“Remembrance of Things Past”

(William Shakespeare: Sonnet 30)

Mary Mason

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The main headings were suggested by Vesselina Bozhilova, to whom I am indebted for getting started on these memoirs.

Dedication

This memoir is written on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the English Language School, Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It is written principally for the students and staff of that school, especially the first and second intakes, whom I had the privilege of teaching from 1959 to 1963.

We live in turbulent times. Much has happened since 1959 and there have surely been many changes in the School. Of one thing I am confident – the present school continues the tradition of excellence which we established sixty years ago. I am proud to have been a part of those early years, and I wish the staff and pupils of the School success and happiness in the years to come.

Junior arrives and the past comes back

I am now a very old lady of 88, living in a comfortable flat near the centre of my home city of Birmingham. Maybe former colleagues and students who visited me here will remember it. I am lucky enough to be in good health and fairly sensible. I have good friends who share my life and take care of me.

No-one looks forward to their eighties but I have found that, as some good things get out of reach (like foreign travel and driving and staying awake), there have been unexpected pleasures. None is more surprising and delightful than this reconnection with Bulgaria. Here's how it happened.

Junior is a six month old Staffordshire bull terrier, who does not like being left alone. He raises heart-rending howls of protest when his owners have to leave him in the flat. I spend most of my time in my flat and, when one day I heard these pathetic cries from 7.00 in the morning till 1.00 in the afternoon, I checked that they were coming from the flat below and resolved to complain to the occupants. A neighbour happened to meet Juno and his owners that afternoon and urged them to speak to me about it. A bit later they rang my bell full of apologies and explanations. They were an attractive young couple, speaking good but foreign English, so I asked them where they were from. I was so pleased when they replied "Bulgaria". And not only Bulgaria but "Plovdiv". We agreed that Plovdiv is the most beautiful city on earth and they showed me up-to-date photos of the city on their i-phones.

My newly acquainted Bulgarian neighbours are Bozhilo and Ivan Bozhilov and Ivan's wife, Dessislava. They told their mother, Vesselina Bozhilova, a journalist, of their discovery of me and she contacted the Old Students' Union of the English Language School and sent me some old photos and pages from the School archives. She suggested I write this article and helpfully provided me with a number of

questions as guidance. The title of this section is her comment from our first emails. Her questions form the headings of the memoir I have written as a contribution to the sixtieth anniversary of the school. I hope to hear what has happened to some of my former students during the tumultuous years of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

How did you come to get a teacher's job in Bulgaria?

My reason for applying for a job in Bulgaria in 1959 was purely political. The Cold War was at its height and it was impossible for people in the West to learn what life was really like in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The wall of hostile propaganda on both sides was impenetrable.

I was born in 1930 and my parents were passionate Socialists. I was brought up to think it was normal to spend every Sunday morning canvassing for the Labour Party and one's evenings in smoke-filled school rooms arguing for left-wing causes. My earliest political memory dates from about 1937, when I was sent home crying. People were being nasty to my Dad, who was asking for money to support the Spanish Republicans.

Then came the Second World War and the air raids, which sent us into a shelter in the garden every night, stopped abruptly when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The Russians ceased to be agents of the devil and became our glorious allies who were bearing the brunt of German aggression. We all rejoiced in the triumphs of the USSR in industrialisation and collective farms, universal education and health. This happy alliance did not survive long in peacetime. The Soviet Union, struggling to re-establish itself after the unimaginable suffering of the War, was once again vilified in "the West" and the Cold War brought down an iron curtain of ignorance about life in the Socialist "East". It was impossible to gain access to the Soviet Union or the countries of Eastern Europe. My family remained in the Labour Party but joined every "Communist Front" organisation in an attempt to gain balanced information about the Communist world.

I was lucky enough to be born in the generation that extended higher education to increasing numbers of working-class children. Under the post-war Labour Government, I received free tuition and a grant to enable me to get a degree in English Language and Literature at London University, and in 1959 I had a good job teaching in a grammar school in Birmingham. I was ready for a change, so I scanned the job advertisements in the educational press and spotted a tiny paragraph inviting teachers with my qualifications to apply for teaching posts in the English Language Schools in Bulgaria. After a perfunctory interview at the Bulgarian

embassy in Kensington, I was offered a post and I accepted it. (There were not many applicants, I think!) I was allocated to the newly opened school in Plovdiv.

I was surprised to receive a letter from the British Foreign Office, inviting me to their offices in Whitehall. Here a charming man advised me on no account to go to Bulgaria. They could not protect me there, he said, and warned me that I might go the way of Gary Powers, who had recently been imprisoned by the Russians after being shot down in an American spy plane. I said I was going to Bulgaria not as a spy but as a teacher. This encounter with my own Government gave me a glimpse into the systematic disinformation peddled by the capitalist world about communism. I am very glad I ignored his advice.

What was your first impression of Bulgaria?

There were two of us appointed to the English Language School, Plovdiv, in September 1959, myself and Ann Slater. The Bulgarian Government paid for our journey from London to Sofia by first-class *wagons lit* – the only time I've ever travelled in such luxury. After two days' travel, and in an almost empty train, we arrived at Sofia Station in the evening. We were tired and dirty. (The brown coal burned in the East European train sent clouds of smoke through the windows of even the wagons lit!) Above all, we had no idea what to expect. The platforms on Sofia Station were amazingly low but somehow we clambered down on to the track with our mountain of luggage.

Then, to our huge relief, someone was looking for us. A dapper little man in a suit led a little group of people hurrying down the track towards us, all with huge bunches of flowers. The man introduced himself as the Director of the Plovdiv School and the others were from the Ministry of Education. They welcomed us, took care of our luggage and helped us carry the flowers. I think only Lyuben Christov, the Director, spoke English.

My overwhelming impression was of warmth. It was already autumn but I felt that the summer sun had baked the land for months and it still radiated heat. The sky was cloudless, so different from England, my beautiful but damp and chilly homeland. It was such a relief to be met by warm unpretentious people, eager to please. Everything that followed was fascinatingly different and foreign, and yet I felt immediately safe and at home. We were taken to a hotel, grand but shabby, and given a meal. I remember being impressed that the chauffeur ate with us instead of being consigned to the kitchen. Then we were driven for several hours along an almost empty highway between Sofia and Plovdiv, catching an occasional glimpse of

another car and the odd donkey cart. We were delivered to our room in Trimontsium at about 3.00 in the morning and at last allowed to sleep.

To our dismay we were woken at about 9.00 the next morning by the Director and led to the English Language School. Our route took us through the main street to the Jumayata (the mosque) and then through narrow romantic streets to the school. It was located in the old French Catholic seminary and behind its high walls we found our future colleagues and pupils, the latter clad in black uniforms and drawn up in military formation. There were about two hundred of them, darker skinned than our pupils at home, with bright black eyes excitedly taking us in. There followed a ceremony in which a pupil made us a speech of welcome in English. Someone from each of the nine classes presented us with a bouquet of flowers. Then the pupils were dismissed in military style and ran off to their dormitories. We were taken inside to the staffroom, where we were introduced to our new colleagues.

Eldora Bozhinova had been put in charge of our welfare. She was a wonderful organiser and, in fact, had been the first Director of the school, setting it up from scratch. (I was glad to learn that her stalwart support of the school over many years was recognised by the granting of the orders of St. Clement of Ohrid in 1975 and Saints Cyril and Methodius in 1986.) She became one of my greatest friends in Bulgaria, and her daughter is the last Bulgarian with whom I am still in touch. Eldora organised our walk back to Trimontsium. Other English-speaking women colleagues accompanied us, helping to carry the bouquets, which were enough to open a flower shop. I remember Rosa Mollova, Annie Mireva and Gina Kuzhukhareva among them.

The sun was shining from a cloudless sky and we climbed Nebet Tepe and took in the view. Below us, behind the school, the River Maritsa flowed through a sun-baked plain from which the harvest was being gathered. In the distance was the massive range of the Balkans and behind us loomed, only 30 kilometres away, the wild mysterious Rhodopes. I had never dreamed of finding myself in such a romantic, beautiful and, above all, *foreign* place. I fell in love with Plovdiv from this moment. My delight was compounded when we were led by our flower-laden colleagues, nervously trying out their English on us, along a street lined with large wooden houses in a wholly unfamiliar style. We arrived at the Hissar Kapia, the Roman gateway to the city. On the dome of the nearby church, on a huge untidy nest, some storks were affectionately clattering their beaks together. I was totally seduced!

How did you see Bulgaria and Plovdiv in the sixties?

After nearly 60 years the memories of my life as a young woman teaching in the English Language School, Plovdiv, are overwhelmingly positive. However, I recently had the opportunity of refreshing my rusty Bulgarian by reading, in a page from the School archives, an account by Lyuben Christov, the Director, of how he met Ann Slater and me at Sofia Station in September 1959. His account describes the same events but his point of view was wholly different! He had suffered for a year from our complaints about our accommodation.

The longer I stayed in Bulgaria, the more I appreciated how different it was from my homeland. Ann Slater and I were not rich and came of working-class stock but we expected to have a room of our own, cooking facilities to prepare our own food and storage space for our clothes and books. The Trimontsium Hotel provided none of these things. It was clean and had a pedestal toilet and hot running water. Our colleagues living in the school hostel along with the pupils, including the Director himself, had none of these things. He describes succinctly and tolerantly the clash of culture that confronted him regarding our accommodation.

In reading this very recently, I realised for the first time what a heavy responsibility he had always shouldered as Director of the new school. I had read my Makarenko, so I understood the ideology that he represented and I did not underestimate the heroism of the undertaking he was entrusted with. I was touched that, in spite of the trouble we gave him, he appreciated that Ann and I established a high standard of professionalism which he found useful in trying to get value from later English teachers in the school. I regret to say that some of our colleagues fell in love, not so much with Bulgarian landscape and history, but with cheap and delicious Bulgarian wine. All too often they had difficulty getting into the classroom at 7.30 in the morning after the parties of the night before!

I had encountered one of the cultural clashes between our two countries before leaving England. Most people thought I was crazy to go to a Communist country. My parents and brother supported my decision but we were all shaken when, long after I should have started work in Plovdiv, my train tickets had still not arrived. My father and I went down to the Bulgarian embassy to find out what was going on. A charming man told us that the tickets were on their way – someone in Sofia had gone on holiday and forgotten to send them. Afterwards my father and I sat in Kensington Gardens, understandably concerned about this unbelievable incompetence, if that is what it was. We devised a code to be used if I ever got to Bulgaria and found myself in danger: I normally concluded my letters to family with "Love, Mary". If I ever ended one with "Your loving daughter", my father would

contact our M.P., Roy Jenkins, and the British press and Foreign Office to get me out! We never had to invoke this code!

This difference between citizens of an industrialised capitalist country, ruled by the clock, and a still largely agricultural country, working in time with the seasons, led to a lot of misunderstandings between us English teachers and our Bulgarian hosts. I remember Lyuben Christov rebuking me for walking along the street too fast. Then I could not slow down but I now think he had a point!

The same disparity struck when, after Ann and I got to Plovdiv near the end instead of at the beginning of September, we did not actually begin school. The day after the welcome ceremony, we arrived at school ready for work and found lorries waiting to take the whole school to Selo Trud (the village "Labour"), a collective farm in what was then open country between Plovdiv and the Rhodopes. I am told it has now been swallowed up by housing development in Plovdiv. We were told we were going "on brigade", giving our labour as a contribution to the developing Socialist state by bringing in the harvest.

Ann and I were not expected to work but were driven round an enormous field in a horse and cart, again in glorious sunshine mellow at this time of year. I loved it but Ann, who was in her forties and not in good health, found the physical discomfort hard to bear. Our Bulgarian colleagues were all of village stock and used to hard physical labour, so they worked in the fields all day while we were entertained in the farmyard by some of our future students. The highlight of their day came when Peter Popchev played an old Bulgarian trick on me, showing how delicious green peppers are by biting one himself and then substituting a hot pepper in its place for me to eat. Everybody but me had a good laugh while I coughed and spluttered. It was a kind of initiation. I still remember the farm yard hung with red peppers (unfamiliar to us then) and corn cobs drying in the sun.

Ann and I spent the remainder of the brigade in Trimontsium and I explored the town. We had been given the textbooks we were to use with our classes. We had plenty to do to familiarise ourselves with a totally different system of teaching.

Were the Bulgarian students different from the British?

Eventually, our teaching duties began. Dimo Dimov, a very quiet unassuming teacher, led me to my first lesson. In the years that followed, I grew to respect him more and more. His English was hesitant but his classes were always the most high-achieving. (I think Eldora accompanied Ann to her first lesson.) I used to entertain my English colleagues after I came home with an account of my first lesson in the

English Language School. As Dimo and I walked along the corridor the noise of teenagers yelling at one another was deafening. Then, as the classroom door opened the sound was cut as by a knife. In the silence a pupil standing at the open door shouted “Class, stand up!” There was an almighty crash as the seats were flung back and the pupils stood to attention. Dimo greeted them: “Good morning, class!” and the class roared back: “Good morning, Comrade Teacher!” There was a further crash as the seats were all slammed down at once. I taught the first lesson according to the textbook and was evidently passed as competent because I was left to myself afterwards. Ann also passed this test.

I think Dimo must have shown me how to examine the class, calling one or two pupils “to the blackboard” at the beginning of the lesson and asking them questions about the previous lesson. The pupil’s answer would be awarded a mark from 1 to 6. These were recorded and formed the pupil’s final academic record in school. I believe this was not a Communist scheme but came from a much earlier tradition in this part of the world. It was in blissful contrast to the written system at home, where, as an English teacher, I had carried piles of books home for marking every night! The oral system kept the pupils on their toes and made life easy for the teacher. Our life was easy in other ways: we did not have to check the substance of our English lessons. As native speakers, we became instant authorities on the English language. Furthermore, in England we were expected to devise our own lesson plans, hopefully full of imaginative ideas for inspiring our pupils. Here we used the state textbook in poor quality paper with no illustrations. We kept a yearly plan made up at the start of the year and ticked off the prescribed lessons as they were taught. There was little time for the teacher’s bright ideas.

I had been trained in the “creative writing” school of English teaching to native speakers and the Bulgarian system looked very dreary and old-fashioned by contrast. In fact, it was highly efficient and very enjoyable because the progress was systematic and tangible. It was, like the other specialist language schools in Bulgaria, an elite school, but in those early days our pupils were selected on political not intellectual grounds. Some of the fathers of our pupils had been killed as partisans and all were pillars of their local Communist parties. These young people were full of idealism and eager to build the Communist state on Socialist principles – not so different from the ideals of the Labour Government in Britain after the War. I had no problem adjusting to this ideology, but felt proud to be a part of their efforts to build a better Bulgaria.

My pupils were lively and challenging and full of fun. Also they could be bribed to further efforts by the promise of a song at the end of the lesson! Any one of them would stand up and sing on their own, full-throated, in English or Bulgarian, so different from shy English people. It is interesting that there is no word in Bulgarian for “shy”. There was no need for one because I never met a shy Bulgarian. Ann and I

put this down to the fact that Bulgarians had all been equally oppressed for five centuries by the Ottoman Empire and had not developed a class system like ours, which makes people nervous about how they speak and dress and behave. (I have recently been told that there is a word for "shy" – svenliv – but the point remains.)

Our pupils were very talented. They loved English revolutionary songs and folk songs and secretly listened to the rock and roll music of the time when they could. (Ann and I were quite happy with the Communist ban on this music.) Every term each class gave a concert in English and they were excellent performers. I never came to terms with my pupils' ideas of a rehearsal. Instead of quietly talking over how they would perform a scene, they all stood in a circle waving their arms and shouting. Eventually the noise ceased and an excellent performance emerged. I never understood how they did this.

My best contribution to these festivities was a play I wrote for one of my classes – "The Sleeping Beauty". The plot follows the traditional tale, but the sleeping beauty is awoken by Fred Prince, leader of a Communist brigade. He kisses the princess and welcomes her to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ruritania, which had replaced the monarchy in the hundred years she had been asleep. This little play has been performed since both in Bulgaria and in England. The Bulgarian performances were confined to the English Language School, and, I believe, always doctored to omit the politically unsound joke about the USSR. The English performances were done by my colleagues in teacher training in England to entertain our students, with our very gentlemanly Head of Department bringing the house down with his performance of the wicked witch.

It was especially rewarding to share classical English Literature with my Bulgarian pupils. When I told my pupils in England that we were to embark on the study of Shakespeare, my largely petit bourgeois and working class pupils responded with groans. I still remember the delight I felt when my Bulgarian pupils, faced with the same announcement, cried out their joyful anticipation. Shakespeare is hard for everybody but they embraced the difficulties with enthusiasm.

I have wonderful memories of excursions with the pupils. The discomforts of mountain hostels are forgotten but the experience of the wild Rhodopes remains with me. One night we were staying high in the mountains and a group of naughty pupils invited me to creep out of the hostel into the forest with them. It was pitch black lit only by flashes of summer lightning. I have never seen this before or since. I think someone had an accordion and we danced traditional Bulgarian folk dances. It was not for nothing than these mountains were the home of Orpheus, who was torn to pieces by the Maenads there! This music reaches back into an ancient past before the Romans, before the Greeks, maybe to the Thracians, who left no written records

but whose funeral mounds can be seen marching across what is still called the Thracian Plain.

As I write this, shivers run down my spine. It was like sacrilege to conclude with the English contribution, the Hokey Cokey.

In the Socialist time, especially this period, what kind of people did you meet in Plovdiv? What did they tell you about life there and the regime?

This is a very good question. It is impossible to recall the people I met in Plovdiv in the early sixties without reference to the political situation at that time. Because of the wall of ignorance imposed in the Cold War by the Western media, most people in Britain quickly forgot about the appalling devastation of the War and the heroic struggles of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to rebuild their economies in a Socialist framework. Coming from a country where a Labour Government had just nationalised its coalmines and railways, set up the National Service and extended secondary education, I was happy to be living in Bulgaria, a country which had nationalised *everything*.

I have described my motivation in applying for a job in Bulgaria, as a rare opportunity to experience what life was like in a communist country. All the Bulgarians we met were eager to explain to Ann and me that Bulgaria was trying to industrialise the economy of a largely agricultural country and persuading people to sacrifice their present standard of living in order to increase everyone's prosperity in the future. So the price of sausage went up in order to pay for the new steelworks at Kremikovsky. By contrast, when the post-war Labour Government in England tried to continue war-time abstinence, it lost the 1951 election, and Socialists here have been fighting a rearguard action ever since.

A police state

The one thing that people in "the West" know and knew about the communist world at this time is that it was a police state. I had no illusions that Bulgaria was a democracy in our sense of the word. It would have been foolish to suppose that we were not always being monitored by the secret police (just as in this country M15 had noted my intention to apply for a job in Plovdiv). My trust that the Bulgarian Government were employing me as a teacher and not a spy was fortunately vindicated. I was always very careful never to do anything which could displease the regime.

