

“I’ve just been Beaten”

Selected anecdotes of the use of the cane at a British public school in the 1960s.

“I’ve just been beaten,” was probably the most attention getting statement by teenage boys attending British Public Schools for a century. If a boy were crying, or “blubbing” as it was usually called, he would be ignored. But for other boys, it was time for hero worship. “Did it hurt? How many strokes? Who by? What for? Can I see your marks?” were fired at the boy, or boys, in rapid succession. So, what was it all about?

The first important point is that it was the preferred punishment of most boys. The other two main punishments were very inconvenient. Writing pages of lines wasted hours of time and gating often spoilt a weekend, especially if the boy was in a sports team due to play away or due to go out with his parents. (Detention was unusual in the days of corporal punishment.) A beating was over quickly and gave the boy fifteen minutes of fame. The experience could be extremely painful, but it was worth it. The other point about being beaten was that it was often due to the boy’s own stupidity. Most of the time, no one investigated the misdemeanours that could lead to a beating. It was all about not being caught.

For instance, boys were trusted to go on a run in an afternoon if no other sports were organised. Usually, the runs were between three and five miles. There was little to check that the boy had run the full distance. Consequently, they often took a short cut and sat down for a while. However, if they miscalculated the sitting down time and headed back early, they were either world champion runners or cheats when they returned to their Houses. The prefect supervising the runs would probably not believe that the boy in question had become a champion runner and he would be beaten by the Head of House next morning for cheating. A bit of care and patience by the boy would have avoided the beating.

Sometimes beatings resulted from sheer bad luck. One term, three fifth formers forgot to ask for Exeats (permission to leave the grounds). They decided to chance it and go into the local town. Suddenly they walked straight into their house master, who seldom went into town. He probably was the only person who knew for certain that they did not have permission to leave college. (Most other master would just have assumed that they had an exeat.) He told them to report to his study at 4pm. All three got a sound beating there and then.

One problem for the boys was the catch-all clause in the school rules. “Lack of common sense is a breach of school rules.” This in effect was a license to punish most infringements. One anonymous boy scribbled across the rules posted on the noticeboard, “Read the Rules; it will save you pain in the latter end!” Unfortunately, common sense was not written up!

Anyway, whatever the reason, many boys had a love-hate relationship with the cane. It was not uncommon for them to record the number of strokes that they had taken by notches on their leather belts. In one House, there was a pair of identical twins, in fact so identical that the Housemaster could not tell the difference. Consequently,

they took it in turn to be beaten, irrespective of which had earned it. Schoolboy humour? It is well worth watching a film short, if you can find it, called *Dollar Bottom*. That film does genuinely encapsulate the irreverent attitude of many schoolboys to the cane. In it, one enterprising boy sets up an insurance scheme for boys who are to get the cane. He finds boys who are prepared to pay to avoid a beating and those prepared to take a beating for money. He makes a fortune on the commission between the two!

Why the Cane?

Perhaps as an aside it is worth considering why the cane became the predominant instrument of corporal punishment. In Victorian times, there were a host of instruments in use; birch, whip, crop, belt, to name a few. Yet by the 1930s, the cane had replaced most of them. The big change was the first world war and the attitude to people. Before, officialdom cared little if the recipient were severely injured by corporal punishment. After the war, the issue had changed. The objective became to maximise pain and minimise damage to the body. The cane applied to the buttocks was seen as the solution. Canes are light, so doing little damage, but sting like mad. The buttocks are resilient and heal quickly. The result was no contest.

But the road was not smooth. For instance, the cane started to be used for the punishment of women in Victorian times. However, the bible-bashers of the era were shocked to find that some women had orgasms during caning. The result was the ban on the public corporal punishment of women, or sometimes, the return to the use of the whip on the back. The latter never caused sexual stimulation as the back is far from the sexual area and the skin damage could cause an unbearable level of pain.

This was also the reason for much lower, if any, use of the cane in girls' schools. Many girls are sexually stimulated at the prospect of being caned (or spanked), sometimes orgasm during a caning, and almost always are highly sexually stimulated after a caning. The prim women who ran the posh girls' schools were well aware of this and avoided the use of the cane despite their desire to apply it to their most difficult charges.

