

# Remembering Bill Fryer

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A31

Bill Fryer, who died in 2010 aged 85, inspired in me a lifetime love of history. John Matson's tribute at Bill's funeral, reproduced in *The Sternian* 2010, gives a broad view of Bill's whole life. By contrast, my perspective is of him as housemaster and teacher during 1953-1960.

When I entered Junior House as an 11 year old in September 1953, Bill was a formidable figure as a housemaster, and at first we JH boys referred to him as Beak - as in 'hauled before the beak' to face the magistrate over our wrong-doings. But soon Beak became Bill as I learned to appreciate his qualities as housemaster and historian.

He ran 'Bill's Bank', which was open on Saturday mornings, using a ledger in which he recorded all JH boys' weekly pocket money provided by the school (a few 'old' pennies), and the monies we paid in and took out. These were tiny sums, but they bought some 'tuck' - a few sweets, recently off post-war rationing - in the village shop.

It was in the senior forms that I came to know Bill well, as a history teacher and mentor. He'd teach the syllabus during the first part of a double lesson, including dictating some notes which we'd copy into our exercise books, and then he'd sometimes go off-topic, discussing some intriguing aspect of history (or not even necessarily history) not in the syllabus. There are several examples in the diaries I kept at the time. "Bill told us some fascinating things about Chinese caves, witches and whatnot in our double History." "Bill felt very talkative & we spent the two periods talking about reforming the House of Lords & abolishing the monarchy." "Bill showed us Tucker's collection of coins & medals struck somewhere between 1780 and 1880." "Most of the History period was spent talking about a variety of things. Apparently a human finger was found in a loaf. The bakery was sued and it emerged that in the factory a worker had had his finger chopped off in the machinery. A typical story from Bill, that."

Such things may not have directly helped us pass GCE O or A Levels but they instilled a love of history. Moreover Bill aimed to provide us with an education, not just turning us into exam-passing machines, in the days long before Government-imposed targets.

I was always interested in the little museum which Bill organised in his eyrie above the dining room. One day "Bill spent the whole period telling us stories about the various exhibits in the Museum, and explaining what they were." He sometimes allowed his historians to revise for exams in the anteroom outside his own classroom, though we didn't always repay him well: "Did revision in Bill's room with a few others, till he chucked us out for messing about".

He had a number of little foibles which we pupils became quite affectionate about and looked out for. For example if he picked up a book from his shelves and found dust on it he'd blow off the dust in a very idiosyncratic style, holding the book in a certain manner and pursing his lips in a characteristic Bill sort of way. It's the kind of little detail that sticks in the mind about the man.

Another link I had with him was the Historical Society, of which I became Secretary in the Sixth Form. Bill and I worked together to organise a number of outings - including Beaulieu Abbey, Buckler's Hard, Lymington, Hampton Court, Windsor, and Guildford Cathedral (where the building was still not completed).

Bill was very interested to hear how I was getting on after leaving LWC and going to university at UCL, and we exchanged letters a few times. My final letter from him however was much later, in 2008 in response to his receiving a copy of the book of my schoolboy diaries. I enjoyed the humour with which he referred to certain entries concerning himself, and the wit with which he signed himself off formally/informally as "William L Fryer (Bill/Beak)".

John Matson was right in describing Bill as "an intensely private man, serious and reserved", but it was very rewarding to get to know him.