

## **Organisation of Alderman Knight School by former pupil Christopher Bird Written during 6-18 February 2001**

When I first started at Alderman Knight School in September 1982, aged 8, the classes were arranged mainly according to developmental age in three departments (junior, middle and senior) by the previous term's acting head, as we had a new headmaster (Mr Walsh) arriving at the same time as me. Alderman Knight School is an area special school for pupils aged 4-16 with mild learning difficulties in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire. It was opened in 1977 and is located in an open setting, with a vast playing field which it shares with the neighbouring comprehensive school. I came from Bettridge School, which was a special school for those with severe learning difficulties. Special schools only cater for around 1-2% of the child population and new pupils can arrive at them at all ages from 4-15, though most new pupils are under 12. Chronological (real) age groups in the education system are often shown as ranges of two consecutive numbers, each representing a year group (e.g. 12-13), with the first number denoting age at the beginning of the academic year (1st September) and the second denoting age at the end (31st August).

The most amazing thing that I noticed when I first arrived at the school was that most of the classes (except the lower juniors) were single sex. During my first year there (September 1982 to July 1983), I was placed in the lowest class (J1) with Mrs Somerset, which contained a dozen pupils under 9, though one was in the 9-10 age group (3rd year junior age in the mainstream system). The next class (J2) contained two teachers with around 20 pupils, so it was divided into two parallel groups of around 10 each. J2 contained most of the pupils in the 9-11 age group, plus about three in the 11-12 age group (1st year secondary age). J3 was a girls' class with about a dozen girls whose average age was 11-12, with a few more able 10-11 year olds and a few less able 12-13 year olds. J4 was a boys' class parallel to J3 with a similar size and age composition. J3 and J4 still did junior work, though most pupils in them were in the lower secondary age range.

After J4 came M1, which (like J2) was a mixed-sex double group with two teachers and around 20 pupils. M1 contained the remaining 12-13 year olds (which was the largest year group in the school with around 25 pupils) plus one 13-14 year old boy. The main reason why it was mixed was that it only contained about 5 girls. M2 was a girls' class, containing around 10-12 girls in the 13-14 age group. There was a boys' class parallel to it (containing about a dozen 13-14 year old boys) but it was illogically called S1 rather than M3 (don't know why)! The teachers of M1 and upwards were really group tutors for their own classes, as they took their own classes only for the basic subjects (such as maths and language) and took different classes in their own specialist subjects (whether it be subjects like art, woodwork, homecraft, rural science and PE).

What was really the senior department proper (S2 and upwards for pupils over 14) contained 4 classes (labelled S2, S3, CSE1 and CSE2), in which three were for boys and one for girls. S2 contained those boys over 14 not considered able enough to take any CSE examinations (now replaced by GCSEs) and needed more help in a smaller group; it contained half a dozen boys, one being 16-17 and one being 17-18 (who was blind). S3 was the top girls' class, containing about 8 'mixed ability' girls of 14-16, some of which were good enough for CSE exams, whereas the two CSE classes formed the senior boys' 'CSE stream', each of them containing around 10 boys which had at least a reasonable chance of sitting CSE exams. CSE1 was for those in the 1st year of the exam course (aged 14-15) and CSE2 was for those in the 2nd year (aged 15-16), the latter of which had the deputy head as tutor (Mr Haddock) and was based in the 'Cabin', a small hut-like building (containing one big classroom) that eases the transition from school to the wider world.

This means that the classes in the junior and middle departments (including S1) for pupils up to 14 were arranged in something like a 'standard' system during 1982-83, not too much different to the 'standards' of the old elementary schools of pre-war days, though each of the classes was far smaller with a much narrower age range and the pupils were not promoted solely on the results of tests or examinations. These classes were based on the school's average of one or two year groups while containing some underage and overage pupils in them. 'Standard 1' was J1, mostly for pupils up to 2nd year mainstream junior age; 'Standard 2' was the double J2 class, mostly for 3rd/4th year mainstream junior age pupils; 'Standard 3' was the two single sex J3/J4 classes, mainly for 1st year secondary age pupils; 'Standard 4' was the double M1 class, mostly for 2nd year secondary age pupils and 'Standard 5' was the two single sex M2/S1 classes, focusing on 3rd year secondary age pupils. 'Standards 4 and 5' had hardly any under or overage pupils since they were rather homogeneous in terms of ability and their year group sizes each fitted a double group.

While the senior department proper (S2 and upwards) for pupils over 14 contained a single girls' class, 'vertical streaming' was said to operate for the senior boys. This is because whilst the more able boys of each of the 4th and 5th year secondary age groups were in the

'CSE stream', in CSE1 and CSE2 respectively, the less able boys of more than one of these year groups (in fact 4 year groups, since both the two pupils still at school beyond 16 at the time were regarded as less able) were placed in a single, small 'non-exam' class. Vertical streaming is distinct from ordinary streaming in that the classes under the latter system are all confined to a single year group (the pupils are divided first by year group, then by ability), whereas under the former system, some classes contain more than one year group. Vertical streaming also allows the less able to spend longer with the same tutor and in the same form base. Like the organisation of the school timetable, I am fascinated by different organisational models of the teaching groups, since fairly complicated mathematics is involved when factors other than age (e.g. ability) are taken into account.

