Shrewsbury House - Adrian Struve’s reflections on the era from 1950 – 1963

My first dim awareness of the Shrewsbury School Mission’s existence came when I arrived at the school in the summer of 1950 to be interviewed by Jack Peterson who himself had only taken up the post of Headmaster the term before. The Mission, known as the “Mish” by the school in those days, only imperceptibly changed to “Shrewsbury House” a few years later as the connotation of “Mission” left people a bit uneasy. I cannot remember that there was a definite decision to change the name. I think I confirmed it myself by changing the heading of the annual report to “Shrewsbury House”, and as no one objected I carried on. That’s how the “Mish” became the “Shewsy”, adopting the name which was already current in Liverpool. It was many years later that it dawned on me that Kittermaster’s “Shrewsbury House,” as distinct from the “Shrewsbury Boys’ Club” referred to the hostel he kept for the boys in transit from elsewhere to emigration or boys sent to him by the Police Court Mission and others in need of temporary shelter. There were never more than ten at a time. There’s an attendance book in the Club archives, and it was an entry in it which enabled me to trace some of the emigrants who had sailed for Canada before the First World War.

But to return to my opening sentence - a few younger members of the school staff has stayed on after the summer term to lend a hand at the Mission’s (let’s call it the Club’s) annual summer camp on the lower playing field. One of these was Michael Tupper, and as both of us were to go on the next day to the public school boys’ camp at Iwerne Minster in Dorset I was glad of his offer of a lift in his little open Morris 8. He was by then, and for many years afterwards, the Secretary of the Shrewsbury School Mission management committee. This was made up of representatives of the School staff and representatives from Liverpool, with the Headmaster in the chair. In the very early days there was also an undergraduate from Oxford and one from Cambridge. The Missioner of course always attended. The meetings were held alternatively at Shrewsbury and Liverpool. In the 1950s I chiefly remember, from the School, David Bevan, the chaplain Guy Furnivall, Bill Matthews, Freddy Mann and Michael Tupper, and from the Liverpool end Reggie Gibbons, Douglas Telfer, Albert Taylor and representing the Club Old Boys’ Association, Billy Holden. The balance changed in 1974 when the new centre was opened: Donald Wright, the then Headmaster, handed the chair on to Terence Harvey, a Liverpool solicitor, and more Liverpool representatives were appointed, including two or three from the local church.

I’ve mentioned Reggie Gibbons and I ought to say a word about the Gibbons brothers, Willie and Reggie. Their mother was a Henderson, of the family firm of that name. Under Willie’s guidance it became a major store in Liverpool. There was a disastrous fire one day in the top-floor restaurant and some people lost their lives. Terence Harvey told me that after that Liverpool had the toughest fire regulations in the country. Willie had a small office in the store to which you penetrated (James Hill told me) by pushing your way past ladies’ intimate garments. James wondered if Willie knew what they were for.

They were Old Salopians and bachelors and lived together, I think, in Hoylake. They used their wealth most generously. Willie twice crossed the Atlantic before the First World War to encourage the Club lads who had emigrated to Canada. We were never quite sure what Reggie did. He had a small office in the city and James Hill thought he was “something in tea”. He had hos own boys’ club in the city and supported it almost single-handedly. It caused him much grief when it perished. He founded the Boleader Club, a lunch club for leaders of youth clubs (boys’ clubs in fact - I cannot remember any ladies present.)

Reggie stood in some awe of his brother. On one occasion David Bevan and I left earlier than normal, and by a different route, to attend a management committee meeting in Liverpool, thereby missing a thick fog which descended over the whole area. The rest of the Shrewsbury Party, Peterson, Bill Matthews driving them in his ancient Rolls-Royce, Mann and Tupper, got as far as a roundabout in Bebington, but could not find their way off it. They did however find a telephone box and the Headmaster rang to give David full authority to conduct business.

There were present, apart from David and myself, Douglas Telfer, Albert Taylor and Reggie Gibbons, maybe one or two others, and of course the Missioner, David Street. Now, David Bevan was a great supporter of James Hill-in fact, James was practically the Bevan family’s private chaplain, presiding at all their baptisms, weddings and funerals. James was going through just then a sticky patch at St. Tim’s. David was determined to encourage him.

