

The End of Corporal Punishment at Finchley

In 1987, the use of The Cane was formally abolished in State Schools. Thanks to the School's meticulously-maintained 'Punishment Record', we have an excellent historical record of the final years of Corporal Punishment at Finchley Catholic High School.

In presenting this account, we have decided not to reveal the names of the individual victims for fear of causing them difficulties with their own children!

However, should any individuals recognise their offences and wish to atone publicly, please let us know. Equally, if anyone remembers being punished in this period and would like a memento of their 'punishment record', let us know and we will send you a copy.

The 1950 Regulations governing the use of these punishments in schools (set out below) required schools to submit details to their Local Education Authorities, recording the victim's name, age and offence, the number of 'strokes' they had received, and the names of the teachers who had awarded and administered the punishment.

1. The Headmaster or Headmistress of the School is responsible to the Education Authority for all forms of punishment, including corporal punishment, which are used in the School.
2. Corporal punishment should never be severe and should be used only if it appears that other disciplinary measures are inappropriate and after due regard has been had to the emotional and psychological effects of the punishment on the individual child. In the case of persistent offenders, the desirability of reference to the Educational Psychologist or the Child Guidance Centre should be considered.
3. Any forms of correction which would be likely to affect adversely the mental or physical development of the child, e.g., boxing the ears, striking on the head, rapping the knuckles, are strictly prohibited.
4. No corporal punishment should be inflicted except by the Headmaster or the Headmistress or by such Assistant Teachers as may be especially authorised by him or her.
5. Headmasters and Headmistresses who give to, or withdraw from, any Assistant Teachers the right to inflict corporal punishment should note the facts at the time in the school record (formerly referred to as the school log book).
6. Corporal punishment should normally be inflicted in private.

7. Corporal punishment should only be inflicted with a cane. In the case of boys it should be inflicted on the hand or buttocks. In the case of girls, corporal punishment should not be inflicted save in exceptional circumstances and then only by the Headmistress or an assistant mistress, and on the hands only.
8. The cane should on each occasion be obtained from the Headmaster or Headmistress and returned to him/her after use.
9. A record of every case of corporal punishment must be entered in the punishment book by the person inflicting it, and be initialled by the Headmaster or Headmistress immediately after the punishment is inflicted.
10. The Head Teacher must ensure that the punishment book is available for inspection at the request of, or on behalf of, the County Education Committee, the Divisional Executive, the Governors or Managers as appropriate.

Infant Schools

While the general principals set out above should be applied in schools for children of all ages, Headmistresses of Infant Schools will doubtless concur in the view that corporal punishment in the case of infant pupils will rarely be necessary. Where, in the exceptional case, it appears to be the only remedy, the use of the open hand on forearm or thigh should be sufficient. An appropriate entry should be made in the punishment book.

The Punishment Book was 'discovered' by Headmaster Neil Kelly in October 1977, and was put to good use over the rest of that term, with 15 boys punished, receiving between two and four strokes each.

The first entry concerns a boy from 2H who received 3 strokes "on the seat of the trousers" and a "letter of information to parents" for the following offence:

"Grabbing Mrs ██████'s bag at Tally Ho and saying: 'You can't do anything - I'm out of school'"

There is evidence of some leniency in these early days. Two boys from 3S punished for "going out at lunchtime" received their strokes on the hand whereas other more serious offences generally resulted in caning of the backside.

Even more lenient, three boys caught "bunking lessons" were let off with a "severe warning" instead, while a boy from 5H caught "writing rude messages to Mr ██████" was sent home and had his parents spoken to instead of receiving the cane.

There was no such mercy for four boys from 5B, given 4 strokes on the rear each on 19th October, 1977 for "kicking and punching a 3rd year boy", all awarded and administered by Neil Kelly himself.

Offences in 1978 ranged from "Out of bounds in White House", "Obscenities written in diary", and "Refusing to attend Detention", to the double offence by one boy in 2C of "smoking with a 3rd year boy on the railway track", a crime which received 4 strokes on the hand. The 3rd year boy apparently escaped without punishment.

John Mumford's first use of the cane as new Headmaster came on 13th August, 1979, three boys from 5C and three from 4C receiving 2 strokes on the hand each for going "off premises at lunchtime".

Compared to the Christmas term of 1977 when 15 boys received the cane, no fewer than 42 boys faced punishment between September-December 1979, and only one of those was for the traditional crime around Bonfire Night of "letting off a banger in class".

Perhaps the unluckiest group of this period were the 5 boys from 3S and the one from 3B who attended the school's "Autumn Fayre" on a Saturday in late November, only to receive 1 stroke each on the Monday for straying out of bounds while at the school.

However, even they will not have felt as aggrieved as the two boys from 4C who received two strokes each on 28th November, 1979, for being “out of school at lunchtime”, whose punishment was “awarded” by one of the school prefects.