The total number of pupils on the school roll was around 135-140 and the sex ratio was about 1.7 boys to every girl. As the dining hall was rather small, lunch was taken at two sittings, with the junior pupils having their lunch before the middles and seniors. To reduce bullying, the juniors had their own section of the 'L' shaped school yard (playground), while the middles and seniors had the other section. The juniors usually had their own assemblies, separate from the upper part of the school. Games was taken in 'departments' once a week; the juniors would do either games or horse riding on one afternoon, the middles would do games on another afternoon and the seniors would do either games or swimming on a third afternoon. Swimming was taken in groups of two or three classes who normally travelled in two minibus loads down to the local swimming pool. Once a year, I usually went with a group of pupils on a residential trip lasting for 4 or 5 nights.

As well as teachers, we had about half a dozen teacher assistants. Generally, these were shared between two classes, though J1 and J2 usually had their own teacher assistant and there was just one for the senior department. These teacher assistants provided additional learning support and also helped supervise breaktimes, which also helped to reduce bullying. One of them performed the role of the school nurse. Mainstream schools not only had much larger class sizes (around 30) but also had hardly any teacher assistants.

In 1983, the school received its first computer (a BBC 16K microcomputer, later upgraded to 32K), and I received sessions on it as a reward for good behaviour, e.g. getting a day of 'stars'. I not only played games on the computers but also developed my programming skills on them by using a programming language (e.g. Basic, as used by the BBC computers). I even sometimes 'broke' into some of the programs to look at the 'listings' in order to see how each program ran. There were punishments as well, we were often spanked and/or sent to the 'waiting area' (the 'time out' room). If we were really bad, we were sent to Mr Walsh to receive the 'slipper', and I even remember all of the occasions when I had received it. I received a total of 14 strokes on 8 occasions (no more than two strokes on each occasion) before the 'slipper' was quietly abolished in 1987.

For the following academic year (September 1983 to July 1984), the new headmaster decided to make all the classes mixed-sex. The classes were arranged more by chronological age than previously, developmental age was being used mainly to make up the most appropriate numbers for each of the classes (uneven year group sizes are to be expected in special schools). However, there was still some age overlap in the junior department, which I will explain below. Luckily, I still have a copy of the school's class list for the summer term of 1984, where the age composition of each class is shown in the following table:

Class	Age group during academic year from Sept 1983 to Aug 1984													Total
	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	
J1	1		9		1									11
J2			1	3	4	2								10
J3					2	5	1							8
J4					1		14							15
M1						1	2	12						15
M2W								2	7					9
M2S								1	9					10
M3									11					11
CSE1S										11				11
CSE1F										13				13
CSE2M											6	1	1	8
CSE2L											10			10
Total	1	0	10	3	8	8	17	15	27	24	16	1	1	131

As you can see from the table on the previous page, while J2 and M1 reverted to a single group with one teacher each, M2, CSE1 and CSE2 each became two parallel groups, with two teachers (one for each group). The main reason for the age overlap in the junior department of that time was that J3 relied on inexperienced, temporary teachers who could only manage fairly small classes of pupils that were not too difficult. Of the two oldest 10-11 year olds in J2, one was amongst the least able and the other was the twin brother of one J3 pupil. The two youngest 9-10 year olds in J3 were both older than the four 9-10 year olds in J2. I had an extra year in J1 and was the oldest by more than a year in that class, the reasons being that I asked for an extra year in J1 with the same teacher as before; I was an unusually bright, autistic person (with Asperger's Syndrome) who would benefit from having Mrs Somerset for a second year as she was one of the most experienced and understanding teachers in the school and she could give me individual teaching; and I did not really like growing up or having any friends, especially in my own age group. I was 8 days older than the youngest pupil in J4 (Matthew Hockett, youngest by more than a year), who I presume was placed in that class (when he first arrived in September 1983) because he was fairly bright and had some behavioural problems.

The youngest pupil in M1 (which now took their lunch with the juniors and played on the same section of the yard as them) had only arrived in that summer term, and that was to be his class next year with the same teacher; placing him in J3 meant that he would have an inexperienced, temporary teacher for a term, then get used to a different teacher after just one term. Apart from him, all the classes from M1 upwards were 'mixed ability' (no streaming) and grouped according to chronological age, with just a few 'underage' pupils in M1 and M2, all of whom were born in the autumn (September to December) and among the more able pupils. M2W, M2S and M3 were all parallel 3rd year secondary classes apart from one or two 'underage' pupils in each of the two M2 groups (W and S represented the initials of the class tutors). CSE1S and CSE1F were parallel 4th year secondary classes, containing both CSE and 'non-exam' pupils, while CSE2M and CSE2L (sharing the Cabin) were similarly parallel 5th year classes, except that CSE2M contained a 6th and a 7th year 'less able' pupils. CSE2L had a new deputy head as tutor, Mr Latter. There were three Easter leavers from CSE2 that year, which were excluded from the above table since it was for the summer term. Of the 131 pupils on the roll, there were 81 boys and 50 girls (ratio of 1.6:1).

In September 1984, there were a lot of new pupils at the school, including around 20 new pupils under the age of 11 and 4 of 1st year secondary age (11-12), and Mr Walsh had to move pupils up by an average of two classes. He decided to arrange the classes from then on by a year group basis (age on 31st August) as much as possible, so that pupils move up with their year group (just as they do in mainstream schools) and they can leave school together (as leaving dates are based on ages on 31st August). To reduce confusion in future, each class was to contain a single teacher with a single group; 'double classes' (like M2W and M2S) were to be abolished.

