarely went to these dances. Local billiard saloons were a popular alternative. We became very good at billiards and snooker. We went to all the best movies. Our knowledge of the contemporary music scene was improved at the local "coffee bars" which were a sort of innocent equivalent to the "clubs" of today. Coffee bars visited were of the likes of "The Tijuana" and "The Montmartre" and featured bands like "The Quinn Tikis" and "The Maori Volcanics". Our wiser elders considered that just listening to a twelve bar riff from one of these bands would addle our brains, condemn us to Purgatory and corrupt us for life. In hindsight there may have been an element of truth in this.

## **Foundations and Trap Doors**

There used to be a bicycle and fire wood storage room in the basement under the senior common room at the east end of Firth House. An inside wall had an ugly hole smashed in it giving

access to more of the foundations. When built, the foundations of Firth House were a series of walled enclosures with no interconnecting access. Realising this, someone had cut a trapdoor in the prefect's cell [private study room] above one of these areas and gained access to the enclosed compartment below. Rumour has it that Sam Meads had heard noise and merriment coming from within the bowels of the foundations and unable to discover a means of access attacked the nearest accessible wall with a sledge hammer. Not unexpectedly by the time he had broken through into the cavity, it was bare. All signs of habitation had been removed and the trap door had been fastened closed. I have no doubt that Sam could have accessed this hideaway in a much less dramatic manner.

Most likely he had already scouted out things when boarders were elsewhere and he was probably was fully aware of the set up. A very satisfactory solution was produced by the dramatic entry. To cane the guilty would have caused resentment for no more of a misdemeanour than of being youthful and adventurous. Although the boarders considered that they had had a lucky escape and outsmarted Sam, the cunning effect was that everything was tidied up and that by leaving the unrepaired gaping hole this hideaway was then no longer available.

After Sam Meads had left the House and gone to Raumati College, another succession of occupants repeated the process by cutting another trap door from an adjoining cell into yet another cavity in the foundations. The new head housemaster seemed to be ignorant of the situation and never discovered this hideaway. This was exemplified to our joy, when, on returning from a term holiday it was noticed that there had been some maintenance done and the ugly hole had been bricked up. We now had two hidden rooms.

A further bonus occurred later when one of the relevant cells was turned into a "Lost Property Room". The duty housemaster would gather up any clothing or property that was found untidily lying about and lock it in this cell. It would only be returned on payment of a fine. We considered this practice was unjust. Sometimes clothing left in the changing room areas while we were absent playing sport was "stolen" by the duty Housemaster. In any event, careful budgeting of our four shillings a week pocket money made no provisions for lost property. It was a simple process to break through the inner wall of our hidden rooms, come up through the trapdoor into the lost property room and retrieve

the confiscated goods. Amazingly the property collections continued. We continued to remove our stuff and replace it with spent rubbish. The lost property room became filled with, ragged smelly, useless junk that no one claimed.

## **A Gastronomic Delight**

An ultimate luxury was to have a supper of toast made from bread taken from the Firth House kitchen. The toast was spread with lashings of butter and anything else we could purloin. This hot toasted delicacy was much more enjoyable than the usual cold toast that was served at breakfast. A hot Milo drink usually accompanied our hot toast. Other than this contraband, no supper was provided in the evening.

As there were very few three pin power points [for the safety of us all] toasting was done by plugging into a light socket with a double light bulb adaptor. This had the potential to blow the fuse so we would beef up the circuit by replacing the fuse wire with some heavy wire. To further add to the hazard, often the toaster was one of the cast offs from home and was thus of rather ancient vintage and in poor condition. Sometimes we made our own toasters from a bare toaster element. Electric jugs were plugged into a light socket in the same way. Sometimes a boiler was made from a large jam tin which we had fitted with a jug element. Thus we learned our basic science. The wiring did not catch fire and no one was electrocuted.

## **Photography Club**

What a wonderful club this was. It was a one room secure haven with running water, electricity, gas for heating liquids, a ventilation system and no windows. While you were in the dark room developing films in darkness or under an orange light, no one was allowed to open the outside door. There could be no unexpected visits by Housemasters. There was a lot of photographic developing done, although there were a lot of failures as very few photographs were ever produced.

Other scientific processes were also carried out in this establishment. Experimental distillation and fermentation was trialled. It was discovered that a sugar solution could be fermented with baker's yeast. Using equipment borrowed from the school science laboratories, Bunsen burners, flasks and cooling columns, we were able to produce a distilled clear liquid. One finding was that the distillation process did not sufficiently purify the fermented solution as a foul yeast taste carried over to the distillate. A willing volunteer was found. After drinking a pint [600ml] of the clear solution he appeared to be drunk, staggered about and vomited



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several times. He was put to bed under the pretence of having a simple stomach upset and suffered a hangover the next morning. Thus it was verified that we had produced alcohol. The guinea pig did not die, nor was he observed to lose his sight and so we concluded that we had produced ethyl alcohol.

Distilling a more pleasant tasting drink proved beyond our means and the distillation experiments ceased. Fruit juices, saved from our desserts and allowed to ferment naturally made a better drink. Once the bubbles stopped we filtered the solution using school filter papers and funnels and sealed the bottles. The sparking of an interest in brewing and wine making processes may have motivated at least two of the boarders in my time have since risen to national prominence as wine producers.

