

My Amazing Education at Alderman Knight Special School and Beyond

By Christopher Bird (written 14-24 October 2004)

Early Years

I was born in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire on 5th April 1974, an only child. I was diagnosed as having autistic tendencies at the age of two and a half years by my local doctor (Dr Giraldi). I was described as 'hyperactive' in my early years as I was spending a lot of time running around and was difficult to calm down. Nevertheless, I was a rather bright child who by the age of three could recite the alphabet backwards as quickly as normal people say it forwards.

I started school at Westlands School at the age of four, and after a few months, I was transferred to Bettridge School (in early 1979) for more specialist training suited to my needs. Bettridge School was a special school for children with severe learning difficulties. I was initially placed in the nursery class with Mrs Spragg, who helped me to 'calm down'. This she did by giving me individual tuition. By discovering my interests in the alphabet and its numbering sequence and my talent for maths, she gave me my own noticeboard, where I displayed my own work, which also included artwork. As I progressed, I transferred to Class 3 (with Miss Currie) at the age of six and a half (in January 1981) - I had just started to learn how to swim at this time. Miss Currie slowly introduced me to more formal lessons (e.g. in reading, writing and number work), and built on this progress by allowing me sessions where I could 'choose' what I wanted to do when my behaviour was satisfactory. Soon afterwards, I needed to go to a different and better school. It was during my last year at Bettridge that the decision to transfer me to Alderman Knight School - a special school for those with mild learning difficulties - was taken. In order to ease the transition to Alderman Knight, I went there one day a week in my final term at Bettridge.

Junior Pupil at Alderman Knight School

When I officially started at Alderman Knight School at the age of eight (in September 1982), I was placed in the youngest class, or 'reception' class - J1 (J for Junior department) with Mrs Somerset. A new headmaster (Mr Walsh) arrived at the same time as me and the average class size was around ten. I continued to benefit from a highly individual programme within a small group situation, just as I did at my previous school. A few months after I started there, I was fortunate in that I had my own individual reward system, in the form of a star book. I was awarded a star whenever I had a period of good behaviour and a dash when my behaviour fell below the required standard. Once I had gained a set number of stars (usually a full day of stars), I was allowed a session on the BBC computer. This was not only to play games but also to develop my programming skills using the Basic programming language. I sometimes 'broke' into some of the programs to look at the listings in order to see how each program run, and to learn things from this. Other rewards included 'free sessions' where I could 'choose' what I wanted to do, such as playing in the wendy house or making things out of coloured paper. I even tried to make a clock out of thin card on one occasion and showed it to Mr Walsh! Once a year, I normally went on a week's residential school journey with my class - J1 went to Weston-super-Mare in July 1983 (from Monday to Friday). (This was my third residential - I had spent four nights at Cowley with Bettridge's Class 3 in each of the two previous years.)

I enjoyed a second year in J1 with Mrs Somerset (September 1983 - July 1984), even though I was the eldest in the class by more than 19 months. The main reasons why I stayed in J1 were that I wanted to be in the same classroom with the same teacher as before; I was an unusually bright, autistic person (later diagnosed 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 started horse riding lessons in September (which lasted for a couple of years), and the following month, won a 1000m swimming badge for swimming 1000 metres without stopping - my parents rewarded me for the latter by taking me to see the 'Blackpool Illuminations'. A new deputy head teacher arrived in January 1984 (Mr Latter) - I used to call him "Alright!" a few times since he looked and behaved a bit like the comedian Michael Barrymore.

As well as rewards for good behaviour, there were punishments when I had misbehaved. The most common punishment that I (and many others) received during my time at the school was being sent to the 'waiting area' (used as a time-out room) - and I was sent there so many times that I nicknamed it the 'prison'. When I had been very naughty, a male teacher from higher up the school (Mr Palmer) used to come over to put me over his knee and give me a sound spanking when I was a pupil in the lowest class. But on one day in February 1984 - when I was already in some trouble that morning - I was caught bullying a younger pupil in my class during morning break and needed an even more severe lesson than a spanking from Mr Palmer. I was sent to Mr Walsh. I had been in that office two or three times before - on one occasion, Mr Walsh actually took out a gymshoe and threatened to use it but swiftly put it back again - but on this occasion (as he said quietly to

himself "I'll have a go with this lad" as he briefly left the office to call for Mrs Somerset), I was nervously thinking to myself, "I'm really gonna get it this time!". And how right I was! When the headmaster came back with Mrs Somerset, I was ordered to bend over and touch my toes and he took out that gymshoe and gave me a hard 'wallop' with it. I rose slightly, he said "And again", so I had to bend over again for another hard 'wallop'. Two strokes was considered enough for me, and as I was nursing my sore backside and fighting back the tears, he gave me a stern lecture including something like, "And you'll get it even harder next time". I had been 'slipped' at school for the first time (Mrs Somerset was there as a witness).