The meeting went swimmingly. At every item on the agenda David would say, “Douglas, would you propose this, and Albert, would you second it?” and at the next item, “Reggie, would you propose this, and Douglas, would you second it?” David was enjoying himself. (I suppose, in the absence of Michael Tupper, I was taking the minutes and desperately trying to keep up.) And then, under Any Other Business (I’m sure it wasn’t on the agenda.) David proposed that the Club (whose finances were slim) should send a check for £250 to James Hill as a gesture of support. It was voted through by the procedure I described.

I imagine Reggie must have gone home and reported, in all innocence, the affair to his brother. Willie was outraged. This was a shockingly unconstitutional use of the Club’s finances. He made his displeasure clear in, I think, a letter to the Headmaster. At the same time, though, he enclosed a cheque for £250 made out to the Club, alleging that a recent issue of shares by the Ford Motor Company happened to have come his way.

The Gibbons brothers come into this story because they were at Kittermaster’s side the night he opened the club in 1903. And they were there for every Missioner who followed until the 1960s. In fact, I think Willie took over for a short time during a gap between appointments. Much of the club’s chapel’s furniture was provided by them, and Willie was most upset when the stained-glass windows had to be removed when the new centre was being built.

They were both very generous to me during my short period of service in 1962 to 1963, as indeed were other Liverpool Old Salopians, especially Peter Rowland and Ray Ellis. I recall two lunches Willie and Reggie took me to at the Athenaeum. Reggie had an altercation with his lemon meringue pie. On attacking it with his spoon, the meringue came away en bloc and landed on the floor. After lunch on another occasion Willie gave the waitress something for the staff Christmas box. “Oh Mr Gibbons,” she protested. “That’s much too much.” “Don’t argue!” he retorted in mock fury.

David Bevan wrote a splendid description of the Gibbons brothers in his memoirs. He also told at some length of Barr Adams, another important figure in the club’s history. Like the Gibbons brothers, Barr was an Old Salopian and a bachelor. I believe he had a small oil business in the city. One day between the wars he paid a visit to the Club and there and then he decided to give all his spare time to it. He equipped a library there and imparted his love of classical music to several Club lads. At David Bevan’s memorial service one of the Ainsworth brothers told me how grateful he and his family were to Barr for introducing them to classical music. But his most important contribution was the series of newsletters he would pin up on the noticeboard for boys to read. His intention was to educate them, to lift their gaze beyond the city boundaries. They started in 1935. They are highly subjective, they express his own opinions on current affairs, on the rising threat of Hitler, the antics of Mussolini, the shortcomings of the League of Nations, and so on. He was deeply suspicious of Churchill! But he wrote of nearer home too, his views of Missioners past and present, local club football successes, Shewsy competition results…

And then by early 1940 the letters took on greater urgency, and from being weekly appeared every few days. As an ARP warden he could give first-hand reports on the Blitz. (There exists a photograph of the Club area which shows almost total destruction except for the old building in Portland Place “as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers”.) As club members were called up they would send their news to Barr and he would relay it far and wide to other members, in defiance (not always successfully) of the censors. You can imagine how eagerly Club lads would receive this news of one another, and it was moving to read their reactions to the news, first, one of their members reported missing or known to be a prisoner-of war, and later of the first one killed. If he could he attended their weddings, including uninhibited comments, approving or not, of the officiating clergyman. I believe he always enclosed to those overseas a postal order, exchangeable at a NAAFI for cigarettes.

You can imagine the effect this devoted service had on the whole community at a time when news was hard to obtain, and it continued until he took his own life sometime in the 1950s. All the letters are stored in the School library, with copies at the Club. There is material there for a social historian.

I must return to my own story. It was the custom in those days for parties of five boys to invite masters to accompany them on a weekend visit to the club. I don’t know when the custom started. It was certainly going in Eric Treacy’s time in the 1930s. For David Bevan tells with relish of the hushed up scandal after the discovery of an empty sherry bottle in the Club dormitory. “Shrewsbury had its Watergate forty years before Nixon.” Before that links between the Club and the School took the form of Club camps which volunteers from the school helped with. In the very early days Kittermaster received great help from a small number of men and women living in and near Liverpool. Bishop Chavasse, the second bishop of Liverpool, was a wholehearted supporter of Kittermaster’s work and held it up as a shining example to his clergy. One of his sons, Christopher, came to the Club every week and instructed them for confirmation. (He later became Bishop of Rochester and his twin brother, Noel, won two VCs in the First World War.)