## Over the Hill and Military Patrols

“Going over the hill”, “taking French leave”, “going AWOL”, were all terms we used for taking unauthorised leave, which we did often. If we were caught without permission beyond the school gates, we risked being expelled from Firth House or at the least we would be “confined to barracks”, “gated” or have future leave cancelled and almost certainly “get the cane” [thrashed on the buttocks with a rattan cane] as well. Although some were caught, we never were. The escapes were quite innocent youthful adventures and were to relieve boredom especially in the evenings during weekend, Sunday night was most popular. The escapes were nothing much more than long walks, but also included haranguing the soapbox speakers and religious groups in “Pigeon Park” and taking in the city nightlife. No tagging, no vandalism, no women, no law breaking and except for smoking the occasional cigarette, no liquor and no drugs.

The success of such a venture was through developing highly polished military scouting and surveillance skills. Escapes and evasions were always done after dark, in mufti, being careful to dress to blend with the locals. A small patrol group was formed using reliable and seasoned members. A forward scout would be sent out from the upstairs dormitory exit to check on Sam Mead’s garage. For the period of the patrol this scout would usually maintain a watching observation duty at a convenient window or in the bushes. We usually departed and returned on the track up the hill at the back of Firth House. This allowed us to venture unseen to any of the local suburbs and the city.

Sam Meads, the Head Housemaster,

had a rather distinctive Austin A50 and depending on whether his car was in the garage or the garage was empty would influence the planning of the patrol route. Sam, “the enemy”, was well known for driving around the streets patrolling for boarders. We had to spot Sam before he saw us. To quote one of his favourite sayings *The price of liberty is eternal vigilance*. We took this advice to heart. We always patrolled with a prepared ready escape and return route in the ready. On the distant approach of a suspicious vehicle from any direction we would bale out and take cover, hopefully unobserved.

The point of departure and return was always especially hazardous and required extra care, due to enemy perimeter patrols. We had to be back before bed time. Before we entered the House we always made a rendezvous with the scout on observation duty, for a report on Sam’s movements in the interim. Depending on this report and the location of Sam, we would pick our entrance to the upstairs dormitories. If we had returned too late we knew that the observer would have left his post and our chances of a successful re entry would likely be compromised.

The best bit of French leave taken was to attend the Ohakea Air Force Base 21st celebration. Shades of *The Great Escape from Colditz Castle*. Many of us at Firth House decided to go to this event. We knew that because of the uncertainty of transport and lack of supervision, it was unlikely that official leave would be granted. We decided that on this weekend we would all apply for leave to one of our approved leave addresses but would not go there, gambling that we would not be checked. A number of separate groups formed various plans to get to and from Ohakea for the occasion. Our group decided to leave as early as possible on Saturday morning, take sleeping gear and food and prepare to stay somewhere overnight. The roads were bumper to bumper with cars and we had no shortage of offers of rides to the event. I do not remember much about the air show. I do remember that I queued for a long time to get a souvenir ashtray, pressed on the spot out of sheet aluminium. I do not know where it is now but it would probably be a sought after item by a collector.

More memorable was the trip itself. We got to and from the air show undetected. The plan on the return leg was that, if separated, to rendezvous at a particular fish n chip shop in Levin and buy our evening meal. We would then walk out of the town to sleep under a hedge or in a suitable hay barn or haystack that we intended to reconnoitre on the journey

up. Other groups had similar plans. As it turned out, before we had walked sufficiently far into the countryside it got dark and nothing was recognisable or familiar. Contrary to popular belief it is amazing how few, haystacks, barns and hedges present themselves in the dark and then there was always the problem of the farmer’s dog. We did not even find a suitable tree to shelter under. Other groups had similar experiences. One group found shelter under a bridge but found this to be damp, uncomfortable and noisy. Some just walked all night, as hitch hiking was not successful during night hours and there was very little road traffic. The most successful were those who decided to return on the same day to their approved leave address. They got plenty of rides offered to them and had the joy of a substantial meal and good night’s sleep in a comfortable bed.

Our group was determined to follow their plan and walked long into the night without finding a good sleeping place. About midnight we came to a small country settlement which a local post office with mail post boxes in a small foyer. It had a light that could be switched on and off and a door that could be shut. Sheer luxury. We made ourselves comfortable on the floor, shut the door and retired. It is amazing how many people clear their mail boxes in the early hours. Probably they were young farmers returning from revelry in town and going home for the early morning milking. None seemed too surprised when they turned on the light to check their boxes and found us. They would apologise for disturbing us, clear their mail boxes and depart. They may have been a bit tipsy or else this was a popular well known sleeping spot for late night travellers. We did not sleep well and at daybreak were pleased to get on our way back to the House, arriving just after midday to get an afternoon nap and recuperate.

Years later, my children would groan with boredom when the saga was retold whenever we would drive past that post office on a journey to someplace else. Boredom was relieved when the post office finally disappeared, a victim of good roads and rapid transport.

## Couth, Culture, Etiquette and Changing Fashions

“Lucy” Locket, the Firth House Matron, retired and “Betty” Edwards replaced her. Betty was more youthful and was popular with both boarders and housemasters. No doubt it was her influence that brought about changes in Firth House intended to improve our lot. In turn, small groups of senior boarders were told to smarten



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themselves up, put on their grey slacks, white shirt, tie and school blazer and report to the Matron's Flat for afternoon tea. Enticed by the promise of a rare treat of fine food, we duly assembled in the Matron's sitting room along with a token sample of Housemasters. We sat about, gangly teenagers, awkwardly balancing bone china crockery on our knees and passing around plates of savouries, cucumber sandwiches and cakes. There were large pregnant pauses as we attempted polite conversation. No explanation was ever given for the meetings. I presume that this was a new programme of enlightenment to prepare us for polite society, an attempt to educate us in etiquette and to improve our uncouth ways.