Positioning, Positioning, Positioning

A key issue always was positioning. Hit too low, especially on the back of the legs, and the boy might jump through the ceiling. Hit too high, especially on the lower back, and the cane could cause internal damage. Thus, a steady target was essential.

The *Touch Your Toes* cliché existed in film makers' imagination. In practice, it is unworkable as any experienced caner will tell you. The best position was always kneeling in some form, with the head below the level of the bottom. On knees, as opposed to feet, movements are extremely limited and offer a steady target.

Many masters favoured a boy kneeling on a chair, bent over the back of the chair, and holding the feet of the chair. This worked very well in most cases and the chastisement could be administered without interruption, in most cases. However,

occasionally the boy would jerk forward, and the boy and chair would go spawling across the floor. In addition, mischievous boys would occasionally just lean forward until the chair tipped over. They would then pretend that they had fainted. The standard comment by the master would then be, "Get up you, stupid boy." If the boy could hold back his smiles, the master would eventually get him a glass of water to revive him. If he could not hold his mirth, he would receive extra strokes. Anyway, many caners preferred two chairs back-to-back, with the elbows of the boy on the second chair. Others would back a chair against a table. The boy would kneel on the chair, lie on the table, and grip the far edge of the table to help control the agony. Which ever way, it would avoid the boy toppling, over! Most masters fully appreciated that boys would show their stripes off to their peers or be seen by most of their House in the showers. Consequently, the administration of six neat, angry red lines across the boy's bottom was just as important to the master as the boy. His respect amongst the boys was partly based on his caning skills. A bad caner would be mocked!

So, who got the cane?

Theoretically any boy could be beaten. Official policy was that older boys should only be beaten in exceptional circumstances. The main responsibility for discipline rested with the housemasters.

Some masters took the age issue more seriously than others. One sixth former was sent to his housemaster for smoking. The housemaster told him to return after lunch. At mid-morning break, he was bragging to his friends, "If he beats me, I bet it won't be the last time." The housemaster did not beat him. Instead, he was given a lecture on the evils of smoking and told if anything like it happened again, he would not be made a perfect. A couple of weeks later, another sixth former was reported. This time the deputy housemaster was on duty. He did not hesitate to beat the sixth former despite the boy already having been appointed a prefect for the next term.

In part, it was the threat of a beating that maintained discipline. Most boys really did not want to be beaten and made considerable efforts not to get caught. Other boys seem to be oblivious to the consequences and considered it the price of enjoying life.

It also affected boys differently. The slimmer, fitter boys could take a good thrashing without a tear. Plumper boys tended to find the experience more painful and often descended into tears. Masters seemed to be aware of this and often did not beat the plumper boys as hard. There was always speculation as to whether masters beat harder for more serious offences. This probably varied between masters. However, one master admitted that, if he was beating a group of boys, he beat the suspected ring leaders harder.

Finally, a couple of more unusual aspects. For minor offenses, especially lateness, boys were given "lines" to write out. They could be awarded between 100 and 500 lines according to offense. The lines were copied from a selected book, with the theoretical benefit that they would be learning something. However, some boys were awarded so many lines it was impossible to write them all. The boys then would go

to their housemaster and ask to be beaten. The Housemaster would oblige and cancel the lines.

Perhaps the most absurd situation was with a pair of identical twins, as mentioned earlier. Their Housemaster was unable to tell them apart. Consequently, they decided to take their beatings in turn, whichever committed the offense. Thus, the Housemaster was never sure if he was beating the correct boy. In contrast, the prefects were closer to them and usually could tell them apart. They brought in a policy that both boys were beaten for an offense until the nonsense stopped.

So, who wielded the Cane?

The answer is a wide variety of people; the Headmaster; Housemasters; Head of College (the most senior prefect in the college); Heads of Houses (the most senior prefect in the house); and some specific masters such as the gym master and occasionally retired house masters. Consequently, the number of beatings administered each day was substantial, given that there were over 600 boys at the school. The majority were administered between breakfast and first lessons, but by no means all.

All beatings without exception were on the buttocks, and, with very, very few exceptions, over trousers or pyjamas. On exceptionally rare occasions, a beating might be on the naked buttocks, if a boy was caught with extra “protection”.