The junior department still contained 4 classes but each one now represented a year group; J1 contained pupils under 8, with most of them of 1st year junior age (7-8) and the rest infants (ages 5-7). J2 contained pupils of 2nd year junior age (8-9), J3 had those of 3rd year junior age (9-10), while J4 took those of 4th year junior age (10-11). The age range of the junior department now coincided with the age range of the local primary schools (from 5-11). Under and overage pupils were limited to a few that evened up the class sizes. I had to make a 'kangaroo jump' from J1 to J4, which had another good teacher for me (Mrs Holmes), while Matthew Hockett (the youngest pupil in the previous year's J4) had a second year in that class.

The age range of the middle department now coincided with the first three years of the local secondary schools (11-14). M1 contained pupils of 1st year secondary age (which now included two sets of twin brothers), M2 concentrated on the school's average and more able 2nd year secondary pupils, M3 had generally the less able pupils from the 2nd and 3rd years (who required more support), while M4 took the average and more able 3rd year pupils. As the 2nd and 3rd year secondary groups each contained around 15-18 pupils, they were best served by three classes and 'vertical streaming' was used to place these two year groups into the three classes, with M3 slightly smaller than M2 and M4.

The senior department continued to serve those over 14, but because of the large numbers transferring from two M2 groups and an M3 group at that time together with another large year group of the old double CSE1 and a few new pupils, then contained around 55 pupils and at least 5 classes were needed for them. In view of the year group sizes (25-30 in each of the 4th and 5th year secondary age groups), Mr Walsh decided to place most of the 4th years into S1 and S2 (the old CSE designation being discarded) and most of the 5th years into the Cabin (S3 and S4) and 'vertically stream' off the least able seniors into a smaller S5 class with more support from a specialist teacher. S5 also contained one or two pupils beyond the normal leaving age of 16, who had nowhere else to go; one of these was Thomas Lusty, aged 18-19.

The deputy head became the S4 tutor and generally took charge of the senior department. While S1 and S2 were parallel 4th year classes in the 'CSE stream' and S3 and S4 similarly parallel 5th year classes, S5 was a 'non-exam' class for those which required the most support. The total number of pupils on the school roll was at its largest ever (around 140-145).

While the junior classes and M1 were arranged by chronological age, in year groups (with few exceptions) during the academic year 1984-85, there was some 'vertical streaming' in the secondary section of the school. This 'vertical streaming' was of the 'hidden' kind, since the classes were labelled in one continuous chain as if they were arranged solely by age. It was best that Mr Walsh had 'hidden' this streaming by labelling them as if there were no streaming because he would have some problems if he decided to reveal this system. How was he to label the two less able classes with mixed year groups (M3 and S5)? Would he decide on particularly 'awkward' names like 'Remove' or 'Shell', or even MR (for Middle Remove) and SR (for Senior Remove)?

In September 1985, the organisation of the classes stayed almost the same as before; as would be more usual in later years, there were around 10 new pupils in the junior department and around 5 new pupils in the middles and seniors every year (some of these enter at any time of the year rather than in September). The number after the 'J' usually corresponded to the year group in a mainstream junior school (though J1 contained a few infants). Most juniors moved up a class each year, from J1 to J2, J2 to J3, J3 to J4. When pupils in J4 have spent a year there, they usually move up to M1 as 1st year middle or secondary pupils, as I did at that time. When pupils got into the middle part of the school, they were taught by a range of specialist staff in certain subjects, which now included woodwork. The teacher taking their register was mainly a tutor who looked after their general welfare and normally only took them in the more basic subjects (such as maths and language). Our class for the next year (M1) had Mr Phillips as tutor, who taught art in the middle/senior part of the school.

As the new 2nd year secondary group became too big to fit in one class (two of these had to be placed in my class when they suddenly arrived in the middle of the previous, summer term because M1 was rather overcrowded), a few of these (3 or 4 of them) had to go into M3 with the less able pupils of the year above them (now 3rd years, who remained an extra year in that class), while the rest went into M2. Incidentally this had nothing to do with ability; the splitting of the new 2nd years seemed to be made randomly, though both sets of twins were split up. The old M2 moved up to M4 as the more able 3rd year group.

When pupils reach 14, they move from middles to seniors. The old M4 mostly moved up into S1 (with the rest to S2), while the older M3 pupils moved either to S2 as moderately less able 4th years or to S5 if they were the least able and required the most support. Last year's S1 and S2 mostly went into the Cabin (S3 and S4), though a few of these pupils were placed in S2 as less able 5th years (though not requiring as much support as those in S5), mainly in order to fit the numbers. S3 and S4 pupils usually left after a year in them, while those in S5 who remained at school stayed in S5 until they left. S5 actually became slightly smaller, with 7 pupils, including two or three beyond the usual leaving age (Thomas Lusty was still at school aged 19-20 or 9th year secondary age; he finally left in July 1986, aged 20).

While the junior classes and M1 and M2 were arranged according to year group during that academic year, those from M3 and upwards were rather complicatedly 'vertically streamed'. While M4 was the 3rd year 'A' class, M3 was mainly the 3rd year 'B' class with a few 'mixed ability' 2nd years. In the seniors, S1 was the 4th year 'A' class, S2 was a 4th/5th year 'B' class, S3 and S4 were parallel 5th year 'A' classes, while S5 was a 4th/5th year (and post-16) 'C' class. The 'A' classes prepared for possible CSE exams while the 'B' and 'C' classes did non-exam work.