Further changes were introduced to make Firth House more like home. The bed covers we had been using were orange monogrammed woollen blankets, "horse blankets". These created a sort of rugged uniformity and a barrack room appearance in the dormitories. We were proud of our horse covers. Without any warning we found that all the horse blankets had been removed in our absence during the day and had been replaced with a patterned conventional blue brocade bedspread. We considered that this made the dormitories look feminine and this was further intensified by the gradual addition of carpet runners on the bare wooden floors and curtains on the windows. Carpet runners proved to be a real hazard to night time dormitory raids. We wondered why anyone would want curtains in a building which was miles away from any other house, was on the top of a hill and had head height high second story windows. Little of any consequence could be seen of the insides from anywhere outside.

A new boarder arrived in the fifth form. He was fresh from living in the USA or somewhere. For casual mufti wear about the House, he introduced us to Italian style shoes, to replace our suede, ripple soled desert boots, also smart, riveted 14 ounce denim jeans to replace the more agricultural ones that we usually wore.

We were used to wearing three piece suits and trousers with enormous floppy 24 inch turned up cuffs. The emerging new fashions dictated that a change was required. The Firth House seamstress, who did minor clothing repairs and let out our seams as we grew, could not be persuaded to taper our long trousers. A local city tailor was kept busy removing cuffs and tapering trousers to a 16 inch cuff. Some of the more practical and handy boarders did their own alterations,

much like the stitching up a wool bale, not very elegant but did the job. School ties were also slimmed down and we stopped wearing waistcoats. Many of us hand-dyed our spare white shirts to a trendy pastille colour. We truly had developed a sense of style.

## **PAUL WAH (1949 - 1950)**

I was an insecure and unworldly boy, brought up in the small racially-sensitive country town of Waverley. My father owned a dairy-type business, selling fruit, vegetables, confectionery, ice-cream etc to the local people and travellers passing by. Being the only Chinese family, we had few social contacts with Europeans and after three languid years at the local District High School I felt marginalised, with no study skills, appreciation of my abilities, social poise and even less ambition. The government paid a small boarding subsidy to rural students needing to attend senior classes at city schools and so my father sent me to Firth House, Wellington College. He hoped that a stint at an elite school would toughen me up, shock me out of a mental malaise and through association with privileged and able boys, I would morph into an ambitious and focused young man, eager to join the enclave of winners that would be the boarders of Firth House.

The ultra-Spartan boarding establishment for approximately 100 boys was a large two-storey brick building, sited amid the spacious grounds of Wellington College. Upstairs were the dormitories, Matron's flat, sick-bay and bedrooms for the resident housemasters. Downstairs were the combined common and study rooms, the shower and locker rooms, and the apartment for the Head Housemaster. Not a single concession seemed to have been made for comfort when these facilities were designed. Walls were of solid concrete plaster, the main corridors floored in brown linoleum, shower rooms had concrete walls and floors, dormitories and common rooms had bare wooden floors. Being left at this school by Father, was the greatest cultural, educational, and emotional shock I had had to endure in my young life.

My fellow boarders, the sons of farmers from Hawkes Bay, wealthy business and professional people, or boys' with parents overseas, were delivered on enrolment day by doting parents in their prestige cars. Overawed by these sophisticated and confident boarders, my first few weeks were sheer misery. I felt completely out of place among boys I had nothing in common with, and who took for granted all the advantages and material possessions I

had never known. Back from the summer holidays, they were full of talk about the family farm, out on the boat, the new car, or their sister at exclusive Woodford House boarding school. A practice I hated was the persecuting "new boys," said to be necessary for developing humility and respect for tradition amongst the young, although because I was a 6th former, this applied less to me. I wondered how I would survive in this alien environment. Allocated a bed in a dormitory of twenty senior boarders, I was placed between two easy-going boys who were sons of Hawkes Bay farmers. One named Butch was friendly, and the other, a chubby slow-thinking introvert, who became a butt for other boys' practical jokes. After lights out at nights I would lie in my bed feeling utterly alone and miserable, yet too afraid to cry lest my companions hear. The fragile confidence and self-belief I brought with me from a reasonably happy time at Waverley High School rapidly drained away.

The first week of the school year brought more culture shocks, with barracks week devoted to army cadet training. All boys were issued with a khaki army uniform and spent a week marching, drilling with a rifle and learning to strip and reassemble a Bren machine gun. What disturbed me was that boys promoted to NCO ranks, ordered others around with an authority of those born to command. There had been nothing like this in my former school and I loathed it. The atmosphere reeked of tradition, being hierarchical, and redolent of Tom Brown and the British Public Schools. The whole school stood respectfully as a black-gowned Headmaster swept majestically into morning assembly; a prayer was intoned, a bible reading, hymn sung, concluding with a short homily. Teachers were referred to as Masters (never teachers), and were careful to remain aloof from students. The standing of individual teachers could be inferred from a range of colourful nicknames such as Foxy, Horse, Weasel, Slops, Lispy, Loony and Gundar, which were clearly unflattering, and others such as Chook, JC, Sam, Q and Jock, denoted affection. Also, a battery of Prefects carried out the supervision duties on behalf of the teachers. Competition was the school's ethos; fighting for places in the strictly streamed classes, graded sports teams, to become a cadet NCO or a Prefect. I had landed up in a Darwinian institution, where survival of the fittest was the key.

The school with a roll of around 750 was top heavy with senior students, more than 100 in the 6th form and fifty 7th formers making up six classes. There



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was a bewildering range of curriculum options in languages, humanities and sciences, and it was compulsory to study six subjects, compared with only four at Waverley. I filled out my option form, only to have the teacher-in-charge, raise his eyebrows and say, *You won't make a living like that*. He crossed out History and rewrote the form to include Maths, Additional Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Geography and English. Nothing in my previous school background had prepared me for this massive programme of study, weighted in the areas that were not my real strength.