Also, at around this time (February), I was starting to spend one day a week with the class I would be joining next academic year - J4 with Mrs Hendon (where, curiously, a boy called Matthew Hockett was already in, a year early - younger than me by eight days but the youngest in the class by 20 months since the class consisted of pupils who were slightly older than the intended 10-11 year old age range of next year's J4). It took some time to settle in to this new group - indeed I was to receive the 'slipper' again for misbehaviour in this group in March 1984 (just one stroke that time) - but it was decided that I had to spend some time there in order to ease the transition to J4 the following September. Mrs Hendon - another highly experienced and understanding teacher who got to know me very well - actually went on maternity leave at Easter and a new teacher (Mrs Holmes) took charge of J4 in the summer term so it was decided to stop these sessions with J4. However, when Mrs Somerset went on a residential school journey for a week with another group of pupils (from J4 incidentally) in the earlier part of the summer term, I had Mrs Holmes as teacher for that week, and I allowed my behaviour to deteriorate (in protest against being given an unfamiliar teacher and against being moved up to her class next term). On one of those days, I threw some books onto the floor and had earned six or even seven dashes out of a possible eight. It was all, of course, to no avail - though nobody even mentioned the word 'slipper' that week. My class spent four nights in Bournemouth later that term (with J2, and one pupil from M2!).

And so, in September 1984, I had to make a 'kangaroo jump' from J1 to J4 (in order to join Matthew Hockett and other pupils of the same age as me). Mrs Holmes was my new class teacher in the top junior class and I had only been in it a few days when another big shock arrived. It happened on September 11 (a Tuesday morning when the fire alarm was being tested) - I was messing about in the changing rooms (for PE) and Mrs Holmes gave me a warning that if I don't get changed immediately, I would go to Mr Walsh. I decided to behave myself and get changed but unfortunately, as I tried to push an already damaged coat hanger back into the wooden board (pulled slightly off its socket by another boy), it accidentally fell to the floor (I didn't mean to actually rip it off) and Mrs Holmes then sent me to the waiting area. I was kept waiting in that waiting area for quite a bit because of the fire alarm, and as I was waiting there at around quarter past to half past ten, I overheard Mr Walsh saying to the fire officer, "Would you like to smash the glass?", and the fire alarm went off. I went outside with the others but when I went back to the waiting area after the fire alarm had stopped ringing, Mr Walsh said to me, "Well, it's your turn now" and went with me to inspect the damage in the changing room before ushering me into his office to give me two strokes of the dreaded slipper. I was too immature at the time to offer an explanation that it was an accident - it was only my sixth day out of J1 - and I am most sorry for that. Who would have predicted that something infinitely worse would happen in New York exactly 17 years later (also on a Tuesday morning, American time)! It may be my worst miscarriage of justice in my entire school career but it is certainly nothing compared to the suffering endured by thousands in New York (and across the world) when the Twin Towers were brought down.

I generally tried to behave myself after that unfortunate episode - the main reason why I was sometimes silly or naughty was because I was bored and wanted to liven things up a bit. Apart from the odd stroke in the winter of 1985, I managed to avoid the slipper again during the remainder of my time in J4 though I had quite a few 'close shaves' in the summer term, for example, typing the f-word on the computer as a practical joke. On another occasion when I was a top junior, I disrupted an assembly by breaking wind - after the others have stopped laughing, Mrs Somerset (who took that assembly) then boomed at me, "And if I hear that noise again, you are going *straight to Mr Walsh for the slipper!*" Nevertheless, Mrs Holmes managed to teach me long division and got me to write quite a few short stories (some of these were on the Mr Men). It was when I was 10 years old that a teacher from the neighbouring comprehensive, Tewkesbury School (Mr Glazier, who taught computing) recognised my maths and computing talents. In March 1985, Mr Glazier allowed a sixth former (called Nick) to take me over to a computer club there once or twice a week for a few months. I had also developed an interest in astronomy at around this time. Our class went to Tenby (in Wales) in June 1985 (from Sunday to Friday) - and I still remember losing my purse there *and* having to visit the doctor's because I had an earache. Earlier that month, I had also been on a 'riding holiday' for two nights with the horse riding group.

