

# Fifty year reunion of the class of 1966

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## Boarding school as home

At the end of September 2016 there was a 50 year anniversary reunion of the [Bedales school](#) class of 1966, the class I was in. The organisers amazingly managed to contact every classmate who was still alive except for one. About half of these turned up, some travelling from abroad, including from distant and exotic places.

I regard Bedales as being my home between the ages of eight and eighteen: first the junior school, called Dunhurst, and then the senior school. Both Dunhurst and Bedales are boarding schools and I think of them as my childhood home because they were the places I lived most of the year until I went to university. The only friends I had when growing up were the children I knew at school. I had no friends outside school. As an only child, my classmates were the closest I had to siblings.

Before Dunhurst, I spent a year as a boarder at the junior school of the notorious [Dartington Hall](#). My memories of this are dim, but to the extent that I remember anything, I remember it as being a lot of fun. My mother told me that she was unhappy with Dartington because I forgot how to read and write when there, so she moved me to the less progressive Dunhurst.

## Parents, grandparents and life outside school

My father, John Gordon, was a part-time lecturer on philosophy and psychology for the [WEA](#). He suffered from depression which he tried to cure using psychoanalysis. It didn't work and he committed suicide in 1956, when I was eight. I have very few memories of him as he and my mother stopped living together some years earlier and I never saw him after that.

My father's parents were Joan and Roland Uhthoff. John hated the name Uhthoff – my mother told me that he was teased at his school and called “toffee” – so he changed his name to Gordon, which reflected his partial Scots ancestry and may have been his middle name (though a cursory scan through my filing cabinet didn't unearth anything to confirm this). Joan and Roland had one other child, another son, who was unmarried and died during the war in Burma as a result of refusing treatment for some easily cured tropical disease because he'd become a believer in [Christian Science](#). My grandfather Roland worked for the [Pilkington glass making company](#) in St Helens, Lancashire, ending up as a company director. When he retired, he and Joan moved to Bournemouth. Roland died in 1955, but Joan lasted until I was in my twenties and I'd periodically visit her. There were a few elderly relatives on my father's side, some of whom, e.g. [Fougasse](#), I'd very occasionally visit with my mother, usually for afternoon tea. After my father died, my mother was very short of money, so my Bedales school fees were paid by my grandmother Joan.

My mother, Daphne Gordon, was born in India and [spent her childhood there](#) (according to a DNA test by [Ancestry.co.uk](#) my [genetic ancestry](#) is 21% Asian). My mother had [two sisters and a brother](#) and I had a few cousins on my mother's side, whom I rarely met. Up until my teens I'd spend the holidays with my mother and her unmarried sister in a rented flat in Ripon, Yorkshire, where their mother, my grandmother Molly, lived. For most of the years when I was at school my mother lived in rented rooms in London, where she worked as a shorthand typist in a variety of temporary positions, often for the BBC. She took temporary jobs because she wanted to be free during the school holidays to look after me.

## Memories of Dunhurst and Bedales

I was pretty happy at school, though I do remember looking forward to the holidays when I was at Dunhurst and then dreading returning when they were over – but once back I enjoyed life there. I also remember realising after my O-levels that I had only two more years at Bedales and worrying about leaving – but I was happy to leave when the time actually came.

One of my classmates published [his diaries](#) a few years ago. I skimmed through the bits on Bedales and what was described there didn't feel at all like the school I remembered, even though it was populated by the same characters. I also came across a [very negative article](#) describing Bedales as being divided into cliques with a pecking order in which those lower in the order couldn't talk to those higher up and could expect to be picked on by them. This is utterly unbelievable based on my memories, though it does describe life as seen by a girl and is about the school a few years after I left. If these accounts are accurate, then there were whole sub-communities that I wasn't part of and didn't even know existed!

Bedales provides strong support for artistic activities like music, theatre and painting, but I benefited at most subliminally from these. Over the years I started to learn several musical instruments but gave up due to absence of ability and interest. Music was the only subject for which I remember receiving punishment for bad behaviour (maybe I also did for sport, which I mostly hated). I was also terrible at the humanities and dropped everything I could as soon as possible. I dreaded writing essays. My academic life at school centred around science. The authors of the diary and article mentioned above were not science enthusiasts. Perhaps it's because I wasn't part of the artistic society of the school that these accounts seem so alien.

As well as the arts, Dunhurst and Bedales provided many craft activities. I learnt the basics of leatherwork, basket weaving, wood and metal work, estate management, gardening and even some core cooking skills. Most of these have been useful during my life.

After leaving Bedales I went to Cambridge University. I'd planned to study engineering, but after a traumatic few months of [work experience in industry](#) I switched to mathematics, which I enjoyed but struggled with. Several of my classmates went to Cambridge too and I'd meet up with them occasionally. A couple of these also became Cambridge academics and one of these still is and we meet for lunch from time to time to discuss possible retirement projects we might collaborate on. I stayed in touch with a few other classmates for several years, but by the time I became a postgraduate student in Edinburgh I'd pretty much left Bedales behind.

