

## **WAS IT A BREEZE? BREEZE HILL SCHOOL**

### **Reflections of Bryan "Griff" Jones – recorded as the first UK dual-use centre manager**

#### **❖ The UK's first dual use scheme with an appointed 'manager'?**

I arrived at Breeze Hill School on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966, to start officially on September 1<sup>st</sup>. The school complex was situated on the west side of Oldham on the road to Saddleworth, just off the road leading to and joining the main road from Ashton under Lyne - where the red bricks changed to grey stone.

In 1966 the Education set up in Oldham was in chaos. They had decided that they were going to be among the very first to go fully comprehensive. A new school was built on the east side (I knew a couple who drove 4 miles across town from the grammar school to teach languages 3 times a week!). They added bits and pieces to other buildings and Breeze Hill was one of these. Thus, the school had been built in 3 phases;

- ❖ The 1920's - comprising a craft block for woodwork & metalwork, 6 classrooms, a gym., with changing rooms and showers for boys & girls with a large main hall capable of seating 500 people.
- ❖ Late 40/early50's - the main new building with a full range of classrooms etc.
- ❖ From 1964-66 - the 1920 classrooms were converted into several domestic science and arts facilities and the traditional gym was upgraded. In addition, house blocks were built containing staff rooms and 4 classrooms. The swimming pool and sports hall and further changing rooms, plus another small block with an office, tea making facilities and a seating area for around 30 people were also added at this time. These facilities were built from a joint budget between the Education and Youth & Community Departments, with the overall management in the hands of Youth & Community.

A footpath led across the land at the back into an extremely poverty-stricken council estate on the edge of the Medlock valley. This estate housed some of the poorest people in the town and was an area where most of the first wave of Asian immigrants settled. Over the years Oldham Council tried hard to demonstrate a lead in community integration. It re-organised schools provision to reduce huge imbalances. Nonetheless, there were some severe racial tensions in the background of the centre operation over the years, culminating in the 'Oldham riots' of 2001.

#### **❖ Arrival at Breeze Hill**

My interview had taken place in April 66, but the day after I was lucky enough not to get appointed to the manager post in Peterlee! My title was actually 'Teacher/Leader' and I was employed by the Youth Service under the direct control of the Director of Youth & Community, Bob Watt. In 1966 this was a very progressive move by the Youth and Community Service. I arrived on site just as school had finished for the summer break, a short period of one month in August. The main holiday when Oldham was deserted was during "Wakes Weeks" in June when everything closed down. The school reopened in July and closed again in August for a month. This made timetabling for out of school activities difficult and there was no public use or caretaking when I actually arrived. I was therefore the only member of staff present in August.

The theory was that I would devote 10% of my time to teaching with the PE staff of the school and the rest to running the games centre. For convenience sake I was listed on the staff of the school so that I could use their staff room and enjoy their privileges. The Headmaster who was very welcoming, explained that as my salary grade was one grade higher than the Head of Department, I was also entitled to use the same punishment regime as other members of staff on these grades and was duly handed a "Punishment Book" and a short strap, not dissimilar to a barber's strap. I never used it! It was a bit of a shock after coming from a selective Church of England school, though I had worked previously at two other boys school in the "Black Country" and undertaken a wide range of Youth and Adult work.

## ❖ Getting to the starting gate

Given this background when I turned up on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1966, a month before I was due to start, there were additional issues that I had to face: -

- I had no telephone, one was installed in mid-September.
- No method of contacting local sports organisations.
- I only managed to obtain a typewriter and gestetner in October
- I had no secretarial help of any sort until April 1968 when I organised my last Sports Festival, which involved over 5,000 participants between mid-April and mid-June (Wakes 2 weeks).
- I was also faced with the dilemma that I was restricted to working with under 18s and
- not knowing what my 10% teaching commitment was going to be, with opening hours from 5-10pm Monday-Friday.

It was going to be very difficult to get started! What had I done?!

