

Being on strike has left me no way of dodging parental obligations. For the first time since my two children started school, I found myself, reluctantly, on a wet November afternoon, visiting the "Open Day" at the school.

My wife tries very hard to keep up with the childrens' education. I admit to being happy to let her take the responsibility. I don't mind watching the boy play football occasionally, but visiting the school has always been the wife's job.

Dai Evans, the caretaker, met us at the school gate, with a warning to "watch that top step". He explained that it had been loose and broken for some years. "It's a miracle no-one has broken something," he muttered. "But there, if someone had been hurt, it might have been repaired."

We crossed the fairly large, but uneven playground, accompanied by Dai. On the far side, two bedraggled netball posts stood, half immersed in a pool, which covered most of what seemed to be the court. I looked questioningly at the caretaker.

"It's always been like that," he grunted. "Everytime it rains, the drains can't take the water. I think the pipes under the yard are either too small, or are broken. We've asked the county to look, but they say that would be a major works, so that's out." Dai's tone was of resignation, rather than anger.

The school is a mixture of old and new. The old building is where I went as a child; the new part is a boxlike, flat roofed construction. As the wife and I reached the main entrance, Dai left us. "Needs painting," he said over his shoulder. "But they're not painting schools any more. The county sacked over twenty painters last July. Painting schools is a thing of the past."

The main hall was just as I remembered it, except that it seemed smaller somehow. The old clock was still on the wall. Many's the time I stood under that for wrongdoings. It was spotlessly clean, but there was an air of shabbiness. The furniture was old and many of the chairs and tables seemed in need of urgent repair. Two lines of floor blocks formed a ridge along the top of the hall, like a series of mountain ridges.

"You'd think they would have that seen to," whispered the wife.

"Perhaps there are no carpenters either," I joked.

"Right first time, Mr Morgan," came a voice from behind us. We turned to find the tall, greying figure of Mr Andrews, the headmaster.

"Well, almost right," he smiled wryly. "I think we have four carpenters to cover the whole of the valley, and we have to share them with Social Services. Little things like floorblocks are a very low priority."

"Like your steps," smiled the wife.

"Exactly, Mrs Morgan. When a child or teachers are hurt, then we may get some action. I'm sorry about the buckets."

For the first time, I noticed buckets placed strategically around the hall. "When it rains, these flat roofs are a damned nuisance. Water everywhere. They try to patch it up, but the water simply comes in somewhere else. The local comprehensive cost one and a half million pounds eight years ago. They've just spent #250,000 replacing half the roof and it is still pouring in. They say flat roofed schools are cheaper to build. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

Mr Andrews led us into Miss Frayling's classroom, where our son Michael and daughter Jayne are classmates. Miss Frayling is a middle-aged lady, with a reputation for strong discipline and a belief in rather old fashioned methods. She greeted us politely, but perhaps a little defensively. The wife got down to business immediately, asking pertinent questions about the childrens' progress. My attention began to wander, until Miss Frayling began to describe Michael's lack of progress, especially in reading.

"He is way behind Jayne, and she's almost two years younger," explained Miss Frayling. "Michael really should be in a small class, where he could be given much more individual attention. But our numbers have dropped and we've lost another teacher. That's three in four years. We did have two small classes for children like Michael, but they've had to go. Now I've got a class of 29 children, of a two year age range and of all abilities. It's not fair on the slow ones or on the bright ones, who are being held back, but there's nothing we can do."

I'd never thought before, as to why my kids were in the same class, with a two year age gap between them. Neither had I really thought about why Michael never seemed to read, while Jayne's head was rarely out of a book.

I said, "Does this mean that Michael will be in a low band in the Comprehensive?"

"I think so, Mr Morgan," murmured Miss Frayling. "But perhaps they'll have smaller classes for the

slower learners. Although there is a rumour, that the Comprehensive has to lose eight teachers next July. Their numbers are falling too, you see."

By this time my interest was aroused completely. "But surely, if the numbers are falling, then there should be fewer children in each class."

"The opposite, I'm afraid," said Mr Andrews grimly, coming into the classroom. "The trouble is that the County, forced by Government cuts, have no choice but to cut teachers' jobs in line with the falling childrens' numbers. I'm afraid it's all down to the 'numbers game'. The Ministry and the Welsh Office are not interested in your boy's problems. He's just a statistic, a number to be added or subtracted. Once a school drops below the magic number, a teacher goes. That is about their only criterion"

The wife muttered something about it "not being like that in the Public Schools." I pointed out that they paid fees.

"So do you, Mr Morgan," interjected Mr Andrews. "I don't think the public at large realise that the Government gives over #80 million to the Independent Sector each year. The schools can register as charities to save tax and the parents claim tax rebates on their fees. Little wonder their pupil-teacher ratio is about 1 to 8."

Anger swelled up inside me at the unfairness of the system, but I turned the conversation to a less serious subject.

"I notice that the books are not in very good condition."

"They will have to be a lot worse before we stop using them," replied Mr Andrews. "A set of maths text books for 30 seven year olds can be as much as #60."

"That's about my requisition allowance for a year," said Miss Frayling quietly. "So what we do is, patch up the old ones and buy a few new ones. Most of the classes share one book between two anyway."

"I'll tell you, Mr Morgan," interrupted the headmaster, "my job used to be dealing with the three R's. Now it's the three M's - milk, money and maintenance." He chuckled, but his tone was deadly serious. "We count milk bottles, coax parents and friends for money. I'm sorry about it, but without "Sponsored Spellings" and the like, we would have no money for buses, theatres, parties, etc. The rest of my time seems to be spent trying to get carpenters, plumbers and electricians to maintain the school up to the very minimum standards of comfort and safety. I don't blame the workmen; they are in the same boat. Too few of them and not enough money for materials." His voice tailed off, and for a moment we saw the worried, hopeless look of someone whose morale had sunk to rock bottom. Suddenly, he managed a smile. "Never mind, other schools are far worse off than we are. There are at least four schools within six miles who have 3 teachers, including the heads, to teach all the children between 4 and 11 years old. Think about that, Mrs Morgan. Three year age ranges in each class - and of all abilities too. It must be almost impossible to cope. Those kids can't be having anything like the best, or even an adequate education. Especially the ones who are slow learners."

As we thanked Miss Frayling and Mr Andrews, we left the warmth of the classroom and went out into the semi-darkness. It was raining heavily again. "No netball for our Jayne this week," I thought grimly. Nearing the steps, we almost bumped into Dai Evans in the darkness.

"At least you keep it cosy and warm, Dai," smiled the wife.

"Only for a few more days," replied Dai. "The coal runs out at the end of the week. I don't know what we'll do then. Calor gas, I expect. It's nothing like as good. Anyway, for God's sake, watch that step. There should be a light there, but it hasn't worked for five years. Comes under major works, I expect. Goodnight."