

My memories of St John's School, fading as they are now, are overwhelmingly happy, thanks to Jean and Eric Temple, the main teachers throughout my time there – 1970 to 1976.

However, my first teacher was Mrs Mariner, as she took the youngest class, which as I recall was in an extension, probably very new when I arrived in September 1970. My first memory of her seems in retrospect very odd – why should a teacher tell such a young class about the death of Charles de Gaulle on November 9th, 1970? Doubtless our parents all knew he was a war hero who had resigned as French President just over 18 months earlier, but perhaps this shows her determination to broaden the perspective of her five-year-old charges.

As I lived in the village, I walked up the hill every day with my friends from Mill Close, including John Eaton, one year my senior, and Gary Tessier, inspirational leader of our gang, the eponymous Gary's Army. Gary's lieutenant, David Freeman, had recently endured a tragedy beyond our youthful comprehension – his toddler sister had drowned in the River Lea.

Our bitter rivals were known either as Paul's Army or Andy's Army, depending on which of the Flynn brothers from distant Cromer Hyde was briefly ascendant.

As we passed the indecent pavement graffiti just before the school gates we would try to avoid being jostled onto it – this mishap condemned the unfortunate child to The Dreaded Lurgy, and subordinate position in playground games at mid-morning break. Even as I left the school in the scorching summer of 1976, the fading "Shit Sign" retained its totemic power over my mind.

The welcome morning play break followed our revolting free milk – I can vividly recall the pyramid-shaped cartons, and the forbidden technique of squirting the government-funded liquid at one's companion. Of course I was unaware of the Education Minister Margaret Thatcher, soon to be dubbed "Milk Snatcher" for sensibly withdrawing the hand-outs in June 1971.

The next year, I can remember a photographer from the Welwyn Hatfield Times arriving to mark the school's centenary.

Perhaps my most enduring memory of those early years was the baby elephant that came to school – Nicky Dellar's parents ran a kennel in Green Lanes, and were looking after this exotic beast professionally for a while. Perhaps it was 35 years later when I met his mother, who proved with a photo it was not a figment of my imagination.

In my memory, I spent far more time at St John's playing than learning, but I can't have been a complete dunce, as I recall being assigned the job of supervising new boy Andy Gunn's efforts to read a Magic Roundabout book.

But I wasn't smart enough at that tender age to recognise an exclamation mark, so his rendition of sentences curiously ending "Mr McHenry, I" went uncorrected.

Andy, who lived in Great North Road, became my best friend for most of the next 25 years, although sadly we are now in touch by Facebook only.

But the third member of our triumvirate, Crispin Driver, who lived near Andy in Brocket Road, is still a regular friend of mine.

Before we met at school, Crispin's parents were friends of my parents through the local Labour Party. But our otherwise firmly left-wing parents were divided by their attitudes towards the ultra-traditional education offered by the Temples. The Drivers joined a group of dissenting parents who

urged more modern techniques and subjects on the school, ultimately withdrawing Crispin to Applecroft, thought more progressive and up-to-date.

I recall very well the St John's assemblies, when we youngsters would troop into the hall and take our place in front of the middle and top classes, supervised by Jean and Eric Temple respectively.

They were both very keen on music, and Mr Temple would play a classical gramophone disc as we marched in and proceed to discuss it in the assembly. To this day, Dvorak's New World Symphony, Smetana's Vltava, and Sorcerer's Apprentice by Paul Dukas recall St John's for me instantly.

He trained us rigorously for the annual concerts – I had a strong singing voice, but a last minute cold stopped me performing one well-practised solo in front of assembled parents. We were also encouraged to learn the recorder, and I recall those lessons, like French, were given in the old canteen building, adjoining the road.

The Temples were also very interested in wildlife, and encouraged my burgeoning fascination with birds.

The assemblies also featured ritual presentation of awards such as swimming certificates earned at our Hatfield Swimming Pool lessons. Very occasionally Mr Temple would make some reference in assembly to current affairs – in April 1975, he told us we should be pleased that a terrible war was over in Vietnam.

Some years before this I can remember when the old canteen was abandoned, and we started to take meals in the main hall. As lunch gave way to a precious a break before afternoon lessons, there was an eager rush to grab the most prestigious of the collection of old tyres kept in a shed behind the old canteen – invaluable for playing with in the old orchard.

Alternatively, we played on the "apps", metal climbing frames with nothing whatsoever to shield us from a potentially very serious fall onto hard Tarmac. There wasn't a great deal of organised sport, but I can remember football, rounders, and the summer sports days, including egg-and-spoon and three-legged races. Very occasionally, we would host a football match against another primary school, but such a small school as St John's was certain to get roundly trounced.

Like all schoolkids, we pretended to hate the food served in both the old canteen and later the hall, but in reality it was both tasty and nourishing.

Mrs Temple was stricter than her husband, but I can't recall ever getting a serious telling-off or other sanction – at secondary school, we soon learnt that in these years at other primary schools, canes were still in occasional use.

Mr Temple unfortunately suffered from deteriorating health, and by the time I was in his class he was frequently forced to take time off. I can remember supply teachers Miss McKenzie, who taught us about her native Scotland, and Mr Cave. Mr Cave rigorously drummed our times tables into us until every member of the class could recite every sum from "Nought times nought is nought" to "Twelve times twelve is one hundred and forty-four."

I don't think the school ever contained more than 50 pupils in my day – when I left in June 1976, there were just four or possibly five in the top year group. Andy, Sylvia Bates and I went to Stanborough School, where I renewed my friendship with Crispin. But I reluctantly lost touch with Krael O'Dowd, who went to Sir Frederic Osborne School, now renamed the Ridgeway Academy.

I think both the Temples, who lived in Codicote, retired shortly after I left, and neither lived very long. I now deeply regret never getting in touch with them in my Stanborough years to express my gratitude for such a great start to my education and life.

ALEX LEWIS - now living in Hatfield (56)