This was unlike some of our English colleagues. Ann and I were joined in our second year by two English teachers and the wife of one of them. This time our journey to Plovdiv was intercepted in Sofia and we were taken by bus to a hostel in the Rila Mountains. The authorities had forgotten to tell us that there was an International Trade Fair in Plovdiv and the school buildings were required for the delegates. School would begin a fortnight late. Our new colleagues were understandably unnerved by this experience and later assured us that they only stayed because of our descriptions of the wonders of the school. We were alone in the hostel and there was nothing much to do there, but the autumn sun was shining and there was plenty of good mountain air to breathe.

There was an older well-established English Language School in Sofia and we were able to get into the capital and meet our compatriots teaching there. Chief among them was Chris Bartlett, a passionate and brilliant Scottish Communist. She, together with her husband, a journalist on *The Daily Worker*, and their three daughters, had been living in Sofia for several years already. She extended the hospitality of her flat in the centre of Sofia to all British people passing through and Ann and I were invited to the first of many suppers there. After dealing with our panic-stricken new colleagues for days on end, it was a relief to be in the company of people who knew and loved Bulgaria

Other British people teaching in the Sofia School were Bert and Peggy Bundy, like myself dedicated socialists but not members of the Communist Party. The Bundys were intellectuals who gave much to their pupils, but they were fiercely critical of the frequent failures of the Bulgarian establishment to live up to their socialist ideals. This meeting in Sofia was the start of a lifelong friendship with all of them.

All the British teachers in both schools were invited to coffee at the British Embassy one morning. We sat in a circle but I cannot remember what we talked about. We were invited to come back alone or a few at a time to continue the conversation. Ann and I did not take up this invitation but our new colleagues in Plovdiv and at least two others from Sofia went back several times.

As in our first year, we started work at the Plovdiv School at the end of September and our British colleagues were reassured about their safety and the goodwill of our hosts. By this time, largely owing to Ann's persistent pressure on the Director, we were all housed in a new block of flats on the edge of Plovdiv, opposite the football stadium. It was less than a mile to the school and there was a trolley-bus terminus outside.

Something shameful and sad occurred in the summer term. One of our new colleagues, a charming and talented man, turned out to be an alcoholic and a homosexual. (Homosexuality was still illegal in Britain at this time and never spoken

of in Bulgaria in front of me.) He was picked up by the militia for “cottaging” in the public toilets in the park, became unkempt, unable to get to his lessons and was a thorough nuisance to all of us. Ann and I petitioned the Director to send him home. The Bulgarian authorities reluctantly agreed.

The remaining British couple enjoyed life in the school and stayed for a second year (Ann had gone home after two years.) The wife was pregnant and not very well. The authorities agreed to send her home part way through the summer term. On the eve of her departure I had found a pile of pigs’ ears in the covered market and cooked a farewell meal for her and her husband, together with a British couple visiting from the Sofia School. The husbands had gone out together in the afternoon and we became alarmed when they had not come back at 8.00. Shortly after, the Director appeared on my threshold smartly suited and very nervous. He said we had all to go to the militia headquarters by the park. There we were told that our two British colleagues had been caught spying.

We were all released later that evening and went home. The following day the two men were quietly sent back to Britain along with their wives. I read later in a Bulgarian newspaper that a soldier had been decorated for catching two British spies who had been taking photos in a hay meadow. I indignantly repudiated these accusations, as I could not believe that anyone could be so stupid. I learned years later that I was almost certainly wrong. I was told that our Plovdiv colleague had been taking notes of the contents of the railway trucks on the goods line outside the windows of our flats and passing this information on to the British Embassy. These episodes, I am glad to relate, were my only dealings with the secret police.

Bulgarian friends

Although our British teaching colleagues were on the whole agreeable enough, I had not gone to Bulgaria to meet other English people. I wanted to get to know Bulgarians. Our Bulgarian colleagues were very able and dedicated teachers, attracted to the English Language School by the small classes and eager pupils. They did not speak English and at first Ann and I spoke no Bulgarian. Also any of them who were ambitious would not have wanted to be seen to be too close to foreigners with untrustworthy political opinions.

As I began to learn a bit of Bulgarian, I practised it on anyone patient enough to bear with me. The cleaner in Trimontsium, who came in each day to keep pristine the long white fringe on our beautiful Bulgarian carpet, was friendly and invited me to her one room attic flat, where I met her 100 year old father-in-law toothlessly grinning by the stove. She came from Northern Bulgaria and, instead of going to school, had worked from the age of seven in the market gardens for which Bulgaria was famous. She was very much in favour of the Communist regime.

The Bulgarian Communist Party controlled every aspect of life. Any opposition to the regime had been dealt with in the post-revolutionary period by sending opponents to prison and labour camps. In fact, I was introduced to the last political prisoner to be released. He was a Protestant missionary pastor and he returned to his church and rectory on Sakhat Tepe.

The people who introduced me to him and to other subversive elements were my greatest friends in Bulgaria, the Baltovi sisters. They were part of the old pre-war intellectual elite of the country. They were now in their forties and their parents were both dead. Their father had been a lawyer who had defended Jews under attack from the pre-war fascist Government. Their mother had been a teacher of Russian in Plovdiv, and some of her pupils still visited her daughters. They still lived in the rented family rooms in a big stone house on Sakhat Tepe. Milka, the elder sister, had graduated from Berlin University and she now taught German to students in the University Medical School in Plovdiv. Venche, the younger sister, had not gone to University because in secondary school she had been found to have tuberculosis. She had missed years of her schooling to cure it. (It had been the scourge of Bulgarian villages in the years before the War and, with the discovery of streptomycin, had been eliminated by the communist health service.) Instead of University, Venche had been to Art College and made a living designing costumes for films as well as selling her art works.

Before the War their family had been actively Social Democratic but the sisters had been sickened by the wave of killing when the Communists seized control. Very late in our acquaintance, when I was visiting them, they told me how they had fallen foul of the new regime. A distant relation had implicated them in a botched attempt to flee the country. Milka had been taken to the Militia headquarters and thoroughly frightened. Since then they had withdrawn from public life, closing their curtains against the unbearable heat of summer and the Communist loudspeakers.

Their home was the only place in Plovdiv that knew the meaning of comfort. They lived in a huge room with a separate tiny kitchen and bathroom. Their electric light and heating was maintained in a perilous state by Venche, who was very proud of her technical skills. They had three or four blissfully comfortable divans which turned into beds at night and during the day served as settees arranged in a circle in the Turkish manner.

I met them through Veta Staneva, the daughter of one of the richest men in Plovdiv under the old regime. The Stanevi had owned half of Plovdiv as well as large estates in the Rhodopes. Their chief cash crop was tobacco and the sons ran branches of their tobacco business in the Middle and Near East as well as Europe. Unluckily for Veta, she had not been sent abroad for Higher Education, so she had no skills to offer

the Communist regime. She knew some English and was employed as a lowly superviser of the pupils in the School boarding house.

She had married a man of wit and fashion, who, before the War, had been notorious for organising picnics with gipsy girls and musicians in the countryside outside Plovdiv. When the Communists took over, the Stanevi had lost everything but negotiated with the Government that their two children should be given Higher Education. The son became a chemist working in the "Red Poppy" cosmetics factory and the daughter a professional pianist. They lived in a beautiful old house on the main street. It had been one of their family properties but now they had to share the kitchen and bathroom with other families. Veta was eaten up with resentment and hatred, but her husband was more philosophical. He was a talented violinist and had been offered a job in the Plovdiv Symphony Orchestra. He refused, thinking that this was too politically vulnerable for a man with his past. He bought a horse and a cart and earned a modest living collecting offal from local enterprises and hotels. He rode at the front of this stinking load like a prince, raising his brown bowler hat to ladies of his acquaintance. He was a great source of the latest jokes against the Government told behind closed doors.

In our first year Ann and I attended classes in Bulgarian run for the few foreigners in the city. We shared them with seven Albanian agricultural students. (Albania was still part of the Soviet bloc at this time.) They were good traditional lessons from a tiny enthusiastic teacher and we learned some basic grammar and the writing system. However, the lessons were in the early afternoon and we had been teaching since 7.30 in the morning. As the summer heat closed in, we found it hard to stay awake and eventually dropped out.

I was looking for a Bulgarian teacher and Veta introduced me to Milka Baltova. I had moved from Trimontsium to private rented accommodation by this time and Milka visited me there for a lesson once a week. She found I had a basic grasp of the language and could read with the aid of a dictionary. To my delight she started to read Bulgarian literature with me, beginning with the stories of Yordan Yovkov. They were beautiful and sad and summoned up life in Bulgaria in the early twentieth century. I went on to read the classics of Bulgarian literature with Milka for the next three years.

Our relationship was at first very formal but we soon discovered we had many tastes in common – not only a love of art and literature but also a taste for political argument. When I moved to the flat by the stadium, I went direct from my school dinner to their house and took over a third divan and the three of us enjoyed a siesta. (Milka worked in the morning only at the Medical School and Venche was only intermittently busy as an artist.) When we woke up, we drank Russian tea and Milka and I read Bulgarian literature. My oral practice came in the early evening when

friends and acquaintances of the sisters called round to exchange gossip and discuss the political situation. Most of them came from the old elite and had suffered in one way or another from the Communist regime. As a Socialist, I could not agree with them and my Bulgarian was honed in argument with this motley crowd of dissidents. Many were connected with the theatre and there were artist colleagues of Venche. One of the visitors had worked as a doctor in the Congo before the War and I was happy to listen to his tales of the marvels of drumming in the equatorial forest. (Everybody else had already heard them.)

Zlatyu Boyadjiev

At one point there was an exhibition of the work of Plovdiv artists in the gallery on the main street. I was struck by the paintings of Zlatyu Boyadjiev and it turned out that he was an old friend of the Baltovi sisters. They told me he came of a peasant family in a large village up the river from Plovdiv, and, as a boy, had discovered his vocation for painting when a painter from Sofia visited his village. Zlatyu had starved his way through Art School and become an established artist in the primitive style. Then at fifty he had suffered a stroke which had taken the use of both his speech and his right side including his painting hand. He used to visit the Baltovi sisters and they persuaded him to try to paint with his left hand. He spent time at their house painting the view from their staircase window. On their walls hung the first painting he completed after his stroke. His style now was quite different from the highly polished realistic earlier works. His new style was executed with free brush strokes reminiscent of Van Gogh. Zlatyu had no trouble with the Communist authorities because he painted the Bulgarian landscape and peasants working in the fields. (Most of the Bulgarian painters I met at the Baltovi were townspeople who had no contact with the countryside, and some of them chafed against the Communist proscription of abstract painting and experimented with it in secret.)

Zlatyu was beginning to be recognised as a great painter, one who channelled the soul of Bulgaria through his painting. Most of his canvases are enormous. Some depict colourful scenes of the herds of sheep and cattle returning to the homestead in the evening, their bells ringing. One of my favourites is filled with a more than lifesize figure of a brown-clad peasant standing looking straight out over the head of the viewer, while behind him in a vast brown plain stretches a line of mysterious Thracian tumili.

At some point Milka and Venche accompanied me to Zlatyu’s house and studio to buy a picture. He was working on a vast canvas showing one of the most horrendous episodes from Bulgarian history. In the seventeenth century the Ottoman Turks secured their access to the Mediterranean from the Rhodopes by forcibly converting the Christian population to Islam. Three peasants fill the painting

agonisingly impaled for refusing to convert. (The Pomaks are descended from the survivors, Muslim in religion but ethnically and linguistically Bulgarian.)

Neither in size nor in subject was this a suitable purchase for me. I chose a small picture depicting the church of San Marina in Plovdiv. The church was totally recognisable but Zlatyu had adjusted the perspective so that we could look over the lowered wall from the street and also see the line of yellow poplars. Milka and Venche used to tease him that this was not true to life. His speech was limited but his intonation and left hand were very expressive as he would indignantly cry: “Tochno! Tochno!” (Exact! Exact!)

I chose this painting because my friend Venche had won the commission to repaint the frescoes on the walls and ceiling of the church. I was happy to bring good quality paint from England for this purpose.

Zlatyu was very taken with us fair-skinned Englishwomen. He would spot me in the square outside the central mosque and insist on taking me to the Turkish-style café next to the mosque to treat me to a “salep”, a little dish of cinnamon-flavoured semolina (I think it was). He was a lovely man who shared his passion for life with everybody.

On my last visit to Plovdiv in 1984, the Baltovi insisted that I take home a picture by Zlatyu which hung on their walls. They had taken it out of its frame and rolled it up. So it travelled among my clothes to England.

Thus I have two of Zlatyu’s pictures. A few years ago I rewrote my will and began to tidy up my possessions. I have three great-nieces and one great-nephew, twice as many potential heirs as there are pictures. They are happy with my decision to send them back to Plovdiv where, I feel, they belong. I am discussing with Vesselina Bozhilova how this can be arranged.

Life in the villages

The Baltovi had inherited from their father a house and a bit of land in Strelcha, a village in the Sredna Gora. They were not ones for excursions but they took me to stay there for a couple of days. On the first day our siesta was disturbed by the sound of very loud Bulgarian folk music in the distance. We got up to see what was happening and cheered as a great crowd of people came dancing down the village street, led by a man waving a handkerchief. It was a village wedding! My friend and colleague, Eldora, explained to me later, when we watched a wedding in the gipsy quarter of Plovdiv, that under the Turks even the priests were illiterate and the way of ensuring the permanency of a marriage was to make sure everyone knew about it. Carts piled high with the bride’s dowry of household goods were part of the

procession. A few years later, when I was visiting Plovdiv, a Bulgarian colleague proudly showed me photos of a relation's wedding in the city Registry Office followed by a Western style reception in a hotel with little white cards and flower sprays for the guests. The wedding in Strelcha was a taste of the ancient Bulgarian folk culture which, even under Socialism, was being replaced by the bland ceremonies of a foreign culture.

Among her other excellent qualities Eldora was a fantastic dancer of the Bulgarian ruchenitsa and horo. In my second year she was sent to join us in the Rila Mountain hostel to cope with the discontent of the British teachers. One day some of us caught the ski-lift up Vitosha, the mountain behind Sofia, and walked the several miles down through the forest. It was the first time I had seen a black and yellow salamander and a tiny tortoise, both of which species lived wild on the mountain. As we emerged from the forest in the gathering dusk, we heard the sounds of live Bulgarian folk music and found a wedding party dancing round a huge crackling bonfire. We were invited to join in and Eldora threw off her formal manners and flung herself into the dance. We British teachers could only look on and cheer.

It was through Eldora that I was lucky enough to get a deeper insight into the ancient Bulgarian connection with the earth. In our second year she invited Ann and me to spend the Christmas holiday in her family home in Northern Bulgaria. This is very different geographically from the Thracian plain. It is a flat landscape, part of the fertile black earth belt that stretches from the Danube Plain eastward across the Ukraine. The weather was bitterly cold and, after many hours rattling over the mountain by rail, we stepped off the train in our townswomen's shoes into a foot of good black earth. We made our way to Eldora's family house in complete darkness and silence, and in mud such as Ann and I had never seen. This journey finished off Ann. By this time she was suffering from bronchitis and she spent most of the holiday in bed.

As guests, we were given a spacious bedroom with brightly-coloured hand-woven woollen furnishings and a wood-burning stove. Everyone else slept, cooked, ate, entertained and did all their tasks in the enormous kitchen, always gloriously warm. In one corner there was a large loom on which Eldora's mother used any spare minutes to weave strips of old clothes into long mats which were then dyed to provide hard-wearing and brightly coloured floor coverings. When Eldora was born (in 1930) her mother started weaving her dowry. In another room the household furnishings which constituted this dowry were piled up. I do not know how relevant they were in the urban world that Bulgaria was trying to build. There were a lot of other rooms but they all went unused in this bitter weather.

Eldora's parents had been rich peasants, owning and working a large estate. Like the Stanevi in Plovdiv, when the Communists seized power in 1945, they gave up most

of their land to the new collective farm in exchange for higher education for Eldora and her brother. The latter had trained as an engineer and was a manager at the new steelworks in Pernik near Sofia. Eldora, as a girl, had been sent to the "American School" in Lovech, a Presbyterian missionary school where she had learned not only excellent English but also an understanding of our Western ideas on time-keeping. This made her the perfect person for dealing with disgruntled English teachers and she acted tirelessly and uncomplainingly (to us, at least) as an intermediary between us and the Bulgarian authorities for all my time in Plovdiv. There was a lot of paperwork which she helped us to handle, and she explained to us crucial matters such as how to get tickets for the trolley-bus and how to deal with the rude service in the sparsely provisioned shops.

Eldora's grandfather lived with one of his sons in the same village. He always wore a conical fur hat even in the house. He explained that his head got cold and showed me the electric fire which kept his head warm in bed. He was a great student of the Bible and explained to me how the Bulgarian church calendar came to be on January 7th, thirteen days later than ours. Christmas was, of course, banned during this part of the Communist period. (Ann and I had felt hard done by when, on 25th December, after a full working morning, we were served the most basic bean stew for school lunch.) I was therefore very surprised when Eldora's uncle in Pordim invited us to celebrate Christmas with his family. Ann was not well enough to take up the invitation but in the evening I ventured out with Eldora and her parents across the icy unlit village to secretly celebrate an old Bulgarian Christmas.

My teetotal Methodist family never had alcohol in the house and one of the most useful skills I learned in Bulgaria was to enjoy drinking wine and spirits. Luckily, I turned out to have a very good head for it and I drank rakia with the men at my Pordim Christmas. A large family party sat round the big table. Preparations had been made and I was shown the wooden bowl hidden under the table. It contained garlic (for health), walnuts (for fertility) and red peppers (so that the cocks' combs would be red in the coming year). The uncle presided over the ceremonies that followed. He started by producing a ploughshare on which he lit some incense. This joined the other auspicious goods under the table.

Then he produced special loaves of bread baked in the form of a curled-up foetus. He held one of them up against the wall above his head and wished that the corn in the coming year would grow as high as that. As we were in a room on the first floor, I thought this was optimistic. Eldora explained that the ceremony dated back to Turkish times (and probably thousands of years before that), when the peasants, together with their animals, lived in houses built half underground to keep out the cold. The name of the village – Pordim – means "polecat" and "smoke", the smoke from these underground dwellings being all a traveller would see of the village from the outside. So, when the uncle held the bread over his head he was indicating a

crop of high grown wheat, the wheat on which everyone depended and made this area, over the millennia of Bulgarian history, so rich and desirable to invaders.

This ceremony, more pagan than Christian, opened a window for me onto the power and strangeness of Bulgarian folk culture. Our first experience of Bulgarian folk music had not been auspicious. During our stay at Trimontsium Ann and I had been woken every morning by this weird music belting out through crackling loudspeakers in the street outside.

When we were lucky enough to join in celebrations at the school -and there were many of them – we began to understand the place of this music in the hearts of our pupils and fellow teachers. The magic (and the suffering and terror behind it) found an echo even in our sophisticated Western souls, especially when part of a festival with the students and staff dressed in wonderful folk costumes, each one peculiar to a region of the country. Above all, I got caught up in the very complicated and fast dancing. I could join in only the simplest horo, which was danced holding hands in a circle. I remember particularly one hot summer evening when the neighbours in the flats invited me to join them dancing in a field by the river among the fireflies. We ate kebabs, drank lots of wine and danced ourselves into ecstacy. It may have been superficially a national or Communist festival we were celebrating but Dionysius was certainly present.