The rate of bad behaviour and resulting punishments continued to rise sharply in the school year 1979-80, with a further 91 boys receiving the cane over the Lent and Summer terms, bringing the total for the year to 133, including a number of repeat offenders.

There is clearly some evidence in this period of an attempt to crack down on low-level misbehaviour. On 21st January, Mr Small and Fr. Fernando both sent boys from 4S and 4C to the Head for “talking in class”, while two days later, Mr Berry awarded the cane to two boys from 3B for the simple offence of “rudeness”.

Even well-loved and kindly teachers like Chris Parker and Conn O’Halpin were obliged to join in the crackdown, although in Conn’s case, the boy from 2H was “talking in class after two warnings” and even then was only awarded one stroke.

In Chris Parker’s case, the offence was a boy from 5R “fighting in class”. Showing that he learned from this painful lesson, the Fifth Year in question is now an Old Boys stalwart, and shared a table with a senior member of the police force and the President of the Albanian Football Club at the last Old Boys’ Dinner!

By contrast, there will be no hints as to the identities of the 18 (eighteen!) boys from 3S who received 2 strokes each on 11th June, 1980 for the heinous - and presumably coordinated - crime of “Breaking Wind During Class”, and even worse, doing so in the class of former nun, Miss Walsh.

Continuing the bad behaviour in June 1980 were three boys from 1C and four from 3C who were caught by Mr Perdoni “causing a disturbance in the Middle School toilet”, and received one stroke each for their trouble.

And as if to show that this misbehaviour was getting out of control, July 1980 records a boy from 3H “starting a fire in the playground”, and a boy from 4H “smoking openly in the playground”, receiving two strokes each.

If we must sympathise with one of 1980’s many miscreants though, it must surely be the boy in 4F given two strokes on 16th December for “Gambling”.

As that example indicates, the 1980-81 school year was another one of rampant misbehaviour and stern attempts by the school to tackle it.

72 boys received the cane, and among the offences are further indications of a zero tolerance policy in the classroom: "Mimicking Teacher", "Bad Language", "Impertinence" and "Disobedience", "Banging Desk", "Rude personal comment" and "Fooling" all making an appearance.

On the 'What were you expecting?' list for 1980-81 must go the boy from 4C given two strokes on 6th February, 1981 for "ringing a bell on the High Road during lunchtime", the boys from 5C and 5R caught truanting by the police on 9th October 1980, and a young lad in 1B given one stroke on 8th June 1981 for "touching a teacher familiarly".

Just 44 boys received the cane in 1981-82, and around a sixth of those came in one incident: 7 boys from 4R "snowballing at Tally Ho" on the 21st December.

Perhaps harshly treated was the boy from 2S given the cane on 29th March 1982 for "bad language on the football field"; less so the boy from 1S punished a few days later for "making obscene telephone calls."

The downward trend continued in 1982-83 with just 31 canings, although there were always new offences to punish: "Throwing conker in class at a boy"; "Hurting another boy in a 'bundle'"; and a spate of punishments for "Letting off Stink Bomb in class".

We can only pity the 3 boys unfortunate enough to get in trouble when Sammy Hewson was briefly in charge of discipline at the end of the school year. Whereas the standard in those days had become 1 or 2 strokes, Sammy's routine punishment was 4 strokes, although perhaps the boy from 3B deserved it for "lighting a cigarette in class".

25 boys received the cane in 1983-84, with some evidence of a crack down on bullying - rarely mentioned as an offence in previous years, and a general sense that for an offence to warrant the cane, it had to be very serious, or a last resort after previous warnings.

5 second year boys received 2 strokes each from new Headmaster Mr Szemerényi for "punching and kicking one boy from another school"; 4 third year boys received their punishment for injuring a first year by throwing stones after a previous warning; while one 5th year received his strokes for "repeated bad behaviour during the previous 5 weeks, including malicious damage to the panel covering pipes in the Middle School corridor."

11 boys were caned in 1984-85 (a figure which may reflect some under-recording) and 24 in 1985-86, and again the offences were usually serious, for example: “beating up a boy after laying in wait”; “throwing a chair”; and “throwing a rock, which just missed a member of staff”.

In the last term before corporal punishment was abolished, it came to a somewhat natural end at Finchley Catholic High School with just 5 individuals receiving the cane in two separate incidents:

- Three boys from 3F and 3H received one stroke each on the hand on 18th April 1986 for “Dangerous Playing in the Playground at lunchtime (Steaming) - this was after a previous warning”.
- And on 16th June, 1986, a few days before the England v Argentina World Cup Quarter Final in Mexico City, two boys from 2H became the last in the school’s history to receive the cane: one stroke each on the hand for “wilful disobedience”.

The graph below indicates the numbers of canings recorded in the Punishment Book between 1978-79 and 1985-86, although this cannot of course account for any punishments administered by individual teachers which went unrecorded.