## Fifty-Year Reunion for the class of 1966

I made the two hour drive from Cambridge to Bedales with the classmate who also lives in Cambridge – he did the navigation. On arrival we were issued with a name badge, thoughtfully with names in big letters so that I was able read other badges without putting on my glasses. We were then taken by a current pupil to the staff room where the class was gathering. I immediately recognised several classmates whom I had met at an earlier reunion a few years ago (this was for several different classes from the 1960s). Some people appeared to recognise me, but often I had to covertly glimpse at their name badges to see who they were. Someone said I still looked the same, though clearly this isn't true. Although I couldn't put names to the faces of [many of those](#) whom I hadn't seen for 50 years, almost everyone still looked familiar.

When I could, I asked people about their life since leaving Bedales. I heard astonishing stories this way. I was surprised that a couple of people mentioned things about me they remembered, but which I barely recall myself. There was at least one person at the reunion whom I guiltily remember once being unkind to, but no residue of this seemed to remain when we chatted.

After about an hour of mingling in the staff room, we were shepherded into the [Lupton Hall](#) to hear two incredibly impressive musical performances by current pupils: a cello piece by a boy followed by a pair of girls singing a haunting unaccompanied duet. During my time at Bedales, assembly was held every day in the Lupton Hall, and school plays and other events were held there. Sitting in the hall hearing this performance was evocative and poignant.

Following the music, we went to the dining room – the same one I'd eaten in every day when at Bedales – for a surprisingly sumptuous buffet lunch. The food bore no relation to what was served in the 1960s. I wonder if school food is now gourmet quality, or if outside caterers were used.

After lunch some group pictures were taken and then we split up to be taken on tours of some new buildings by current pupils. Several of us, me included, noted how lavish these buildings and their equipment was compared to our day. Presumably this is a consequence of [Bedales evolving](#) from an experiment in

progressive co-education providing “sound coverage of English and modern languages, science and design, gardening, crafts, drama and nature walks” to its present state of being “extremely fashionable, attracting many literary and artistic parents as well as minor British and European royalty”. The school fees are now eye-wateringly expensive. I wonder how the changes in the school have influenced what Old Bedalians end up doing. Chatting to people and a little googling reveals a wide variety of careers of my classmates including: academia, teaching, arts and crafts, antiques, music, radio and television, public service, politics, business, engineering, running a hotel, law, medicine, architecture. Quite a few live or spent many years abroad, some in distant continents.

After the tour of the new building, the class reassembled in the staff room for cake and drinks which, alas, I couldn't have as I was driving back. I tried to catch up with more people, but the time was too short and there are many whom I regret not managing to talk to.

That evening and in the following days there were lots of enthusiastic emails – here are a few extracts:

It was wonderful (fascinating, extraordinary...) to see you all again – most of you for the first time in 50 years – and I enjoyed every minute. Please all come and continue the conversation .. I also have a bed or two for visitors.

What struck me was the fascinating mixture of activities we've all been up to, which speaks of Bedales encouraging wide choices and giving us the confidence to do what interested us. I thought – not bad for a collection of 60-somethings,

It certainly was a day to remember and remember..... I am still in recovery.

There was so much to say to so many and I was sorry that I didn't get to talk to everyone. I hope all you enjoyed it as much as I did..... I think we have worn well !

... so enjoyable to be in a room where because of a background shared so many years ago, you could talk so easily to anyone.

It was wonderful (fascinating, extraordinary...) to see you all again – most of you for the first time in 50 years – and I enjoyed every minute.

On my campus (here's yet ANOTHER American idea) each class on leaving school plants a tree and it would be nice to leave something as a group. Would there be any interest? I know nothing about trees (and

am hardly local) but if there were any interest I would gladly support a 50th anniversary tree and perhaps start a tradition. In 20 years it might look like something--and that could be an encouragement for us all.

The planting a tree idea really caught on and it looks like it will happen ... though currently the kind of tree to plant is under prolonged discussion.

**Update:** The tree was planted on May 21, 2017. [Here's a picture.](#)

## Final thoughts

Looking back on the reunion, the thing that strikes me is how little I remembered about the childhood personalities of many of my classmates. Hearing stories of what they did over the last 50 years was fascinating, and sometimes surprising, but I didn't find it awakened many memories of them as children, even though I'd lived with some of them from age eight to eighteen.

It's hard to know if I accurately recall the person I was whilst growing up, but I fear I may have been neurotic, possibly rather annoying, and perhaps even a bit weird in a nerdy sort of way. I'm grateful to Bedales for turning me from being a mixed-up child who might have gone off the rails into someone I think of as reasonably stable and normal – a point I made in [a short video](#) that Bedales commissioned a few years ago as part of a profile of some of the Class of 66.

That I can't remember what my classmates were like at school is reassuring – it gives me hope that they now can't remember what I was like!

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First complete draft: September 28, 2016.