The Zaria

This is the place to break off from our Christmas in Pordim and recount the strangest of the ceremonies we were privileged to take part in – the zaria. History in this Socialist period continued the version of history told after the Bulgarians won their liberty from the 500-year-old "yoke" of the Ottoman Turks in 1878. The heroes of this history were rebels who had died fighting the Turks, often in abortive uprisings put down with great cruelty. The Bulgarian rebellion against the Turks had started with a consciousness of the Bulgarian language and the writing of a patriotic Bulgarian literature. Some of the most popular heroes of the revolutionary period were poets, such as Christo Botev. I remember seeing a line of kindergarten pupils holding on to their comrades' pink smocks marching along a street in Plovdiv merrily bawling out "Tikh byal Dunav" in full-throated folk style. This song celebrated the abortive rebellion led by Botev, which the Turks had easily put down. Botev had crossed the "quiet white Danube" to liberate Bulgaria in 1876, only to lose his life at the age of 28.

This version of Bulgarian history as a series of rebellions against oppression flowed seamlessly into the Communist interpretation of more recent history as the victory of the workers and peasants against their capitalist oppressors. (As a Socialist I had no problem with this.) This version of history was consolidated in the ancient ceremony

of the zaria. The one I attended took place in the school yard at dusk. All the pupils were drawn up in class formation in military style with furled banners and the staff in front. The teacher in charge called out the names of heroes who, from the nineteenth century to the present day, had died for the freedom of Bulgaria. Chillingly, from the ranks of the pupils, one boy or girl after another, chosen to embody each dead hero, called out his name to confirm that he too was present. It was as though the boundary between past and present had melted away. It is something that, as far as I know, has no equivalent in Britain.

During the siege of Pleven in 1876, Pordim had been the place where the liberating Russian forces had camped at one end of the village and the Romanian army at the other end, using the only two buildings in Pordim which were above ground – both stills for brewing rakia. One day of freezing fog Eldora took me to Pleven on the local train. We visited the main historical site – a tower containing the piled-up skulls of Bulgarians killed in the battle of Pleven. (A tourist site rather different from Stratford-on-Avon, a contrast which highlights the difference in the histories of our two countries.)

On a later visit, I accompanied Eldora to the women's bathhouse in Pordim. Every town and village in Bulgaria had what they called a "chifte banya", a pair of baths, one for men and one for women. These went back to not only Turkish times but to the Roman Empire. In 1960 it was still hard work, even in a comfortable house like Eldora's, to heat up hot water for a bath and traditionally everyone went to the communal bathhouse with its apparently limitless supplies of hot running water. It was a leisurely social occasion. In the cloakroom we all stripped and first went into the hot room (the caldarium). There were taps running all round and stone seats on which everyone sat and gossiped and scratched one another's backs with a back scratcher identical to the Roman ones found on archeological sites. Eldora and I chuckled because the local ladies of Pordim were eying me curiously to see if the foreigner was constructed like them. Then followed the cold room (frigidarium) with a tiny pool for a few swimming strokes to cool off. There was a *chifte banya* near the school in Plovdiv, which, with our accommodation first in Trimontsium and then a modern flat, I had not needed to use. However, I did later visit the magnificent tiled baths in Sofia, very different from the humble bathhouse in Pordim.

Eldora and I became very good friends. In 1963 she married Dimiter Neshev (Mitko), the maths teacher at the English Language School. I was lucky enough to be taken to Mitko's family in Klissoura high in the Sredna Gora. This is a beautiful village, famous for an abortive rebellion against the Turks in 1877. The Bulgarians had made cannons out of cherry trees (which, unsurprisingly, blew up) and a model stood on a high point looking down on the valley.

Why don't you marry a Bulgarian?

This was the constant question on the lips of acquaintances in Bulgaria. It was not for lack of offers. I was well aware that, apart from my personal charms, my British nationality made me extremely attractive as a passport to the riches of the West. Meetings were set up, village style, to introduce me to suitable "candidati" but nothing came of these well-meant efforts. Over the years a succession of British teachers to the English Language Schools married Bulgarian girls and went back to live in England. I remained a happy old maid.

Visas

One of the few things that people in the West knows about the Communist world during this period is that foreign travel was severely restricted. Only the privileged were given visas to make trips abroad. We were therefore pleasantly surprised when Eldora and another colleague, Nick Stoev, who had also been detailed to look after us in the School, were given visas to visit my parents in Birmingham in 1963.

Later it became common for English language teachers to visit England on courses run by the British Council. I was able to entertain my former colleagues and also some of my former pupils who had become teachers of English. Consumer goods were still (in the seventies) in short supply compared with the West and our Bulgarian visitors were more knowledgeable than I was about open-air markets where they could load up with cheap clothes for their families.

Year after year the Baltovi sisters applied for visas to visit me here in England and they were always turned down. Milka's encounter with the militia in the post-war chaos was obviously still on her record. At last in 1976 Venche got a visa and we spent a very enjoyable few weeks together seeing the sights. It was the year of the hot summer and her paintings of the English countryside were brown and yellow instead of the usual green.

Finally in 1990 both sisters were given visas to stay with me, but, sadly, Venche had a stroke on the eve of their departure and the trip was called off. I maintained an intermittent contact with them by phone after this. Both sisters died in the nineteen nineties.

My last Bulgarian visitors were Eldora's daughters. Both of them have made successful careers using their excellent English, one as a teacher in the same school her mother was educated at (now located in Sofia), and the other as an interpreter and translator for Bulgarian business enterprises. I maintain a regular email correspondence with Diana, the teacher, which keeps me in touch with the new post-Communist Bulgaria.

One of my last visits to Bulgaria was in 1984, when I attended the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the School. It was a huge delight after twenty years to meet some of my former students again. They seemed unchanged. The reunion with them seems like yesterday but in fact it was thirty-four years ago. My teenage pupils will now be in their seventies!

What happened to you after you left Plovdiv – work, private life, adventures?

Privileged and easy and happy as my life was in Plovdiv, I decided that I would never be at home anywhere except in England. I decided to see my first cohort of pupils through their final year and leave at the same time as them.

Sofia English Language School 1964-1965

However, the thought of going straight back to the rigours of teaching in cold capitalist England was too hard to contemplate. I asked the Bulgarian authorities to let me teach in Sofia for a year. They readily agreed to this request, and I spent the next year teaching English language and literature in the First English Language School in Sofia.

This turned out to be a very enjoyable year but in some ways very different from my experience in Plovdiv. Sofia is a pleasant modern capital city, its tree-lined avenues overshadowed by Mount Vitosha, which rises more than 2,000 metres above the city. Sofia has a lot of snow in winter and is pleasantly warm in summer. It was another world from hot, ancient, Eastern Plovdiv. Our pupils were different too. Most of the pupils in Plovdiv came from the countryside and only a minority from the city itself. Like me, they were the first generation of their family to be educated and we all knew how lucky we were. The Sofia pupils were children of the upper echelons of the Communist Party, the sons and daughters of ministers, civil servants, ambassadors, generals in the army and intellectuals of every kind. There was no boarding house and the pupils lived at home. They were much more sophisticated than my pupils in Plovdiv, but just as eager to learn.

One of my new colleagues was Mercia MacDermott, who was spending a year in Sofia, not only teaching in the school, but writing her book on Vassil Levsky, the greatest of all the Bulgarian heroes, who was executed for his part in the liberation of the country from the Ottoman Empire. This book was published in England as *The Apostle of Freedom*. It was translated into Bulgarian and its publication made her a celebrity. She was (and is) a member of the British Communist Party and for many

years she was chairman of the British-Bulgarian Friendship Society. She went on to write many more books about Bulgaria. The most recent one is a memoir of her life in Bulgaria, published in English under the title *Once upon a time in Bulgaria*. Her contribution to the understanding of Bulgarian history has been acknowledged by many honours. I was delighted to hear recently (2017) that her book on Levsky is to be reprinted. Most of what I know about Bulgarian history and folklore I painlessly acquired from Mercia.

We became (and remain) great friends. Together we made full use of the wonderful cultural amenities of the capital city, particularly the internationally renowned opera and ballet. We were housed in an old hotel, the *Slavianska Beseda*, which was just down the hill from the Opera House. The school was ten minutes' walk away. When Mercia and I recall that happy year, we remember our Sundays off, when we, together with half of Sofia, would take the tram to the foot of Vitosha. We would ramble among the foothills, stop at one of the new restaurants for lunch and hasten back for the opera in the evening. New Year's Day 1964 was particularly memorable. It was a clear sunny day, icy cold. We climbed through the deciduous trees, then the belt of firs and finally, with me puffing and blowing, reached the barren rocky ground at the top of Vitosha. The mountains rippled away in every direction not only across Bulgaria but to the mountains of Yugoslavia and Greece. I joined a rambling club when I got back to England and rambling was my principal pleasure until my legs gave out 30 years later.

Mercia and I worked hard in the school and found it very rewarding. Nobody in the world celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in 1964 as enthusiastically as the Sofia ELS. A real theatre was hired and every class performed a scene from Shakespeare in costumes borrowed from the National Theatre. (Somebody's mother worked there.) Twenty years later when I was visiting Bulgaria, I was standing on the steps of the Alexander Nevsky cathedral when a tall young man addressed me. "Comrade Mason," he said, "I was the body of Caesar." I recognised Sava, who had played that important but undemanding role in the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" scene of *Julius Caesar*. It was a joyful reunion.

As in Plovdiv, we had regular celebrations of historic and political occasions with excellent staff parties. The Bulgarians are good at parties and there was always wine and good food, singing of folk and revolutionary songs and at the end dancing. Mercia and I had been learning some Bulgarian folk songs with the music teacher. I found both the rhythms and the scale unfamiliar but we persevered and practised our repertoire (very loud in the Bulgarian style) in our rambles on Vitosha on Sundays. We prepared a song for the celebration of International Women's Day on March 8th and sang it in two parts (Sluntseto trepti, zahozhda). It was very well received, reducing some of our women colleagues to tears. Encouraged, Mercia and I

prepared another song for the next staff party, but to our disappointment, we were not asked to perform again!

It was an extraordinarily happy and instructive year but I had made my decision to go back to the responsibilities of family and political life, and in July 1964 I returned to my parents' home in Birmingham.

Matthew Boulton Technical College 1964-1968

It was the summer holiday when I got back to England and there were not many teaching vacancies left. I applied for the few available in Birmingham and accepted the first that was offered. This was for a teacher of "English and Liberal Studies" in Matthew Boulton Technical College.

Battle for comprehensive secondary education

Before I left for Plovdiv in 1959 I had been an active member of NALT (National Association of Labour Teachers). There was a lively branch in Birmingham, which campaigned within the Party for a more equitable and effective secondary education, one which would give every child a good education and provide the country with the skilled labour it would need.

In the fifties the Labour Party was in power in Birmingham and about to build new secondary schools. I am pleased to report that it was my speech at the Municipal Policy Conference that changed the right-wing plan to build separate Grammar and Secondary Modern schools. Instead, the first two new secondary schools in Birmingham (Sheldon Heath and Great Barr) were built as comprehensive schools. They served as the model for the secondary schools built in Birmingham over the next fifty years. However, they were never truly comprehensive, as there remains a very powerful and well-funded old grammar school system, the King Edward's Trust schools dating back to the sixteenth century. These continue to cream off the most promising pupils.

Unbelievably over sixty years later the battle continues and, although a comprehensive system was established in some areas of the country, it was sabotaged and under-funded by successive right-wing governments and local authorities. This is in contrast to the Socialist Scandinavian countries, which funded a truly comprehensive system. The results of this can be seen in their heading the international table of educational achievement, while we languish way down the charts.

In many areas, including Birmingham, we are still stuck with the tripartite system of Grammar, Technical and Secondary Modern Schools. For my putative Bulgarian

readers I perhaps need to explain this, as it conditioned the whole of my future career.

Some of the Grammar Schools date back to Elizabethan times. In the nineteen fifties they still offered an academic education based on Latin and Greek, though my own Grammar School in the industrial area of Birmingham was strongly biased towards the sciences. My brother and I were lucky enough to pass the eleven-plus exam and were educated at Saltley Grammar School. From there we went to University, all fees paid and supported by a government grant. By 1951, when I graduated with a degree in English Language and Literature, the Cold War had descended, and I was too busy collecting signatures on peace petitions to pay attention to my future career. My all-women's college, Royal Holloway, part of London University, expected most of its alumni to become Grammar School teachers and, in the absence of other ideas, I followed this path. In the two grammar schools I taught at, nearly all the staff were graduates.

The Secondary Modern Schools had a less privileged origin. They were set up, often by various churches, in the late nineteenth century when the industrialists found they needed a literate workforce to service a developing capitalist economy. The class sizes were 50-60, compared with the norm in the grammar schools of 30-40. The pupils were not asked to do more than to master the three Rs of Reading, (w)Riting and (a)Rithmetic. There was a huge class gulf between the children of the poor who attended Secondary Modern Schools and the predominantly middle class children who prospered in the Grammar Schools.

The Technical Schools were in status halfway between the Grammar and Secondary Modern Schools, established to provide the skilled labour needed in an industrial economy. There were never enough such schools and we are still suffering from a shortage of skilled people. (Hence we depend on plumbers from Poland and construction workers from Bulgaria.)

Matthew Boulton Technical College was built in the late nineteenth century as a cathedral to industry. It was a church-like structure but, instead of Jesus and the saints, the Gothic arch above the main door was filled with men hitting anvils. The College provided the courses needed by the great Birmingham engineering works which dominated the city. I taught young men preparing for well-paid lifelong jobs in such factories as Guest, Keen and Nettlefold, Lucas's, and Bellis and Morecom. (All have recently merged with international conglomerates and their Birmingham factories have been demolished, along with Matthew Boulton Technical College itself.)

I had no problem in fulfilling my job description as "English teacher". Technical Colleges were very exam-orientated and I taught English language and Literature to

O and A level some of the time. This was familiar and easier than teaching the same thing in secondary school, where much of one's energies were spent on stopping the pupils smoking behind the bike-sheds. Altogether I found the unpretentious and highly professional atmosphere of Matthew Boulton very congenial.

The part of my job described as "Liberal and General Studies" was another matter. Nobody knew what exactly this was. My Head of Department was an economist so I was given his syllabus of economics to follow. This meant my weekends had to be spent working out how to explain the balance of trade (which I myself was hazy about) to mystified electrical and plumbing apprentices. The most rebellious of my classes was the sheet-metal workers. Their compulsory General Studies class was timetabled on Friday afternoon, so that they had to do the practical work for which they had come to College in the evening. That meant they were not free to take their girlfriends out at the end of the week. They blamed me for this!

In my second year I found out that I was not expected to follow somebody else's syllabus in these courses, but was free to devise my own. I figured out that the Government had noticed the poor level of literacy and general culture in students in technical schools and colleges and had tried to make up the deficiency with this well-meant but ill-funded hour of Liberal Studies. I came to an accommodation with most of my students so that the hours passed at least in peace and even agreeably. One effective technique was to invite them to give talks to the class about their own interests. I learned a lot from this. How else would I know about the joys of clay-pigeon shooting or parachute-jumping?

What shocked me as an educationalist was the low level of literacy of many of the students. I remember a class of electrical students struggling with their exam papers. They were keen well-motivated young men, wearing collars and ties as a mark of their respectability and ambition. They recalled their secondary modern schools with gratitude and affection. Yet, after ten years in school, they were barely literate. How could this be?

My next career move was to find an answer to this question.

City of Birmingham College of Education 1968-82

I wanted a job that would enable me to see round the parts of the education system that I had no personal experience of and I applied for a vacancy in the local College of Education, at this point an expanding field.

Colleges of Education had been set up to provide some professional training for teachers in state primary and secondary schools. After the War the two-year training course had been expanded to three years, but in the sixties it was recognised that the

poor level of academic education of these teachers, compared with the graduates in the grammar schools, was still a brake on improving standards in the Secondary Schools. The two-year certificate was expanded to three and four year degree courses and the colleges were advertising for staff to provide the academic content of these courses. With my good degree and experience of A-level teaching, I obtained a post in the English Department of the City of Birmingham College of Education.

The academic English course was purely literature. My colleagues were all passionate about classical and modern literature and some of them wrote novels and poetry. (Like most English teachers, I too have a novel in a cupboard somewhere, dating from this period.) Moreover we were lucky enough to have in John Way a Head of Department who ran what he called "a happy ship". I fell readily into this cultured and leisured environment. I shared a study with a colleague coming straight from the hard work of secondary school and we could not believe we had so much free time. My best friends in later life are nearly all colleagues from this period.

Teaching literature to students who had volunteered for the subject was very enjoyable. It was reminiscent of the happy days in Bulgaria, sharing the riches of English Literature with enthusiastic students. However, our students' level of competence in academic language often fell far short of the high standard of literacy which was the norm in the English Language Schools in Bulgaria. I volunteered for an innovative oral-based course, usually chosen by the less confident students. I worked hard at improving their essay writing skills with only moderate success.

There was no room on the English Literature course for the study of English language. The old Latin-based model of language teaching (an outdated description of the grammar of English) had been driven out of fashion. In fact it was taboo among my generation of idealistic teachers of literature, who relied on "creative writing" to teach people how to write. It was very nice to be paid for such a pleasant pastime.

The professional teacher-training side of my job was more problematic. I had not been inside an infants' school since I was an infant myself, yet each week I found myself confronted by 30 students expecting me to train them on how to teaching reading and writing to little children. It was scandalous. I hastily read a few books and booked myself into an infants' school on my free day to pick up some tips from experienced teachers. I try not to think about what a poor service I delivered in this respect.

An important part of our work was to supervise the students' teaching practice. This gave me the opportunity to visit many schools of all kinds in the city and sit in on

my students' classes. I soon found some of the answers to my puzzlement at the low level of literacy of many of the young people I had taught in Technical College. The size of the classes in primary schools was the first thing that shocked me – children who needed help simply got lost. Also there was a lack of urgency about equipping people for the skilled work of the future. These were the days of full employment and there were plenty of unskilled jobs for teenagers who had idled their way through school. As I write this in 2018, when the Government has imposed a ruthless system of testing, I think nostalgically of the easy-going times in the sixties and seventies.

Among teachers of English there was a contempt for teaching the mechanics of writing such as spelling and punctuation. We relied on the enjoyment generated by reading "good" literature to inspire our pupils to write in a similar way themselves and left the tedium of mastering the eccentricities of English spelling to take care of itself.

As a Socialist, I wanted to equip my working-class students not only for employment but for citizenship. I wanted them to be educated to take part in a democratic society and for this they needed to be able to read hard books and to write, at the very least, the minutes of their local Labour Party meetings. (As it was, I always got that thankless task!) I was a keen conference goer and I remember being one of a tiny minority at a big conference on reading arguing for the necessity of equipping all our pupils with a competence in spelling and punctuation.

