

Life at Woolverstone Hall 1948-51 - by Alan Rawlinson



Shortly after WW2, the London County Council (LCC) leased Woolverstone Hall estate and designated it as a Nautical School for London area boys who could pass the entrance exam. (Later, in 1958 the estate was purchased.) But back in 1947 the boys and staff from the existing London Nautical Training School (LNTS) school at Bray in Berkshire were transferred up to the estate in Suffolk, the first year of an intended nautical college meant to offer training for both the RN and the Merchant Navy into the future.



Training Ship Exmouth at mess: 1899 - ©Peter Higginbotham

The question might fairly be asked however: “Why would the London County Council” use an estate in Suffolk and turn it into a nautical school?” The answer lies with the demise of the Metropolitan Asylum Board which was established under Poor Law legislation to deal with London’s sick and poor. It was established in 1867 and dissolved in 1930, when its functions were transferred to the LCC. And when the LCC inherited the Metropolitan Asylum Board, it came with responsibility for the old “Exmouth” boys from the training ship. This purpose-built vessel offered refuge and an education to needy boys.



The author, right - with Peter Lightbody

The discipline onboard was harsh in the style of navy training, but it did turn out young men fit and ready for the world. When WW2 started, boys aboard the ship moored off Grays in Essex were evacuated, being taken ashore in Sept 1939 to a base in Burnham on Crouch, and 9 months later, they moved again to Lydney in Gloucestershire for the duration of the war. It was part of the wider evacuation exercise that took place in England at that time. In January 1945, and with hostilities nearing an end, a further move was made to Bray Court, Berkshire. The final move, only 2 years later in Sept. 1947 was to Woolverstone Hall. This was a beautiful building with a long history situated on the banks of the river Orwell with views. This then, was the 5th and final location in 8 years!



These notes are meant as a record of life at the school from 1948-51 when the author attended. Some of the older boys met on arrival had been at Bray before transfer to Woolverstone.

The school was now designated - "LNS Woolverstone, as shown on all the cap ribbons we wore as part of the traditional

'square rig' naval uniform. The previous and latest use of the imposing Hall and grounds had been as a "stone frigate" during the war when it was commissioned as "HMS Woolverstone". Nissan huts were built and served as dormitories which remained in use during the LNS days.

The recollection of life at Woolverstone from 1948 to 1951 is strong, and the memories still vivid. I joined the bus at County Hall on Sept. 4th 1948, at the start of the new term, aged 13 yrs and 5 months, and waved goodbye to my parents and - had I known it - goodbye to any home-life for the foreseeable future. My presence was the result of passing an entrance examination and oral test, and I was the only one successful from many applying from my vast comprehensive in north London. It was a scholarship, but with my parents also contributing monthly.

On arrival at Woolverstone, we were immediately kitted out with new uniforms and essentials. The overwhelming memory is of the strong smell of the brand new kit. All stock - and there was seemingly mountains of it - was kept in a Nissan Hut used as a storeroom. These huts were all over the grounds, and twelve of them in two rows were designated as dormitories. One served as a 'tuck shop', two of them joined were turned into a mess hall, and two more became the seamanship rooms with a lovely deep aroma of Stockholm tar and new cordage. It was heaven to any nautical romantic, and still is. Here we learned some quite useless things for the modern world, such as how to serve a wire rope, and the mnemonic or ditty that went with it,

i.e. *“Worm and parcel with the lay, and serve the rope the other way.”*

For the uninitiated, this refers to the need to cover the splice on wire-rope rigging using canvas and cordage. It formed part of the rigging of a sailing ship, and it stems from Nelson's day.

The not unpleasant smell of the serge uniforms in the store hut was so distinctive, and this wafted over everyone walking into the hut piled high with stacks of bell-bottomed trousers and the blue serge tops that accompanied them. New footwear, and all the extras - silk cap band, lanyards, and the all-important cap, complete with ribbon - completed the kit. We were yet to be introduced to the tradition and rigmarole that accompanies naval uniform, but soon we were told how to make the rig look 'tiddly', in the jargon of the day. This is a subject on its own, and at Woolverstone the ex-navy instructors, some named Matthews, Denton, Pamphlin, all very long in the tooth, gave unofficial advice. It was confusing to a new boy like me, struggling to come to terms with boarding school life. Ignoring the trendy advice however meant being left out or even ridiculed. First, the cap had to go, being the oval-shaped issue boys bought perfectly round ones privately. Bell-bottomed trousers had to be pressed to create 'ladders', seen as horizontal bands, and the sharper the better. Wooden presses were made in the workshops to achieve this.

The new arrivals were given numbers and a dormitory. We were appointed to divisions, i.e. houses. Focs'le, Foretop, Maintop, and Quarterdeck, I was 717 Rawlinson and remained this for my stay in 12 Dorm/Quarterdeck. I failed dismally to make the sartorial standard demanded by my dormitory pals, and was dubbed "Rags Rawlinson" - a nickname which stuck and which I even became fond of!

