

SLEEPING RUFF

It was Sleeping Ruff's last day at St. Edward's. Forty years he had taught there. He would miss the school; it had formed such a large part of his life. But he was not moving far away. He would, he felt sure, keep in touch.

Of course, Sleeping Ruff was not his real name. That was Edmund Walker. The boys all called him 'Mr Walker' or 'Sir' to his face. But he had long been known as Sleeping Ruff by the boys and, if truth be known, by some of his colleagues as well; it is possible that no one at the school any longer knew why he had that nickname. It had been passed on by one generation of schoolboys to another. But they did know that 'Ruff' was spelt with two Fs and was a sort of bird: that was part of school lore.

How had he come by that name? His earliest nickname when he came to the school in the late 1950s was "Sleepy." It is not entirely clear why he was given that name; certainly it was nothing to do with Disney's Seven Dwarfs. At just over 6 feet, Mr Walker was anything but a dwarf. Nor had he any of the attributes of the Disney character. It was probably a cut down version of "Sleep Walker", perhaps suggested both his name but by the fact that after a good lunch he did sometimes seem sleepy in the afternoons. There was even a rumour that he had actually fallen asleep in class; but no one could agree on when or with which class this had happened.

The young Mr Walker, however, soon began to be serious about a lady friend and a young teacher's salary did not allow for both a lady friend and extravagant lunches. The days of heavy lunches and sleepy afternoons very soon became a thing of the past. Edmund Walker eventually settled in and became a very alert, conscientious and well respected member of staff. The nickname "Sleepy," however, stuck, as nicknames often do.

It was in his third year at St Edmunds that the second form groups had field trips to the Welnet Wildfowl Wetland Trust Reserves. Among other birds seen there, was the *Philomachus pugnax*, otherwise known as the 'ruff'. It was in its breeding plumage and its head tufts, in particular, reminded the boys of Mr Walker who, in those days, wore his hair quite long. The bird was also long-legged just as Edmund Walker was; and when they were told that the female was known as a "reeve", the boys could barely contain their laughter. Only last year "Sleepy" had married the young school secretary, Miss Reeve. Inevitably "Sleepy" became "Sleepy Ruff" among the second forms; this quickly spread through the school, becoming, as it did so, "Sleeping Ruff."

Had it been spelt ROUGH it would not have been appropriate. Edmund Walker was always well dressed and neatly turned out; he certainly had none of the attributes one would associate with anyone who had been sleeping rough. But it was RUFF. It gave the boys a feeling of superiority when they explained to the uninitiated that it was RUFF, not ROUGH, and – as everyone knows – a ruff is a bird. It was this, perhaps, that had ensured the name got passed on from one generation of boys to the next, even though the reason for giving the name came to be forgotten.

Sleeping Ruff had taught the boys Latin for the past 40 years. When he started there, all the boys learnt Latin in their first two years, and most continued to do so at least until they were sixteen. There were four full-time members of the Classics Department then. But things changed from the 1970s when O-level Latin was no longer an entry requirement for Oxford or Cambridge. The numbers taking Latin began to drop or – as he said in his farewell speech – to decline. But sadly not everyone noticed the pun.

He had hoped that the Cambridge Latin Course, whose Unit 1 was published in 1970, would help to keep the subject alive. Its emphasis was on reading and comprehension; and the reading material was far more interesting than any Latin course before. It integrated culture with language and used dramatic devices to capture pupils' attention and interest from the very beginning. The course seemed to be proving successful; though it should be said that Sleeping Ruff's own enthusiasm played no little part in stemming the drift away from Latin.

The new course, however, did not meet with unqualified praise from all quarters. It was not long before the English staff began complaining that the boys knew no grammar. Sleeping Ruff, who by this time had become Head of the Classics Department, suggested that perhaps the best people to teach *English* grammar were the English staff. This did not go down well with the English staff; however, Sleeping Ruff's feathers were not ruffled by this.

But even he was becoming concerned at the boys' growing lack of awareness of grammar. He was not convinced that it had been a bright idea by the writers of the Cambridge Latin Course to label the various noun cases as the A, B, C, D and E forms. It seemed to give the boys the impression that their differences were not very important; and when the German master complained that boys no longer understood what Nominative, Accusative, Genitive and Dative meant, he did agree that the course was deficient in some respects.

The planners of the Cambridge Latin Course had been influenced by the ideas of the American linguist, Noam Chomsky, and seemed to imagine that pupils would subconsciously generate their own grammatical structure as a result of their intelligent reading and that they would assimilate vocabulary by a sort of mental osmosis. Sleeping Ruff found these ideas simply nonsense. He had started to add his own remedial material of a more traditional nature and was thinking of abandoning the course altogether. At this time the numbers opting for Latin also dropped off more; possibly Sleeping Ruff's less than enthusiastic endorsement of the new course helped in this decline, as well as the inevitable pressures from other subjects. There were now only two full-time members of the Department.

However, he was delighted to find that the Revised Cambridge Latin Course, which appeared in 1982, had not only reinstated the traditional nomenclature but also had sections of explicit grammar, more learning activities, and a full section of exercises for reviewing word forms, rules, and sentence patterns, as well as keeping the stimulating reading material of the

original version and presenting the whole thing in a modern, attractive way. Things had picked and, although the Department was now smaller and the number of boys learning Latin were fewer than when he had begun; the enthusiasm of the boys who did learn Latin was better than in the old days when all had to begin it. He felt he was leaving a small, but successful Department to his successor.

But he would be remembered at St Edward's not only as a Latin master, but with both respect and affection as a Form master and, for the past 20 years, as a House master. Many former pupils still kept in touch with him. He and his wife had had no children of their own so they treasured these continuing contacts, and he felt sure such contacts would still continue after he had retired.

At the Final Assembly, no mention was made of *Philomachus pugnax*, or of anything vaguely dormant, until the end of Edmund Walker's farewell speech. He said he had a picture which he would like to donate to the school. It was a print of a field sketch by the artist Hans Larsson who, he explained, specialized in drawing and painting birds. As he unwrapped it and held it up, it was, he said with a smile, a field sketch Hans had made of a sleeping ruff.