My students in College of Education were mostly young women who had chosen a career in teaching. They were not inclined to join in the student protests that enlivened Higher Education in the sixties and seventies. However, even they were roused to call meetings to complain about our failure to prepare them for their chief problem in the schools, which was discipline. My own Post Graduate training had offered me little guidance in this basic part of any teacher's life and I had learned my trade in my first job. Hence, I sympathised with our students' discontent. Like many of my colleagues, we helped our students maintain order by practical advice on teaching practice in schools and by giving the occasional demonstration lesson (as well as taking over when things got too rowdy). As far as I know, I was the only lecturer in the College who had theoretical backing from my reading of Makarenko in my student years.

Applied Linguistics 1975-6

I have indicated above that our academic course was exclusively English Literature. Like the schools, the colleges had abandoned, with relief, the apparently pointless task of teaching a poor Latin-based description of the English language to bored students. This left a vacuum, which others were waiting to fill. Our College, along

with all the other colleges in the Midlands, came under the University of Birmingham for validation of its academic standards. There Professor John Sinclair was setting up a powerful department in modern linguistics. He used his power over the Colleges of Education to insist that all our would-be degree students passed an exam in Linguistics as well as Literature. Unfortunately, none of us lecturers were qualified to teach this new subject and nor was anyone else. The result was that our brightest and best students failed their degrees. Hundreds of students in the Midlands colleges felt the impact of this change of policy. We were furious on behalf of our students, and "Linguistics" became a dirty word to the staff of the English Departments.

Professors concerned with promoting their own specialities are indifferent to the casualties their political actions may cause. Kate Cooper, one of the casualties of John Sinclair's exercise of academic power, turned up in my life recently and I sent her this account of the period. Her reply shows the human cost of such irresponsibility:

I wish we'd known how angry you staff were. We didn't. I didn't until you said so recently. On reflection, of course you would have been . . . But at the time, we just felt let down. And ashamed.

I don't know whether you know, but I took an Open University BA degree when my kids were babies. Got it in 18 months too. I discovered that reading is a great accompaniment to breast feeding, and rapidly learned what (male) management consultants called 'time-management'. I don't think I got over the shame of it all until I got a distinction in my MSc which I got while part-time teaching of Algerians, Saudis and Kuwaitis, plus looking after a couple of little ones and running a household. That Master's degree taught me how to think well, structure knowledge, et al. That year at Aston changed my life.

Fortunately the shortage of linguistics teachers was soon remedied. Ten years before, when I was teaching in Bulgaria, Teaching English as a Foreign Language was the province of wandering eccentrics like myself. By the seventies, however, it was clear that English was already the world language. All over the world there was a demand for native speakers to teach English in schools and colleges. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) was becoming professionalised and new one-year M.A. courses in TEFL had been set up in a number of universities.

The situation in the English Department of my College was transformed when two young men, John Burke and Chris Brumfit, arrived fresh from their M.A. (TEFL) course at the University of Essex to teach the Linguistics component of our English degrees. Both had spent a number of years teaching in Africa. They were very able and confident (both became professors later) and not only saw our students through their degrees but also had the temerity to challenge the way the English Department was run. They outraged the literature enthusiasts by giving us a lecture to prove that Literature should be regarded as a branch of Linguistics!

I had always been fascinated by language, and my experience of TEFL in Bulgaria meant that I had much to discuss with these new colleagues. Together with the new Linguistic teachers in all the Colleges of Education in the Midlands now implementing Professor Sinclair's demands, Burke and Brumfit set up the Midlands Association of Linguistics Studies. They organised lectures and weekend courses attended by hundreds of staff and students. I was quickly recruited to MALS and was eager to learn more about this new and fast-moving field of knowledge. My literary colleagues, who were also my friends, never ceased to regard this as betrayal!

My interest in Linguistics was not purely academic. I was not alone in suspecting that the intellectual inadequacy of many of our pupils and students had something to do with language. Even in grammar school I had always felt some kind of intellectual barrier between my pupils and what I was trying to teach them. (Bulgaria was the one place where this was not true! And it was not merely that our political sympathies coincided.) I looked to this new army of Linguistics scholars to give us the solution to this problem.

After two years John Burke and Chris Brumfit moved on to University posts and Gerry Power, a very bright new colleague (like them fresh from Essex University), took their place. The degrees of our students seemed secure. But our Head of Department was afraid that, when Gerry moved on to the University post he was already applying for, our students would again be left without a competent teacher of Linguistics.

I was 45 by this time and unlikely to quit what was a very nice job. In those palmy years it was normal for experienced staff to be granted a sabbatical year in which to renew their academic capital. My Head of Department somehow managed to get the College governing body to send me to Essex University, all fees paid and on full salary, to get an M.A. in Applied Linguistics (as TEFL was now known).

I spent a blissful year at Essex having no responsibilities except to read hard books and write a few essays. I made a point of walking by the sea every day. Only two of us on the course had a background in English schools. The others were all TEFL teachers, about half of whom were non-native speakers from all over the world. I loved this international environment.

Above all, it gave me that rarest of privileges in a teacher's life – time to think and restock one's intellectual capital. It was an exciting time both in theoretical linguistics and in Applied Linguistics (TEFL).

The academic core of the course was Chomsky's Transformational-Generative grammar, which was to dominate Linguistics for the next half-century. (In 2018 I have been reading new books denouncing this school of Linguistics as a dead-end, but then keen linguists leapt on it, not least because it was difficult.) I learned Chomskyan grammar with interest but also took an optional course in Systemic linguistics, which I later found more useful as a descriptive tool.

Most of my fellow-students had more practical interests. They needed their M.A.s to catch up with the various revolutionary ideas then transforming the teaching of English as a foreign language. Before I went to teach in Plovdiv in 1959 I had looked for materials to take out with me. There was literally nothing. Now in 1975 there was an abundance of textbooks for different groups of students world-wide, each one offering a different syllabus. The old grammar-translation method that I had used in Bulgaria ten years before was long out of date. Fashion moved from notional to functional to lexical syllabuses faster than practising teachers could keep up. However, with my Bulgarian experience as evidence, I used to point out that if the students are well-motivated enough, they will learn whatever the method. However, I had to admit that the new communicative methods were more fun.

What I had not expected was to find an answer to a problem that had always bothered me as a teacher of literature. As taught in the West, there was no explicit theory underpinning our choice of texts as worthy of study. In Bulgaria I had felt very comfortable teaching literature because our teaching was based on an explicit Marxist theory relating it to the class struggle. It was simplistic but at least we thought we knew what we were doing. At Essex I was lucky enough to be offered the chance to attend Laurence (Paddy) O'Toole's courses in Semiotics and Stylistics, which were at the forefront of the new literary theory. Here I was introduced to Post-Structuralism, Post-Modernism and many other –isms which were challenging but very exciting.

Back in the College, now qualified by a good M.A., I picked up my former timetable plus a bit of Linguistics teaching which Gerry Power devolved to me. I also found myself responsible for putting together a new course for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language as an option on the one-year Post-Graduate Certificate. This included teaching practice in sunny Barcelona for six weeks in the summer term.

Teaching practice in Barcelona opened up a new opportunity of contact with another culture. Franco, the Fascist dictator (whom my father had campaigned against in the thirties) had just died and every night the streets of Barcelona were full of enormous street demonstrations. The Catalan language, banned under Franco, was restored as the official language, the street-names were being changed back into Catalan and altogether it was a wonderful time to be there.

Many of my students had already had experience of TEFL and they were eager for the training we offered. I had already worked with Bob Farmer, who in theory was in charge of the new CCTV facilities, but in practice had much more than these cumbersome and unreliable machines to offer. Bob had come to the College in the early seventies after experience in the RAF Education corps. Like me he had been horrified by the slackness and amateurism of the professional training in those years. I arranged with him to let my students do micro-teaching to a small number of newly immigrant pupils. Bob's technician filmed these ten-minute lessons and we later analysed them. This showed the students how much work goes into successful language teaching and they carried this high standard of preparation into their six-week practice in Barcelona.

The PGCE was tackling the old problem of how to link theory with practice by arranging joint seminars with a subject (TEFL) tutor and one from the Education Department working together. I was lucky enough to team up with Stewart Buchanan, a bright and entertaining sociologist from the Education Department, and I like to think that he, Gerry Power, Bob Farmer and I offered a very professional training to these students.

A footnote to my time in Spain: I was standing on the steps of a hotel opposite the Cathedral in Barcelona, when a voice said: "Good afternoon, Comrade Mason!" Amazed, I turned and there, looking down on me, was a tall young man in a smart suit. It was Georgi from 8D class of the first intake in the Plovdiv school! He was representing Bulgaria at a European conference on fisheries. (Bulgaria was proudly building up a deep sea fishing fleet at this time.) Georgi was booked to fly home that afternoon, so we had time only for a hasty exchange of words. I was so delighted to have this echo from Bulgaria, especially to know that one of my students was holding an important position in the service of his country. Also I took a vicarious pride in his impeccable English!

Early retirement 1982

These were lively and productive years full of competing ideas in every sphere. They were also stressful because we were constantly being reorganised. I was an active member of my union (though we were too genteel to have a "union" - we called it a "professional organisation".) In this capacity I served on endless committees negotiating the amalgamation, first of my College with two smaller Colleges of Education in the city, and then the incorporation of the enlarged college into Birmingham Polytechnic.

Also by 1980 my parents were old and disabled, and increasingly dependent on me. I had returned to their home after leaving Bulgaria and had never got round to moving out. It was a squeeze in their pleasant two-bedroomed Council house, but it

suited us all and we always found room to entertain my brother's family as well as Bulgarian friends who appeared from time to time. I had been lucky enough to be introduced to Betty Clark, a tiny Irish lady, who had just retired from a clerical job at Lucas's. She loved my parents and helped me care for them. Hence, I was able to swan off to Barcelona and elsewhere, leaving her in charge. (When I interviewed her, she concluded the good impression she had made by proudly stating that she was Treasurer of her local Conservative Party. I said: "For God's sake don't tell my parents!" In fact, I found out, not for the only time in my life, that politically active people have a lot in common even though they support different sides.)

In 1982 the City decided to shed 17 staff at the College by offering a generous voluntary redundancy package. By this time the pressure at work and at home was such that I decided to avoid a breakdown by volunteering to be made redundant. My union supported me and I retired from my last full-time job at the age of fifty-two. I realised it would make me poor in old age but, in fact, I don't feel at all poor and I have no regrets for making this decision.

University of Birmingham

At this point Deirdre Burton comes into my story. She was a young lecturer in the English Department of the University of Birmingham. I had met her through M.A.L.S. and encountered her by chance in town. We had a coffee together and discussed the possibility of using my unexpected leisure to extend my knowledge of linguistics by embarking on a Ph.D.

In September, when my former colleagues were going back to work, I was still exhausted. I told Deirdre that I was not up to embarking on a programme of linguistic research. She and Tom Davis were running the M.A. in Literary Theory, while David Lodge was on sabbatical leave, and she suggested that I attend the lectures without coughing up the £3,000 a year fees. I did this and was immediately hooked. I paid up, Deirdre agreed to be my tutor and I looked forward to a happy irresponsible period of reading, discussion and research. Deirdre's own research was in Stylistics, the application of linguistics to literary texts. Under her guidance, I imitated the work of scholars in this new field by doing a linguistic analysis of two passages of literary criticism showing how the different philosophical theories of F.R. Leavis and Catherine Belsey were embodied in the grammar of passages from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. I never wrote this up but gave it as a lecture at a conference of P.A.L.A. (the Poetics and Linguistics Association), whose conferences I enjoyed on a regular basis for the next decade.

The English Language Department under John Sinclair ran a great variety of courses which they needed casual teachers to staff and I was invited to help teach English to a group of Algerian engineers. They were on a one-year crash course to learn English

from nothing to coping with M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in the Engineering Faculty. Their native language was Arabic (sometimes Berber) and they had studied their first degrees in French, the language of education in Algeria. Lecturers like Tony Dudley-Evans and Tim Johns had pioneered the development of Academic English and were doing innovative work at a higher level. I had never taught the early stages of TEFL (the Bulgarians had wanted me for the advanced classes). I found this work very satisfying because these able and well-motivated young men learned incredibly fast and kept outstripping the textbooks I ordered for them.

Africa

At Christmas that year I sent out cards to friends as usual. Among them was Thelma Henderson, a friend from my year at Essex. She was now a professor at the University of Warwick and responsible for many TEFL courses all over the world. She and her husband were “old Africa hands” having spent many years in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, during the years of the struggle for independence. I put a note in Thelma’s card that I had been made redundant and, to my surprise, she immediately offered me a job, starting in January. It was a short-term contract for TEFL work in Zambia.

Betty Clark was willing to look after my parents for the four weeks I would be away and was nearly as excited as I was at this totally unexpected chance to go to Africa. I filled up with injections and anti-malarial tablets, guessed what clothes and books I would need and in January set off for Lusaka, still unable to believe my luck.

This turned out to be the first of many “tours”, first in Zambia and later in Namibia. I was working with a team recruited to write textbooks to teach English to SWAPO refugees. The South West African People’s Organisation was an organisation fighting to liberate their country (now Namibia) from its illegal occupation by apartheid South Africa They had escaped political persecution, sometimes by swimming the Ovambo River and hiding in the Angolan jungle. The refugee guerrilla fighters were living in secret camps in the Zambian bush, planning to return one day to rule an independent Namibia. In Zambia there are four groups of languages, none of them dominant, so they had chosen English as the official language of the country when it gained its independence. There are even more non-cognate languages in Namibia. We suspected that most of the rebels we were working with spoke Afrikaans, but this was the language of the oppressor. They wanted English to be the official language of their new country and we were employed to do was to write textbooks to enable them to run a modern independent Namibia.

Our project was funded by British Overseas Aid and run by the International Extension College. This was a branch of the National Extension College, which had

long pioneered Distance Learning by offering postal courses of all kinds to working-class people. (I happened to be familiar with the NEC, because my father had taken one of their courses in journalism. He was very pleased when his last piece of writing was evaluated "of professional standard" by his tutor.)

Distance learning seemed ideal for our SWAPO learners of English, as they had no teachers out there in the bush. However, another team had already spent a lot of time and money producing a textbook for them, which had failed. It was competently written and very nicely illustrated by a Namibian artist, but our target group had been unable to learn from it. Hence, we had been appointed to try again.

Our first task was to analyse the needs of the target learners. We were not, of course, able to visit the guerrilla camps, which were under attack from South African bombers, so SWAPO people who were working in various jobs in Lusaka were recruited to act as our guinea pigs. After years of exile in Lusaka with English as the only language shared with their Zambian hosts, their spoken English was more than adequate to communicate with us. As political activists, they were bright lively people but it was soon clear to me that the reason the first textbook had failed was that our would-be learners were functionally illiterate. We had to show our professionalism by giving lots of tests and, on my insistence, this included dictation (out of fashion at the time). I was the only member of the team that had experience of teaching reading from scratch (derived from my years in teacher training in the state primary schools). However, I was persuaded to keep quiet as our potential students were touchy about being branded illiterate.

It is difficult enough to teach reading and writing in England with its abundance of trained teachers and attractive choice of teaching materials. Our students in the bush had no teachers, any tape-recorders they acquired would be full of sand (and stolen anyway), so we had nothing but the written word as the channel of communication. And their standard of reading was not up to the job.

Our team came from a variety of backgrounds and we all worked very hard to overcome these obstacles and produce a usable first textbook. We wrote lot of trial material on our own and met each morning to discuss our efforts and work out a syllabus. Some of us also met socially at about midnight for conversation and whisky (bought on the advice of the old hands at the duty-free at Heathrow on the way out). This sociable group included the two Namibian women teachers we were lucky enough to have advising us on the course. I was glad I had learned to drink in Bulgaria, as these convivial late-night sessions were a chance to talk to these lively revolutionaries. They later stayed with me in England when attending secret ANC conferences.

I had found the heat of the Plovdiv summer a knockout and had hastened home in July every year. This was some preparation for the heat of East Africa. We were staying in a hostel on the campus of the University of Lusaka in single rooms with a private bathroom. I devised my own timetable of work, sleeping in the afternoon and working through the night, cooler but still so hot that I wore only a summer nightie and kept a bath of cold water to plunge in from time to time. The food in the canteen was rice and chicken every day but the hygiene standards were high and we never got ill. We ate together in a little garden shaded by a fragrant frangipane tree in full bloom. I got up at dawn and would sit in a quiet place on the campus fascinated by the brilliantly coloured wild birds. Once a colleague and I trained our binoculars on a strange creature on the path below my window. It turned out to be a cobra.

I was well-paid for my services and spent every penny on seeing as much of Africa as I could. I spent wonderful days on safari in the Luangwa Valley and the Victoria Falls. I took the advice of my ex-patriate colleagues on long-term TEFL postings and enjoyed what I have since called the best day of my life. I was staying in the tourist hotel in Livingstone close to the Victoria Falls. I got up early and went out with plenty of drinking water towards the Falls. There was no-one about except for some people waiting at a bus stop. A family of baboons ran off as I approached them. I crossed the bridge into Zimbabwe before the border guards were up, marvelling at the exotic birds on the telegraph wires. Somehow I missed the tourist path to the Falls and found myself walking along the Zimbabwe bank of the Zambezi River. It was still early and the trees along the bank provided shade. On the path there were piles of fresh dung deposited by hippopotamuses overnight. Luckily for me, these dangerous animals were now wallowing out in the immensity of the fast-flowing river on its way to the Victoria Falls, which I could hear thundering behind me. I walked for several miles quite alone, enjoying the clouds of brilliantly coloured butterflies that flew up in front of me, pale blue swallowtails and small bright orange ones. After a couple of miles I turned out of the forest on to a road and watched a mother and baby warthog run across it. There was no traffic and no people about. I felt as though I was in the Garden of Eden before the Fall!

On a hill across the yellow grass I could see what looked like a hotel and I made my way towards it, strengthened by a vision of a huge glass of ice-cold lemonade. A small herd of impala scattered as I approached.

Then I saw that the building was a burnt-out shell. I remembered seeing on television pictures of the Elephant Hills Hotel consumed by fire in the fighting that accompanied the end of British rule in Zimbabwe. It was time to turn back. It was unbearably hot and my umbrella was no shield against this African sun. Back at the Falls there was a hotel with reclining chairs and fresh lemonade. I then did my duty as a tourist and was duly terrified by sound and sight of the Victoria Falls

themselves. A border guard, chatting pleasantly, accompanied me back over the bridge into Zambia. I was back from paradise.

An important member of our team was the British Council representative in Lusaka. When I stayed on after the others had flown home, he and his wife invited me to stay with them and I enjoyed their hospitality in between my tourist trips. Thanks to them, I enjoyed the good side of the ex-pat life, such as sitting on their stoep in the evening, using their copy of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* to look up the birds I had seen on safari.

There was a large ex-pat community in Lusaka who socialized with one another in a very pleasant middle class style supported by the abundance of cheap domestic labour. However, my hosts had to employ a watchman at night to protect their beautiful but walled and razor-wired garden, never sure whether he was working for the burglars or for them. And, while we were there, a number of ex-pat colleagues had been terrified when their dinner party was broken into. Young black men had lined them up in the garden and robbed them of their jewellery. The wives of the ex-pats had a very boring life there. The wife of the British Council rep did not drive herself and was as good as imprisoned in her beautiful bungalow, passing her time doing crafts of various kinds. I realised that the ex-pat life was not as glamorous as it looked.