Middle School Pupil

After J4 came M1 with Mr Phillips as my form tutor in September 1985 (as we started having different teachers for most of our subjects, which now included woodwork). I was now in the Middle School. The period from September 1985 to July 1986 was the academic year that I took part (or represented the school) in the

Gloucestershire inter-special school cross country and athletics championships for the first time - I came seventh in the under 12 boys' cross country at Dean Hall Special School in March 1986 and finished third in the under 12 boys' 200m and relay at the Prince of Wales Athletics Stadium a few months later, in July. The school gained a couple of additional BBC computers (which had disk drives instead of tape recorders) during that year (so we were no longer limited to one machine). In June 1986, my class spent another five nights in Tenby again, and the following month, M1 (along with some other children from other classes) took part in the Tewkesbury Carnival, on a float with the theme 'Babes in the Wood'.

Unfortunately, my immaturity got the better of me as I was unable to avoid visits to Mr Walsh's office in each of the three terms of that academic year. (Mr Phillips was fairly strict and one of his catchphrases was, "Get that smile off your face before I wipe it off!" - he sent me to the waiting area quite a few times.) In the autumn term of 1985, I was slipped for writing graffiti in someone else's exercise books during a computer session (two strokes); in the spring term of 1986, Mr Latter, the Deputy Head (as Mr Walsh was away) gave me two strokes for a cumulation of misbehaviour (ending with blowing my nose on a teatowel in a cookery lesson). The early part of the summer term was a particularly rough period for me as I had two trips to the headmaster's office in the space of little more than a week. I got two strokes the day after the Queen's 60th birthday for scratching a record (sadly, with one of my fingernails, as I couldn't put it on a record player and rotate it backwards and forwards like a 'rap artist' - this was also just a few days after I was caught walking on the setting cement on which the new cycle shed was to be built) and another two strokes by Mr Latter on 1st May for very silly behaviour and repeated failure to respond to Mr Phillips' instructions in the dining hall. But the 1st May 1986 will be forever remembered as the day of my very last slipping.

But the most important thing that happened to me in that academic year was that I started having maths lessons at the big school just up the road - Tewkesbury School. It was June 1986, I was 12 years old, the maths teacher was Mrs Pleass, and, needless to say, I found that it was a very different and strange world - 30 pupils per class in a large school of around 1500 to say the least. I slowly learnt how to cope, even if it was for only a few hours a week in my favourite subject. Biggest shock, though, was the regular homework (pupils at Alderman Knight were rarely - if ever - required to do any homework at all). Lucky, I didn't have to wear the uniform as well (I would have hated having to wear the same clothes as everyone else, and that cumbersome tie as well).

In September 1986, I moved up to M2 and had Mr Main as my next tutor. Pupils from M2 and upwards used the senior yard at breaktimes - as 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. A boy called Leslie Cook joined our class - he was notorious for his behavioural problems, disrupting lessons, getting sent to Mr Walsh and so on. The boys in the year above me (Jamie Day, David Tiller, Andrew Williams et al, then in M3 and M4) also had a reputation for behavioural problems. At Tewkesbury School, the maths homework stopped when I was placed with a fourth year maths group (supposedly low ability) - so all of my evenings were completely free again. Early in 1987, I was very surprised to have won a competition for Gloucestershire special schools with the phrase "British potatoes make the most of a meal because like Britannia they rule the Vitamin C's" - I received a camera, while Alderman Knight won £200. In March that year, the Middle School put on an excellent school play entitled 'Bugsy Malone' on two evenings (directed by Mrs Hendon) - I only had just one small part in it (that was to read the news) and I enjoyed watching the rest of that play. Alderman Knight awarded me another prize (was it a book token?) for raising the most money in the annual sponsored swim.