Worse was to come. The same teacher with a speech impediment took us for Ad Maths, Physics and Chemistry. He proved a very poor practitioner, who did little preparation or marking. His lessons consisted of boys in rotation reading a paragraph of text. No notes were given, nor his blackboard ever used. The venturesome, bored and bright boys, to the entertainment of the others in the class, would amuse themselves by snide insubordination and mimicking of the hapless teacher. His fetish for tidiness brought a particularly cruel practical joke. An iron tripod was heated up and left on the teacher's bench for him to clear away. His agony brought no sympathy and the perpetrators became heroes amongst the boys. Another middle-aged teacher taught English and Geography in the same ad hoc way. Both these teachers earned little respect for their lack of professional pride or a sense of obligation to their students. A contrast was the one good Maths teacher, the First Assistant, who delivered exemplary lessons and provided me with a lifelong model for how to succeed as a maths teacher.

Life could not have been more uninspiring. For seven 45-minute periods each day apart from Maths, I wandered from one badly taught class to the next, studying subjects I did not like, under teachers I did not respect. My classmates were mostly very bright day boys from Wellington's professional and business families, interspersed with a few from the "other side of the tracks." Of the multi-racial component, two were Chinese, one Jew, one Indian, a part Maori and a Eurasian. The folklore that "the old school tie," bound Wellington College boys together in a spirit of life-long brotherhood was illusory. The rich made friends amongst the rich, the clever associated with the clever and those who fitted neither category formed another group. There was no hiding the elitism. One of the exalted set who was later to become highly placed in the Anglican Church, made a point of giving sneering

sideways looks whenever the Jew spoke in class. Perhaps the relentless competition forced boys to highlight the differences amongst each other.

I made a couple of good friends. One was Jim, the son of a missionary recently returned from an overseas posting. We both found difficulty in finding a niche in this privileged atmosphere, nor could not we adapt to the 'laissez faire' style of teaching. As orphans in the Wellington College system, we needed nurturing but no such help was forthcoming. The other, Jock, was the son of a manager of one of Wellington's largest motor vehicle franchises. Often on a Monday, he would tell me of his weekend's escapades. His family owned a large house in Karori, a luxury cabin cruiser, and a Bach in the Marlborough Sounds. One Monday morning an exhilarated Jock told me of how on a beautifully fine Saturday morning their family together with a couple of girls from Marsden (a private girls' school) sailed across Cook Strait for an idyllic weekend of swimming, fishing, boating and partying. With a forced smile, I congratulated Jock on his good fortune, but inwardly I felt envious and angry. Why was it that he had so much, and I so little? The girls were the last straw. "Lucky bugger," I thought, "probably having sex, as well." For all our mate ship; Jock never invited me to his home. Weekends at Firth House meant cold showers, concrete floors and even less appetising food on the cook's "day off." This form of apartheid was a continuing theme that gnawed away at my psyche, fed my feelings of inferiority and led to a lifetime's suspicion of the Establishment.

Gradually I became acclimatised to boarding school life. The monotonous unappetising diet of plain food, always insufficient for active adolescents, but bolstered by plentiful supplies of stale brown bread, the consumption of which was regulated by a mean ration of a single small cube of butter. Monday was sausages, Tuesday stewed chops, and Friday there was fish to cater for the Catholics. For Sunday lunch, the best meal of the week, there was roast mutton and potatoes served with gravy. Whatever produce was seasonably cheap usually meant a saturation diet for a week. When crates of rhubarb arrived, we braced for stewed rhubarb for breakfast and pie for dinner until supplies were exhausted.

With unpopular cauliflower and leeks, the cooks cleverly smothered these in thick white sauce to make the dish more palatable. At home, leeks and rhubarb never featured in Chinese cuisine. Initially I missed the tasty Chinese food my mother

cooked, the fragrant herbal soups, the stir-fried vegetables and the tasty meat and fish side dishes, but gradually my taste buds adjusted to snarlors (sausages) frogs-eggs (sago) pudding and sinker (fat-laden steamed pudding) that was our daily fare. Most of the boarder's craved relief from an unappetising diet and on Friday afternoons would flock to local shops to spend their half-a-crown pocket money on cream doughnuts and fish and chips. The chocolate cakes my mother would send me were squirreled away in my shower room locker where storage of food was prohibited.

There were morning cold showers, in even the most frigid temperatures, supplemented by two luxurious evening hot showers each week. Supervised prep was for half an hour before breakfast, and one and a half hours in the evenings. Saturdays were for organised sport, and Sunday morning meant donning suits and school ties to attend church. My nominated church was St John's Presbyterian in Willis Street, where the service featured mournful organ music, hymns about a deity I did not know, and a lengthy sermon about Christian righteousness that I never saw. A friend and I decided to try different denominations. This was forbidden, but who would know? It was an education, the Catholic service with all its mysterious ritual conducted in unintelligible Latin, the Spiritualist Church in Cambridge Terrace, its tiny congregation transported in séance, absurdly appealing to an apparition long since dead. Best of all were the evangelistic Revivalists, preaching a certain coming of Armageddon, when we would all pay for our sins. Worshippers sang hymns with gusto after which I was invited to take communion and join the church. Not for me, these people were fanatics.