The textbook which the IEC team had cobbled together was evidently serviceable, as a few years later I was invited back to take part in more workshops producing textbooks for the next stages of learning English as a foreign language.

The Wigan Language Project 1983-1991: theory

Back in England I returned to my own academic work. The contrast between that and the work we had been doing for the SWAPO refugees in Zambia could not have been starker. The work there had been at the most basic level – teaching a language without an adequate channel of communication.

At home I revised my analysis of the two texts of literary criticism I had been working on. (page 35) I had been analysing the linguistic differences between the two academic texts. What struck me now was what the texts had in common – they were very both very difficult, not to say abstruse.

I've been subject to attacks of good ideas all my life, but the idea I had about these texts was the best I'd ever had! If it was possible to analyse the differences between these texts, it must be possible to analyse what they had in common. My motivation

was not purely linguistic but also pedagogic. I was not alone among linguists in my feeling that the major obstacle encountered by working-class teenagers in secondary schools was something to do with language. I had long hoped that modern scientific linguistics would throw light on this problem.

I thought that making a contribution to this puzzle would take the rest of my life. In fact, the answer turned out to be quite simple. I was new to the field and, above all, I was paying my own fees and free to do as I liked. I found the answer to my question, not in the grammar of academic texts, which, under Chomsky's influence dominated linguistics at this time, but at the level of the word. Deirdre Burton, my tutor, was supportive and interested. She had recommended to me *Metaphors we live by* (George Lakoff and Keith Johnson, 1980) and this was a crucial part of my analysis.

I settled down at home each morning with the texts, ready to do some hard thinking about them for the next fifty years or so. To my astonishment, after a couple of days I came up with a very simple description of the linguistic features shared by the two literary texts. Next I analysed school textbooks across the curriculum and found the same two features - nominalisation and metaphor. It is these two features which make abstract thought possible and creates the big distinction between everyday language and the academic language which is needed for success in secondary school and Higher Education.

Every time I talk about this I feel again the thrill of discovery. In 1983 I was still living with my parents. My mother was an invalid by this time, and she was waiting for the nurse to come and get her up. I remember dancing round her bed, baffling her with my brilliant analysis. My father had suffered a series of strokes and was now a miserable old man in a nursing home, but when I filled his ear with the marvels of my discovery and the political implications of it, he cheered up and was as delighted as I was. He died a few months later.

The description of abstract language is so elegant and demands so little linguistic knowledge that I cannot resist reprinting it here but my readers who do not thrill to the words *adjective, verb* and *noun* are invited to skip it.

OPTIONAL:

Concrete and abstract language

This is an extract from an article in the website www.breakthrough-to-learning.co.uk under "Downloads". It is called: Illuminating English: how explicit language teaching improved public examination results in a comprehensive school. It was published in Educational Studies, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1992

(a) All abstract words are based on concrete words. They are made out of concrete words by:

(1) changes of word-class, especially nominalisation; that is, changing other word-classes into nouns—

for instance, preserve (verb) to preservation(noun); warm (adjective) to warmth (noun);

(2) metaphor, including personification;

for example, chain reactions, the aim of research.

(b) In English the link between the concrete base and the abstract development is often lost, because the concrete words are Germanic in origin and the abstract words are Latin or Greek.

For example: The apple hangs from the tree (concrete); an argument depends upon close reasoning (abstract—Latin: dependere—to hang from).

(c) Verbs in the passive voice (often without the agent). For example: The solution was heated in the test tube.

(d) Long sentences with clauses logically connected, by conjunctions, relative words, sentence adverbs, participial forms, etc.

Discourse Structure

The above analysis is at the level of the word and sentence. There is an impressive body of analysis of academic text at discourse level—that is, language above the level of the sentence. The work of Eugene Winter in the field of clause relations has provided a seminal analysis of how scientists combine sentences to make larger meanings. His work has been taken further by Michael Hoey, whose On the Surface of Discourse forms the theoretical basis of Book 3 of Illuminating English.

Briefly, the structures which underlie both narrative and non-narrative discourse in our culture are:

(a) problem-solution;

(b) compare and contrast;

(c) general-particular.

Note on discourse structures: I had been made aware of this work by Eugene Winters and Mike Hoey as long ago as 1976 and had thought then that this could be mediated to young people in secondary and even primary schools.

When I got the chance to do this myself in *Illuminating English* I was still attached to the University of Birmingham and Mike Hoey was very generous with his time in checking Book 3, which mediated his academic description to schoolchildren.

Concrete and abstract language

Two short texts illustrating the differences between concrete and abstract language can be found on the website www.languageofideas.co.uk following Academic Language and Linguistic Analysis.

The Wigan Language Project in action 1984-92

I had planned to spend the rest of my life in the quiet pastures of academia, eventually producing a Ph.D. on the linguistic analysis of literary texts. (I was very good at this and had several papers published.)

However, the discovery that the difference between everyday language and the abstract language of secondary school could be described pushed all that to one side. It was not merely the delight of intellectual discovery but the enormous political implications of it that determined my activities for the next thirty years. In other words, working class children, the occupants of the B and C streams, could be made clever by teaching them the language they needed for academic success. The principal cause of the failure of many working-class teenagers in secondary schools was not inherited inferiority but a deficiency in language. **And, if these differences could be described, they could be taught.**

I was exploring with my tutors the possibility of doing my Ph.D. on this new subject, when a unique and irresistible opportunity occurred of trying out my theory in practice.

Shevington High School, Wigan

For the last twenty years my brother, Bob, had been teaching in comprehensive secondary schools, first as a Geography teacher and then as Deputy Head of Paddington, the toughest comprehensive school in Liverpool. In 1973 he was appointed Head of Shevington High School, Wigan. (We had become a family of teachers. Bob's wife, Cath, was a dedicated teacher at a local infants' school. No child left her class unable to read.)

Bob and I had always shared our educational experience on family visits and in long phone calls. (I could hear his sons in the background moaning "Boring! Boring!") As

Socialists, we were committed to comprehensive education, now well-established in all local authorities in the country, but always underfunded and undermined by powerful forces in the establishment. The main battle had moved to the still contentious matter of streaming. Even though the basic research was fraudulent, most people in education were conditioned to believe that Intelligence Tests measured inherited and unchangeable differences between pupils. This dodgy theory justified teaching children in different classes with different expectations, a practice known as "streaming". As Socialists we believed that streaming itself created these differences, and a few brave and radical Head teachers had created secondary schools which were genuinely comprehensive and treated all children as capable of learning. (Finland, under the influence of progressive British thought at this time, remodelled its schools on these Socialist principles, with the result that they now (2018) lead the world in educational standards, while Britain slips steadily down the tables of achievement.)

It should be said here that few people engaged in education, now or then, actually use their privileged education to keep abreast of current scientific research into subjects such as linguistics, sociology and psychology, which are relevant to their professional work. They are carried along on the deadweight of traditional beliefs, not recognising them as the product of the English class system. (Bulgarians, with their very different history, have no idea of the cruel and persistent class distinctions which still poison all aspects of life in England.)

Bob, given the chance, as Headteacher, to put his well-researched ideals into practice, had the support of Wigan Education Authority. Over the next few years Shevington High School was transformed from a run of the mill Secondary Modern School into a model comprehensive school. By the time I fell over my great idea, the school was running smoothly and streaming had been abandoned. The school was attracting able and radical teachers. Though it had its share of troubled children, discipline was no longer an issue. There was no C stream to protest against their despised status by challenging the authority of the school. I had visited a lot of schools in my College of Education days and I had never seen a secondary school where the children went in by the front door, as they did at Shevington under Bob's leadership. This was symbolic of the fact that the children felt that the school belonged to them.

A personal experience illustrates the spirit of the school. I had been visiting Shevington, arriving early in the morning before school began. The pupils were arriving at the same time and passing unsupervised through the main door, quietly chatting to one another. Later that day I drove down to Heathrow to pick up Bulgarian friends who were to stay with me. I had some hours to spare and I parked in Windsor and wandered over the Thames to have a look at Eton College. Through the railings I could see the boys strolling quietly to their classes chatting quietly to

one another, just like the boys and girls at Shevington, except that the Eton boys didn't wash their hair as often as the Wigan children.

Wigan Education Authority was going through an exciting period of intellectual and practical excitement. A Labour Government had asked representatives of five Local Education Authorities to design a national programme for the future of education in this country. Over a period of ten years these representatives met once a month in London to draw up a curriculum for the future. Bob and Jim Jones, his Deputy at Shevington, together with Bill Greenwood, the Senior Adviser in Wigan, represented the LEA at these discussions. They produced a series of "red books" which drew up a rationale based on current educational theory and even a draft timetable of what education might look like in the future. A Conservative Government under Thatcher withdrew its support from this programme and it was allowed to die.

In 1984 we did not guess what a transformation was to be effected by eighteen years of continuous Conservative Government, and the Wigan Language Project continued with the support of the Labour Council in Wigan. The articles on the websites describe how, over the course of the next eight years, my bright idea was turned into a three-year course which taught the pupils at Shevington High School to recognise and use the abstract language which is the vehicle of all academic subjects. It was based on my analysis of school textbooks from across the curriculum, borrowed from Shevington school library.

My TEFL teaching in Bulgaria twenty-five years before was formative, because it was my first experience of imparting knowledge through the medium of a foreign language, where the vocabulary of every subject has to be explicitly taught. The language course at Shevington was based on the idea that working-class pupils, more than those from educated homes, have to be taught that part of their native language which they do not pick up at home and (in those pre-computer days) in the street. (Most of the teachers who later grasped what the course was about were teachers of English as a Second Language – that is, of the large and growing number of the children of immigrant parents, who knew they had to learn English to a high level to succeed in our schools.)

Once Bob grasped the potential of explicit teaching about language he undertook the task of persuading the staff to give up teaching time (always jealously guarded by subject staff) to teaching the course I now found myself writing. I knew from my long experience in schools that teachers were too hard-pressed to learn new linguistic ideas, which they were dubious about anyway. This is where my work in Africa came in – I used my distance learning experience to provide them with ready-made lessons which ran themselves. (This is available in full on the website www.breakthrough-to-learning.co.uk. It is the third rewrite of the course. The one we were working on at this stage was the second edition of *Illuminating English.*)

We had the huge advantage of support from the Director and Advisers of the Education Department in Wigan. Wigan is a handsome little town in the Pennines which had grown rich on coal and the manufacture of cotton in the Industrial Revolution and, with the demise of these industries, was now suffering from unemployment and deprivation. Always a Labour Local Authority, it was fortunate to have at this time very bright and forward-looking officers, who quickly understood the purpose of the experiment at Shevington and gave it their moral and financial support. Bob and I used to meet them in the Welsh tea-room in everybody's lunch hour to discuss the latest developments. Thus, the experiment at Shevington (extended to small-scale trials in two other secondary schools) became the Wigan Language Project. The authority funded the production of materials.

Illuminating English

The Wigan College of Technology was trying to find ways of creating employment in the town and set up a number of new ventures, including a publishing company. They asked if they could publish the three books, which had now been systematically worked through and emended at Shevington, appointing Maureen Layte, a teacher in the College, as editor. She was very able and hard-working and she and I enjoyed a very good working relationship for the next few years.

I spent most of these years writing what turned out to be a three-year course for the first three years of secondary school, using the pupils at Shevington as guinea pigs. At first, we all naively assumed that this course in the English language had to be the province of the English Department. Accordingly, we entitled it *Illuminating English*.

Unfortunately, the principal opposition to the course came from the English staff, who taught according to the "creative writing" school of English teaching where pupils were taught to read and write as a by-product of the study of literature. It was the theory that had underpinned my own teaching in secondary schools and I had passed it on in my work in College of Education. It was uphill work to persuade the English staff at Shevington that a course teaching the structure of the English language was not merely irrelevant but positively immoral. We were all members of the National Association of Teachers of English, a body which passionately espoused this framework of literature-based teaching. Maureen and I took a stall at the NATE conference in York one year and the teachers, fresh from a lecture by Michael Rosen, the poet and NATE pundit, rioted around our bookstall, when they spotted the word "adjective" on the contents page!

The English staff at Shevington were a bright and dedicated department who were in general in sympathy with the ethos of the school. In spite of their misgivings

about language teaching (and using the untested ideas of the Head's little fat sister) they loyally taught the course for the first two years, still grumbling that the time taken from their normal teaching meant that they had no time for poetry.

In fact, anyone could administer a distance-learning course and Bob devised a system of taking lessons from every subject department in turn, calling on the senior staff to administer the course. It is important to emphasise here that the pupils were encouraged to work through the material in pairs or very small groups. This solved potential discipline problems, which arise mostly because children are talking out of turn. We actually encouraged them to talk about the substance of the lesson and work through it together. There was an "extension" to each lesson with games and role-playing activities but I never heard of anyone having the time to use them. The senior staff were always being called away from these lessons to deal with emergencies and the lessons continued perfectly well without them. I had always used my access to Shevington to try out lessons with pupils and I administered some of my own lessons from *Illuminating English*. I found that I had, indeed, nothing to do and so made myself a nuisance by chatting to individual pupils and distracting them from their work.

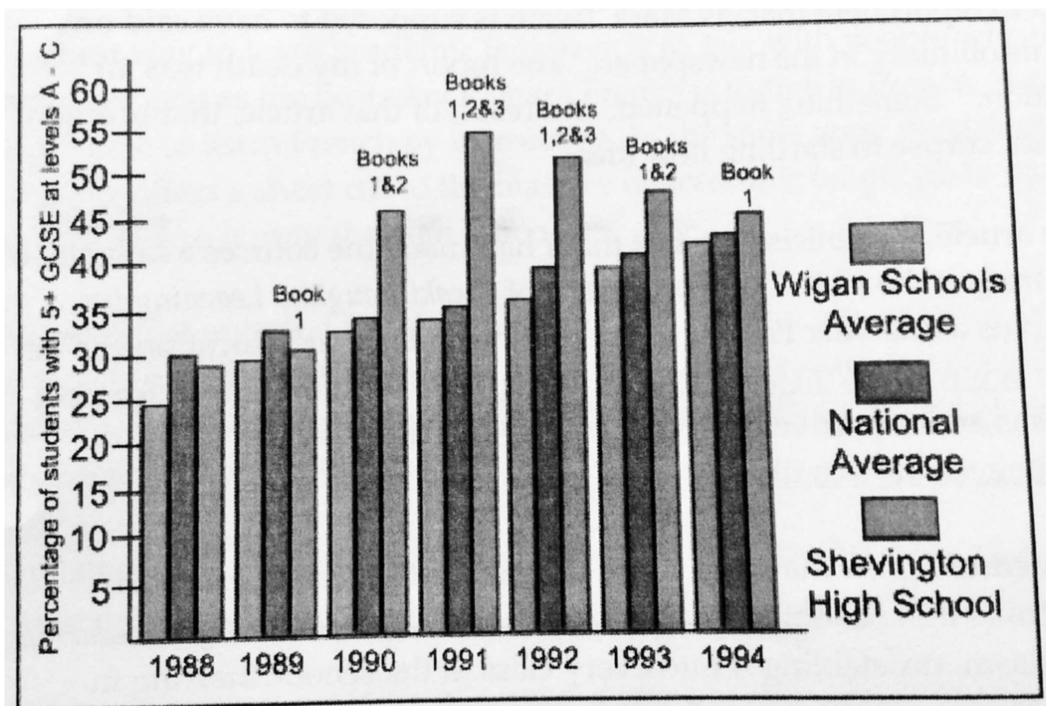
Success ……

Shevington was a "good" school and Wigan was a "good" authority, as measured by GCSE results, both better than the national average in those years. Wigan seconded Brian Heap, one of the teachers on the course, who had some experience of research methods, to spend a year out of school carrying out an evaluation of the course. He used the public exam results before and after the introduction of the course and showed conclusively that it had been effective. In subjects across the curriculum, the percentage of pupils getting 5 GCSEs at grades A-C had risen from 30% to 57% - almost doubled. Bob and I, the senior staff at the school and the senior officers in Wigan were vindicated. We were exultant.

….. and failure!

Our triumph was short-lived. Bob had had a heart attack a few years before and took early retirement in 1991, confident that the linguistic programme would continue. But the deadweight of ignorance and tradition was too much for this innovative and unbelievably successful project. The new head was a scientist and we hoped this would mean that she would understand our statistics and support the course. Instead, she took the advice of the Head of English (a NATE devotee) and abandoned the Project. We had gained some publicity for the success of the course and head teachers from all over the country now rang up the new Head at Shevington, only to be told that our course had been abandoned. Everything

reverted to normal and soon the pupils at Shevington were going into school by the side door like everywhere else.
The GCSE results soon fell back to what they had been before. The graph shows this very starkly.



National Curriculum

In these years the Government was working towards a new National Curriculum. It invited educationalists to send in their views and we, of course, sent in parcels of books and articles at several points during the development of the Wigan Project.

Meanwhile, Professor Ron Carter at the University of Nottingham had persuaded the Government to spend a lot of money trialling a linguistics course for secondary schools (Language in the National Curriculum - LINC). It used members of NATE to trial the materials, rather than people who had experience of teaching English as a foreign language. It was based on the idea that knowledge about language in general would improve academic standards, unlike the Wigan course which targeted the specific area of deficiency – that is, the abstract features of academic language. The LINC course was attractive but in the end was rejected by the Government, because it did not address the real problem (though the proponents of the course claimed it was because it was too left-wing).

Bob and I tackled the task of getting the Wigan Language Project known and then widely adopted, not only on the educational network but also through our contacts

in the Labour Party. Claire Short, my MP, arranged a meeting for us in the House of Commons with the Shadow Minister of Education, Jack Straw. He asked very pertinent questions but was not enthused by it. His mind was clearly elsewhere.

What we still don't understand is why we received no response to our repeated attempts to tell the civil servants and politicians about this important contribution to the new curriculum. We did not get even an acknowledgement to the piles of books which they must have been tripping over. None of the measures which successive governments have imposed on schools are well-researched and validated, like ours, but are based on traditional ideas on discipline and business ideas on testing. The missed opportunity at Shevington became the missed opportunity of the country.

Putting aside paranoid thoughts of skull-duggery at the Ministry, the reasons for the long-term failure of the Wigan Language Project are a little clearer now, twenty-five years later, than they were at the time. One obvious one was that it was innovative in more than one way. First, it was based on linguistic analysis, simple enough, but the generation of teachers I had helped to train not only had learned no grammar but despised it as choking the imagination. Secondly, the distance teaching methods I had learned in Africa were unfamiliar to educationalists working in schools catering traditionally for native speakers.

Above all, it is part of the English failure to re-examine the theoretical foundation of their practice, to know and use the scientific advances which could have transformed education by now. Moreover, the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two of this have been a period of successful counter revolution. The collapse of the Soviet Union makes the collapse of the Wigan Language Project seem a very small matter, but it was a part of the same historical process.

Picking up the pieces

After the Shevington experiment was abruptly terminated, some of the initiatives that we had started still continued.