In the summer term of 1987, M2 spent five nights in Torquay (with M1) and I managed to finish second in the county special schools' under 14 boys' 800m (came third in the 100m and fourth in the relay) - so I was pretty good at running (despite not making the six-pupil under 14 boys' cross country team that ran against other special schools the previous term). Leslie Cook (who came fifth in that under 14 boys' cross country but was excluded from the athletics for bad behaviour) got suspended for a week for fighting - I obviously was never the worst behaved pupil in the school. (Strange if there is a relationship between high athletic ability and poor behaviour - I don't know of any Olympic stars who went to prison.) The Monday of the final week of the summer term saw the one and only time that homework was ever set to my Alderman Knight class - Mr Walsh happened to take the early afternoon health education lesson about a bicycle (since the regular teacher wasn't available), and he wanted it finished and marked by the end of the term. I had generally been a lot better behaved that academic year than in previous years - I managed to avoid the slipper in the very last year it was still available (corporal punishment was made illegal in state schools in August 1987); in fact, I did not even need a star book or behaviour record book in the whole of that year, though I did have the odd detention in May. Mr Walsh described me as an 'enigma' on my school report that year.

The next class for me (September 1987 - July 1988) was M4 and I was to have the excellent Mrs Hendon as tutor for the remainder of my time at Alderman Knight. (M4 was an all-boys class that year!) The autumn term is remembered for Leslie Cook getting expelled just a fortnight into the new term, the hurricane (which meant that we had to go to Bristol instead of the London Science Museum - we managed to go to the London Science Museum on 1st March 1988), me having problems with which door to use when I entered and

left the building (to do with growing up), and managing to join the juniors in their Christmas Party instead of the Senior Disco at the end of that term (my one success at turning back the clock). At Tewkesbury School, I was placed with another fourth year group (middle set) for maths lessons, and I think that Mrs Pleass decided to start me on the GCSE maths course a year early mainly because she was planning a career break to have children in 1988 and another teacher was unlikely to take me on. (Another reason may have been that I was unlikely to take any of the GCSEs offered at Alderman Knight.) Still managed to get away with not being asked to do homework (apart from two occasions early in the autumn term), perhaps because of the shortage of materials there.

In the spring term of 1988 (particularly the first half of it), my behaviour had gone through another poor phase resulting in two trips to Mr Walsh's office (and I nearly got sent home on one occasion). The old star book was back - I even remember an occasion when a letter was sent home to my parents for repeatedly running in the mud (when told to walk) and being silly with an abandoned traffic cone found on the playing field during one rural science lesson (I think I also lost three weeks of computer time as well). But in that term it was Matthew Hockett that got suspended (for hitting Mr Walsh in a heated argument in the changing rooms) - I was only moderately badly behaved at worst, never allowed myself to get too over the top. (Those were my last ever visits to the headmaster's office for bad behaviour). I had behaved well enough to go to the London Science Museum and take part in the county special schools' cross country in March - where I came fifth in the under 14 boys' (three seconds behind fourth placed Vincent Willmore of M4, born on the same day as me and the only black pupil in my school) and was whisked to the dentist to have my brace fitted soon after. We had enough entrants in the under 14 boys' for two teams - our 'A' team (first four home - Vincent, me, Craig Blount and Jonathan Rymer) came joint second in the team championship, while our 'B' team (next four home) were placed eighth and last. At the end of the term, Mr Latter left us and Mr Main was to become acting deputy head next term.

In the summer term, I was generally better behaved - I had to be when there was a particularly strict (albeit temporary) teacher called Mr Sullivan around for a term, who took M4 on Thursday afternoons. It was like going back in time to the Fifties and Sixties with him - no talking in class, for instance! I remembered him shouting at Ryan Whittall for failing to leave the door open when a woman teacher was coming into the classroom. I don't think he addressed us by our surnames though - which were Bird, Groves, Hayward, Hockett, Rymer, Twining, Whittall and Willmore. (I managed to avoid even being told off by him throughout the time that he was at the school.) The county special schools' athletics was cancelled that year - the weather was the raining champion! I went on two residential trips that term. I spent four nights in Blackpool with some pupils from the middle school, while in the penultimate week of that term I went with Mr Walsh, Mr Kent (PE/Games teacher) and a party of boys (mostly pupils from my class) on a journey that involved an overnight stay at a hostel in South Cerney (rambling on the first day, swimming and sailing on the second). Originally, the hostel trip was for the senior boys but because of their behaviour (I think that David Tiller was expelled that term), it was decided that only boys from the middle school could go. I also remember accidentally formatting some of the computer disks (wiping them clean) just before I went on that hostel trip.

