Those gold stripes on blue

Britain in 1948 was a drab affair; it was still at war with recovery. Rationing and ID cards remained, and town re-builds were starting. The Berlin Airlift commenced and the state of Israel emerged.

Yet television ownership passed the million mark and the LP was in the music shops. The transistor was invented. The names Land Rover and Porsche appeared, but new cars were wait-listed; if a student had one, it was a pre-war ‘old banger’. British Railways was set up, the NHS created and Kinsey reported on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male.

I crossed the portal of QMC after a year’s wait, as servicemen resumed studies. The burnt-out Queen’s Hall hit my eye; I thought it wartime damage, as at Imperial, Kings and UCL. Aeronautical Engineering, for which QMC was already renowned, resided in Portacabins stacked two high, awaiting new premises. The site seems to have been in constant development ever since.

At our first day briefing we had a list of required books; some would be for sale by graduating students. It was the era of the slide-rule and Logarithm tables, particularly for engineering students, I trained myself to move slide and cursor to fractions of a millimetre.

I had to budget my grant (about £250 a year, if I remember), for it had to cover the train fares and eating Lunch could be my mother’s sandwiches, but a few times I joined those eating at the British Restaurant nearby Mile End station; meals there could be had for a shilling or so. Or it was snacks in the ‘Bun Hole’, down in the QMC basement – an area for Student Meetings, bridge tables, and dancing classes (at which I met my wife).

There seemed to be a post-war taste for conflict. Inter-college ‘Rags’ had the aim of ‘securing’ another college’s mascot; the primary London targets were Reggie – Kings copper lion, and Phineas – UCL’s wooden Scots piper. QMC’s own Mary, a stuffed leopard, suffered similar attention. The QMC rag-army once sought to disguise its ranks, by queuing at a theatre near Kings. Rags could result in quite a fracas!

Maths teaching was classroom-based, I don’t remember a lecture theatre in QMC; blackboards were the display, books and notebooks the student media. Our year in Special Maths numbered about twenty; the College overall totalled about a thousand. The students were mainly native British.

One of our lecturers, Doctor ‘Sammy’ Soal, prominent in research on Extra-Sensory Perception, had carried out extensive tests, where candidates focussed on cards carrying symbols which were guessed at by distant
‘receivers’. Unfortunately his dedication led to nothing. He would have been astounded by work today on detecting feeble transmissions of ‘brainwaves’ with fMRI.

Much self-study took place at the polished hardwood desks in the library of the Octogon. Useful text was copied by hand and the fountain-pen was king. The cupola above did not let in much light and the area lighting was poor, so each position had a green-glassed reading lamp. The book galleries above were accessed by metal spiral staircases, so peace was often shattered by the impact of hard-soled shoes.

I took the train daily from Northwood to Stepney Green: cross-compartmented carriages on the Metropolitan Line to Baker Street, and full length units on the District Line; they were ancient, wooden, dingy and reeked of tobacco smoke. Autumn smog could reduce visibility on the Mile End Road to under fifty yards and my shirt collars often ended a day black-rimmed.

Extra curricular activity was available to me at Dytchleys’ cricket ground. I also had a brief skirmish as a Thespian – on stage in 1949 at the People’s Palace, as the king in the masque Comus by John Milton. I look back with dread on my performance. Geoge Bernard Shaw died the following year.

My future career took another turn. A College notice board advertised the University of London Air Squadron, of which I had no previous knowledge. But I had joined the Air Training Corps in 1943, finally making flight sergeant, and was accepted as a cadet officer in ULAS. Flying training was carried out at Fairoaks, near Woking; lectures took place at 48 Princes Gardens, over the road from Imperial. Wartime servicemen flew there as reservists, and the atmosphere was much more relaxed than it is today.

You will note that of mathematics I have said little. There is regrettably little to say. I like to think that QMC established in me coordinated thinking which was of value in my career. “Coniunctis Viribus”?

I graduated B.Sc. in 1951, with a lowly 2/2. National Service was still in operation and I was called up and commissioned directly into the RAF. Much of my two years was served as a pilot on No56 fighter squadron.

And the rest is indeed history: I retired as a captain in British Airways in 1981. I then spent fourteen years writing articles for Flight International magazine – testing new airliners, as a motor magazine might test cars. I finally retired at 65. Now my main hobby is to try to remain in touch with the arcane possibilities of each new generation of software for my home computers.

- written by Harry Hopkins (QMC, BSc Special Mathematics, 1951) -