In June 1986, I began maths lessons at the neighbouring secondary comprehensive school, Tewkesbury School, since I had a particular talent in that subject. Mainstream comprehensive schools are usually organised in year groups, with tutor groups always being mixed ability, as are most (if not all) lessons to start with. As pupils move up the school, they are increasingly placed in 'sets' according to ability in the academic subjects in order to stretch the most able and give the most support to the less able. While 'streaming' refers to general ability across all subjects, 'setting' is a more efficient system since it refers to special ability in a particular subject. For instance, while a pupil may be in the top set for maths, he may be in the 2nd set for science and the 3rd set for English, while this is not possible under a 'streaming' system. But the main differences between Alderman Knight and Tewkesbury School (apart from the much larger school and class sizes) are that uniform, homework and at least one foreign language (e.g. French) were compulsory for all pupils (up to 5th year) attending the latter (like nearly all those at mainstream secondary schools), while we didn't have to worry about any of these.

It is true that mainstream schools (both junior and secondary) used to adopt 'streaming' in the past, but virtually all of them have now replaced this by 'mixed ability' classes with some 'setting' for the older pupils in certain subjects. Not so long ago, there were different schools for pupils of different abilities at the secondary stage; the brightest 20% of pupils (according to the

'11 plus' examination) went to the grammar schools, while most of the rest (the average and less able pupils) went to the secondary moderns. There were also some technical schools in many areas (Mr Walsh was a former pupil of a technical school) but since the late 1970s, most secondary schools have been comprehensive, catering for pupils of all abilities except those that attend special schools.

In September 1986, the junior and lower middle classes were organised in the same way as before, apart from most of them moving up one class. The main differences lay in the upper part of the school. While J4 became M1 and M1 became M2 (luckily, my year group remained small with no more than 10 pupils), M2 and the few 2nd years in M3 moved up to two parallel 'mixed ability' 3rd year classes (M3 and M4), as they had been quite a few newcomers to that year group during the past 8 months or so. Mr Walsh decided to 'unstream' M3 and M4 at this time mainly because the year group above me was fairly homogeneous (with very few less able or 'B type' pupils compared with other years). This year group had by this time gained a reputation for having a number of difficult and aggressive boys (which tended to be among the 'average' or more able or 'A type' pupils), so 'unstreaming' M3 and M4 into two parallel classes hoped to split this group up (as well as the two sets of twins). These two classes were also fairly small. My class (M2) had another tutor, Mr Main, who was the environmental studies teacher and head of the middle department. As M2 pupils moved onto the senior yard at breaktimes and I did not like growing up, I stayed around the boundary between the junior and senior yards, witnessing what all age groups were up to.

Last year's M4 ('Form 3A' to outsiders) generally moved up into S1 ('Form 4A'), while the 3rd year pupils in the old M3 ('Form 3B') went up to S2 ('Form 4B'). The old S1 generally formed the new S3 ('Form 5A'), whereas those pupils in the previous S2 and S5 who remained at school were generally placed in Mr Latter's group, S4 ('Form 5B'), in which 3 or 4 of them were actually of 6th year age (16-17). As they was a record number of leavers in 1986, there was one fewer class in the seniors; S5 (the 'C' class or 'Remove', as it can also be described) disappeared. All 'Fifth Formers' were now based in the Cabin.

While the junior and middle departments were based on 'mixed ability' year groups during 1986-87, the seniors had two classes for each of the 4th and 5th years, and so Mr Walsh decided to 'stream' them in the 'ordinary' way, like the old secondary moderns used to do. The 'A stream' (S1/S3) followed the exam syllabus while the 'B stream' (S2/S4) did non-exam work.

For September 1987, I used an old copy of the pupils' address list for that time (which contained their class groups), from which I worked out their ages both from the earlier class list for the summer term of 1984 and a later one for the autumn term of 1989. The age composition of each class in September 1987 is shown in the following table:

Class	Age group during academic year from Sept 1987 to Aug 1988												Total
	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	?	
J1	2	2	4									1	9
J2			3	5									8
J3				3	7								10
J4					2	7	1						10
M1							12						12
M2							2	7					9
M3								6	2				8
M4									8				8
S1										8			8
S2										11			11
S3											10		10
S4											10		10
Total	2	2	7	8	9	7	15	13	10	19	20	1	113

As you can see from the above table, the year group sizes in the juniors were fairly uneven, and so Mr Walsh used developmental age to even up the numbers in the junior classes. He had decided to do this in the middle department as well. Since the 1st year secondary age pupils were too big to fit in the M1 class, he decided to keep one least able pupil down in J4 whilst placing a couple of more mature pupils in M2, with the less able 2nd years. The more able 2nd years were placed in M3 with a couple of less able 3rd year pupils. The rest of the 3rd years (including myself) were placed in M4 with Mrs Hendon, another highly experienced and understanding teacher and tutor (perhaps the best teacher I have ever had). Indeed, Mrs Hendon was to remain my tutor for the rest of my days at Alderman Knight. Luckily, the M4 of 1987-88 also happened to be an all-boys' class, since there was only one girl in my year group

and Mr Walsh decided to place her in another group after two years as the only girl in M1 and M2 (she also happened to require more support as well), but it was around the beginning of this time that I experienced problems with the school's entrances and exits, since M4 started to use the 'senior' door, rather than the 'middle' door. I also started 'rural science' lessons, which I found to be 'too vocational' and not 'proper science'.