Amazingly, I have still kept a record of my school behaviour during that summer term, detailing the stars and dashes that I received, and the reasons for each dash that I was given. During the period from Monday 25th April to Friday 8th July (nine weeks of 44 school days, excluding the week in Blackpool), I received 389 stars out of a possible 440 - meaning that I was good 88% of the time. I received a full day of 10 stars on 13 of those 44 days - on 18 days, I got 9 stars; on 7 days, I got 8; on 5 days, I got 7; and only on one of those days did I get as few as 6 stars. Due to my behaviour the previous term, if I was sent out of CDT (formerly known as woodwork) or music lessons in that summer term, I could expect to be sent to Mr Main for 10 minutes - and if I was sent out for a second time in the same lesson, I could expect to go to Mr Walsh. (One yellow card - Mr Main; two yellow cards in one session makes a red card - Mr Walsh.) In the event, I did not get sent out of any of the music lessons that term but I was sent out of CDT for being 'silly' on four consecutive weeks in the first half of the term ('single yellows' only) even though I had behaved myself in CDT throughout the second half of that term.

Apart from CDT lessons, I had also been particularly silly during the lunch hour that term - 14 of the 44 lunch hours in the period in question resulted in dashes (only 68% stars), and I was sent to the waiting area in five of these lunch hours (all for being silly and/or rude in lunch). One entry reads: Friday 27th May 1988, 12.15-1.15: Dash (In lunch, rude and sent to waiting area. Afterwards, silly eating pudding and told to sit and eat on own and stay until end of play). In one of these lunchtime sessions, I was sent to the waiting area twice - and had also been sent to the waiting area twice on 21st April (just before the period in question). So I had no fewer than eight spells in the waiting area that term - bizarrely, all of these were for poor behaviour at mealtimes, since I managed to avoid being sent to 'prison' at all other times during the period in question. Indeed, with the exception of CDT, I also managed to avoid being sent out of any other lessons during that term, even if it didn't involve going to the waiting area. So, it seems as though it was mainly CDT lessons (first half of term) and lunchtimes that posed the problems that term.

Senior Pupil

In September 1988, I moved up to the senior part of the school - I was placed in S2 with Mrs Hendon (a non-exam group who needed more individual support). A new deputy head (Mr Parry) arrived at the school - one of his main innovations was the introduction of the behaviour groupings system, in which pupils in the middle and senior departments were placed in one of five groups according to behaviour. While fairly high standards of behaviour were required for Group 1 ('All Known Privileges'), some pupils found themselves in the lowest groups (4 and 5) from time to time and lost all of their privileges - including school trips, breaktime facilities and work experience. The worst offenders (pupils caught smoking, stealing, absconding or bullying) went down to Group 5 for a certain number of days, which meant staying in at breaktimes (e.g. waiting area or detention) and being placed on Report. Happily for me, I generally was of good behaviour from then on, and after spending the autumn term in Group 2, went up to Group 1 the following term (I mainly stayed in Group 1 for the remainder of my time at Alderman Knight, moving down to Group 2 on occasions when I have been a bit silly etc). I may have had the odd week or two in Group 3 but I have never been in Groups 4 or 5 (as this would prevent me from going over to Tewkesbury School). I really did not need the star book anymore, though Mrs Hendon retained it to check my progress until she allowed it to quietly fade away for good some months later. It was the other pupils' turn to misbehave now!

In that academic year (September 1988 - July 1989), I was allowed to do my GCSE maths at Alderman Knight and rely on my textbook (as Mrs Pleass left). However, I started lessons over at Tewkesbury School in another subject (information technology) with Mr Glazier in October. This involved passing six modules (including word processing and computer programming) using one of the computers there (pity it wasn't a GCSE course). The computer programming module required me to learn a new programming language - Pascal. I even had Matthew Hockett coming over with me for a while though I don't think he got on too well there.

