

Renee Dalby

An appreciation by Professor Anthony Trace KC (WB 72)

Renee Dalby, or “Matro” as she was affectionately called, was the Matron at WB for very many years. Her death is an extremely sad loss to generations of WB boys.

In order to understand all her strengths, the love that she generated, and the esteem in which she was held, one needs to understand what WB was like in the early 70's. Uppinghamians of today, and of the recent past, might find what follows incredible to believe, but it is true in every regard.



When I arrived at WB in 1972, there were no study bedrooms: all the boys slept in dormitories, separated by “tishes”, which were wooden screens, but they did not go up to the ceiling and were open to the long corridor down the centre of the dormitories (or “dorms” as they were called). There was thus very little privacy and it was common for boys of upper and lower years to be in the same dorm. The sleeping in dorms continued throughout my time in West Bank and, incredibly, I was still in a dorm when I was House Captain in 1976!

Washing facilities were primitive in the extreme: there were no showers on the floors on which the dorms were situated, there were simply two baths which were open to the wash basins, which separated the dorm on one side of the House with the other, and, remarkably, there was a seat at the end of the baths so that anyone could come in for a chat! The only other washing facilities in the entire House were open showers in the communal changing rooms, which, again, gave no privacy whatsoever for anyone in any year.

Each boy had a work study (either single or double) but these were fairly primitive affairs. Perhaps the worst things were the punishments: senior boys were able to mete out what was called a “tish call”. This involved the person in receipt of the tish call having to leave the House and get the signature of the person named on the tish call paper. Breakfast was at 8am, for which one was not allowed to be late, and, if one was late, this would entail another tish call the next day! The tish calls could be “a single tish call”, “a double tish call” or a “triple tish call”. Thus, depending on the type of tish call, one had to get one, two, or three signatures before breakfast at 8am – and for good measure the doors did not open until 7.30am. For West Bank, the worst tish call was a “triple tish call” to Constables, Farleigh and Brooklands. Of course, senior boys would send the hapless recipients sometimes to people that they did not like, in order to wake them up, so signatures in those cases were not easy to find and also, remarkably, small boys often had to go right into the dormitories of senior boys in order to get signatures. To put it mildly, that was pretty terrifying.

I will not list all the other punishments that could be meted out, but one of the worst, and most common, was a “Long Ayston” and a “Short Ayston”, which involved the recipient running flat out to designated spots in Ayston (someway outside Uppingham), and back, in 30 minutes (from 7.30am (when the doors of the House opened) to 8am (the compulsory time for Breakfast)). Running flat out was the only way to accomplish this punishment!

As can be imagined, it was a complete culture shock for boys who had been kingpins in their Prep Schools, as I had been; I was a Prefect there and much respected in the School.

So, it was often the case that boys could feel miserable. All the boys, therefore, at each stage of their positions in the bottom of the House, stuck together and supported one another, but this is where Matro came in...

She was like a mother to us all. She was always there with a kindly word and a bit of advice and, best of all, she used to allow boys in **all** year groups to go up to her sitting room in the House after Prep for a general chat, and in this way she did her very best to make the House totally cohesive – and this she achieved, which was incredible.

“Certainly, in my time there, she encouraged us all, from top to bottom of the House, to get along together, work hard and play as well (we were a very sporting House).”

Year group after year group were looked after by her, and brought together by her, and so many people have shared stories with me about her – all of them warm and wonderful.

She also had the patience of a Saint. She listened to all our exploits and gently encouraged us back to the proper path – even if she had to do this regularly! She also encouraged the boys to do things that were outside sport and work, and she was particularly keen on the Theatre. Thus, in the early days of productions there, she did not bat an eyelid when all her electricity was cut off upon the Theatre creating a surge of power during one of the Theatre events!

She also did not leave her motherly care to people in West Bank. I know of many people, both in the Town, and in other Houses, who she counselled and helped and I include my own family – there are now eight who are OUs.

“As a family, we beat a path to Matro’s door for good cheer and wise words and we kept in touch with her.”

Another of her gifts was to keep in touch with Old Uppinghamians. I was a Trustee for 17 years and every time that I went to the School for a Trustees’ Meeting, I would knock on her famous door on Stockerston Road and see if she was in. I have very happy memories of chatting with her in her sitting room and she would tell me all she knew by way of update about the West Bank boys. She was a mine of information.

I cannot leave this appreciation without mentioning her family who are all wonderful, both young and old, and Matro was the Matriarch to a wide and happy family.

In all, she was one of a kind in the WB history, in the history of the School, and in the history of the Town. She is much missed. Thank you, Matro, for what you did for all of us.



Dorian & Elizabeth Nicholls Cutham

Boyd, Mitchell, Walker, C. J., Gimson, Oliver, Thorp, Craven, Ford, M. J., Williams, Bendall, Ellis, Tildesley, Moffat
Read, Whitaker, Macqueen, Stephen, Wakeley, Manley, Cooke, Fielding, Spencer, Riley, Maud, Bruce-Gardner, S. B., Brogden
Lea, Skidmore, Bruce-Gardner, R. D., Walker, N. J., Brierley, Sparkes, Crane, Newton, Walters, DeLattre, Davies, Scowcroft, Walker, S. M.
T. D. McChrystal, Mrs. Daulby, P. R. Dixon, J. P. Green, Esq., R. F. O'Brien, P. A. Whittington, J. S. Abbott, Esq., Mrs. J. S. Abbott, D. B. Roxburgh, J. P. Ford, R. G. Bean, Esq., L. Q. Findlay, J. M. Pearson
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