Last year's M3 and M4 moved up to the two 4th year classes (S1 and S2), which remained 'unstreamed' (partly to split up the more difficult boys), though the few least able pupils (two or three girls) were concentrated in S2. Incidentally, S1 was another all-boys' class (as all the 4th year girls were placed in S2). The Cabin contained the two 'ordinarily streamed' 5th year classes (S3 and S4). S3 ('Form 5A') took in the more able pupils (e.g. from S1), that prepared for the new GCSEs, while Mr Latter's 'Form 5B' mainly took care of those which required more help (and moved up from S2), and was regarded as a non-exam class (though I think the odd 'B' pupil or two might have entered for GCSE in one or two subjects). Mr Latter was to remain for only two more terms; we had an acting deputy head (Mr Main) for the summer term before a new deputy head arrived in September 1988.

No pupils at the school now were over the normal leaving age of 16; from now on, all pupils would leave at 16. At that age, pupils either went out into the world or found a place on a further education course (such as the newly established special needs department at Gloscat). In general, the 'A' pupils tended to go straight into jobs (if they can find employment at all), while the 'B' pupils tended to transfer to Gloscat or some other special needs unit (I have even visited the Star Centre in 1997). The size of the school by this time had fallen rather sharply to 113 (77 boys and 36 girls, a sex ratio of 2.1:1) because the large year groups have left and those moving up the school tended to become rather smaller.

So things changed slightly during 1987-88. Throughout the junior and middle departments, Mr Walsh had to use developmental age (or ability) as well as true age to obtain the most appropriate class sizes. While M1 was a 'mixed ability' 1st year secondary group, M2 was 'Form 2B' with two 'mixed ability' 1st years, M3 was 'Form 2A/3B' and M4 was '3A'. An alternative way of organising the classes in the middle department was 'vertically streaming' the 1st and 2nd years, so that M1 took the more able 1st years ('1A'), M2 the less able 1st/2nd years ('1/2B') and M3 the more able 2nd years ('2A'), while keeping the 3rd year 'mixed ability', apart from placing the 3rd year girl in with M3. The senior department was 'unstreamed' in the 4th year secondary age group (though S1 was minus the least able pupils and could be called 'Form 4A') but 'streamed' in the ordinary way in the 5th year.

In September 1988, while Mr Walsh continued to place the juniors first by year group, then by developmental age, the organisation of the middle and senior departments changed again, as he reintroduced 'vertical streaming' for those classes. M1 was still a 'mixed ability' 1st year secondary group but it also contained an able 10-11 year old 'top junior' (who managed to transfer to Tewkesbury School the following year) and a least able 2nd year (who had moved up from J4). As the new 2nd year group contained 16 pupils and the 3rd year group 13, it was decided to select 12 average/more able 2nd years for M2 ('Form 2A'), while 3 of the 4 less able 2nd years were placed in M3 (with 4 less able 3rd years promoted from M2) and the remaining 2nd year pupil (who was already a year below her age group) moved up with the 1st year to M1. M3 ('Form 2/3B') therefore was a small class of 7. The remaining 9 average/more able 3rd years were placed in M4 ('Form 3A'), where 5 had come from M3, three had come from M2 and one was a new pupil.

The senior department contained 10 pupils (9 boys and 1 girl) in the new 4th year secondary group and 17 pupils (13 boys and 4 girls) in the 5th year group. My year group was now 'vertically streamed' as Mr Walsh placed 6 of the average/more able 4th years (all boys from M4) in S1, while me and the other three less able 4th years went into S2 with Mrs Hendon and two least able 5th year pupils (both girls). The remaining 15 average/more able final year pupils went into the Cabin and were divided up into two parallel classes, S3 (with 7 boys and 2 girls) and S4 (with 6 boys). This meant that S1 was a 4th year 'A' class of 6 boys, S2 was a 4th/5th year 'B' class of 6 pupils and S3 and S4 were two parallel 5th year 'A' classes of 9 and 6. The 'A' classes formed the 'GCSE stream' while the 'B' class was a non-exam class. I was placed in the senior 'B' class so I could still have Mrs Hendon generally looking after me and giving me some individual lessons, and she is the best at dealing with an unusually bright pupil like me (too bright for the 'A stream'). Indeed, Mr Walsh had described me as an 'enigma' in one of my school reports. I began to receive computing lessons over at Tewkesbury School, which also entered me for GCSE maths a year early. I could do the school timetable now! But at that time, I wasn't yet ready to begin other exam courses.

We had a new deputy head, Mr Parry, who was the S4 tutor and in charge of the senior department generally. One of his main innovations was the introduction of the behaviour groupings system, in which pupils in the middle/senior departments are placed in one of 5 groups

according to behaviour. The main reasons why Mr Walsh divided the 27 seniors up into 4 small classes (rather than 3) were that many of the boys (especially the 5th year boys) had behaviour problems, the deputy head and S1 tutor (Mr Beevers) were new (and the S3 tutor, Mr Kent had only been at the school a term) and the school could still afford to employ 12 full-time teachers when there was a further 'dip' in the school roll to around 100 pupils, making an average class size of around 8-9. So there was more 'space' in the seniors.