Sunday afternoons were eagerly looked forward to by all the boarders, as a chance to explore the city. I particularly envied those boys with friends or relatives who would roll up in their flash cars to take them out for the afternoon. If the weather was fine, I would sometimes go wandering over the tracks of Mt Victoria enjoying the views over the city and inspecting the old gun emplacement sites. Other days I would walk to Newtown to visit my grandmother who would drop everything to cook a Chinese meal for me, asking how could I bear having to eat that bland European food. This was the least of my concerns.

One hundred boys of different ages and backgrounds, living together in close proximity were always going to be a potential source of conflict. Some found



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conforming to institutional discipline impossible, while the housemasters tried to break them in, by “tough love” methods. A clear demarcation existed between teacher and student. Boys seen to have any close relationship with a master were scorned as “suckers,” just as teachers were careful not to take a special interest in any boy. Caning was the standard punishment used to contain misdemeanours, quick, and easy to administer. Most masters used this sanction sparingly, but a sadistic few would inflict red welts and bleeding from the buttocks. Recalcitrant’s seldom received sympathy. You took your punishment like a man, however unjust and any whinging invited ostracism. Those who conformed were left alone but the few who remained on the outer were persecuted until they either broke or asked to be withdrawn. One new boy from Germany was horrifically victimised, being tormented and beaten up while dozens of boys consumed by a pack mentality yelled encouragement. It was only four years after the Second World War.

When the rugby season rolled around, I took to the field in a game amongst the boarders. My status changed instantly when they saw how skilfully I played. *Hey, you are pretty good*, said one of the boys who had previously ignored me. Of my two years at Wellington College, the rugby gave me the greatest success and enjoyment. Playing against many of the best teams of other colleges at centre position, I was always the smallest back and a target for my bigger opponents. However, I loved this combative game, despite my lack of physical presence.

Initially I was received with coolness and a little suspicion since many of the boys had not previously associated with a Chinese. Gradually I created my own small circle of friends, but always felt anxious that I would be regarded as their second-class friend. During the second year, I became more secure in my relationships with fellow boarders. Those earlier barriers of race, status and wealth that seemed insurmountable gradually faded as I came to see that decent boys did not cease being so because of their parent’s station in life. School friendships were sustaining at the time, but only transient. I knew that in adult life those privileged boys would fulfil a destiny to which they were born. They had been programmed from birth to enjoy the fruits of wealth, succeed in the education system, land the best jobs, make friends amongst their own, marry the most desirable women, have bright children and indoctrinate them to perpetuate the cycle of advantage that was theirs of right. Struggling outsiders like myself had no

part in their world.

Some evenings the Headmaster Noel Hogben would visit the boarding house and chat to some of the boys. Sensing my insecurity, he alighted on me, and over several evenings of gentle enquiry extracted an admission of my not doing well and feeling ambivalent about his school. Yet I had tried to present a picture of normality, a typical boy, well adjusted to his mates, and getting on with life. That the Headmaster had penetrated this façade I found disconcerting as I blurted out how I felt out of place in Firth House. The kindly Headmaster said, *Next month there is a school dance to be held in conjunction with the Girls’ College, which I think you should attend*. I was totally embarrassed, answering that I could not dance and would not know what to do. *Think about it for a few days, and let me know*, he replied, in encouraging tones. I should have accepted his offer but I could not face the thought of shuffling across the dance floor to ask a girl to dance, when I did not know what to do with my feet. What would I say? For scintillating conversation, would it be next week’s rugby game or the price of bananas? Not good enough, I thought.

At Firth House a church confirmation class met regularly, and one evening the Headmaster, a committed Anglican, came to me with a startling question. *Paul, have you been confirmed?* Putting up my Chinese-boy-from-the-country defence, I pretended not to understand. Noel Hogben undeterred, continued saying, *The church. If you were to be confirmed, it might help you to have a faith to believe in*. This was a moment of philosophical siege. I would have liked to oblige this well-meaning and decent mentor, by agreeing, but spoke my mind, saying, *Sir, I don’t believe in God*. The Headmaster seemed quite taken aback and after a moment’s thought replied, *I shall arrange for Reverend Temple of St John’s Church to talk to you. Will you go?* I agreed and attended an unproductive meeting where the minister exhorted me to “have faith.” At seventeen I saw little evidence of a compassionate deity and knew that my greatest need was faith in myself more than a mystical god.

As the time for my leaving school approached, the Headmaster asked what I intended to do next year. I replied that I had no idea, and no options. He replied, *I know you have not made the most of yourself here, but you should continue with your studies. But how?* I asked. *I will ask the careers teacher to arrange an interview for a Technical Trainee’s position with the Department of Scientific Research, which will allow you to further your education*.

Noel Hogben was as good as his word, passing instructions to his careers teacher, and writing to my father in support of his proposal. Shortly after, I met the careers advisor, a tall, middle-aged languages teacher Mr Griffin. His opening words were, *You’re a bit different from the usual applicants, and it will be harder for you, so hold your head up and look confident*. My immediate reaction was *here we go again, another racist put down*, but on reflection acknowledged he was doing no more than reminding me of the realities of my situation. In retrospect, I had to be thankful for Headmaster Noel Hogben. He had been the only teacher to read my troubled mind, and had tried to give direction to an aimless youth.

As I walked away from Wellington College, I was not downhearted. My two years at Wellington College had taught me a great deal. I had seen the face of the “Establishment,” and how the school’s traditions groomed the next generation of achievers. The most favourable scenario for me would have been to come away fired with the ambition to join that exalted group, but I knew that I would need to find another pathway. Approaching adulthood, I had been jolted into a sharp awareness of my own inadequacies. These were an inhibiting and unjustifiable inferiority complex, race identity conflicts, social ineptitude, no goals in life, no appreciation of my strengths, and no study skills. My position with the DSIR was confirmed and I left school determined to fabricate a new “me.” I did not know how to proceed, but at least boarding school had taught me to look after myself.

