

In the third extract from the Memories from the life of James Albert Davies, the author recalls his experiences as a young teacher during the 1930's.

Memories from the life of James Albert Davies

IN the October of 1932, on the Saturday before the Harvest Sunday at the Chapel, I had taken Mary Taylor out for the first time; I had known her for years at the Chapel, but had steadfastly refused earlier involvement because of home circumstances and having little to look forward to in way of a future. As soon as I knew that I was 'on my way', and that I could and would succeed in becoming a teacher, we joined forces, and never looked back!

I had a major problem posed by the final year of my course at the Tech; a full-time year, which would include an essential six months teaching practice before sitting, was the usual procedure, but I could afford neither the time away from home nor the expense. Instead, I elected to take a correspondence course and arranged to do the six months teaching practice in a nearby school (unpaid) in Babylon Lane in Adlington, which enabled me to cope with household matters pre-9.00 am and during the lunch period, and be home in time after close of school to have everything ready for the workers' return.

I was summoned to attend on the Director of Education at County Hall, Preston, who wanted me to wait until they could find me a paid post in which to fulfil the six months teaching practice requirement, but this would have meant a year's delay to which I was totally opposed, and in the end I carried out my original

arrangements (with his agreement, as I couldn't otherwise enter school premises).

Very demanding

The correspondence course proved very demanding of time, and I soon found myself behind schedule; rules were strict re returning Instruction and Question papers on time, otherwise no further dispatches, and on more than one occasion I had to get Marjorie to copy them for me to deal with later (and to return the originals on time!). There was little time for pleasure, and Mary suffered, but we survived. Lack of time due to studying meant that I couldn't get out to make the money for my Final fees (ten guineas), so I had to borrow the money and repay it from my first month's pay as a teacher.

It was during this period that I bought my first bicycle, as it was obvious that travelling was about to increase - I entered into a hire-purchase arrangement with the local dealer, and from then on life became a bit easier.

When I visited County Hall to discuss my future, I had become one of their statistics, and a few weeks before my final exam I was approached by the County Organiser with a request to take over the teaching of Workshop Practice at Worsley Tech, near Manchester, for the duration of the Summer Term (Easter to July). I leapt at the chance, providing I was released for my Final exam dates. It meant a longer day away from home (I cycled there of course, but it wasn't just across the fields), but I was determined to look to my own affairs a bit more; Marjorie was well into her teens and able to fend for herself a lot more, and I was still around in the evenings and weekends to help out.

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Once I was through my exams and so a qualified teacher of Workshop Practice, I promptly started looking for a position. For a time I was in limbo, but soon was kept busy 'filling-in' for absent teachers, arranged by the County Organiser. One such job covered a joint appointment at Abbey Village/Shevington, where the teacher had been 'played off' with a nervous breakdown. When I arrived at Abbey Village on the Monday morning to take over (20 February 1936) I found that the school had been burnt down on Saturday night/Sunday morning, and quite literally I entered the place on my backside. I had cycled over from home in Coppull, and met no problems on the roads, even though it was

winter, but water from the fire-engines had frozen and turned the area into a huge skating rink which I didn't notice quickly enough on turning into the entrance, and my bike went one way and I went another!

The workshop was in a part of the school which wasn't touched by the fire, and most of my time there was spent on dividing the chapel for use as a school, with portable screens as the chapel was needed for Sunday worship (it was a Methodist Church and day school). The lads learned a lot, but not perhaps the normal tuition provided in a school workshop.

The 'other half' of that job in Shevington had its problems also; I was supposed to teach bee-keeping as well as woodwork - hives in an area out in the school grounds - but as I knew nothing of bees, and didn't want to know anything, we played a lot of football that month. The workshop doubled up as a domestic science room on the alternate days, and I remember going into the storeroom for my bike at the end of the day and finding a young woman (the Domestic Science teacher) changing into riding habit - she came to school on a horse!

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The following school year was bleak in regard to teaching work, but I wasn't idle; Marjorie was at home, leaving me free to go about and earn enough as a



journeyman to keep us in what we really needed. Father thought that holidays and anything which wasn't essential were a complete waste of money, but Marjorie needed more than basics and got some of the pleasures through my help. Like me she'd little to thank father for during this still difficult period of our lives, but between us we kept things ticking over fairly well.

Sunday School and Chapel were involving us to a greater extent; I had undertaken the secretarial work, and Mary was the School pianist. The social life was much stronger then than it is now, with few free weekends and many midweek activities - the time passed quickly. I had a workshop at home where I started to think about future needs, in between working to pay the bills.

Much of our leisure was spent on our bikes. Mary hadn't much after a full week in the mill and again it was a case of making the most of what we had and striving for a better future.