I’ve digressed again. Soon after I joined the Shrewsbury School staff in September 1950 five boys from Severn Hill invited me to join them for a weekend in Liverpool. We left by train after lunch on Saturday and returned on Monday morning. We found our way from Lime Street Station to Portland Place by following Arthur Broadbent’s map at the back of the Club’s annual report. The boys probably felt very conspicuous in their school uniform during the twenty-minute walk. But many years passed before it became a problem, and only then because the Salopian party were taken to be supporters of a London football team.

I remember very little of the visit. I do know that we attended James Hill’s service in St. Tim’s and that I had to say a few words in the Club Chapel. A regular fixture was a five-a-side football match between the Salopians and the Club on the top gym. Almost always the Club won, usually by a huge margin. The visitors slept in a terribly cold dormitory on the top floor. What made the trip special for me was the hospitality shown by all in the club. As soon as the language barrier was overcome the boys mixed freely. The Rev James Hill had arrived as Missioner in the darkest days of the war. His benign influence had earned him respect, and indeed the love of the area’s inhabitants. He was much in demand for local weddings and funerals. Emma Hayes, the canteen lady, said to James’s nephew one day, “I can’t wait to die because your uncle is going to bury me.”!

James was an Old Salopian himself and stood in the tradition of mainly public-school men who gave many years of devoted service to a desperately needy area. Moreover, the deceptively gentle control they exerted over the Club was very different to the quite shrill discipline of many of the boys’ homes, and it had a calming and welcoming influence which made visiting the Club a pleasure. James was a master of this gently humorous and patient approach. Remote onlookers might scoff and call this public-school attitude patronising. But there’s something in the Liverpool character which explodes the notion of patronage at birth. I experienced this easy relationship myself. I found the club lads and the local families to be my friends straightaway. They won my heart.

And it is important to remember that Shrewsbury School was very inward-looking at that time. Visits by teachers were only to other public schools, the weekend visits to Liverpool provided the only personal contact with the wider world. This had always been so. One Old Salopian told me that when he was encouraged to make a will as he joined up in the First World War he bequeathed his meagre savings to Shrewsbury House. He knew no other. It was not until the 1960s that the boys from the School were able to go further afield and the incidence of weekend trips to Liverpool declined. The nature of the visits took a new and more constructive form. I’ll return to that later.

Apart from helping at Club weekend visits, leading parties of the Club lads up Caradoc, giving a hand with tea on Pulley Common, I had no further contact with Shrewsbury House until in 1953 Bill Matthews asked me to take over the post of treasurer at the School end and gave me his old typewriter. This job chiefly consisted in handling donations from the School and from Old Salopians and friends (developing the fairly recent inovation of the covenant scheme) producing the annual report, writing a simple budget and sending the rather modest monthly stipend to the Missioner. He himself dealt with the finances at the Liverpool end, and it was only several years later that the appointment of an experienced accountant for the Liverpool finances became necessary.

Just before I came on the management committee James Hill moved aside to be full-time vicar of St Timothy’s and St. Ambrose’s, leaving John Turner to be Missioner. It was back in 1948 that the connection with St Tim’s had been established. The church building had suffered badly during the war, and yet the congregation, led by the doughty Duckett family, was hanging on grimly. It was their fortress. Clifford Martin, Liverpool’s Bishop at the time, had invited James Hill to supervise its eventual closure, he accepted the invitation, but determined to keep the Church afloat, he turned to his great friend on the School staff, David Bevan, who had done more than anyone to keep the Club-School link alive throughout the war. David went to the Headmaster, J.F (later Lord) Wolfenden, with the result that in the Easter holidays of 1949 a party of some forty boys and masters spent a week at St Tim’s, with Mr Duckett a builder, as clerk of the works, repairing, painting and generally doing up the whole building. The finishing touch was produced by the art master, Arthur Broadbent, who painted the four evangelists in the walled-in east windows. This simple, amateur act of service by the School had a dramatic effect in West Everton. It brought the School right into the community, not just into the boys’ club. It is doubtful whether the school authorities realised the significance of this, but in fact it was the first step into a changed relationship. The School was becoming no longer the patron and supporter of just one of the many Liverpool youth clubs. It was developing into the equal partner with an entire inner-city community. From now on the School, from a privileged and beautiful countryside would always be welcome in West Everton, one of the most deprived communities in the country-and vice versa. An old Club member Eddie Cartwright summed it up eloquently: “To stroll through those grounds at the School and to stroll the streets of Everton are two completely different life experiences, and yet those places and people have been united through the Club for more than a hundred years, brought together and teaching and learning from each other. It’s a tale of mutual respect and mutual advantage.” And what was said of the Club could now be applied to the whole community. I think the School, owing to its ever changing population, has been slow to wake up to the reality of this extraordinary situation for it is extraordinary. No one could have planned it. It could not be replicated elsewhere. It is providential. I digress again!