The normal beating was six “strokes” or “cuts”. The school rules specifically limited a prefects’ beating to “up to six cuts.” However, it was probably unknown for a prefect to administer less than six. Housemasters sometimes only administered four strokes and, on rare occasions, gave more than six.

The Headmaster

By the time a master became a headmaster his time was increasingly taken up by wider issues, but he never gave up completely responsibility for discipline. If there were a possibility of a boy being expelled or rusticated (sent home for the rest of the term), the matter had to go to the headmaster. The latter would usually beat the boy(s) first then tell them the final punishment. (If a boy knew he was about to be expelled, he would be unlikely to accept a beating.)

Headmasters, however, often had extensive experience with application of a cane and could make it highly effective. On one occasion, a boy fainted during the caning. When the boy recovered, the headmaster was standing by the window looking out, his hands behind his back. The headmaster let him off the final two strokes.

There was one situation where the headmaster was always informed. That was when something happened that could bring the College into disrepute. If a boy had been arrested by the police or caught “stealing Farmer Giles’s apples”, the Headmaster would deal with the matter.

He would also deal with more serious offenses, especially those that transgressed House boundaries. On one occasion, a rather unpopular chemistry master found his 1963 Heinkel three-wheel bubble car sitting outside his chemistry lab on the second

floor of the Science block. The car had overloaded the goods lift and the matter was reported to the headmaster who ordered an immediate investigation. The three culprits were soon discovered and soundly beaten by the headmaster the following morning.

But as a proportion of the beatings administered, the headmaster would be responsible for a relatively small fraction of them. This meant, of course, that the words "I've just been beaten by the headmaster" received the highest accolade from the boy's peers.

Housemasters

A housemaster was mainly responsible for disciplining his charges and administered most beatings. He also had to authorise any beatings by prefects.

There was one well-worn path to a beating. Other masters and the occasional female teacher issued "tickets" to boys mainly for misbehaviour in class or during sports. The Housemasters might then beat the boys who presented them with these tickets or, more likely, if a boy had received several tickets in a short period. The queue to see the Housemaster after breakfast could be analysed. Those holding small white square pieces of paper were in line for a possible beating. Those with similar but pink pieces of paper were requesting an issue of pocket money and those with green ones hoped for an exeat.

Housemasters often wandered around their Houses to check up how things were going. Luck, or otherwise, would have it that they sometimes stumbled across a serious misdemeanour. On one occasion, a housemaster silently walked around a common room during evening prep (the equivalent to homework for day boys.) One boy, quite a good artist, was drawing cartoons, especially a rather unflattering one of his Housemaster. He did not hear the housemaster looking over his shoulder, who became furious instantly. The boy was sent to the housemaster's study and promptly beaten.

On another occasion, a housemaster peered around a door during prep and saw about six boys arguing and throwing things at each other. The whole group were sent up to his study where they were all beaten. You could not hear a pin drop for the rest of the prep except for the fidgeting by the boys. They were having trouble concentrating on their work due to their throbbing rear ends.

Occasional mass beatings were the domain of a housemaster. One time, a group of boys were playing football with a teddy bear after lights out. The game became noisier and noisier. Not surprisingly, the door suddenly swung open and the main lights switched on. The housemaster was not amused. All fourteen boys out of bed were sent up to his study and they were beaten over their pyjamas. It took him nearly half an hour to beat all of them.

Housemasters had quite different views of the value of beatings. One housemaster always claimed that they were "useful". It was an expression by the housemaster to the boy that his behaviour was unacceptable. Other masters beat as hard as possible, to instil sufficient fear of another beating to discourage further bad

behaviour. The first option had its drawbacks. Most boys' rear ends were pretty tough, and a token beating could backfire. For instance, on one occasion, a housemaster beat a boy only moderately hard, and the boy stood up laughing. He had to give him a further four hard strokes to take the smile off his face.

Other Masters

Sometimes, there was a conflict of views between retired housemasters who usually pressed for more liberal application of the cane and current housemasters who might hand out less beatings.