Towards the end of the summer of 1937 the County offered me a three-day per week teaching job (permanent) at Haslingden Grammar School, and though it wasn't really what I wanted, after due consideration I accepted the post pending a more suitable position transpiring. Workshop Practice wasn't taken seriously in grammar schools at that time, being more or less regarded as light relief from the more important academic subjects, but there were signs of change and expressed intentions of it becoming as important as most other subjects. Originally the local joiner was brought in to supervise this light relief - uncertificated, and thus not on the official payscale but paid by the hour. By now most of them had been replaced by certificated Workshop

Practice teachers, either through retirement (enforced) or death. Haslingden had such a teacher, who had died suddenly during the Summer holidays, hence the urgent appeal to me!

Wasn't happy

I made it perfectly clear to them that I wasn't happy with the situation, but as they had helped me in the past, I would take the job on the understanding that I was free to leave it if and when what I really wanted appeared - no ties. The Director assured me that they also were dissatisfied with the three-day post, and that they were looking for two days elsewhere to make it the regular full-time appointment, on the Burnham Scale. After another week's holiday in Old Colwyn, I took up the position of Woodwork teacher at Haslingden Grammar at the beginning of the 1937/8 school year, for 'as long as I wanted it'. The hourly rate of pay was far in excess of the scale rate for teachers, almost twice as much for three days as the rate was for five days. No pay for days off or holidays, sickness, etc, so though it seemed an attractive situation it obviously didn't have any future and the sooner I was out of it and in a regular situation, the better.

The Head made it clear to me that he wanted Workshop Practice putting on a professional footing and prepared for external exams like all other subjects, thinking that it would be of benefit to his less academic pupils. I worked hard there to get rid of the play-room image, and enjoyed the work even though it meant almost a 12 hour day. Haslingden was a difficult place to get to from Coppull (three buses, sometimes four); the long and expensive journey soon began to pall!

Early in 1938 I received word from Wakefield that there was a vacancy arising in

the West Riding, and true to their promise they were offering me the job if I was still interested and available. I immediately informed the Head and told him that I was going over there the following day to see what was on offer; he was none too pleased, pointing out that teachers usually stayed on a job for three years. Naturally I pointed out that my situation wasn't a usual one, and that I wasn't bound to the job in any way. Later in the morning a message came through to the workshop to say that I was wanted on the phone - an irate Director of Education from County Hall demanding that I be in attendance there the following morning at 9.00 am.

I agreed to see him, but had already made up my mind that I was going on to Wakefield after the interview; he was angry about me even thinking of going over to the West Riding, and wanted to know why - he had promised to regularise my post but I hadn't given him enough time, and there were 'things in the pipeline'. I pointed out that there were other difficulties, such as a long, tedious and expensive journey and that I couldn't move up there on a three-day basis, that the long days meant costly eating out, and on top of all the hassle there wasn't enough of my pay left to make the job worthwhile - and that I had taken the job on pending something better, and Wakefield was offering me just that.

Listened quietly

To all this he listened quietly, and before I knew what was happening a clerk had been sent for to take notes - that I was to be paid all travelling expenses, also a generous meals allowance, and that in a matter of weeks he would find me another two days in another school to regularise my position as a certificated teacher, assuring

me that the Lancashire Education Authority could do more for me than the West Riding. As he had surprisingly agreed to remedy some of the unsatisfactory conditions (the ones over which he had control) I couldn't refuse the new promises and agreed to wait a little while longer. Within weeks I was notified that I was to take over the workshop at Hindley & Abram Grammar School on the two days per week, which would put me on the Burnham Scale. I later learned that the joiner/teacher at Hindley had been sacked by the Head and I often wondered whether my interview with the Director had any bearing on the decision.

Two grammar schools, 40 miles apart, was hardly an ideal situation, but as I lived in between and the journey to Hindley was easy, the hassle wasn't much worse than what I was already suffering. I immediately claimed the extra allowance for keeping two sets of equipment in order, and coupled with the travelling and meals allowances, was better off financially at least - and was still free to look around for something more convenient.

I was very soon 'in trouble' at Hindley; the Head tried to insist that I wore a hat to school - he'd seen me arrive without, and it was a strict rule that they be worn! I replied politely that I never wore a hat, and couldn't see how I could possibly be subjected to such a rule - I was a member of staff, not a pupil, and was immediately threatened with a Governors' Meeting. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, and asked him to call an immediate meeting and settle the issue. After a bit of blustering on his part he climbed down and admitted that he couldn't have me dismissed for such a reason (I knew full well that he couldn't) but he would have

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seen to it that I wouldn't have been appointed if he'd known I wasn't going to wear a hat!

First round to me, but it was only the first of many. I made it clear in the beginning that the workshop was a class room, like any other, and not a repair shop for the school. There were many favours to the school which I would undertake as long as they served some purpose in the teaching of boys, but the regular routine work (until now) of repairing smashed desks, doors, etc, was 'out' from now on. I was employed as a teacher, not a journeyman, and firms in the town would undertake such work.