As we had moved up to the seniors, we had just two more years to go, so this final phase was primarily concerned with preparation for life after leaving school. We had a new 'subject' called 'leaver's programme'. 'A stream' pupils began to prepare for GCSEs, 'B stream' pupils started to consider the special needs unit at Gloscat. It is, after all, the 'B' pupils (and people like me) who are most likely to have problems in living independently in adult life ('A' pupils have at least some problems too, some of these may even taste life on the other side of the prison bars), so this Gloscat course mainly concentrates on their 'life skills' (pity it only lasts for two or three years). Senior privileges included buying snacks from the 'tuck shop' and staying inside at breaktimes to listen to the record player or play computer games, though I always wanted to stay outside at breaktimes, even if it was raining! Well behaved pupils had the opportunity of several stretches of work experience, which could last for three weeks at a time for those in the 'top' behaviour group. I tried to resist this too, as I expected 'many years' of education ahead of me.

It had only been a few weeks into the new academic year when the two girls in S3 asked to be moved 'away from the lads' and into S2 with Mrs Hendon. Almost immediately after this, a new 4th year 'more able' girl arrived and was placed into our class because she would be the only girl in S1. As a result, S2 (the senior 'B' class) became more 'mixed ability' when it grew to 9 pupils, in which 4 were 'A' pupils studying for at least one GCSE. S2 also contained all the senior girls, since all of the other three senior classes (S1, S3 and S4) became small, boys-only groups of just 6, 7 and 6 pupils respectively. Towards the end of the academic year, in June 1989, the Cabin became empty (as S3 and S4 had all left at half term), and it was decided that S2 would move into the Cabin a few weeks early (and swap places with Mr Parry), as that class would be based in there the following year.

The 'vertical streaming' philosophy continued in the following academic year (1989-90) in which I still possess a copy of the school's class list for the autumn term of 1989. The age composition of each class then is shown in the following table:

Class	Age group during academic year from Sept 1989 to Aug 1990											Total
	5-6	6-7	7-8	8-9	9-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	
J1	1	2	9									12
J2			2	7	2							11
J3					9							9
J4						11						11
M1							9					9
M2							7					7
M3								10				10
M4									6			6
M5									10			10
S1										10		10
S2										3	4	7
S3											7	7
Total	1	2	11	7	11	11	16	10	16	13	11	109

As you can see from the above table, Mr Walsh organised the junior department in the same way as before, using developmental age to limit the size of J1 and 'fill up' the small year group in J2. Since the numbers in the middle department were nearly twice as many as the numbers in the seniors (42 middles to 24 seniors), there were now 5 classes in the middles and 3 in the seniors. The new 1st year secondary age group was large enough to be divided into two classes; these classes were 'streamed', with the more able in M1 ('Form 1A') and the less able in M2 ('Form 1B'). Both M1 and M2 now ate with the juniors and played on their section of the yard. However, the 2nd year group was small enough to fit in one class (M3) and it was regarded as a more able ('A') group, so M3 was 'Form 2A' with there being no '2B' pupils. The 3rd year was 'streamed', with the younger pupils of the old M3 (when it was 'Form 2/3B') together with two from the old M2 ('2A') and the oldest of the previous 'mixed ability' M1 ('Form 1') making up the small, less able M4 class ('Form 3B'), and the remainder of the old M2 ('2A') going into the more able M5 ('Form 3A'). Notice that the two 'B stream' classes were deliberately smaller than the three 'A stream' classes. Incidentally, during the course of this academic year, there was a new pupil who

was a 'less able' 2nd year; it was decided to place her in M2 ('1B') rather than M3 ('2A'). She could also have been placed in M4 ('3B') but M2 was a better group since she would be in the same group next year when the whole class would move up together. At least, this 'streaming' was 'vertical' in theory.

In the senior department, there were three classes for two nearly equal-sized year groups, so it was decided to 'vertically stream' them. Last year's M4 ('3A') moved up to S1 (with Mr Parry) as average/more able 4th years ('4A'). The older members of the old M3 ('2/3B') moved up into the less able S2 (in the Cabin) with Mrs Hendon and joined the younger pupils of last year's S2 (who, like me, remained in that class for a second year). So S2 was 'Form 4/5B' with one special '5A' pupil (me). The previous S1 ('4A') also moved into the Cabin and became S3 ('5A'), and the more able girl from last year's younger part of S2 managed to join them. The September school roll went up slightly to 109 pupils (71 boys and 38 girls, a ratio of 1.9:1). However, two new pupils entered the seniors in the middle of this academic year (both 4th years); while one was placed in S1, Mr Walsh decided to place the other (Gordon Parsons, who was a 'fairly average' pupil) in S2, partly because S1 was rather large. A sad thing that happened during the year was that a 4th year boy in my class (Iain Morralee) had lost his sight.

Although the 'vertical streaming' in the middle/senior departments of 1989-90 was of the 'hidden' kind, it was fairly easy to tell which class is in which 'stream' by noting whether the number after the 'M' or 'S' is odd or even. Odd numbered classes were in the 'A stream' while even numbered ones were in the 'B stream'. Another interesting finding during that year was that two boys in the same class and year group (J4, final year juniors) not only shared the same Christian name but also the same surname (Stuart Richardson).