During that August period my boss, Bob Watt, took me to three meetings – with the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce and The Lions, representatives of which visited the site and promised support. I took advantage of this and the first benefit was that one car supplier along with an engineering firm and a wood yard made a set of barriers for me – each a metre in height 2 metres long that slotted in metal feet to act as the rebound wall needed. They of course had their logos highlighted on the side. Not only did the barriers prove effective for football, but also for hockey and roller hockey at a later date. When not in use they stacked along the wall with the seating.

On arrival I had no budget, which meant that if I wanted to post a letter I had to take it into the office in the town hall. This was quickly resolved by being given a £1,000 to draw on. This allowed me monies to purchase such items as duplicating paper etc. In addition it was also agreed that the centre could keep all income. This situation was later resolved in the budgets from 1967/68. I was granted £5,000 for casual staff and miscellaneous sports items and a further £2,000 plus the income, for other items. All other expenditure, including the funding for the appointment of a female assistant, was buried in the Departmental budgets, this included maintenance and capital expenditure e.g. the cricket netting.

As a result of these changes I met on a three-monthly cycle with my boss and a member of the finance department to audit the expenditure/income, and to countersign the cleaner's work sheets and those of casuals we employed "if and when". The actual income was placed in a Council account at a bank on our doorstep. No monies were ever kept on site due to its isolated position.

## ❖ The Sports Hall

The sports hall was large, from memory 140' x 120' with no heating and louvre type windows (operated on long winders on the walls) on both sides of the hall to allow in daylight. They were rarely open. The flooring was a black bitumen type surface - they hadn't heard of Granwood (mind, nor had many other people). The lighting system was the usual fluorescent tubes. The floor markings had been painted on for 5-a-side football, mini rugby league, and netball plus in the middle 1 tennis court. I discussed this with Roger Hopson, Head of PE, but he had not been consulted. It had been decided by some ill-informed member of the architects' department. The end result was that we had a large area for football, leaving a wide strip down the full length of the hall, which strangely enough had its usage as there was no storage room. At the end of the first year I was able to have a single cricket net installed in part of this space and still have room for storing inherited loose standing bleacher seating, divisible into 3 separate sections to seat 150 people. I also inherited 2 x 5-a-side goals, 2 x netball stands and a table tennis table, and 10 PE benches. The benches became useful initially because when playing 5-a-side football there was only one rebound wall. I have mentioned the weird court layout, so the benches had to be laid along the court sideline, not very effective!

## ❖ **The Swimming Pool**

The swimming pool was 20m by 7.5m and deck level, quite innovative. I was informed that it was from a Canadian design - the only one other in the UK was in Scotland. It had a full glass wall on one side and the depth went from 1 metre and halfway sloped to 2 metres. The changing rooms for the pool were unfortunately also the changing rooms for the outdoor pitches, enough said! This posed a lot of problems as they also had to be used at night by the sports hall users. The changing rooms were attached to the pool which meant that hall users had to leave the rooms and walk along an outside corridor running parallel to the hall wall - believe me very unwelcoming in bad weather. At the end of the changing room there was a small overhead covering which led into the small block containing my office and the so-called social area.

The maintenance of the pool was of great importance. Oldham had a major pool in the town centre, possibly late 19 century/early 20th with two satellite pools at the edge of the town. The major pool was the then conventional 33+1/3<sup>rd</sup> yards. The two smaller ones were 20yds x12yds. The changing cubicles were around the sides of the pool behind canvas curtains. Also included on pool side, behind a curtain was a concrete bath, which people used to come in for a 'scrub down' as per the bathhouse days. Now that there was a very modern pool in the town, the Baths Institute members considered they should manage it and have a man permanently on site. This caused friction with the caretakers union, NUPE. The caretaker and his assistant both had houses on the site. These problems were resolved before I arrived. The senior school caretaker was sent on a 2-day course(!) which caused a few problems. We turned up one morning to find that after coming back from the Lighthouse pub he had gone into the plant room to close it down resulting in 320,000 galls. of water finding its way down the Medlock valley with of course the problems then of refilling etc. The assistant caretaker and one cleaner were also allocated for keeping the changing rooms clean and for weekend work. They were both paid extra from the Youth & Community budget and paid in the form of a bonus on a three-monthly basis based on work sheets submitted to and approved by me, as was the senior man. Unlike the senior man the assistant caretaker was young, enjoyed his sport and did quite a bit of voluntary work for us.