When James Hill moved from the Club his place was taken by another Old Salopian, John Turner. I have the impression, I hope not unkindly, that he was holding the place open for David Street. He was a schoolmaster by profession-I think he had been headmaster of a school in Lancashire (Barr Adam’s letters will confirm this) Whether a stop-gap or not, he kept things going on the well-run lines. In 1955 he took a post at Kingham Hill School in Oxfordshire.

My second visit to Liverpool, in 1953, was in company with a large contingent from the school, to celebrate the Club’s fiftieth birthday. There’s a photograph of us all there, and it includes, besides H.H Hardy and Jack Peterson, Kittermaster himself, who was the subject of an amusing little incident with billiard balls, well narrated by David Bevan in his memoirs. (I seem to remember a small boy has crept into the photograph front left. It is Derek Bowman.)

David Street who followed John Turner, is an important figure in the Club’s story. I spoke at his memorial service and asked Derek Bowman beforehand how he remembered him. “A man’s man.” He replied. He was educated, I think, at St Edward’s, Oxford and joined the Royal Marines. He was at a loose end on his discharge and was uncertain what to do. His father, Jimmy Street, the senior master at Shrewsbury School, referred him to James Hill, and under James’s influence he decided on ordination and trained at St Aidan’s in Birkenhead, lodging with James while doing so.

(Jimmy Street’s action in recommending his son to James is ironic. Jimmy wrote a little autobiography entitled “Changes and Chances.” Willie Gibbons bought a copy, but he was so indignant at finding not one reference to his son and to Shrewsbury House that he gave his copy to me. Perhaps the omission was due to Jimmy being a Unitarian.)

With his Royal Marine background, David organised many enterprising activities, well beyond the normal football events. In several recent leavers from the School joined us. One activity in particular stands out in my mind. Towards the end of the 1950s the Duke of Edinburgh had given a speech encouraging the army to do more for youth clubs. Thereafter David got in touch with Brigadier Howard, Commandant of the Army Outward Bound School in Towyn. The Brigadier gave David wholehearted support and put his instructors and cooks at the Club’s disposal. (One of the instructors was Chris Bonington, soon to become world famous as a mountaineer.) For a whole week a coach load of Club lads was put through, at the Army’s expense, the outward bound experience, which young soldiers had to undergo, rock-climbing, mountaineering, canoeing, death-slide - the lot. The fresh air, the disciplined hours, the balanced diet, the strenuous exercise in the mountains of Snowdonia did wonders for the boys’ health and outlook on life. A few Old Salopians joined them, as did David Bevan and I, and the Brigadier attended throughout. It was exactly what the Duke of Edinburgh had asked for and was repeated the next year.

All this time there were numerous events taking place between the School and the Club, some at the school, some in Liverpool. These included boxing matches and athletic events. And of course, the annual two-night Whit weekend visit. Two British army sergeants had hit the headlines by walking across the United States and David lost no time in showing what the Club could do. The walk from the south end of the Mersey Tunnel to the School took a day and a half, the party stopping overnight at a scout hut in Ellesmere. David Bevan alerted the “Shropshire Star” (“I’ve got a scoop”) and organised a reception party, after which the footsore Liverpool lads insisted on an impromptu football match.