There was one remarkably interesting case where this clash of views caused a major row at the weekly masters' meeting. Mr Hawksworth (name changed), nicknamed the Buzzard by the boys for his tall, thin, and hook-nosed appearance, had been a Latin and ancient Greek teacher for forty years and a Housemaster for twenty-five. Because of a shortage of Latin teachers, he had stayed on after retirement as a part time master. One boy, in his class, intensely disliked Latin and was a continual nuisance. He gave the boy a series of tickets to take to his Housemaster. However, the Housemaster did little about it and certainly failed to beat the boy. Eventually, Mr Hawksworth's patience was exhausted. He told the boy to come to his study during the morning break. Despite his substantial age, he gave the boy six of the very best. The problems in the class decreased sharply, but the boy's Housemaster was furious. He brought the matter up at the masters' weekly meeting and claimed it was his prerogative to beat boys in his house; big mistake. Mr Hawksworth was even more furious and subjected the poor Housemaster to a withering attack on his competence, who shut up quickly.

The Head of College

A Head of College was also the head boy in his own house. He would probably administer more beatings as house captain than as head of college. College beatings were mainly for college offenses. For instance, bad behaviour during an away sports match could result in a college beating. The prefect in charge of the sports trip would more than likely be from a different House than the errant boy. A boy being rude to a college prefect from another house could also result in a college beating.

College beatings were carried out in the prefects' common room during evening prep, in front of the assembled college prefects. Two college prefects would find the boy and walk him to the prefects' common room. This would entail walking across the main quad with the two prefects walking immediately behind him. The boy could feel himself being watched through the windows of all the Houses around the quad. Hundreds of boys would know exactly what was about to happen. Some five to ten minutes later the boy would re-emerge by himself, possibly rubbing his bottom.

The Head of House

Most "boy on boy" beatings were administered by the Head Boy of the House, with the permission of the Housemaster. They could be quite disruptive as there was no obvious place to administer them in many Houses. Often, the Removes' (new and

second year boys) common room was used. This meant that they would have to vacate their common room just as they were preparing for lessons. When they returned, they would find the room totally disorganised.

All the House Prefects were entitled to watch a House Beating. Thus, all the furniture would be pushed back. A Chair would be backed against the long table that the Removes sat round; a reminder to the Removes of the consequences of bad behaviour, unless of course it was one of their number being beaten.

Some Houses did have more convenient arrangements. For instance, one House had a large box room (where the boys' travelling trunks were kept during the term.) The prefects pushed all the trunks to the walls, and just left two piled up in the middle for boys to bend over. It worked well but it was a stuffy, airless room. Most boys who wore glasses came out of the room after the beating with their glasses misted up.

House prefects in effect ran their Houses, under the sometimes-watchful eye of their Housemasters. It meant that their methods of discipline could be very quirky. One House Captain worked on a formula for punishments: 100 lines, 200 lines, and 200 lines and a beating. The system rather fell to pieces when the Housemaster refused to sanction a beating if the third offense was very minor.

Another problem was that House Captains often needed time to hone their skills. The first beating that they administered could be shambolic. One head of House was so nervous that he rushed the whole exercise, hardly marking the boy because the strokes were so light and administered seven because he forgot to count. That afternoon, the boy was in the swimming pool area, asking boys to count his stripes. Unfortunately for him, the marks were so light it was difficult to count them accurately. His plans to have the head of House deprefected went up in flames!

Parental Caning

Perhaps as an aside, it is worth considering this issue. By the sixties, the days when a father kept a cane at home in order to deal with his miscreant off-spring were largely over. However, there were exceptions. One boy came to school at the end of the holidays and complained that he had been beaten by his father during the holidays. Now this boy had escaped being beaten at school for three years. But then I suppose that the fact that his father was a house master at another major public school greatly increased the chances of his holiday thrashing.

Unofficial Punishments

When discussing corporal punishment, the flow often drifts onto unofficial punishments. "Surely there were lots of times when a boy got his rear end roasted off the record?" people would ask. Surprisingly, my answer is always, "Not as far as I was aware." However, in my time as a prefect, there were a couple of incidents that are worth recounting.

