

One writer looking back... lots of writers looking forwards!

At first light yesterday, I travelled to Spalding High School, my own former school, to which I had returned only once previously since leaving the sixth form. I received a wonderful welcome from Adrian Isted, the newly-appointed Head of English, who began the day's activities by showing me round the school.



First stop was the office of the headteacher, Mrs. Michele Anderson, who is also fairly new to the school. She was fascinated to hear a little more from me about Mrs. Jeanne Driver, the first married headteacher at the school, who was its leader throughout my school career. Born Jeanne Ouseley, she lived at 10, High Street, a large house of several storeys situated near the River Welland in Spalding. Part of this house was divided into flats and there were usually several other teachers living there, as well as two of my fellow sixth formers, Cheryl Ouseley and Elizabeth Davies, both of whom were her nieces. They called her 'Auntie Jeanne', a name that the rest of the sixth form also used affectionately, if unofficially. Mrs. Driver was one of several strong women who influenced me as a girl. She had a strong sense of duty and an even stronger work ethic. We found some of the things she said highly amusing (for example, 'I stand up whenever I hear the national anthem, even if I'm in the bath.'). Sometimes she

took the notion of duty to an extreme. I remember she told us that when her husband, who had been in ill health for some time, finally died, she finished marking a set of books before setting in train the preparations for his funeral. But her influence has lasted all my life.

The school has been added to, but otherwise is little changed. I suppose the thing that struck me most yesterday is how it seems to have shrunk. The corridors seemed longer, the stairways steeper, the ceilings higher when I first attended it as an eleven-year-old, then for only a part of the school week – pupils belonging to the first two school years still spent most of their time at the old school building in London Road, the first home of Spalding High School when it was established in 1920 on the site of its predecessor, the privately-owned 'Welland Academy for Young Ladies'. (The present school building was completed in 1959, but the London Road property continued to be used by younger pupils for more than twenty years afterwards.) The assembly hall still boasts its luxurious but absurdly impractical parquet floor.

In my day it doubled up as a gym (there is now a separate sports hall) and we were obliged to do PE barefoot, which we all hated, so that the floor wouldn't become scuffed by gym shoes. The same grand piano stands in the corner, to the left of the stage. In the corridor outside the headteacher's office are several group photographs taken of all the teachers and pupils at intervals during the school's history. After some searching, I was able to discover myself on one of these – and I could also name all the other girls in my form and most of the teachers.

After the tour, I was interviewed by Eleanor Toal and Holly Hetherington for *High Quarterly*, the school's completely online magazine (which is streets ahead of the drab, dark-red-covered printed production of my youth). Eleanor, the e-zine's editor, also writes articles for the *Spalding Guardian*, carrying on the long-standing relationship between the school and the local newspaper. Eleanor and Holly (who edits Gardening and Food in the mag) knew they were going to be asked to interview me only very shortly before we met, because the intended interviewer was ill, but I wouldn't have known if they hadn't told me. I was much struck by the sensitivity and perspicacity of their questions and enjoyed





answering them.

Holly, left, and Eleanor interview me for High Quarterly

After lunch, I talked to sixth form English students about how to get published. Jean Hodge, who reports on cultural affairs for the Spalding Guardian, also attended and joined in. It was quite an exciting occasion, because it also took the first steps towards setting up a short-story competition that the Great

British Bookshop has agreed to sponsor at the High School. Adrian and his colleagues and I will choose the best ten or twelve stories submitted to be published in a single volume at The Great British Bookshop's expense. Winners will each receive a free copy of the book, which will then go on sale in TGBB's extensive distribution network. I'll be writing more about the competition in this blog very shortly.



I completed my day at the school with a writers' workshop for Years 7, 8 and 9 students. The participants explored some of the key elements of crime fiction (they proved to be very well read) and collaborated to put some of those into practice. Their discussion illustrated their excellent grasp of linguistic and literary effects and the results were amazing! Nearly all of these students bought one of my books at the end of the session; some bought all three. Thank you!

I can't conclude this post without saying that a remarkable library now exists at Spalding High School. The library is housed in the same room that I knew, but what a difference in the stock! The emphasis is on supplying students with books to read for pleasure. It's a place of relaxation and also a place where students can go to work in groups. There's none of the shushing and grim looks that any talking in the library produced when I was a schoolgirl and all the dusty old Latin grammars and ancient editions of *Gray's Anatomy* have been disappeared. Hats off in particular to Kirsty Lees, the School Librarian and Learning Resources Manager, and to her team. The school knows how lucky it is to have them and to be able to enjoy the warm and inviting place (complete with crime scene rug featuring a splayed body) that they have turned it into.



It's almost impossible for me to thank all the people who made this day so special. I'm deeply grateful to Michele Anderson for making it possible; to Adrian Isted and Kirsty, for making it happen; to Eleanor and Holly, for giving me such a delightful interview; to Jean Hodge, for all her support for Sausage Hall both at this event and elsewhere and, especially, to all the students whom I met yesterday, who were such a joy to work with and who were so keen to develop their own writing. Thank you all!





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