## ❖ **Community involvement - in its infancy!**

To try and generate interest, I invited the secretaries of the local football, rugby league, netball, women's hockey to a "pie & a pint" at the pub at the end of the road into Breeze Hill. It was called the Lighthouse, who knows why, we were miles from the sea! I used the same format and invited representatives from the local referees' societies and by October the first leagues were up and running and continued until I left. The netball clubs set up and ran their own league, hockey came later after the appointment of a female assistant, Jennifer Tyler.

## ❖ **Working with ethnic groups**

There were several ethnic groups in the town, primarily Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Afro-Caribbean and Ukrainian. They all had their own premises. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups shared an old Victorian School building in which the two groups were strictly segregated from each other. There was also a small Indian group. We were keen to integrate this Muslim group. We approached them to enter a football team, but I could not get past or convince the mullah. The other 2 groups were different and entered teams. The other Asians in the town were supportive. Indeed, amongst the 5th year in the school was a girl called Lala Ackter who was both a good athlete and county standard hockey player, whom we used in school time as an interpreter and who wanted to become a PE teacher, an ambition she fulfilled. Her father was very westernised, an engineer, and she had travelled the world with him. She became our liaison person on more than one occasion.

## ❖ **Full sports centre management gets nearer!**

At the start of course I was restricted by the under-18 age limit. However, I was lucky in the sense that the town was twinned with one called Kranj in what was then the old Yugoslavia, and what is now Slovenia, near to Ljubljana and a youth exchange was taking place in the September. However their "youth" age was 25 and they had to be suitably matched by age. Because the initial response to the centre from our officially designated age group was so poor, after a lot of arguments/discussion it was reluctantly agreed I could open it up to the higher age group remembering which group had priority. This was introduced in January 1967 and the limit became forgotten along the way, and the name was changed from Games Centre to Sports Centre.

Bryan (Griff) Jones AGREED VERSION FIN Oct 29th 2019

At the same time it was decided to relieve me of any teaching duties although I still went in several mornings to assist with the swimming and got rid of the strap! A problem then arose regarding my title which was revised from April 1967 to 'Manager' and at the same time I took over the running of the old school gym and hall for evening activities.

### ***Weekends start with Saturdays***

A year after starting, again overcoming opposition, I began to accept Saturday bookings from various organisations, including blind, partially sighted and hearing-impaired groups, and other physically disabled groups.

### ***A charging policy is devised***

To start with we had no charging policy, so the initial system was based on further education charges for courses, bearing in mind that the facility was not geared for individual use, so it was through necessity based on group and course charges. However, in late 1967, through the Times Education Supplement, a meeting of like souls (and managers!) was organised at Crystal Palace by the Sports Council under the guidance of Harry Littlewood. There I met George Torkildsen, Graham Jenkins, Geoff Bott, and the North East contingent from Stockton etc. As a result of this meeting we drew up a Breeze Hill charging policy, in some ways similar to elsewhere, but bearing in mind that the streets of Oldham were not paved with gold.

### **❖ Recreation programming develops**

In September 1967 Roger Hopson, Head of PE, left for his native Newcastle to work for the Sports Council and was replaced by Tom Saunders who had taught at Hulme grammar school in the town for several years. He was acknowledged as "Mr. Life Saving" in most of Lancashire and parts of Cheshire. This opened another avenue as he spent a lot of evening time on site. Through him, we ran Learn to Swim for over 40's and lifesaving courses. East Lancs Sub Aqua Club used the pool for introductory courses. We also had the odd "fun nights" when sports teams of four competed in mini swim competitions on a knockout basis.