First, every evening two or three prefects were expected to stay up to 11pm to check that there were no problems in the main dormitory or any of the smaller ones. In practice, this meant chatting and having coffee in the linen room. One evening the discussion became rather acrimonious. One of the prefects was a small chap, with a

big chip on his shoulder. I cannot remember exactly what we were talking about. However, I was a burly rugby player and then, not someone to argue with. I suddenly grabbed the irritating, eighteen-year-old egotist, and hauled him across my knees. I pulled down his pyjama bottoms and gave him several dozen hard slaps on his rear end, until it was bright red. Well, it shut him up! He was so stunned by the incident that he just pulled up his pyjamas and went to bed. Corporal punishment was so ingrained in the boys that it was an expected part of life, and he seemed to accept it as such, despite his age. The incident was never mentioned again.

On another occasion, I went into a senior dorm and there was one boy at war with his dorm mates, all seven of them. I am not too sure what the yelling was all about, but it included some very flowery and definitely prohibited language. To my surprise, the culprit was a fifth-former called Daniel (not real name), a blond round-faced boy who hated sports and portrayed a goody-two-shoes image. When one of the words was aimed at me – I'm not sure he realised who I was – I flipped him over the low wooden wall that separated his cubicle from the next one. His face was just above the blanket on his bed; his legs dangled down the other side not quite reaching the floor. His full, rather effeminate bottom lay across the top of the wall, his striped pyjamas stretched tight across his bottom. One of the other boys immediately offered me one of his slippers. Well, there was little I could do but apply the slipper hard across Daniel's bottom, a couple of dozen times. By the end, one could clearly see the red under the clothe. I told him to get into bed while the other boys continued to dance with delight at Daniel's fate.

In retrospect, I rather regretted the unofficial punishment. I wish that I had reported him to the head of house. He would have given him six of the best next morning. Daniel had never been beaten before, but I wondered how much that was due to the angelic innocence he was capable of summoning up. A good sixer across that plump bottom would have changed his image!

So what justified a beating?

One offense that resulted in an inevitable beating was bullying. It could result from an impromptu action by a bigger boy to a smaller boy or from systematic action. One example was a fifth former who lashed out at the third former who was taunting him. The fifth former was not very bright, not that good at sports and a bit large and lanky. Eventually, his patience snapped, and he gave the third former a black eye. Despite the provocation, the Housemaster was very angry and beat the boy. He was broad shouldered and broad soft bottomed, which offered an excellent target. It left the boy in tears. The Housemaster, as was his wont, told the boy to come back in an hour. The full story came out then. Boys seemed more willing to tell the full truth after a beating. The Housemaster continued his practice of calling boys back for a post-beating interview.

Angry actions resulting in injury were not uncommon on the rugby field. In one House team, the hooker was a fiery Italian commonly called Ronny, an abbreviation of some long and unpronounceable Italian name. His father had been held in a British prisoner of war camp for Italians. After the war, he had stayed in England building chain of Italian restaurants. The other boys had tried to tease him about his

background until they discovered that he was extraordinarily strong for his size and rather short tempered. The latter sometimes landed him in hot water, especially during rugby. One day, he kicked another boy on the shin in anger. That boy had to be shipped off to the sanitorium where fortunately no bones were found to be broken. Ronny was told by his Housemaster, who was watching the game, to take his boots off and go straight to his study.

That was probably a mistake as, when the Housemaster arrived, he was confronted by a smelly, mud covered individual. It was clear that the thick mud on his shorts was going to offer him substantial protection from the cane as well as make a real mess. The boy was told to remove his rugby shirt and shorts then come into the study. The boy entered wearing only jock strap and socks. After a few angry words from the Housemaster, he was made to bend over two chairs back-to-back, and offer his full, round muscular rear end to the tender ministrations of the cane. The Housemaster administered ten hard strokes for bullying, and it gave him some satisfaction to see the start of some tears coming from the boy's eyes.

Another term, two boys were caught taunting and bullying a boy from another House and were given tickets. Their Housemaster was not going to be rushed on the matter, with a queue of other boys just outside his door. He told the boys to come back at 2.30 in the afternoon. They sat in his study while he listened to their side of the story, gave them the appropriate "bollocking" (telling off) then sent them out one at one a time while he beat the other boy.