TRACE, the publishing company set up by the Wigan College of Technology, was publishing the second edition of the three books of *Illuminating English* with very nice pen and ink illustrations by Ian Thompson, a former colleague at the College of Education. Reasonably enough, he expected to be paid for his work and, to pay him, I took a series of undemanding and well-paid jobs with a Birmingham company which employed linguists to advise commercial firms on how to help their clerks write simply and lucidly to their customers (part of the Plain English movement). I worked for such firms as West Midlands Gas, Abbey National Building Society and Martin-Baker, the firm which made 94% of the world's pilot ejector seats.

The Managing Director of the company was a former College of Education student, Kate Cooper. (She had been one of John Sinclair's victims, failing her B.Ed. degree because of the lack of linguists. See page 48.) By the nineties Kate also Managing Director of a company set up to sell linguistics-based packages to industry and she was now happy to employ me to write and deliver them. (She always gave a touch of class to her programmes by telling her customers that I had taught her T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.)

I continued to travel the country giving lectures on the Wigan Project. The Government had introduced a way of keeping teachers abreast of current developments by making all schools take one day off every term for in-service work. My lectures fitted well into this pattern, giving the staff an entertaining and even useful non-teaching day. There was a difference, however, between working an audience up into a lather of enthusiasm for the project and convincing them to actually give up teaching time. However, TRACE sold some thousands of books, I got a modest royalty and some free school meals and a good time was had by all. At least it spread a knowledge of the potential contribution of modern Linguistics to education.

I was also busy writing articles and getting them published in educational and linguistics journals. A pleasant acquaintance from my Bulgarian days was renewed through Annie Mayho, whose husband, Robin, had taught after me at the ELS in Plovdiv. They now lived in Birmingham and we had been introduced by Eldora, who, on one of her visits to me, asked to be taken to meet them again. Annie now turned up as a member of the Statistics Department of Birmingham University, and very kindly she got our test results checked out. Bob, as a geographer, was pretty good on statistics but it was nice to have independent and authoritative confirmation.

Bordesley Green Girls' School 1995-1997

Headteachers in secondary schools were at this time under increasing pressure from the Government to improve their exam results. The unparalleled success at Shevington in this respect attracted a number of Heads to learn more about the Wigan Project. The one who actually picked it up and ran with it was Joan Sandland, Head of Bordesley Green Girls' School in Birmingham. 98% of the pupils at this school, as second generation immigrants from Pakhistan, spoke something other than English as their first language, mostly Urdu. Like their English neighbours in Small Heath they suffered from deprivation of all kinds but, unlike many of the native teenagers, they had a positive attitude to school and came from mostly stable Muslim families.

I had been involved in teaching courses for teachers of English as a Second Language in College of Education in the seventies when the wave of immigrants into cities like Birmingham had taken the Education authorities by surprise. I had my Bulgarian experience of TEFL to compare it with and I was shocked at the poor level of language teaching and the low academic level that these ambitious immigrant children were expected to achieve. My own course, which made no demands on the linguistic knowledge of the teachers, was exactly what they needed. But, in fact, the teachers in the Advisory Service had established a pretty comfortable life for themselves with docile teenagers and they felt threatened by my professional approach (and that of any other Applied Linguist with experience gained abroad).

At Bordesley Green Girls' School Joan and I devised a programme to try out the effectiveness of the systematic teaching of *Illuminating English* by offering a voluntary class after school once a week to Year 10. I taught it myself and was delighted to confirm that it was as foolproof and undemanding of teachers as I had always asserted! We measured the achievement of the experimental group (the volunteers) against that of the control group. The results were always positive but the numbers were small and there were many variables which we could not control. For example, were the volunteers more keenly motivated than the pupils who did not opt for the extra tuition? This was further complicated by the fact that the girls' Muslim parents monitored their daughters' whereabouts after school very tightly and the extra class gave the volunteers the opportunity to meet boys on the way home!

I gained an insight into the way these lively well-mannered girls were caught between two cultures, when I talked with two of them who came into school on several Saturday mornings to help me with a third rewrite of the course. One of them unloaded her problem of being faced with an arranged marriage with a cousin in Pakhistan. She did not like him but would not have objected to marrying his younger brother. She was hoping to transfer to a sixth form to continue her education, partly in order to postpone the marriage.

The experiment at Bordesley Green came to an abrupt end in 1997 when Joan Sandland retired and a new Head cancelled it!

Variables 1994

Bob and Cath and I did not lose interest in the Wigan Language Project after the debacle at Shevington. I had long been aware that there was something missing from the theory behind it. It was easy to show that academic writing in all subjects was

characterised by long abstract words made out of short concrete words by nominalisation and metaphor. But why was this so important?

At a lively family wedding in 1994 we seized a few moments between dodging the pouring rain and comforting a yelling baby to discuss the abstract language which made academic thought possible. We used as our example the water cycle, a key concept in Geography, Bob's teaching subject. Our discussions were necessarily brief but, as I got into my lowly bed on the floor of the lounge, it dawned on me that these abstract words constitute the variables which structure all scientific discourse.

It was a eureka moment! I leapt out of bed and hastened to the caravan parked in the garden and snuggled into bed with Cath, soon as delighted as I was with this latest revelation. Bob produced a bottle of brandy and we drank to the variables.

Our idea was published in subsequent years in various journals. The passage below is taken from *Breakthrough to Learning: Linguistics in the service of Mainstream Education,* Mary Mason and Bob Mason, published in the *Issues in Education Series: No.2 of the University of Central England Faculty of Education Papers* 1997 (Trentham Books)

Not everyone is as thrilled as we were by this amazing breakthrough, so I include it here as an optional extra:

OPTIONAL: variables 1994

Variables and Systems: an example from Geography

The point will be illustrated by examining in more detail the derivation and possible use of the word *erosion*:

Erosion: This abstract word is formed (like all other abstract words) from a concrete root: in this case, from Latin *rodere* – to gnaw. To describe the effects of wind and water on the physical landscape, *wind* and *water* have to be personified: they *gnaw* at the landscape, as a person (or other animate being) gnaws at a bone.

Another verb for describing erosion is to *wear away* – an alternative personification. It is impossible to express this concept in non-metaphorical terms. Like all personifications it ascribes intentionality to entities – *wind* and *water* which, unlike human beings, are not capable of intention. Personification is a branch of metaphor very commonly found in academic texts.

As so often, the technical word selected – *erode* – derives from Latin, for so many centuries the language of ideas throughout Europe. Thus in English there is no derivational link between the concrete word *gnaw* and the abstract word *erode*. German *zerfressen – to erode*, for example, is clearly derived from *fressen – to eat.* (See Mason, 1986 and 1987)

Thus personification produces a verb *erode*, which expresses the action of wind and water on the landscape. This enables us to generate a very large number of sentences, descriptive of this process. For example:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
wind		
		rocks
ice		shorelines
rain		river beds
water — rivers	*erode*	glacier beds
seas		soil
chemicals		buildings

So long as *erode* remains a verb, it can express only a particular example of the action of eroding agents on the landscape.

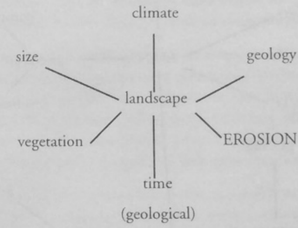
If we want to generalise, we have to change the verb *erode* into the abstract noun *erosion*. In doing so, we shed the subjects, *wind, water* etc. and the objects; *rocks, shorelines* etc.

This has the effect of reducing a **clause**, or rather a large number of potential clauses, to a **word**. This makes it available for being operated on **again** at the level of the clause. Thus it can be related to other processes, such as *precipitation, deforestation, vegetation* etc. Any of these can also be related to **properties**, derived by nominalisation from adjectives: for example, *height* or *altitude*.

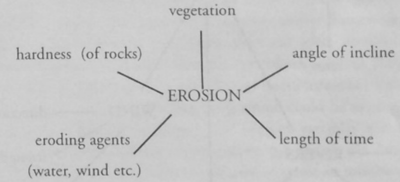
Using erosion as a variable

The nominalised forms may be used in a variety of ways. The most powerful one, however, is that, as concepts, they are available for use as variables, so creating systems. This is the paradigm of scientific discourse.

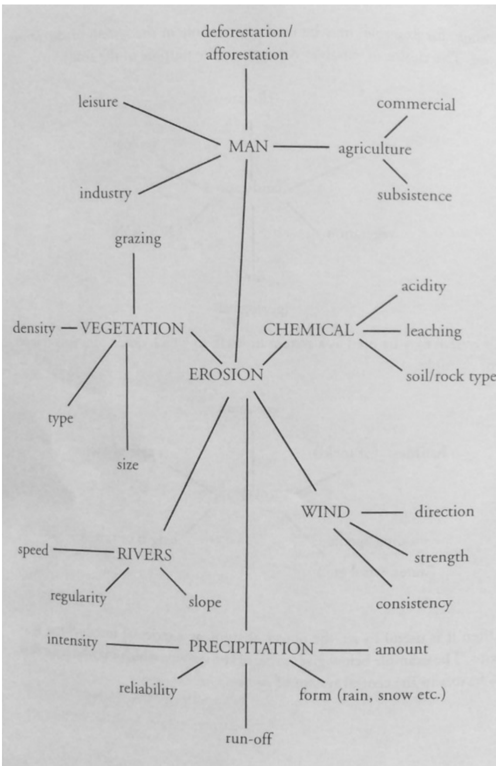
Erosion, for example, may be used as a variable in the system of the *landscape*. The choice of variables depends on the purpose of the study.



Or *erosion* may be used as a system in itself, to which other concepts relate. For example:



Often it is useful to see the object of study as a series of interlocking systems. The example below gives some of the systems which may be regarded as factors in the central system of *erosion*.



Note that all the variables are nominalisations. There can be no clearer example of the way in which language constitutes thought.

The diagrams above bear an interesting resemblance to the mental maps used by Tony Buzan in his influential book on study skills. (Buzan, 1989)

From these systems of variables (or mental maps), students will compose texts to suit their individual purposes or tasks, using the discourse structures and syntax most appropriate. They will join the ones relevant to their purposes in relationships of cause/effect, question/answer, problem/solution, compare/contrast, advantages/disadvantages, stopping at appropriate moments to give particular examples of their generalisations.

For instance, if they want to consider erosion as a **problem**, they will choose to work with such variables as: *deforestation, over-use of footpaths, cavern and cliff collapse, flooding, hurricanes, monoculture*, using cause/effect and, probably, compare/contrast to make their textual framework. If they choose to examine the positive effects of *erosion*, however, they will select such variables as *deposition for sedimentation for future rocks, valuable agricultural land* and *mineral resources*, perhaps using a question/answer framework. If they decide to study erosion in the tropics, they will select variables such as *amount and intensity of rainfall, humidity, agriculture, leaching, flooding* etc., linking them by, for instance, cause/effect or question/answer frameworks. Another possible study or teaching programme could be erosion in connection with hydro-electric power: the relevant variables will then be: *creation of deep valleys, rainfall, silting of dams, type of rocks* etc. Any or all of the available discourse structures can be used to create an infinite variety of texts.

Soviet teachers 1989-1991

My mother died in 1989 and, on the morning of her funeral, Bob, Cath, Betty and I were ready to set off, when the phone rang. It was my old friend, Ann Brumfit, inviting me to take part in a summer school she was organising. It was for teachers of English from the Soviet Union and was to take place in Cambridge that summer. I surprised her by the readiness of my acceptance, but it seemed a very jolly prospect compared with the immediate one of our mother's funeral.

In fact, teaching on the British Council course for Soviet teachers was a hugely enjoyable and rewarding experience. The Soviet Union did not want its teachers mixing with teachers from capitalist countries, so the British Council had long organised separate summer schools for them. My Bulgarian experience meant that I understood and, to a large extent, shared the ideology they represented and we all got on famously. The chief aim of the course was to improve their skills as English Language teachers, but the course also included a programme on English Literature. Ann gave me a free hand me to plan and teach this component of the course.

She also asked me to suggest places of literary interest in the Cambridge area for visiting. The East coast is a strange flat part of England and, together with our Soviet students, we explored Aldeburgh, the home of the eighteenth century poet, George Crabbe. Ann remembers us sitting on the beach at Aldeburgh eating fish and chips out of newspaper. My parents had on their limited book shelves the complete works of the Socialist playwright, George Bernard Shaw, and I had grown up reading and re-reading his witty and at the time politically shocking plays. At last I had the chance to visit his home at Eyot St. Lawrence and the shed in the garden where he had written many of his plays. Little Gidding, a village near Cambridge, is the setting for one of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets.* We visited it as a group and Ann and I and a few of the students sneaked back after supper one evening and read the poem aloud to one another in the stillness of the churchyard. Once again I was being paid for having a good time!

I had been told that the Soviet teachers loved handouts, so I made sure that they did not go away empty-handed. The British Council were generous in the facilities they offered us and I photocopied copious extracts from the contemporary novels we were studying for the students to take home and use with their own students. Every year Ann arranged a trip to Stratford to see a Shakespeare play and it was a delight to prepare our students for this as they came to it full of enthusiasm. One year they were a bit sniffy that we thought they needed preparation, but it was *Love's Labours Lost* and nobody understands that without footnotes, so I insisted on telling them the story. They thanked me for my intransigence afterwards!

While we were sitting in our deckchairs on our shady Cambridge College lawn, reading English poetry, the Soviet Union was collapsing. Our students were concerned about what was happening to their families while they were away, but they were so polite that they tore themselves away from the television news after breakfast and paid full attention to our teaching. In 1991 we were all glued to the sight of Boris Yelstsin speaking from the top of a tank. In that year the students came from many different republics of the Soviet Union. There were ethnic Russians from Kamchatka in the Far East, Alma Ata (then the capital of Kazakhstan), Dushanbe in Tajikhistan, and ethnically local people from Armenia, Turkmenistan, Latvia and Lithuania. Some of them, especially the Russians, were understandably concerned about their future, as one after another of the republics declared their independence.

Two of the men from Siberia regularly sat up all night watching the news and reporting to us in the morning. One of them was a Volga German whom Stalin had moved to Siberia during the War. His friend, a native Russian from Siberia, said of the Volga Germans that Stalin "sprinkled them like salt" over the vastness of the Soviet Union. Also on the course was a tiny Korean lady whose family had been moved by Stalin from their home on the Far Eastern frontier to the deserts of Kazakhstan. It was odd hearing these stories as we were walking along peaceful trickle of the River Cam to the Old Vicarage, Granchester, about which Rupert Brooke had written his famous poem.

I think we all hoped that the Soviet Union would retain the stability and planning of the Communist era and, under politicians like Gorbachov, introduce the democratic laws that made our English lives so agreeable, including freedom to travel. It has not turned out like that.

On the last night of the last course we played two games which illustrated to me the difference between the ideologies of capitalism and communism. One of the English lecturers had introduced a party game which involved a lot of shouting and competition with winners and losers. The Soviet teachers were not enjoying this much and one of them took over and said: "Now we'll play one of our games." We held hands and wove in and out of the arches formed by our upraised arms. We didn't get anywhere but it was a very happy "game". (I met it twenty years later as a dance with music at a Circle Dance workshop.)

I do not know what became of these serious, kind and sensitive people in the upheavals that were to follow.

Africa 1991-94

In 1989 the new South African Government, under international pressure, began to dismantle apartheid. In 1993 some of us in the Birmingham Labour Party were lucky

enough to get tickets to a huge meeting which welcomed Nelson Mandela to the city. It was inspiring but the great man's message was to ask for help in meeting the economic needs of the new Government.

In 1990 Namibia was at long last granted its independence. The SWAPO exiles returned to their country and, indeed, were elected to form the new government. This included our friends from the English course writing days in Zambia.

The new government wanted the language of an independent Namibia to be English, not Afrikaans, the language of the oppressors. It was gratifying that, for once at least, English was regarded as the language of liberation. I was delighted when I was invited to form part of a large team entrusted with writing the English Language course for the secondary schools of the new country. Over the next four years I took part in three such workshops and we produced a workmanlike course. Once again we were employed by the IEC. The BBC seconded a man to write the spoken component using the small tape-recorders now available.

One of the aims of the workshops was to train Namibians in textbook writing. For this reason we worked in teams, so that the local people would be empowered to continue the work after we left. It was very hard work getting a whole course out as well as training the participants, but the very disparate individuals who made up the workshop were all committed to the project and there was an excellent spirit created by learning from one another. Each time I was employed for a week longer than the others to edit the whole thing. I almost made it, but was handicapped by my incompetence on the computerised word-processors which were now replacing our typists and typewriters.

The Namibians on the team were, of course, now resident in the capital, Windhoek, a charming well-policed German-style town, which gave no hint of the genocide of the local people by the German colonisers who preceded the South Africans. We Europeans were full of injections and tablets, since we were no use if we fell ill. For that reason, we were accommodated in the best international hotel, as at this time there was little between that and the round thatched huts of the villages that the families of our Namibian colleagues came from. The old Africa hands in the British Council and the International Extension College arranged trips for us newcomers on our days off. There is a single tarmacked road running straight from south to north – the military road built by the South Africans to reach the stronghold of the rebels in Ovamboland on the border with Angola. This made it easy to access most of the country.

Most of Namibia is desert of one kind or another and pretty empty. It has, however, great mineral wealth, especially diamonds, which the South Africans were ripping out before they left. I found the land haunting, especially the strange coast with its

banks of mist from the cold Humboldt Current which runs along it. The last twenty-five years have seen a constant flow of wildlife films from Namibia on our televisions, so I hope the country is doing well out of the tourist trade.

The films give the impression that there are animals round every corner, but all I saw was a mongoose tail disappearing down a burrow and a solitary ibex far away in a wilderness of sand dunes. The television films show the fields of briefly blooming flowers but they were not performing when we paused to have our photos taken under the Tropic of Cancer sign. While the Luangwa Park in Zambia was lush after the rains and full of large animals and brightly-coloured birds, the Etosha National Park in Namibia was parched, its bony acacia trees offering no shade against the unforgiving sun. But there were a lot of animals and flocks of birds round the waterholes.

One day members of the team had a picnic just outside Windhoek where there was a reservoir which supplies the capital. On a shelf now I have a plastic kudu to remind me of the huge beast that burst out of the acacia trees in front of our landrover on the way back to Windhoek. On the last evening of one of the workshops a colleague and I walked over the hill in the centre of the town after supper at one of the restaurants. It was a sand road in the area where the new elite lived in their pleasant bungalows and we saw a group of endearing little animals standing on their hind legs looking nervously around. We learned later that these were meerkats whose images have since been harnessed to sell insurance before and after *Coronation Street*.

We had stood with our English colleagues on the same hill some days before to see the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh being driven in an open car from the airport to the new University of Namibia, which they were opening. I am used to regarding the monarchy with some scorn as a relic of feudalism but I have to say the Queen made a serious and highly appropriate speech (which we saw on television) and did a thoroughly professional job. Peter Katchevivi, the Minister of Education, described to us afterwards how the Queens's visit was choreographed to the second. Peter sent his regards to Clare Short, my MP, whose husband, Alex Lyon, the Minister of Overseas Development at the time, had helped him when the South Africans were giving him a hard time as a member of SWAPO.