Looking back on those distant days, it is clear that there were two sides to the school: the naval side, dominated by Commanders Smethwick and Wiseman supported by several lower ranks, and the school side led by the Head, Mr Langley, and his teaching staff. The two rarely met. On occasions Langley set off in his Morris Oxford to scout round for boys said to be "missing". He usually found them. Sometimes they were seen straggling along the foreshore.

Boys were sent off into the real world at the end of their stay, and around the age of sixteen. It is still a mystery to the writer exactly how this happened, or how careers were decided, and I suspect that where parents failed to express any preference or failed to cater for their sons, the school bursar took over. Thus there was a steady feed of boys to HMS Ganges at Shotley, where they were integrated into the Royal Navy after further training. That was a tough life. We had a glimpse of the conditions when playing them away, and we were always in awe of the famous mast which dominated the camp. Many, judged to be suitable, were offered places as cadets or apprentices in the shipping companies of the British merchant navy, still vast at that time. This was to be my destiny, and I shall be forever grateful for the experience, travelling the world in an unfashionable company, but one which provided an absolutely unique and precious experience. The odd boy, usually the smartest, went to Dartmouth Naval College for RN officer training. Many more were accepted as RN Artificers after passing the entrance

exam. The musical ones from the school band often started a career in the Royal Marines band. Some must have left to pursue a career in non-naval occupations, but they were in the minority.



What was life like in the LNS years? It was dominated by routine and discipline, much of it a hangover introduced by the grisly old naval staff. Walking was not allowed. Doubling (running) was obligatory everywhere. Bugle calls regulated events such as showering in the morning, and calls to meal times. There was an 8 pm supper call, when we all doubled to the huts serving as dining-halls to get a square of hard cheese, a slice of dry

bread, and a cup of cocoa, admittedly heaven at the time. The school fostered a band, trained by an ex RN bandmaster, and music played a major part at parades and on Sundays when we marched to the church. At the Sunday parade, the band played lovely slow marches, as the inspection took place. The tunes are still familiar to my ears and much loved 75 years later. "Imperial Echo" was the march favoured by the bandmaster and the one chosen to start any marching required. "On the Quarterdeck" and a version of "La Paloma" hogged the slow march agenda. The band practised in a room in the stable block which also housed the sick-bay and accommodation for some of the staff.

Boarding school life is well known to be a severe test, and Woolverstone was no exception. Weekends were welcomed as a time for some independent activity or privacy. In those days football was the preferred winter sport, with cricket in the summer months. A few lucky ones including me were offered places in the sailing boats run by some staff members, and I became a regular, helping to win a trophy in the woodwork master's boat in the Harwich regatta in 1950, but not before some hairy escapades in a gale. On other days I crewed with Commander Smethwick. This was the best reason not to be dragged into the semi-obligatory cricket or football teams.

Over the weekend, a so-called 'Liberty Bus' also ran into Ipswich town. This was a van with seats, and it was popular. Anyone opting to go to Ipswich had to be properly dressed and inspected before boarding. Away games to other schools and establishments were arranged and it was a chance to leave the Woolverstone grounds for a while. Holbrook was another naval school, in addition to Ganges.



The visits were an eye-opener in respect of the discipline meted out there, although it must have appealed to many boys who went on to enrol in the R.N. after Woolverstone. Sundays also meant church service, marching behind the band. Each Saturday, the mornings were given over to dormitory cleaning, polishing the Lino and generally preparing for a noon inspection. We were then permitted to dress down, a welcome relief. Clandestine trips into Pin Mill were common, and these were carried out by slipping through the wire and traversing a few fields, often full with luscious sweetcorn cobs in the autumn.

1951 was the very first GCE 'O' levels, which a number of us took. Being a naval school, it was possible to take Seamanship and/or Navigation 'O' levels, the papers being set by another nautical college - Pangbourne. Interestingly, the seamanship paper had a practical element which called for skills to be demonstrated on the water. I remember sculling the heavy wooden whaler with a single oar over the stern, to the satisfaction of the examiner with his clipboard.

My personal modest achievements at Woolverstone apart from a few 'O' levels, consisted of being awarded the English prize in 1951, and being one of only two lads to have an advanced signals badge. I was always top or near the top at seamanship, too. The last year I was there I was put in charge of 12 dorm with the new intake of eleven-year-olds in their civilian clothes, and whose names I still remember today. The nautical rig was discontinued thereafter.

It is interesting to look back and give a verdict on the experience, and this must vary according to the individual. Some boys ran away, unable to continue, but most adapted. My first year was very difficult, including bedwetting, but the outlook slowly improved and overall it was of benefit. Now, as an old man reminiscing, I cannot escape the feeling that it was like a comical 'Gilbert and Sullivan' parody, but one that served me well for a life at sea, and the successful management career in shipping that followed.