**TIM KERR (1962 - 1966)**

## Roll Call and Nights Out

One of the worries of the capos running Firth House is the matter of us going AWOL. To restrict us, a roll call was instituted at mealtimes during the weekend. It was quite a simple process. All those who were on leave for that day were marked off the list. The rest, who were not on sanctioned leave, sat at the meal tables and their names were called out and they simply answered “Yessir” and stuck their arm up in the air when their name was called. Foolproof...

However, no one bothered to do a head count. So, I discovered that I could apply for – and get – leave from after lunch on Saturday to after lunch on Sunday. Then, I could remain in Firth House and present myself for the Saturday evening meal without arousing any suspicion. Now, the purpose of this self-restricted leave was quite simple. It was to bypass Saturday night curfew, which from memory was



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something like 2200 Hrs – 10.00 p.m. By being on sanctioned leave I could hang around the seedy nightspots of Wellington until the small hours.

Not having any close ties to the seedy underworld of night-time Wellington I would rarely find a place to crash in the small hours. And of course, one gets pretty hungry so I would sneak back into Firth House in time for breakfast. Oddly, there was no roll call or headcount for breakfast, so again, the system allowed for an extra place.

The system seemed to be foolproof – but not quite, breaking into Firth House was almost as difficult as breaking out. Early one morning as I was walking up the drive I heard an engine start up and a pair of headlights swung in my direction. It must have been about 0400 hrs – a ridiculous time for anyone to be driving up and down the school grounds! I leapt over the railing and rolled down the wet bank to avoid being seen. Mud and grass stained my fashionable light-grey strides. The vehicle passed by – it was the bloody milk truck! Another couple of times I was caught by a Housemaster as I sneaked back in. Both times I thought I was going to get into real trouble – but because I was on sanctioned leave I was not going to get into trouble for not being at Firth House when I should be. Instead, it looked like I was going to get into trouble for being in Firth House when I should NOT be there. Now this posed a bit of a conundrum for the respective Housemasters, and in both cases they must have decided the problem was better solved by ignoring it than by going to some other, higher authority.

And I still got breakfast!

## **A POW in the House**

Boarding in an institution set parameters and restrictions that irked us – but also offered creative challenge. Rules were there to be circumvented. We were born on the cusp of WWII and in 1963 not yet embroiled in the protests of the Vietnam War. Many of us lived WWII in our imagination, avidly read escape stories, and had fathers and teachers who had “been in the war”.

To some of us, living in Firth House was comparable to a prison camp. Lousy food, not enough of it... guards armed with instruments of corporal punishment, nasty, unpredictable kapos in the form of fifth and upper fifth formers.... And hours and hours of compulsory supervised prep time.

During those hours of supervised prep, instead of memorising French verbs or

dumbly sitting time out in front of a series of unintelligible algebraic equations I would covertly carry out other activities. Here I must digress and explain that dayboys were eligible to purchase monthly bus passes. The bus passes cost 7/6 – that is, seven shillings and sixpence for unlimited bus travel about the city. Us boarders received four bob a week allowance, so a bus pass would have cost us close on half a month's income. Additionally, there was some bureaucratic regulation dreamed up by the PooH-Bahs of the Education system about travelling to and from school and home that disqualified boarders from legally fronting up to purchase a pass.

So, one of my more covert activities was the production of bus passes. The passes had conditions of use in black type face on coloured card, the colour varying from month to month and each pass was stamped diagonally across the face with the month of issue – usually in blue ink. Of course, if the pass were printed on blue card, then the month of issue would be stamped in red ink. We did not have photocopiers back then so I drew up the cards with a map pen and India ink. My challenge was matching the shades of colour, both for the card and the pale shades of ink stamped across the face. Each pass would take most of one or two prep times. My first bus pass was yellow. I have no idea how I obtained a yellow to tint the card, but the thing looked acceptable enough. It worked. My next was white and it was a doddle to produce. The next pass was blue with a red stamp across the face. I had problems getting the blue to the correct shade, and with the blue too dark, I had problems getting the red stamp across the face to look right. Of course, the proof was in the use. I hopped onto the bus with my new pass, flicked it quickly in front of the driver and headed up to the back of the bus. “Come back here sonny!” The driver yelled out to me. “What for?” I replied. “I didn't see your pass, come back and show me your pass.” My heart sank. I had no idea what the penalty for counterfeiting was. I pulled out my wallet, held it up with the pass displayed in the transparent pocket and prayed the driver would not ask for a closer look. “OK,” He said, and lectured me about making sure I showed it properly in future. Of course, that day I had to catch another bus back to Firth House. I hopped on and flicked the pass in front of the driver. Before I took another step he stopped me. “I didn't see your pass!” I was trapped. There was no way I could get some distance between me and the driver. I opened my wallet and more slowly flicked it in front of him. “OK,” He said... and I carried on.

No one questioned the pass for the rest

of the month; but it was the last pass I made....