I learned a useful political lesson in Windhoek. As a member of the Labour Party I could not understand why the Labour Council in Birmingham was not responsive to our urgings to repair the residential tower blocks in the city centre where I lived. Windhoek gave me the answer to the puzzle. All over the world middle class people are finding it attractive to live in the city centre and the poor people who have traditionally lived there are driven to the outer suburbs (a process called "gentrification"). In the centre of Windhoek, at the back of the pretty shopping and restaurant area was a huge cleared space. It was where the poor blacks used to live.

Now from the ridge in the centre we could see the smoke of their cooking fires rising in a ring a few miles away all round the city, where townships had been built for them on the South African model.

This was twenty years ago. I am not in touch with any of my colleagues from my time in Namibia and I do not know whether "luxury" flats and offices have yet filled in the empty space in Windhoek, as they are doing in Birmingham.

I said earlier that I called my day's solitary rambling up the Zambezi by the Victoria Falls "the best day of my life". It was the day that had given me the best sense of the beauty of the earth and its indifference to human beings. A magical day in Namibia gave me a similar experience. Doug Campbell (the man from the BBC) invited us to join him on an excursion into the desert in his car. Only one of the Namibian teachers and I took up his offer. He drove off road across miles of stony wilderness, pausing at a tiny oasis with a few trees. We caught a glimpse of a single brightly coloured bird. It was unimaginably hot and the stony desert with distant worn-down mountains stretched in every direction. We women were exclaiming to one another, but Doug said: "Listen to the silence." We did and it was total. Utter silence. Nothing like it before or since. We felt this even more strongly when Doug seemed to experience some difficulty in locating us on the map. This was before mobile phones and we wondered if we were destined to die there. Some years later I met Doug at a Society of Authors' gathering in London and we remembered our adventure. I called this "the second best day of my life".

Breakthrough to Learning in Further and Higher Education 1997-2007

Breakthrough to Learning

We had by now considerable experience of using *Illuminating English* in schools and it was ready for a third edition. In particular, we wanted to rewrite the crucial section on abstract language, to show how the ability of language to create abstract words made possible the ability to think in terms of variables.

Wigan College was happy to publish the rewritten course. We all agreed on a change of title: *Illuminating English* suggested that the course was the province of English teachers, who, we had painfully learned, were the least likely to welcome it. *Breakthrough to Learning*, we hoped, would indicate that academic language was a whole school responsibility. In the initiatives of the next few years it was very useful to have books readily available from the publisher.

University of Central England Faculty of Education

In my last few years at the City of Birmingham College of Education, I had been made a Fellow of the Research Department and I had kept in touch with former colleagues there. The College had long been transmuted into the Faculty of Education of the City of Birmingham Polytechnic. (This name was later changed to the University of Central England and I shall use that title here.) It still occupied its pleasant leafy campus and its student hostels. Some of the younger of my former colleagues were still there but there were also many new members of staff recruited from successful school teaching experience to run the vastly improved professional courses.

My old friends in the English Department were still hostile to my language project. However, members of the Education Department readily grasped the importance of what I had been doing and some of them had been promoted to positions of responsibility. Stewart Buchanan, who I had worked with very happily twenty years before on the TEFL Post-Graduate Certificate in Education, was now Dean of the Faculty and he supported a number of initiatives to get my course known.

I was able to contribute to the work of the Faculty when the Government suddenly decided that all primary teachers in training had to have what they called "Knowledge about Language". What they meant was the grammar of English and I wrote, at short notice, a self-access course for the purpose, adapting some of the chapters of *Illuminating English*. There was no provision on the timetable for teaching this work, and the self-access method was ideal for graduate learners at very disparate levels of previous knowledge. The results showed a gratifying rise in achievement and all the students passed this component of their training course. Again, Wigan College was very helpful in publishing the book *Knowledge about Language* for us at short notice. They had not, however, the skills needed to market it, and, as far as I know, it was not used anywhere except in the Faculty of Education of Birmingham Polytechnic.

National conference 1996

The Head of the Research Department was always supportive of my work, not least by allowing me to use his photocopier for the early trials of *Breakthrough to Learning*. He had also published a couple of articles for me. In 1957 a new Head of Department, Dr. Richard Hatcher, went further than that and organised a national conference on my work. It was a huge success in that the two hundred or so people attending it had a good time: I explained the theoretical background, using clips from an Open University television programme and the soap opera *Eastenders* to

illustrate the difference between academic language and everyday language. Bob and the Head of English at Shevington, Tony Quayle, explained the practical implementation at Shevington. Joan Sandland brought in some girls from Bordesley Green to demonstrate how using self access books in pairs worked in practice.

By this time our graph showing the increase in GCSE success correlated with the learning of the three books of *Illuminating English* now showed how the success declined with the abandonment of the course. Shevington results were now back to results at the average national level and in the next few years they sank below them. As Richard Hatcher commented: "Bad for the kids, good for the results!"
The conference led to a lot of invitations to speak at in-service days all over the country. My appointment diaries of the next few years remind me that I visited Newcastle, Bulmershe, Uxbridge, Sheffield, Glasgow, Cardiff, Tower Hamlets, Brixton etc. etc., lecturing on abstract language and the success of directly teaching it.

Most of the people at the conference were from the Midlands and most of the subsequent invitations came from local schools and colleges. Lindsey Hammond, a former student on the TEFL PGCE, always as passionate about education as I was, was now employed as an adviser by Birmingham City Council. Her job was to help secondary schools in trouble and, with the support of a new Headteacher at Four Dwellings Comprehensive School, we devised a programme for using BTL as a proven way to raise academic standards. It was working well but was finally scuppered by the hostility of the Head of English.

Solihull College of Further Education 1997-1999

At the end of the conference three teachers of English from Solihull College of Further Education approached me, offering to trial the course in their College. Like me, they were dedicated teachers of English Literature but they were open to the idea that there was no conflict between a love of literature and a direct teaching of the academic language their students needed to pass exams in all subjects.

The Colleges of Further Education had changed since I was employed to teach engineering apprentices at Matthew Boulton Technical College thirty years before. By the nineties the engineering apprentices had gone, together with the industries they had served. What remained unchanged was the language problems the students encountered in tackling their academic courses. Many of them had not done well at school and were retaking their GCSEs.

The Solihull teachers could see the potential of the course for helping these students. They used *Breakthrough to Learning* for several years, always with positive results. These older students were short of time and Linda Anderson and I co-operated on

producing a shortened course especially for them. Wigan College published this single book as *The Fasttrack of Breakthrough to Learning*.

Changes of personnel in the College led to the cutting out of this programme when yet another wave of reorganisation overtook the Colleges. However, the experience proved useful in the next programme.

I am further indebted to Linda Anderson for inviting me to one of her parties and introducing me to Howard Sharron, who ran his own educational publishing company in Birmingham. He immediately understood the potential of our work and introduced us to the innovative work of Israeli educationalists such as Feuerstein. He was keen to publish *Breakthrough to Learning* but I was tied to TRACE by contract as well as obligation, so I felt I could not take up this opportunity.

This was perhaps a missed opportunity. Howard was a business man and would have known how to market my course. By contrast, TRACE in Wigan was part of Local Government and had no more idea than I had of how to make money. I did have the pleasure of working with Howard on a "Dictionary" series he was publishing at the time, contributing the book on Grammar. It was very enjoyable to work with him and the excellent artist he employed.

This contact with Howard proved crucial in the survival of *BTL* at a later stage.

UCE: Widening Participation 2000 -

An adviser at an in-service course asked me to make a video of the lecture I had just given. I thought of Bob Farmer, with whom I had worked on the TEFL PGCE in the late seventies. Stewart Buchanan and I had worked with Bob on the microteaching that made our PGCE TEFL course so effective. Bob still controlled access to the UCE CCTV system (vastly improved) and kindly did the filming himself – hence he was probably the only person who actually listened to the lecture. He readily grasped the importance of what I was saying.

Bob Farmer had moved on since we last worked together. He was now a professor and Head of the Staff Student Development Department of the University, which provided training services for the whole University. UCE (formerly Birmingham Polytechnic) was an amalgamation of a heterogeneous set of faculties, most of them providing training for the many skilled engineering trades that had made Birmingham "the workshop of the world" – silver-smithing, jewellery, coinage, the famous Birmingham School of Art, lawyers etc. etc. Most of them followed traditional ways of training and the standards of teaching were very mixed. Bob had set up a teacher training scheme for the whole university, as the Government was now insisting that all university teachers had a certificate of education.

The programme devised by Bob and his team was highly innovative. It combined academic work mediated by computer with practical day schools in agreeable surroundings. These provided the human contact which computers lack. Bob describes his course as follows:

Each session introduced a wide range of educational ideas and theories. The team modelled how these methods might be used to encourage students to take a more active and effective approach to their learning. Participants then worked together to establish how, individually, they would adapt one or two of these ideas, however small, into their own teaching. Before the next meeting participants wrote a reflective diary summarising how things went and evaluating their "new" teaching experience. Each diary entry received supportive written feedback from Bob's team before the next session. The university intranet was used extensively to implement this process.

The older lecturers were not happy with this challenge to their traditions, but by now the course was well-established and some of the younger lecturers were enthusiastic about it.

Bob supplied the knowledge which I lacked in how to get projects set up and running. The first thing, he realised, was to get funding. We were lucky in that Phil Walkling, in 1970 a young lecturer in the Philosophy of Education at CBCE, had now risen to Vice Chancellor of the University. He had always had a particular interest in linguistics and readily understood the theoretical foundation of our course.

The Government was demanding that all universities set up programmes of "Widening Participation" to encourage working-class youngsters to apply for places in Higher Education. Bob could see the potential for using *Breakthrough to Learning* for such a programme and he got funding for it. UCE offered local secondary schools and Colleges of Further Education free tuition in *Breakthrough to Learning* to be delivered by UCE lecturers appointed for the purpose. Julia Barnes was appointed to set up and run this scheme, which she did very successfully for several years. Two other lecturers were drafted in to help carry out the programme.

In 2005 the scheme was entered in the competition run by the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* under the Widening Participation programme and won first prize.

The Language of Ideas

This triumph was seized upon by Bob Farmer to get funding for the next stage. Everybody's world was being turned upside down by the computer revolution. Several features of the Widening Participation programme were unsatisfactory, not least because the visiting tutor from UCE had to carry round piles of books for the pupils in schools and colleges to work from. Fortunately, Elaine Winters, who now did most of the teaching, was able to cope with this situation.

More seriously, the work in the various faculties of the University itself had expanded and these adult students needed more adult material to work on than the school-based texts of *Breakthrough to Learning*. The courses at the University were all being put on to computer and all schools and colleges now had computer rooms. Bob therefore got funding to write a much shorter adult course rewritten for computer.

One of the bright young staff who joined the team was Emilia Prodanova, a Bulgarian who had attended the English Language School in Rousse. She was now married to an English lawyer and teaching English as a Foreign Language at UCE. She made a great contribution to our new course by finding suitable texts for us.

In the end, however, over the next twelve months Bob and I wrote the course ourselves. It was incredibly hard work, as neither of us was confident in persuading the machines to do what we wanted. Eventually, one of his staff showed me how to use a programme which offered a set of exercises which were perfect for the kind of teaching we had in mind. We just managed to finish it before we both became (temporarily, but decisively) incapacitated. Bob was diagnosed with a serious illness and I fell over while attempting to catch a frisbee with younger members of the family.

We called the course *The Language of Ideas* and it is available in full on the website. I was happy to have the chance to see it in action and it worked just as well as Bob and I had anticipated. For instance, Matthew Boulton Technical College had recently been moved to a magnificent new building in the centre of the City. It had brand new computer rooms and they were made available to students working through our course. Elaine now sailed in empty-handed and confidently started the lesson. The students were mostly women in their early thirties who were on an Access course to prepare them for taking nursing courses at UCE. They worked happily in pairs as the computer programme unrolled, talking through the difficulties and tapping in the answers to the exercises.

I felt my life in education had not been wasted when one of the students called me over and asked me how I had come to write the course. She said: "It makes you think differently." Bingo!

Using the web 2010-

The Language of Ideas was up and running at UCE and my work was over. In the next few years, as I grew accustomed to the wonders of the Web, I realised that it was now possible for anyone to make their work available to everyone in the world. Someone introduced me to John Lockett, a teacher himself, who in his retirement had made himself expert in what was to me the baffling world of computers. I paid him far too little to put *The Language of Ideas* on to the internet as www.languageofideas.co.uk and later he put up *Breakthrough to Learning* as www.breakthrough-to-learning.co.uk.

So much work had gone into it that I hoped that someone somewhere might find it useful in the future and save them the trouble of all the experimentation that the two Bobs (my brother and Bob Farmer) and I had done. I thought that this might happen long after I was dead.

Matthew Moss High School

Then in 2012 I had a lovely surprise. Lindsey Sladen from Matthew Moss High School in Rochdale rang me up to say they were using *Breakthrough to Learning* in the school and some of the teachers would like to meet me.

Rochdale is a small town in the North of England, a mill town built on the spinning and weaving of cotton in the Industrial Revolution. It is famous in the Labour Movement as the place where the co-operative retail movement began (the Rochdale Pioneers). It is now, in common with the rest of the North, suffering from unemployment and poverty.

Matthew Moss High School is one of the comprehensive schools serving the town. 51% of the pupils receive the Pupil Premium (the measure of poverty) and coincidentally 51% have English as an Additional Language.

It is, however, unlike most comprehensive schools in its ethos. The only schools in my experience that have come close to it are Shevington High School, Wigan, under the Headship of my brother Bob twenty years ago and also the English Language School, Plovdiv, in the early sixties. I have been incredibly lucky to have worked in

three schools which were models of happy orderly communities based on the joy of learning, rather than fear. As the MMHS handbook says:

"Nobody thrives in an atmosphere of fear and if individuals live in fear, a community is doomed to fail. We do not want you to fear retribution for failure. We want you to learn from failure – or experience as you may wish to call it!"

(As the man said in the video of the 60th anniversary of the English Language School, Plovdiv, when asked what he and his fellows had gained from the school: "Discipline – order - friendship – love.")

Where the ELS was based on explicit Communist theory and the staff at Shevington were intuitively working towards a new kind of school for everybody, MMHS is based on a rigorous understanding of the purpose of education. Again I quote from its handbook:

'What makes Matthew Moss very different from other schools is its Learning Agenda. Strange as it may seem, most schools do not have this; they concentrate on teaching assuming that learning will follow. It has been proven so often that this is not so. Anyone recalling their own school experiences will know that the teacher taught them many things but they did not actually learn most of them.'

It is fascinating to see how this switch in philosophy has changed everything at Matthew Moss. Bob (Mason) and I both visited the school and were shown around, given the privilege of sitting in on lessons and discussing with staff and students the theory and practice of education. Crucially, the school has accepted the academic discrediting of intelligence testing and there is no streaming. As at the English Language School, Plovdiv, and at Shevington High School in Wigan, all children are taught in the same class.

With its steady focus on learning, the staff at MMHS recognised that BTL filled a gap in their programme. By the time they rang me, it was fully operational throughout the school. I visited it several times and Howard Sharron published an article about my impressions in *Creative Teaching and Learning.* He called it: *A Great Idea Revived*. I quote from it here:

(Educationalists) have pointed out that, in spite of the scientific advances in psychology, sociology and neuroscience (and I would add, linguistics), most of what passes for education in our schools and colleges is based on custom and practice, much of which dates from before the invention of printing.

MMHS is different: in accordance with the school's view of itself as a place of learning, the theory and practice of education itself comes under scrutiny. At MMHS, I was told, they do nothing which is not based on sound research. There is an Education Library, a nice little room with bookcases full of the books on educational theory and practice which the school

bases its philosophy on. The teachers at the school read these books and debate their implications for practice.

The effect of this philosophy in practice is felt in walking around the school. I tried to capture this in my article:

Where to begin? First, it is uncannily quiet for a school full of teenagers. At lunchtime there is none of the noise of released energy roaring from the playground. As we moved about the school between lessons, staff and students walked quietly and without jostling or hurrying, chatting quietly to one another. (They have the advantage of a spacious new building built under the last of the Labour Government's Building Schools for the Future Programme.) For one used to the hurley-burley of secondary schools, it was like having died and gone to Heaven!

I went on to describe how BTL was being used in the school:

I observed several Breakthrough to Learning lessons and rejoiced to see how the pupils, in accordance with the ethos of the school as a place for learning, were working through the materials in pairs or small groups with the teacher as facilitator. The lesson in Year 7 was structured by the teacher in terms of when the learners moved on to the next exercise, but by Year 11 the learners were used to working through the materials at their own pace. It was clear, from chatting to them, that they felt responsible for their own learning.

As at Shevington a rigorous system of testing BTL was put in place. I quote from a first exercise in monitoring the course:

We (the BtL team) conducted a sample survey of 36 learners in Years 7-9 and these were the general impressions:

- Many pupils found it fun, could see the link with other subjects in school and liked the games/puzzles element.

- Some of their comments are below:

"We are learning things we haven't heard of before."

"The tasks get your brain going!"

"Sometimes it's frustrating because it's hard."

"It makes you think as you have to understand the learning which expands your knowledge."

"I'm not sure how relevant it is."

Just as at Shevington, the BTL team at Matthew Moss wanted to have the course validated by test results. Jessica Coupe a TEFL teacher recently returned from Japan and doing an MA in Applied Linguistics at Liverpool University, was distantly related to one of the teachers. She agreed to make the evaluation of BTL at MMHS the subject of her MA dissertation. The results were overwhelmingly positive. This is

written up in the article in *Creative Teaching and Writing*. Howard Sharron aptly called this *Resurrection of a Great Idea*. Indeed! (And Jessica got a first for her dissertation.)

Fortunately, the article I wrote for the same journal describing how BTL fitted into the ethos of MMHS is on the *Breakthrough to Learning* website under Downloads. I hope any of my Bulgarian students who read this will read the full article, especially those who have been teachers themselves.

Domestic matters 1964-79

The home to which I returned from Bulgaria was my parents' home. They were always pleased to have me and, with no family of my own, I was never interested in owning and maintaining property for its own sake. With my parents still in their sixties and retired, I enjoyed a very high standard of living with live-in cook, housekeeper and gardener. I tried to live up to the high levels of preparation and teaching I had enjoyed in Bulgaria and I was glad to be able to concentrate on my work. My married women colleagues meanwhile were on tranquillizers from the strain of juggling the responsibilities of looking after husbands and children as well as running full-time teaching jobs. No wonder I was good at my job!

Just before I returned from Bulgaria in 1964, my parents had moved from the three-bedroomed Council house my brother and I had grown up in. They had secured tenancy of a "pre-fab", one of the pre-fabricated bungalows which in the post-War period had been assembled in factories as a quick way to ease the housing crisis. The pre-fab had only two bedrooms and very little insulation, but it was beautifully designed and I managed to cram all my books and papers into the generous cupboards of my bedroom. The estate was on the edge of the Warwickshire countryside, and my father, newly retired, was happy growing vegetables and flowers in the large garden. In those days we could still hear the cuckoo when it arrived in Spring. (It is rarely heard anywhere in England now.)