Tyrannical fads

Another of the Head's tyrannical fads was insisting on open windows, even in winter, something else I wouldn't accept. I pointed out that I was responsible for safety in the workshop and was not having boys handling razor-sharp tools in a 'fridge' - and I won that one, and many more as they cropped up during the course of normal school practice. When the others learned of the 'war' I was fighting they gave me a week before the 'chop', pointing out that he'd sacked my predecessor; but I assured them that there was no danger of the same fate befalling me as I was a certificated teacher, not a journeyman in the direct employ of the Head, and that he couldn't sack me, and that I would never give him the chance of reporting me to the higher authorities for misdemeanour or defaulting

in my work as a teacher - the work for which I was employed.

It was a good school, staffed by teachers who had been there a long time and who knew how to get good exam results, and I was soon conformed to their routine (mostly) and traditions, including the post-lunch 'wander' up the road to the park - every male member (except the Head) with a courtesy apology to the Senior Master if you missed it for some reason! With experience I learned that the Head's bark was worse than his bite; he enjoyed quarrelling with staff!

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Life began to take on a bit more shape; we were heavily involved in Church activity and able to get around more on pleasure. All the hard work and sacrifices were bringing their rewards and we started to make amends for all that we had to forgo during the years of struggling. It hadn't been easy for Mary during that period, living as she was with guardians, and working in the mill which she disliked intensely.

In the July of 1938 we had made coach and accommodation reservations again for a holiday in Old Colwyn, but on the Tuesday before we were due to leave I purchased a tandem bicycle (snap decision) and after one trial run we decided to go down to Old Colwyn on it and abandon the coach booking - a 'mad decision' apparently (her guardians certainly thought so and did their best to dissuade us, to no avail!). We had a wonderful holiday, after taking all day to get there, stopping at every place of interest (thought I would never get her past Chester at one stage) and many wayside tea-and-cake roadside cottages. We ran into rain beyond Chester and got soaked - we were riding in shorts and

shirts - but on reaching Rhyl the weather was glorious and we lay in the sun and dried out. We finally arrived at Colwyn about 10 pm, but knew our accommodation was safe, and spent all week roaming the ranges, free as the wind, whereas previously we had always been tied to coach and mealtimes and the 'tourist' ways.

A long weekend in Llangollen was a further venture by tandem, but when we arrived we weren't very impressed with the area and decided to go on to Old Colwyn, only another 50 miles - but we'd overlooked the notorious Horse Shoe Pass en route. We had to 'walk' a long way to the summit, and again arrived very late in Colwyn where we luckily found our usual accommodation was open to us even without a booking.

'Four-in-hand' driver

A further long weekend venture was a visit to Penmaenmawr, during which we rode the Sychnant pass; the climb up from Conway wasn't as bad as other 'mounts' we'd made, but the ride down into Penmaenmawr was a nightmare - much too steep and winding for a tandem, which is faster and more difficult to control round bends than a solo machine. Luckily for us we met nothing on the road down - we needed all of it, not just our own half, and were travelling much too fast for comfort when we passed through a little hamlet at the bottom, again without mishap as the road was clear, and we arrived back at our digs in one piece. Our host there was a 'four-in-hand' driver in his younger days, and took a lot of convincing that we really had 'ridden the pass'. He believed it to be impossible and told us that coaches often went off the road at the worst bends and

finished up smashed in the valley below, often with fatalities.

Another memorable event was a weekend in Morecambe, when we decided to go by the scenic route via the Trough of Bowland, and again it was a much harder ride than we'd anticipated - we were faced with a very strong head-wind all the way through and the climbs were steep. At the time there were gates across the road at intervals (sheep control) and we were on and off like grasshoppers to open them for progress and close them behind us to keep sheep flocks separated, with sheep all over the road on either side of them. The scenery was magnificent, but we couldn't give it our individual attention.

We had another mad caper when once again we were en route for Wales; I taught Wednesday and Thursday at Hindley Grammar and being free of my Friday commitment at Haslingden, we decided to get off straight after school from Hindley and head for Colwyn on a long weekend. I went to school on the tandem on Thursday morning and arranged to meet Mary on Wigan Station to catch a train to Warrington as we were making a late start. We changed into riding gear in the guard's van and packed the panniers when we suddenly realised that we were stopped at Warrington and needed to exit quickly (with the tandem) or be taken on to Crewe. The risky exit won the vote, and with the help of a porter who saw what was happening we got away with it - jumping a moving train, with a tandem in tow, wasn't easy but at least Mary wouldn't have been injured - she was out first! The venture gave us a good long weekend, and as usual we enjoyed every minute of it. She loved that bike (except when it was windy) and the freedom it gave us - we had been tied down for too long!