## **When Time went Backwards**

“Cell” was the soubriquet for the small, cement-plastered room with a door, window, electric light in the ceiling, and a single three-pin plug protruding from steel conduit near the skirting board. Upper sixth formers and house prefects were each allocated their own cell. Us lower sixth-formers were packed four or five to a cell. Apart from a locker with a matchwood door in the ablution chambers, a cell was the only repository where one could display one's personal effects and show any expression of teenage taste and creativity. In the cell I occupied, four or five school desks were ranged facing the wall around the cell perimeter. With a single fluorescent tube set high in the centre of the ceiling we were left to achieve our academic goals for the year with our oleaginous, spotty necks effulged in fluorescence, but our study material cast solemn obscure a capite.\*

With my desk furthest from the double-adaptor-stacked three-pin plug (streamlined multi-boxes were not available in those pre-PC days) my challenge was to find an alternative source of power for a desktop light. The obvious option was to obtain electricity from the central fluorescent light in the ceiling. Now, I didn't scrape through two attempts at School Cert. General Science without some inking of electrical circuitry, so I knew that to wire up a desk lamp from the fluorescent light source I would have to turn the power off at the switchboard. My plan was to get up early in the morning, switch off the power, wire up the lighting, reset the two electric clocks above the staircase recesses and switch the power back on. No one would suspect a thing!

I completed the job, reset the two clocks then turned the power back on.

But when I flicked the mains switch the clocks rotated backwards! Fortunately, the problem had a logical solution, switch the power off, and then switch it back on again. It must have worked, because I remember having to turn the power off for other electrical jobs over the year.

Notes:

\* The Latin in broad terms for “In the gloom of our own heads,” the antithesis of the school motto *Lumen accipe et imperti.*)

With a single fluorescent tube set high in the centre of the ceiling we were left to achieve our academic goals for the year with our oleaginous, spotty necks effulged



# A Collection of Memories from former Boarders and Housemasters

in fluorescence, but our study material cast in the gloom of our own heads.

## The Head Housemaster's Tool Shed

In our sixth form year at Firth House we were allocated a cell. Our cells were the only semblance of privacy within the organisation – albeit that as a lower sixth former I shared a cell with four others.

Having our own cell was an opportunity not only to gain privacy, but also to surround ourselves with the equivalent of a few home comforts. I cannot think what the home comforts were – although large bottles of Coca-Cola were on the list.

I decided I needed a locker or cabinet. There was a pile of bed-ends stored in the room under the fourth-form study area. They were rimu and pretty solid and I thought they would provide material for a decent cabinet. That meant, off course, that I would need a saw, set square and a few other tools to cut a couple of bed-ends up. There were woodwork rooms in the main school, but I had neither the sense nor the wit to arrange to borrow a few tools from the woodwork teachers – or maybe I suspected they would not approve of cutting up Firth House bed-ends.....

The Head Housemaster lived on site in a house quite close to Firth House and the house had a tool-shed. So, I had a source of raw material and tools. It was just a matter of combining the two.... Unfortunately, the Head Housemaster's kitchen overlooked the path to the tool-shed and there was an element of risk in ducking along the path into the shed, sorting out the required tools and ducking back to Firth House. The tools had to be returned – I was borrowing them, not stealing them. It was quite a time-consuming project and I could not complete the job in one attempt. If I retained the tools overnight or during meal breaks some other light-fingered resident would have no qualms in taking ownership of them. Therefore I had to repeat the process of ducking past the kitchen window to return them whenever I was not using them. There was quite a lot of sawing and then, once the main components were cut to shape there was the matter of finding nails, hinges and latches before the cabinet could be assembled. This required a hammer, screwdriver and chisel. Thus, I had to revisit the tool shed several times. In addition, I had to source a screwdriver to obtain fittings such as hinges and a latch. These I obtained from the matchwood doors on vacant lockers in the shower block.

I was not a skilled woodworker, but the cabinet must have been OK because

when I left Firth House I took it with me – and years later it ended up mounted on the wall in my father's garage. I might add, that whenever I mucked around with my father's tools I never seemed to construct anything successfully. So I feel there is some truth to the adage that "A good workman never blames his tools." – for the simple reason that a good workman HAS good tools; the Head House-masters tools must have been pretty good!

## The Best Day of my Life

From time to time one is asked, "What was the best day in your life?"

Well, obviously that is likely to catch one off-guard, because we all have the occasional great day. The trouble is remembering which bloody day it was! So, I have set aside a day that I define as the "best day in my life".

One early winter's Saturday a family member dropped off a bag of home grown Granny Smith apples. They were gigantic, bright green deliciously sour apples – not the tiny brown, leathery-skinned things that currently pass for Granny Smith in the supermarkets today. Just biting into them brought you out in a tingling sweat – and there was still plenty of flesh between the skin and the core for a second hefty bite.

How we managed to get them into Firth House without being spotted by the fourth-formers was a miracle. Of course, there was no hope of my eating all of them in one day, and the chances of hiding them and eating them over a period of days would have been zero. By coincidence, there were only a few of us turd-formers hanging about. All the fourth-formers were either on leave or playing rugby whereas the few of us turdies had had a bye or the matches had been cancelled for some reason.

Another coincidence, no house-masters were to be seen sneaking about the place. So, the apples were distributed amongst the six or seven of us present. With apples in hand we stripped off and turned on the showers. There we spent a pleasant hour or so munching spine-tingling Granny Smith apples under a hot shower. A perfect afternoon: something to eat, a hot shower, social company amongst our peers, and no mindless fourth-form bullying or house masters reading out riot acts. Bliss.

Later in the afternoon the fourth formers arrived back from their rugby matches and turned the showers on. There was no hot water.

Oh.... Poor buggers!

And the most delicious part of the whole afternoon was that no one ever found out why the showers were defective that day....

## WILF SIMENAUER, QSO (1944-1945)

On arriving at Firth House for the first time, I went looking for the head-teacher, 'Chook' Holmes, only to find him busily taking roll-call in the large common-room. I crept in quietly, and not wishing to draw attention to myself, remained standing at the very back. Roll call was almost over. (I had just travelled up from Dunedin and been permitted to arrive a day later than the other boys.)