The annual Gloucestershire special schools' cross country was moved to late November / early December and I finished fifth again, this time in the under 16 boys' race. I was the first senior boy home from my school that time - just over two minutes quicker than the next person (Craig Wiggins of S3, who came sixth) - and our senior boys' team came second in the team championship (behind Bownham Park School). At the end of that autumn term, I was finally considered 'too mature' for the Junior Christmas Party but I still managed to join the Middles' Party rather than the Senior Disco - I wish I could spell 'disco' with a 'g' instead of a 'c' and have an old computer disk throwing competition instead, even if it's sponsored 'disgoing'! In the spring term of 1989, my father raised a considerable sum of money for Alderman Knight when he organised a sponsored swim for members of the firm where he worked. In May, I spent my annual residential school journey at a place in Wales (with some members of the senior school plus a couple of middles), which involved sleeping in tents for four nights (another all-male party). I sat my GCSE maths exam the week before half term. In June, I spent a week's work experience at my father's firm (where I used one of the computers and learnt how all the computers networked together), and when I came back, S2's classroom base had moved into the Cabin (a few weeks early, as the group of particularly difficult final-year boys that were in there had all left school by the end of May).

In July, I was pleased to finish second in both the 800m and 1500m in the senior boys' section of the athletics for special schools in the county (my team came third in the relay). (Vincent Willmore of S1 had to settle for fourth place in the 1500m.) More good news followed when I gained a grade C in GCSE maths (a year early) that summer - equivalent to an old 'O' level pass. It was the highest grade available on the set (or tier) of papers that I had been entered for - as Tewkesbury School probably thought that it was easier for me to gain a 'good' grade on the 'intermediate' tier than on the 'higher' tier. I had been a bit of a perfectionist (best handwriting, doing all my writing in pencil so I could rub it out whenever I made a mistake) - if I had worked a bit faster and did some homework without the teacher prompting me, I might have been entered for the 'higher' papers (where a grade A is possible) but I don't think it mattered too much in the end. I had also been awarded an Information Technology certificate in Word Processing.

In September 1989, I was to stay in S2 (with Mrs Hendon) though we were already based in the Cabin. To celebrate my maths achievement, I managed to get my picture in the front page of the local newspaper (the Echo). Mr Glazier decided to transfer me from the 'information technology' course to the two-year 'AS' level computing course (before the Curriculum 2000 reforms, an 'AS' level was as demanding as a full 'A' level but required half the study time) as he thought it would be better suited to my ability. I spent the month wondering about my future maths lessons when Mr Glazier began to persuade the head of maths of Tewkesbury School (Mr Angood) to take me on to the 'A' level maths course. After much discussion - both Mr Walsh and Mrs Hendon got involved - I was admitted onto the 'A' level maths in October, though it was on a trial basis (at least to begin with). Mr Angood gave me some 'catch up' work to do and I was to join the 'A' level maths lessons after half term, which was taught by two teachers - Mr Angood and Miss Mitchell. I was to dramatically change my attitude - to stay on the course, I had to do all the massive amount of work and homework asked of me, and show all of my working (intermediate steps in arriving at the final answer). I had to write much more quickly (not worry too much about handwriting or mistakes) - I found that when I changed from pencil to pen, it was

much easier! My teaching assistant at Alderman Knight (Miss Hopkins) was to come over with me to the sixth form maths lessons to make sure that I do all of the work required in the lessons (note taking etc). It was quite a big shock at first - it took me a while to settle down. It was the first time that I did regular homework in my life (had hardly any homework up until this point) - and Alderman Knight exempted me from some of their lessons in order to fit the homework in.

My lack of homework prior to starting 'A' level maths may even have been an advantage in my case since I had much free time to think independently in the evenings. I could set my own 'homework' whenever I felt like it. For example, I was able to create plenty of computer programs of my own on my ZX Spectrum + at home. I first learned trigonometry (sines, cosines and tangents) when I was 10 or 11 from a maths book - and was intrigued when I saw that the tangent of 90 degrees is infinity. 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). I even made a board game of my own called 'Birdy's Game of Chance', which was a bit like a mini version of Monopoly (where you can get sent to 'prison' a few times). Indeed, this lack of 'proper' homework (set by other people) may have 'conserved my energy' and made me feel fresher and more willing to undertake the challenge of being the first pupil from Alderman Knight to take an 'A' level (where large amounts of regular homework are considered essential).

As the 'A' and 'AS' level courses last for two years and I was now normally in my final year at Alderman Knight School, if I made satisfactory progress on those courses, I would probably find exceptional circumstances in spending an extra year at Alderman Knight. If I was good enough to start a degree course, a good grade in GCSE English would normally be required - Mrs Hendon started to give me individual lessons in this subject in preparation for the one year GCSE course at Tewkesbury School which would commence the following September. So by Christmas, I was concentrating on just three subjects - maths, computing and English. As things turned out, not only had I managed to cope with the demands of the 'A' level maths and other courses, I had also greatly astounded my teachers by coming top in the end of first year (Lower Sixth) exams in both maths and computing (despite being a year younger than the rest of the group). I had achieved marks of 81% for maths (predicted grade A) and 72% for computing. "*What! You must be joking!*" So I was granted my wish of staying on at Alderman Knight for an extra year, which surely (for me) beats being on Jim'll Fix It! By that summer term (1990), I only needed Miss Hopkins to come over with me for one of my four double periods of maths per week.