My middle class colleagues were paying off mortgages on the homes they hoped to own, and urged me to do the same. There was a huge stigma attached then (and now) to paying rent and above all living on a Council estate. As a Socialist, I did not subscribe to these prejudices, still less after Mrs. Thatcher persuaded the nation that the most desirable thing in the world was to own your own home – "the property-owning democracy". (I know my Bulgarian readers will find her doctrines more palatable than I do!) Living with my parents meant I could not join in the competitive wining and dining that my colleagues enjoyed, but, since this was

largely the province of married couples, as a single woman, I was marginalised anyway.

Thus freed from domestic responsibility, for over a decade I enjoyed a varied and interesting career as well as lots of holidays, theatres and concerts with the single, widowed and divorced women who formed our own congenial social groups. My parents enjoyed my company and, as they got less mobile, the freedom which my car gave us to explore the beautiful countryside around Birmingham and attend every Shakespeare performance at Stratford. We also helped to run the local Labour Party branch. What we enjoyed most of all were the visits of my brother, his wife and two little boys for the Christmas holiday and three weeks in the summer.

It was in this period that I continued the rambling that I had begun in Bulgaria. I joined a couple of rambling clubs that took us out by coach, in our big boots and woolly hats, to the varied and beautiful countryside around Birmingham. We bought maps which showed the old foot paths established in an earlier age for other purposes but enshrined in law and fiercely defended by the Ramblers' Association. I was lucky enough to be able to do this every Sunday for nearly thirty years, returning to a hot bath and my mother's warmed up Sunday lunch. When I go to Heaven the first thing I shall do is join the rambling club!

These good times ended with my parents' increasing age and disability. I was under a lot of pressure both at home and at work and I resented spending up to two hours a day commuting to and from my job on the other side of the city. So, when the Council decided to demolish the pre-fabs in 1979, I got us transferred to a flat near the City of Birmingham College of Education where I was teaching. This was in Edgbaston, the wealthiest suburb in the city, noted for its abundance of green trees.

Ten minutes' walk away, over the main Hagley Road out of the city, was Ladywood, one of the poorest wards in the country.

Living in Ladywood 1979-

Twice in the past I had visited Ladywood when canvassing for the Labour Party on election campaigns. The first was in the fifties when I had seen for myself the dilapidated slum housing in the shadow of the huge engineering factories that had made Birmingham rich and famous. The owners like Joseph Chamberlain (screws) and the Cadburys (chocolate) had lived in Edgbaston and adjacent suburbs on the opulent side of the Hagley Road. Joseph Lucas's mansion is on Westbourne Road opposite the College of Education. He made his fortune in bicycles and electric goods and Lucas's is now part of an international aerospace consortium.

In the early seventies I found myself canvassing in Ladywood for a second time, when the Labour council had pulled down the fetid slums and replaced them with high rise blocks of flats. They were fresh and clean with modern sanitation and the first tenants were thrilled with them. On neither occasion was it difficult to persuade the denizens of Ladywood to vote Labour.

In 1979 I found a flat on the second floor of Chamberlain House, one of seven eight-storey flats on the Chamberlain Gardens Estate in working-class Ladywood, ten minutes' walk from the College of Education in upper-class Edgbaston. The Chamberlain Gardens Estate, unlike most of the thousands of working-class flats which had replaced the old slums in Ladywood, had been built on land which had formerly been occupied by large run-down houses with big gardens. Imaginatively, the designers of the estate had left intact the big old trees in these gardens and the estate is unusually leafy.

Forty years later I am still there, as are the trees, which continue to provide us with a green and pleasant environment. My windows look out on Chamberlain Gardens Park with its big old lime and beech trees and a beautiful avenue of flowering cherries in Spring. And all this half a mile from Birmingham city centre. I could not wish for a more beautiful place to live. And maintaining it is no trouble to me at all! I feel that living in publicly owned housing in a publicly owned park is a remnant of the Socialism that we dreamed of.

Birmingham – (1) up with culture

However, things never stand still. While things ticked on in our quiet little backwater of Chamberlain Gardens, everything was changing in Birmingham. The old engineering factories were being demolished and Birmingham was reinventing itself as a city of culture. The Council used grants from the European Union to build the International Convention Centre two bus stops from my home. It opened in 1991 and now attracts all kinds of national and international conferences to the city. (My colleague and it was there that I heard Nelson Mandela speak in 1993.) The ICC contains Symphony Hall, a state-of-the-art concert hall with wonderful acoustics, and between 1980 and 1998 Simon Rattle transformed the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra from an ordinary provincial orchestra to one now recognised as world-class. My early retirement coincided with the arrival of Rattle in the city and, together with friends and former colleagues, I bought season tickets to enjoy this marvellous period in the musical history of our city.

More culture of an international standard arrived in a startled Brum with the Birmingham Royal Ballet in 1990. This was the old Sadlers' Wells Ballet Company, the touring branch of the Royal Ballet in London. Birmingham, not noted for any

cultural pretensions before the War, had always had an excellent repertory theatre and this was now housed in a more up-to-date theatre built in 1971. Adjacent to it since 2013 is the new Birmingham Library, an amazing space, about the architecture and financing of which huge controversy still rages.

As I write this in 2018, with High Speed Rail to London planned to open in 2026, Birmingham is increasingly becoming a dormitory town to London with many young professional people, unable to afford housing in London, living in Birmingham and commuting to work in the capital. Banks and other enterprises are also opening in Birmingham itself and twenty-storey skyscrapers are marching along Broad Street from the City Centre to Chamberlain Gardens.

Birmingham - (2) and down with public services

The regeneration of the city had not been without cost. The European grants had to be match-funded by the City Council from the funds meant to be spent on local services such as education, housing and social services. These all suffered cuts in order to fund the new amenities.

My neighbours in Chamberlain Gardens were predominantly the old English working people who had laboured in the local factories. Most came from the old slums and had moved into the estate when it was opened in the seventies. They observed that in the eighties the City's housing management, which was responsible for maintaining the estate, was providing a poorer and poorer service. The homes which they had been so proud of were deteriorating in every way. The Council has always been responsible for housing a rough element and the poor state of the blocks were an invitation to our local nuisances to behave badly. There was a group of determined women ten years older than me, who urged me to "do something about this".

I was still a member of the Labour Party but enjoying a respite from the endless round of canvassing, minute-taking and fund-raising. I knew who would be secretary of any tenants' organisation we set up and I was reluctant to take on the responsibility. I gave in when the Housing Department decided that the faience tiles decorating the block were falling off and put up a rough wooden structure over the entrance with flapping sheets of plastic and a notice saying "Keep Out!" On my home! Some of my friends and colleagues, who had all bought houses and flats in middle class suburbs, were afraid to visit me at night.

Finally, one bitterly cold night in 1986 about a dozen tenants gathered in a vacant flat and set up the Chamberlain House Residents' Association, later expanded to the Chamberlain Gardens Forum. We held jumble sales to raise funds, organised protest

marches and held regular minuted meetings to protect our homes. The next thirty years of my life have been spent in a multiplicity of organisations trying to get the City Council to provide proper services for Ladywood.

At first I was puzzled by the reluctant response of the Labour Council to accede to our demands. Municipal housing had always been a major plank in the policy of Labour governments and councils and, as a lifelong member of the party, I expected our local councillors to support their tenants (whose votes they depended on to get elected). Then we found some books about the redevelopment of the inner cities. Traditionally these areas were the home of the poorest factory workers, but now, with the factories gone, they had become very desirable residential places for the professional and business people working in the city centre and potential patrons of the new cultural facilities. My visits to Windhoek showed this process of "gentrification" in its starkest form (page 25). Any doubts we had about what was going on below the surface were cleared away by a book called *A Tale of Two Cities* by a local academic working in Birmingham City Council.

The last thirty odd years in which I have been active in local politics have seen enormous changes everywhere including Chamberlain Gardens. The old English people who were the mainstay of our early activities have died and the new tenants are, on the whole, young educated immigrants from all over the world who are working for peanuts in the "gig" economy and having very nice well-nurtured babies. From time to time some of the most degraded and disorderly natives are housed in the block, who make their neighbours' lives a misery by fighting and drunkenness and leaving the taps on. I have got to know my neighbours in the flat above by our joint attempts to stop the flow of water from the upper floors. This family is from Guinea in West Africa and I have had the pleasure of helping their children with their school work. (I am happy to say they are excellent students and no longer need me. As I used to tell my students, a good teacher aims to make herself redundant.)

The worst time was probably one about the turn of the century when the Housing Departments moved a pimp and drug dealer into the block. His customers broke all the doors and staircase windows, and used the lift and staircase as toilets. The police regularly raided the block, on more than one occasion bursting into the home of a very respectable old English couple and frightening them to death. I was very busy with my Language Project at the time and I did wonder whether I had made a mistake in staying in Council housing!

Mostly, however, this has been a success story. The Chamberlain Gardens Estate was refurbished in 1991 guaranteeing it a life of thirty years. After two years of noisy repairs the old tenants got their popular estate back. A major problem was that being so near the city centre, our estate was used by commuters from the country parked

for free on our estate and took a bus or walked to their work in town. In 2003, through one of the organisations we ran in Ladywood, we were able to get a Residents' Priority Parking scheme, which gave the estate back to the tenants. Most recently – with no formal input on our part – the whole estate has been splendidly refurbished with a "green" heating system. (We are assured by the Housing Department that the material used for cladding was not the same as that used at Grenfell Tower in London which last year burned down killing 72 people. This appalling tragedy has given publicity to the systematic neglect of Council housing in the post-Thatcher years, which has left us with thousands of homeless beggars on the streets.)

Our activities over the last thirty years have necessarily spread beyond the confines of Chamberlain Gardens. My appointment diaries refer to endless housing and community conferences, community police meetings and uncountable "walkabouts" (informal inspections) of the seven Council estates in Ladywood Ward.

Sometimes we have got involved in wider campaigns like helping to run the Birmingham Assembly Against Racism, which in 1999 made a submission to the Lawrence Inquiry. (Stephen Lawrence, a black schoolboy, was murdered by racists in London six years before and the police had failed to investigate.) We also spent two years in an Employment Tribunal defending the victims of an alleged employment scam. We helped stop developers building a car park in Chamberlain Gardens Park and also a plan to build private housing on the important local amenity of Edgbaston Reservoir. (So named but in fact the "lung" of densely populated Ladywood.)

Our last (possibly in both senses) contribution to local politics was a dossier of evidence of alleged misconduct by the Housing Department which we sent to the Kerslake Commission, set up by the Government in 2014 to inquire into mismanagement in Birmingham City Council. The culture of secrecy is such that we shall probably never know whether this has had any effect. For instance, is it a reason for the recent £12 million restoration of the Chamberlain Gardens Estate?

A last bitter-sweet memory which encapsulates the contradictions of the times I have lived through is the visit of the Soviet teachers to Chamberlain Gardens. The British Council arranged with the nice middle class people who have taken over the pretty villages around Cambridge to invite the Soviet teachers to visit their homes and have tea with them. I always felt that this gave the Soviet teachers a skewed and sentimental idea of how ordinary English people live. So when, on the last of the summer courses, it was decided to spend the last few days in Birmingham (saving the long coach journey from Cambridge to Stratford), I offered to invite them to visit Chamberlain Gardens.

Our forum was very active at this time and the local Housing Officers turned up trumps by offering to finance the visit. A coach brought the teachers from the University of Birmingham hostels in Edgbaston to Ladywood, and the Lord Mayor came to Ladywood Community Centre to welcome them. Our members invited the thirty Soviet teachers in ones and twos to tea in their flats. I took the visitors to Chamberlain House on to the roof to enjoy the panoramic view from our beautiful roof garden. We then walked them along the canal to the city centre past the relics of Birmingham's proud economic past such as the Mint, which then still made coinage for former colonies. (It has since closed and the building turned into "luxury" flats.) In honour of the occasion we planted roses (named City of Birmingham) on the estate. These lasted as a memorial for twenty odd years. Some of our neighbours made friends with their visitors and kept up a correspondence with them for years afterwards.

Democracy

My English readers will be familiar with the traditional democratic mechanisms that we take for granted in this country. Much publicity is given to the right to demonstrate in the streets for and against worthy causes. I have done my share of this and enjoyed the thrill of shouting slogans and waving banners with thousands of like-minded people (especially peace marches). I have also endured the humiliation of walking with a handful of people with home-made banners round the city centre on a busy shopping day, ignored and jeered at by our fellow citizens with more pressing concerns.

The media in the West is totally controlled by very rich people. They select what demonstrations to report and which to ignore. For instance, the last CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) demonstration I went to London to join in was attended by hundreds of thousands of people. It was totally ignored by national television that evening.

A less glamorous exercise of democracy than mass demonstrations demands a knowledge of the law. This is difficult and boring but can still be effective. In Ladywood we have used, for example, the right to set up voluntary pressure groups, the right to challenge the City Council in the courts, the right of local government electors to examine and question the City finances and the right to see and object to Planning Applications.

I have no idea whether such freedoms have ever been available in Bulgaria with its utterly different history, nor what the situation is now. What I have learned over the last thirty years in Ladywood is that grassroots politics in a democracy is very hard

frustrating work which never ends but which can still bear fruit, even in this time of counter-revolution.

Breakthrough to Learning – a last word

The thing which has made most sense in my life has been my contribution to linguistics in education. The foundations for this insight were laid sixty years ago in my experience of teaching in the English Language School, Plovdiv. It is appropriate, therefore, that I end this memoir with the latest news on that subject.

My connection with Matthew Moss finished in 2013 when I gave my very last lecture (15 minutes) as part of a day's training on *Breakthrough to Learning* for the whole staff. Much of the day was spent in the school's computer rooms working in pairs through www.languageofideas.co.uk. – something which had not been tried before. The staff sat in subject groups discussing their plans for incorporating the insights of BTL into the teaching of their own subject.

I had to rethink my ideas on what was the best day of my life. The ramble down the Zambezi and the silence of the Namibian desert had to drop their rank. January 3rd 2013, the in-service day at Matthew Moss High School, was incomparably the best day of my life.

Since then I have looked every so often at the MMHS website. The English upper class has always ruled by fear and this attitude manifest itself in the education system when it falls into the hands of the Conservative Party. Corporal punishment was made illegal in English schools only in 1986. Bob banned it at Shevington in 1977 (his first year as Head) and it was unthinkable in Plovdiv in 1959.

But there is more than one way of creating fear. The internal conduct of MMHS may not be based on fear (see above page 73), but Ofsted makes a very good job of replacing the fear of corporal punishment with the fear of failure, as measured by public examinations. (Ofsted is the Government body, set up in 1992, which regularly inspects and grades all schools.) It has given MMHS a hard time over the past few years but I was delighted to see on the school website that the school has at last been recognised as "good". Any of my readers who want to know more about this remarkable truly comprehensive school can access their website by googling Matthew Moss High School.

Recently (2018) I rang up the Head, Mark Moorhouse, to ask if the school was still using the course. He replied: "It has entered our bloodstream." I could wish for no more.

Aldridge High School 2016

I received unexpected confirmation that my website had been picked up elsewhere when Libby Marcano-Olivier contacted me. She did her teaching practice at Shevington twenty-five years ago and is now Head of English at a comprehensive school in Aldridge (about fifteen miles away). She drove down to Ladywood one day in the summer of 2016 and Bob took a day trip from Liverpool to meet her. We were delighted to hear her description of the scheme she had set up for teaching BTL throughout the school.

I cannot resist printing out here one of her emails. Some of the organisational details may be unfamiliar to my Bulgarian readers, but Libby's own language gives the feeling of real life in an English secondary school:

January 2017

I promised I would give you a progress report on how things were going here with the BTL programmes.

We are currently running the main programme in English lessons for years 7 and 8 with the intention of these pupils continuing for three years, although we might condense it slightly into two. The plan to complete it with form tutors was not viable this year but curriculum changes meant that we gained a period of English across all KS3 classes and we have staffed it with English teachers but who do not teach the class for their "normal" English lessons.

The Fasttrack programme is being run in English lessons for all of year 9 and the majority of year 10 and 11. Again, these classes have an additional lessons and a different teacher.

Year 12 are completing the Fasttrack in registration periods under the supervision of their form tutors.

Feedback varies. Some pupils like the independence it gives them, some love the knowledge that they are acquiring and the way it enables them to access difficult words. I had a fantastic session on adverb placement with year 8 yesterday in which a couple of the girls, in a middle ability class, identified the impact of moving the adverb in the sentence! WOW! And they were so pleased with themselves.

On the other hand, and to be fair it is down to teacher approaches on the whole, some pupils are less enthusiastic about the course. I did do some editing to bring it into the 21st century but still, some of the topics are dated. Another thing I did this week was about the importance of adjectives in the wiring of plugs. Well, of course, in this day and age when appliances come with an integral plug, this is never an issue.

I am hoping to continue with this literacy work but do feel that I need to modernise it and adapt it to suit our purposes. I would like to ask for your permission to use the structure and content as it stands but to create a new edition which may take on quite a different form. Until I try to work on it I am not sure how it will look. I had mooted this idea with our

headteacher and he is going to look into me having some time, staff and money in the summer term.

This is a suitable note to end this memoir. It gives a flavour of the real life struggles in an English secondary school – not only the hard work and the exhaustion, but the unextinguishable joy of teaching and learning.

Envoi

I conclude with a word of thanks to Juno, the white Staffordshire terrier whose howling led to my getting in touch with my old pupils in Plovdiv. He is getting bigger, slobbers over my hand and sometimes allows me to throw a ball for him.

I was delighted to be able to participate in the 60th anniversary of the English Language School and to have the opportunity to share this memoir of my long and privileged life with my former pupils in Plovdiv, who, like me, remember the very different world of the 1960's.

One result of my encounter with Juno is that I have embarked on a correspondence with two of my former pupils who have worked inside both the Communist and post-Communist systems. I am hoping to bring some clarity to my understanding of the world in the "interesting times" we have all lived through.

I wish my former pupils a happy old age especially those fortunate enough to have children and grandchildren. I should be very happy to hear from them by email.

The **Sixtieth Anniversary of the English Language School, Plovdiv**

I write this on June 4th and the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the English Language School, Plovdiv, which I anticipated so eagerly, has come and gone.

Thanks to my good friend, Vesselina Bozhilova, I was able to participate at a distance of two thousand miles, not only by having my greetings read out by the Director, but by viewing - on the day itself! – a newscast of the proceedings.

I have watched it over and over and, as I view it, I imagine myself arriving at the Roman Theatre together with the School's alumni of all ages, climbing with them up the stone steps and through the arch, putting on a hat against the summer sun and emerging into the glare of the arena. Like them I look eagerly around, hoping to recognise some old friends.

Bulgarians are good at ceremonies and the carrying in of the school banner, the singing of the choir and the address of the Director are in the tradition I remember from the early days of the School. I watched the newscast several times, until I could understand all the Director's speech, glowing with pleasure at his reading out of my message to the School.

Most moving is the end of the newscast when some white-haired old men are interviewed. "What do you owe to the school?" they are asked. "Everything," one of them replies. "We enrolled at 14 years of age and graduated in 1968. We owe absolutely everything to the School. Discipline – order – friendship – love –"

The speaker's voice is full of tears and I shed some with him.