Another offense that invariably resulted in a beating was smoking. Even in those days, it was strictly taboo for teenagers. It was not uncommon for a housemaster to puff away on his pipe while berating the boy for smoking, then to beat him.

Offences that earned a beating were sometimes inconsistent. In one house, a boy could regularly receive tickets for minor offences. The housemaster usually tut-tutted and told the boy not to do it again. (One day, the deputy house master was covering for the housemaster. He was not impressed by a string of tickets, and, to one boy's horror, he was given six of the best.) In other houses, it did not take many tickets to result in a beating.

In another House, the housemaster sanctioned almost ever beating the prefects wished to administer. One boy was caught revising with a torch under the blankets after lights out, which would normally earn 100 lines from a prefect or paise for his endeavours. In that house, he received a house beating. Some Housemasters beat more frequently than others. Some offences fully merited a thrashing; one boy put food down another boy's bed and made a right mess. His beating was well earned. Bullying always resulted in a beating if caught. But beatings for middling offenses would vary from House to House and record of behaviour.

The Junior School

The senior school catered for boys from thirteen to eighteen or even nineteen. Virtually all boarders, the junior school boys ranged from eight to thirteen. The system of corporal punishment was very different. The headmaster administered all canings or "swishings" as the boys called them. They were carried out over pyjamas

just before lights out. The headmaster walked around the dormitories, thrashing all the boys on his list in front of the other boys in the dormitory. If a boy was due to be caned, there was usually a weird hush in the “dorm” while they waited for the headmaster. When he arrived, he told the boy to get out of bed and bend over the end of the bed. The boy had the right to ask him, “How many, please Sir?” The head would reply, four or six, depending how seriously he viewed the offense. The boy then bent over and receive his punishment. The school had a communal system for showers and the boy’s marks would be on display to all his peers during showers, as well as to the under matrons who supervised the showers, all commenting on them. There always was a debate between the boys if it was better to bend right over during the caning or stand as straight as possible, that is which position was more painful. The older, more experienced boys, that is those caned most, always had advice for other boys, especially those due to be caned.

The canings were part of the merit system of the school. Good work gained a star, and bad behaviour or poor work gained a stripe. These were posted on a large board which listed every boy in the school. The stars and stripes were posted on the board, every star (in red) equivalent to two stripes (in blue). If a boy was caned, a large C was written by his name, and it was deemed equivalent to ten stripes. It was very rare for a boy to have two Cs by his name in one term but not unheard of. At the end of term, all the stars and stripes were added up to determine the top House (out of four). Because of this, any boy who had been caned had to stand up in the weekly House meeting and explain why he had been caned, thus bringing disrepute to his House.

In Conclusion

It was a system that worked well. It had been brought under proper control from the days of the Victorian excesses. Discipline was tough but not excessive. But like all punishments, if you did not get caught, you did not get beaten. Thus, the system worked, in large part, on the danger of getting caught, or otherwise.

The campaign against corporal punishment was largely based on ignorance and pseudo-science. People do not hit their thumb with a hammer if they can avoid it; it hurts. Boys do not misbehave; beatings hurt. That is nature. Evolution developed pain as a deterrent. Obviously however, it works better in the tightly defined environment of a boarding school. No one claims that it was perfect. For instance, one boy suffered from an excess of teenage rebellion. A deputy house master gave him a really hard beating; the resentment festered, and the following term he absconded, never to return.

Another argument was the move towards coeducation. This was driven by both an aim to create a more natural environment and by economic considerations. This leads to an obvious point; if corporal punishment worked so well, why should girls be exempt. Their behaviour is not intrinsically better than boys. The idea that coeducation should lead to its abolition is nonsense.

Finally, there is the age issue. Teenage years are very physical years of a person’s life. In the days of corporal punishment, teenagers showed none of the nonsenses

that have become associated with them more latterly. They got up on time, worked hard and were not rude to their elders. It is a case of tailoring the solution to the needs. (In the same way, punishment of young children by physical means should not be allowed. The level of force is excessive to their size and their understanding is limited, causing resentment.)

We hope that this short summary of the use of corporal punishment in the 1960s improves people's understanding. It was not a cruel system!