Mr Holmes had written my name at the very bottom of his list, as I was the last boy to arrive. By now, having nearly reached the end of his list, Mr Holmes called out, *Williams*, and *Williams* replied, *Here Sir*. Then he called *Wilson*, and again, *Here Sir*. But now a very hesitant Mr Holmes slowly and deliberately articulated, *See - mee - nowr*. *Wilson* jumped up, walked up to Mr Holmes, and said, *Yes sir*. Somewhat startled, Mr Holmes demanded, *Yes Wilson, what do you want?* *Wilson* replied nervously, *Sir, you just asked to 'see me now'*. Mr Holmes, seeing the light, explained, *I was trying to say 'See- mee-nowr', the new boy's name*. Everyone laughed.

Soon after the start of the first term of 1945, 'Chook' Holmes called me into his study. There in front of me stood a RNZAF Squadron-Leader, a Flight-Lieutenant, and somewhat incongruously, an American Army Sergeant. Carl Fasshauer, the American sergeant, had been 'picked-up' by the famous RNZAF Military Band, somewhere in the Pacific war-zone. To my utter astonishment they actually asked to see me! Everything soon became clear, when the squadron leader explained that the American sergeant, a very fine cellist, had joined forces with the band, in the Pacific war-zone where they had been giving concerts for the Allied troops. Presently they were on tour in New Zealand, but somehow when in Wellington, Sergeant Fasshauer found himself minus a cello. Would I lend them my cello? Sergeant Fasshauer explained that he had been a pupil of Emanuel Feuermann, probably the greatest cellist of all time.

Naturally I was delighted to be lending my cello to the pupil of such a paragon. Having handed over my 'Dodd' cello, I was thrilled when the Squadron Leader invited me to attend their concert in the Wellington Opera House, that evening. [The war-time RNZAF Band contained



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many excellent wood-wind and brass players, who in 1946, filled many of the principal positions in the fledgling National Orchestra that is now the world-class NZSO.]

I was recruited into the school orchestra whose only function it seems, was to provide the accompaniment for the school's singing of the hymns at morning assemblies. Hard as it is to understand, the orchestra was permitted to rehearse (but only occasionally) in a small hall, next-door at St Mark's Primary School.

For some mysterious reason Headmaster Mr Hogben, without any explanation, suddenly stopped the orchestra from rehearsing altogether. The orchestra was in shock.

On the following day, imagine the scene at morning assembly - the Headmaster and his staff (more than thirty gowned masters) were solemnly mounting the stairs leading to the Assembly Hall platform, and then, as he did every morning, the Headmaster leaned over the edge of the platform to give the signal for the orchestra to start playing the introduction to the first hymn. But when Mr Hogben looked down, he was shocked to see staring back at him, nothing but rows of empty chairs. So where then was the orchestra? The orchestra was on strike! For days, a livid Mr Hogben attempted (without success) to single out a ring-leader, including my oboe-playing friend, the late Dick Treveathick. The outcome of this united stand? The orchestra was allowed to rehearse again, the school was able to sing its hymns again, and I experience my first industrial action!

When Headmaster Hogben asked me to

play a short concert for the school, I was to be accompanied by my piano-playing friend, John Hunt, whose father Brigadier Hunt, had fought alongside General Freyberg, in North Africa. Performing for more than 1,000 boys certainly filled us with apprehension, as in those days so-called 'classical' music was not nearly as accessible as it is today, and certainly a long way from being 'top of the charts'.

However we need not have worried, as more than half a century later I often run into Old Boys who keep reminding me of that concert, which apparently had stimulated them, to listen to 'straight' music. But I still break out in a cold sweat, thinking of the nerve I must have had playing Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee* at that concert. Over the years I have performed many demanding works, including Shostakovich's exceptionally difficult *Cello Concerto*, but today I would think twice before tackling that particularly demanding piece. Such is the confidence or ignorance of youth.

### **WILF VICKERS (1955 - 1958)**

Often when we had weekend leave Garry Kenny, Ross Gebbie and I would catch the train, called the Fields Express back to Wellington. It would stop at every town and siding from Palmerston North to Wellington and was nearly always late. We would catch the tram from the station but instead of getting it to the Basin Reserve we would get off at the Roxy Theatre and watch a couple of movies. When we did eventually get back to Firth House there was always the fear of running into Sam Meads doing his rounds of the dorms as we were supposed to be in by 7.30pm. On a good day, Sam would ask or even suggest the train must

have been late that night. We would agree and couldn't get to bed quickly enough in case he delved further into the reason for being late.

We had a new fellow boarder join us midyear as his father had been appointed as a diplomat to an overseas posting. He was more advanced in testosterone than most of us in the fourth form and took a liking to the domestic staff in the dining room, who had their sleeping quarters attached.

Sam Meads knew what was going on with everything we did and soon sussed out that this fellow was frequenting the domestic quarters.

One morning Sam came into the junior prep room before breakfast where this fellow was doing his prep and indicated that he knew what had been going on. Sam gave him the choice of either Sam sending him to the Headmaster or he dealing with him. This fellow sat there with his head in his hands and turned and looked at Sam and said *I will take what you have in store for me, Sir*. They both walked up the passage to Sam's office. There was complete silence in the prep room (Sam was only ever known to give two canings at a time) but this time we all counted silently to ourselves and couldn't believe Sam gave him "six of the best". This fellow walked back to the prep room and swung the two doors open and sat down at his desk, took up his pen, and carried on with his home work. We couldn't believe that he barely flinched. The thought of the domestic staff got the better of him and he was eventually sent to Mr Heron, the Headmaster and was duly expelled.