As I had already gained a C grade in GCSE maths (a year early) by this time, my computing teacher at Tewkesbury School (Mr Glazier) decided to put me on an 'AS' level computing course and also persuaded the head of the maths department there (Mr Angood) to take me on an 'A' level maths course as well. After some discussion, Mr Angood had agreed to take me on the 'A' level maths course in October 1989. This meant that I would have my own individual timetable, spend much more time over the comprehensive school and do a lot of homework. I was now finally in a special 'stream' of my own. Also, the 'A' level course lasts for two years and because I was now normally in my final year, I would probably find exceptional circumstances in spending an extra year at Alderman Knight School. If I do well on the course, I could not only achieve the distinction of being the first special school pupil to pass an 'A' level (at least in Gloucestershire) but also start a degree course. I would also really need a good grade in GCSE English to progress further; Mrs Hendon started to give me individual lessons in this subject in preparation for the one year GCSE course at Tewkesbury School, starting the following September. As things turned out, I had in fact managed to cope with the demands of the 'A' level maths course; I had also surprised my teachers by coming top in the end of first year exams (despite being a year younger than the rest of the group). "What! You must be joking!", said some. So I was granted an extra year at Alderman Knight.

The class organisation in 1990-91 (the year the National Curriculum first applied to special schools) was virtually the same as that in the previous year; 'vertical streaming' continued in the middle and senior departments. While J1, J2 and J3 mostly moved up a class, J4 moved up either to M1 or M2 according to ability, since the new 1st year secondary group was again large enough for two classes. So the 1st year continued to be 'streamed' (M1 was '1A' and M2 was '1B'), though the school managed to reduce confusion by splitting the two Stuart Richardsons up. Those higher up the school mostly moved up by two classes. Also, on this occasion, there was virtually no splitting of classes; apart from the old J4, every class seemed to move up together as a unit with virtually every pupil (who wasn't new) having all the pupils that were in their class at the end of last year. In the middle department, M1 ('1A') generally became M3 ('2A'), M2 ('1B') became M4 ('2B' including a 3rd year 'less able' girl) and M3 ('2A') became M5 ('3A'), with maybe the odd shuffling or two between the 'streams' (I don't know if there were any). Mrs Millett, last year's M2 tutor (and basic subjects teacher), also moved to M4 with her group (this is obviously more likely to happen in the 'B stream').

In the senior department, M5 ('3A') became the new S1 ('4A'), which now had about 12 pupils in the charge of Mr Parry, while M4 ('3B') moved up to S2 ('4/5B'), along with their tutor (Mr Keelan, who taught CDT, formerly known as woodwork), to join a couple of pupils that were in that class the previous year (S2 had by now moved out of the Cabin and into the rather unsuitable CDT room). Of last year's S2 pupils (which had 4 each in the 4th and 5th years), two 4th years remained in S2 as 5th years (though they moved out of the Cabin), the blind 4th year boy (Iain Morralee) transferred to another school and three 5th years left for Gloscat, while me and the remaining 4th year pupil (Gordon Parsons) stayed in the Cabin with Mrs Hendon. We were joined by those that had come up from S1 ('4A'), which formed the new S3 ('5A') group. As S2 contained 7 or 8 pupils and S3 12 (including me), it was decided that these two groups were

rather too big to fit in the Cabin, which was the chief reason why S2 moved out of it. Since we had relatively fewer leavers in 1990 and plenty of new 1st year secondary pupils, the school roll increased somewhat to around 115-120 pupils. As before, odd numbered middle/senior classes were in the 'A stream', even numbered ones in the 'B stream'.

I became the only '6th year secondary' pupil at Alderman Knight. Starting the GCSE English course meant that I would have to spend more time over at Tewkesbury School (as Alderman Knight did not teach English to that level). I had a support teacher (Mrs Hall), which gave me one-to-one tuition for this course, where I would sit the exam at the same time as my 'A' level maths and 'AS' computing ones. Unfortunately, Mr Glazier left halfway through the 'AS' computing course and I had a less supportive temporary teacher (Mr Bennett) for the second year of that course. In April 1991, it was decided in a 'case conference' meeting that I would leave Alderman Knight and transfer to the sixth form of the comprehensive school on a full-time basis in the following September. Placing me in a 'leavers' class for my final year, where nearly everybody left before the end of the academic year (at the end of May) undoubtedly helped because the classroom would be empty for the latter half of the summer term and I would use the period immediately after my exams to ease the transition to Tewkesbury School, while still returning to Alderman Knight for lunch and my final games lessons until the end of the term. During this period, I would start 'A' level further maths, where I would be the only student on the course (meaning that I would have to teach the bulk of the material myself), and aim to sit the exam after just one year.

I did well in my exams in the summer of 1991; I got a B grade for 'A' level maths (a year early) and a C for GCSE English. Unfortunately, I failed my 'AS' computing mainly because Mr Bennett mostly left us to our own devices. To mark my achievement in mathematics, Tewkesbury School awarded me a 'special maths prize'.

In hindsight, I found that it was a pity not being able to have proper physics and chemistry lessons when I found myself to be that good at maths, especially as I had been fascinated by astronomy when I was around 10-11 years old. I had even memorised the names of all the 'moons' that revolved around their planets and also their orbital periods. I did not enjoy woodwork lessons mainly because I spent a great deal of time polishing and sandpapering. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to do things like electronics or engineering (now considered part of CDT lessons in secondary schools). At home, I enjoyed making things out of Lego, for example, using a set of cog-wheels to make a gearbox, on the outside of which could be some of the following; a handle, a set of wheels, a fan, a gearstick and even a counter (in the form of a bank of reels with numbers on them). When I was about 12, I became fascinated by cars, with their different sizes, engines (according to capacities, fuel and engine types and power and torque outputs), gear ratios and levels of luxury equipment and found some interesting mathematical relationships between them (cars still attract some interest today even though I have never driven one in my life). Finally, I would not have even started the 'A' level maths course (or indeed, any course other than GCSE maths) in the first place if it had not been for the dedication of Mr Glazier, so my greatest thanks really go to him.