I’ve mentioned David Bevan several times and I’d like to describe him. He was known at the Club as Major Bevan. He was a big red-headed Oxford boxing blue. Although the Club lads were in some awe of him he was no more threatening than a St. Bernard with a barrel of brandy round his neck. Though he attended many functions at the club he was best known for umpiring boxing matches. “Well boxed Red. Blue the winner.” Summed up his gracious generosity to the loser and underdog and no one ever questioned his verdict. H.H Hardy had appointed him vice-chairman of the management committee long before the war and he faithfully fulfilled that role under four headmasters. “Blessed are the pure in heart.” Always made me think of him. His rather ponderous Balliol Oxford voice made it difficult for him in the School chapel to keep up in the Lord’s prayer with the Irish chaplain, and I used to anticipate his omission of “And deliver us from evil.” in order to pick up the flow. He didn’t take himself too seriously. In introducing a short reading from his memoirs, he said “I am no Herodotus, I am no Gibbon. But I have a slight gift for ephemera.” In commending a rather old car of his to a colleague his sales pitch was “It will get you there, and it will probably get you back again, but it may leave its gizzards on the side of the road.” At some stage when his children were small they had come across Hudson Pope, the veteran children’s’ evangelist, at a beach mission. And he was glad to accompany David Street and a mixed party of boys from the school and the Club to hear Billy Graham at the Maine Road Stadium in Manchester.

For David Street was always faithful to his calling as an ordained priest. The Club evening ended in chapel and David was careful to shine a divine light on the day’s events. Eddie Cartwright, brought up in an orphanage, wrote of David, “He preached about God’s love and I remember thinking to myself, I could do with a load of that.”

With Salopians beginning to look further afield for new experiences, David was anxious to develop the link with the School to better effect. In conjunction with the School he organised a couple of experimental courses for twelve Lower Sixth boys to study in some depth the challenges facing inner-city youngsters on the verge of leaving school. For three days the Salopians would meet and talk with headmasters, businessmen, chaplains (from the Seamen’s Mission, for example) Liverpool clergy (e.g. Sidney Goddard at World Friendship House). Policemen and Magistrates, probation officers-indeed, anyone engaged in the particular theme chosen for the visit. Salopian businessmen in Liverpool helped David to secure contacts. These first two “Social Studies Courses” were reckoned a success and are now part of the Lower Sixth Form curriculum. Some Salopians have declared that they learned more in those three days than in all their time at Shrewsbury, and many of them have become full-time financial supporters of the Club.

James Hill left Liverpool for Newport, Shropshire, early in 1962. David now lacked someone of great experience, true humility, spiritual strength and endless sympathy that he could unburden himself with. He was Missioner and youth leader rolled into one, though he had some good local volunteers to help him, besides one or two young Old Salopians staying with him at the Club. He also had St. Tim’s and St Ambrose on his hands, though whether this was official or not I do not know. He appointed a local youth leader, Ken Greatrex, recently released from the now demolished Rydal Club, to help him, but that was not a substitute for James Hill’s absence. So it was no surprise, though regrettable, that he applied for and got the post of chaplain at C.A Joyce’s Cotswold Approved School. He left the Club in September 1962.

As far as I can remember the question of his successor was left open at the July meeting of the management committee. David (he told me later) would have liked Richard Raven, who had taken part in several events in Liverpool, including two large painting parties at St. Ambrose and at St Saviour’s Falkner Square, Sidney Goddard’s church. But Richard made no move. I was totally unsuited for the role and was in any case due to take over Churchill’s in a year’s time and must be on hand to see prospective parents. And yet I felt a strange urge to hold the fort in Liverpool while a successor to David was found. Jack Peterson agreed, rather reluctantly, to my going for a term and arranged for others to take my timetable. Whether the idea of a team ministry for West Everton came from David Street or from me or from both of us together I cannot say. The previous April David and I had gone for a long walk along the beach at New Brighton, but I have no recollection of our conversation. But I do know that in going to Shrewsbury House I had two, and only two aims. One was to find a Missioner whose desire to do youth work was the expression of his calling to preach and teach the Gospel. The other was to find someone to set up a team ministry and so overcome the isolation of a Missioner working on his own. One term proved insufficient for these goals. It was not till the summer of 1963 and after many discussions with Bishop Martin, the Headmaster and Liverpool businessmen that the team ministry was set up under Richard Allen, and Roger Sainsbury was appointed by the management committee as the new Missioner and the first member of Richard’s team.

I just had time for a final Club camp in Scotland and for marriage before introducing the two men to all the Club members and Club Old Boys and returning to my post.

 Adrian Struve, 2018