The appointment of Jennifer as assistant was an absolute gift. She had initially trained in PE at Madeley College, but did her 3rd year at Laban, which turned out to be more than useful. She was also a member of the England Women's Basketball Squad. Now having a female on site and with the assistance of Lala at the start of 1969, we managed to run two types of keep fit, one purely for Asian women and one to the general public, both to music with a dance element (Laban) which ran that year between Christmas and Easter. We circulated the PE departments of schools for girls' basketball and Jenny held these sessions in the gym on 2 early evenings a week.

### ***A memorable event***

One of the most memorable events was a national 5-a-side soccer competition for Iberian Airways. They came from all over the UK and stayed at the Midland Hotel in Manchester. The presentations took place at the Hotel and were made by George Best who arrived in a chauffeured Jag, 1 hour late. George emerged in a scruffy pair of jeans and an even scruffier T shirt, to present the trophies, downed a glass of wine to go with the others he clearly had prior to arriving, mumbled a few words, presented the trophies, his driver picked up his cheque for £500 pounds and they left, 20 minutes in all. To say the UK director for Iberian Airways was unimpressed would be an understatement.

### ***Pressed into action***

In the last three months before leaving I had a discussion with the local newspaper sports writer who wrote an article. This resulted in 8 teams being raised for over 45s men's 5-a-side soccer based on streets. We ran this league on Sunday mornings between 10-12.30 for a trial period of 6 weeks, no running but based on fast walking. It was a huge success and requests followed for 4-a-side touch rugby. This now meant that on certain weeks we were open 7 days in the week. The young caretaker opened and closed at the weekend, and if he was not due to work, he was paid on a casual basis.

### ***Was this one of the first sports hall entertainment events?***

My final flurry was in September 1968 with the trophy presentation night. Bob Watt and I invited anyone who was anyone to the ceremony with the principal guests being the Mayor and Mayoress. Then, as now, I am a big band fan and at that time there was one in Manchester named the Syd Lawrence Orchestra. I hired them for the evening, so we had a small concert in Glen Miller style along with the presentations. There was no precedent for this!

### **❖ Moving on**

I left for Breeze Hill in late October 1968, feeling that we had achieved a lot, from a zero base. Soon after, most of my team left for pastures new. Jenny left in March 1969. Lala went on to Chelsea PE College. My successor was a young PE teacher from the Blue Coat School in town. He soon left and was not replaced. Sadly Bob Watt died in 1970. The scheme then went firstly to the Parks Department and was then swallowed into Education, with much talk at the time about a new leisure Centre in town, which later materialised.

I left for Nottinghamshire, and the Directorship of the new, jointly provided Grove Sports Centre in Balderton.

### **❖ Oldham thereafter**

A new swimming stadium opened in Oldham in 1975 and in 1985 a new sports centre opened alongside (that building was another 'victim' of a centre fire in 1995, re-opening after repairs in 1997). In 2016 the sports centre was demolished following the opening in 2015 of a new Oldham Leisure Centre.

### ***EDITORIAL OVERVIEW***

Breeze Hill School was a mixed-gender comprehensive secondary school for 11- to 16-year-olds in Oldham, Greater Manchester. It became a specialist 'Humanities College' and served over 750 students. Since the school lay in the heart of Oldham's Pakistani Asian community, the students were predominantly Asian.

The Breeze Hill School campus contained two main teaching blocks. The Year 7 Base was for new arrivals and was created to ease the transition between primary and secondary school. The main teaching block served students from Year 8 onwards. Breeze Hill had intensive playing fields and an Astro-turf pitch, used for various sports both by students from the school and by the local community.

In May 2001, a racially motivated attack outside Breeze Hill School began a series of events that escalated into a five-day period of rioting known as the Oldham Riots. On 31 August 2010, Breeze Hill School and Counthill School merged to become the Waterhead Academy. The campus was renamed Roxbury Campus until the academy moved to a third location in November 2012. **GC**