The following September, I officially started full-time at Tewkesbury School, where the headmaster was Mr Cotter. The sixth formers no longer wore uniform and were placed in completely parallel, 'mixed ability' tutor groups of around 20, that is, every one of them contained a similar number of lower and upper sixth, 'A' level and one year vocational-only, etc. students. They would remain in the same tutor group until they left. My tutor there was Mrs Storey. To broaden my studies, I initially started a GCSE double science course with a 4th year group but after a couple of months, it was decided that a vocational Intermediate GNVQ course (worth 4 GCSEs at grade C) would be better for me, so I switched over to prepare for the one year sixth form course which would begin in September 1992. I also joined in with the others for PE and non-examined general studies lessons.

I presume that the class organisation of Alderman Knight in the year after I left remained similar to the previous year, with 'vertical streaming' in the middle/senior departments. The middles probably continued with 5 classes, with M1, M3 and M5 for the more able 1st, 2nd and 3rd years. M2 was for the less able 1st years, M4 for less able 3rd years, with the less able 2nd years being placed in either M2 or M4 or split between the two, according to numbers. The seniors remained as before; S1 meaning '4A', S2 being '4/5B' and S3 '5A'.

In June 1992, I upgraded my 'A' level maths to an A grade (also gaining a merit at 'S' level in this subject) as well as passing 'A' level further maths with a D. I was to stay at school for one more year, where I no longer needed any helpers or support staff. In the summer of 1993, I passed the Intermediate GNVQ (in health and social care), gained a B grade in GCSE social science and also upgraded my 'A' level further maths to a B grade, and was awarded the school's 'top prize' just after I left. That autumn, instead of going to Gloscat, I started a degree course in maths with computing at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, where I

actually graduated with first class honours in 1996. I could do Mr Cotter's timetable now and sort his classes out!

This year (2001), I am on my 4th module (out of 6) of my Master's degree course in maths with the Open University (part-time), where I hope to graduate by Christmas 2003. In order to avoid isolation, I have attended a centre at Gloucestershire Group Homes (for autistic people) in Nailsworth every Tuesday for the past two years. At that centre, I enjoy free use of the internet and also play computer games. Since last May, I also attend a learning centre in Gloucester called 'Look Forward', normally every Monday. My hobbies include reading books on education, analysing exam results (since this involves maths), visiting the library and writing computer programs. I have recently written a rather complicated slot machine program that has a hold feature and a few 'wild' symbols, so that there is an element of strategy. I spent many hours using highly complicated mathematics in order to find the optimum strategy and keep the maximum expected payout rate to around 93-95% (which is what many Las Vegas machines pay out). As I am still afraid of 'growing up', I still refrain from doing age-restricted activities; I have yet to even see a '12' film at the cinema, let alone visited Las Vegas, where you have to be at least 21 to play a slot machine (this is also the drinking age in America).

It has been in the news recently that Alderman Knight School and other special schools for those with mild learning difficulties in Gloucestershire may well close in a few years time, and its pupils integrated into mainstream schools. A 'Save Our Schools' (SOS) campaign has sprung up in order to save these schools. It is rather like the campaigns to stop the closures of many of the old grammar schools in the sixties and seventies. Alderman Knight now has its own web-site. I do hope that the county councillors stay on the sympathetic side and leave Alderman Knight (at least) as it is, as it does such a good job to its pupils, particularly to people like me. This has made me wonder how I might have turned out if I had been born in the future. How would I have coped if I had to spend most of my schooldays in the rather rigid mainstream system?

It would be such a shame if Alderman Knight School were closed, particularly because of the great support and security it gives to pupils with some form of problems, such as those with learning difficulties or behavioural problems, or who are prone to bullying or suffering from a disability. These pupils would be harder to look after and provide for their special needs and therefore would be much more likely to be neglected, alienated, bullied and subjected to an undesirable peer influence if they were integrated into mainstream schools too quickly as these have a much greater pupil-to-staff ratio, which means much larger classes and less supervision. Their true potential may therefore not be recognised and thus achieved. Another important aspect is the loss of the dedicated and focused team of teachers at special schools where they can concentrate on pupils with similar needs.

My fears are that if they were integrated, they would face a stricter regime with a greater number of rules which many would find difficult to cope with, and would be required to wear a uniform. They would be treated much more like normal pupils than as individuals with special needs and they would receive less help. They would also be more likely to feel a failure and have less enthusiasm, so they would be more likely to be bottom of the class. They would also be struggling to get to know a greater number of teachers, some of whom may fail to notice their special needs. As a result, their educational performance and behaviour would be much more likely to deteriorate than improve. Indeed, if I had been integrated into a mainstream school before I was ready, I would be completely alienated by the experience and teachers would never have allowed me to progress in any subject, as it would mean studying with students from the mainstream system.

I personally believe that smaller classes and smaller schools do improve pupils' performance, particularly those that are among the least able. This means that more of these least able pupils will have the opportunity to do better if they are sent to special schools, which is why I think it is so important that Alderman Knight (and other schools like it) should remain open.