I continued to have assemblies and PE and games lessons at Alderman Knight School, and my only disappointment of the autumn term of 1989 was not been able to take part in the county special schools' cross country at Dean Hall due to flu (there was a flu epidemic around early December which prevented one special school from taking part). We didn't have a proper senior team either - Shane Williams was the only senior pupil that took part that year (there were no senior girls from our school). In May 1990, I went on a residential school journey with Alderman Knight for the last time when S2 spent four nights at Butlin's in Minehead (remembered for the incident when I opened another boy's drawer and spotted a packet of cigarettes - both me and the other boy got punished by being kept in that night).

The 6th July 1990 was my best day of my life as far as running was concerned - I won both the senior boys' 400m and 1500m in the Gloucestershire inter-special school athletics championships (I think our combined middle/senior boys' team that year came third even though Jonathan Rymer was the only other senior in it - and he only came fifth in the standing cricket ball throw!). I made an amazing sprint finish to win the 400m with a time of 61.7 seconds - if I had been just a second quicker, I would have broken the record! My time for the 1500m was 5 minutes and 15 seconds. It certainly cancelled out the disappointment of the England football team losing on penalties to West Germany in the World Cup semi-final just two days earlier. So, you could say that I excelled both in the classroom and on the playing field! (Pity we didn't have enough volunteers from the seniors to take part in the relay that year.)

In September 1990, while I continued to be based in the Cabin with Mrs Hendon, I was 'promoted' to S3 (the top group 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 (20% of the final grade) at the same time as my 'A' level maths and 'AS' computing ones. Luckily, I was exempted from the compulsory oral component for GCSE English, due to my autism. 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 who mostly left me to my own devices - which was just what I needed since I had to do a fairly large project in the second year. My 'AS' computing project concerned Vauxhall cars as I had an interest in cars and all their different specifications (Vauxhall was my favourite make of car). Miss Hopkins no longer accompanied me to my maths lessons, where I had managed to gain a perfect 100% in one short internal test in September (the 'A' level course was entirely assessed by two three-hour papers at the end - no coursework, by the way).

I managed to finish third in my final cross country for Gloucestershire special schools (under 16 boys) in early December 1990 even though I was the only senior pupil from Alderman Knight that took part (once again, there were no senior girls from my school). We bade farewell to one of my old teachers (Mr Main) at the end of the autumn term - some pupils even made a video to celebrate his departure. I faced mock exams in January 1991, and I did not do too well in them that time (did not spend enough time on revision) - I got a mark of 47% for 'A' level maths (third out of eight candidates, predicted grade C) and I must admit that I was absolutely stumped in the 'AS' computing paper (only 15%, predicted grade U - very different to the end of lower sixth exam). I also sat a mock GCSE English paper in that spring term and only got an E or F for it. (Had to pull my socks up a bit - only a few months to go before the real thing.) The month of March saw the one and only time I went to the old Wembley Stadium (with a party of pupils from Alderman Knight) and we watched England beat Scotland 2-1 in a Under 15 Schoolboys football match. (Though I liked watching football, I didn't like playing the game or any other 'team sports' as this involved 'mucking in' with other people - I preferred 'individual sports' such as athletics and cross country.)

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. I wanted to stay even longer at Alderman Knight - I was happiest as a large fish in a small pond - but this time I was told that I had to move on, like it or not. (It was difficult enough just to get me out of J1!) 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 (in late May and early June) 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 had remembered how important it is to revise for my exams (revised as much as I could using past papers), and a week after I had finished that year's exams, I celebrated by winning the senior boys' 1500m again in the county special schools' athletics championships (with an improved time of 5 minutes and 6.9 seconds) - though I only came third in the 100m and relay (a proper team this time). Tewkesbury School organised an induction week for new sixth formers in the first week of July - I was included in their activities programme throughout that week and joined in as much as I could. And I marked my penultimate day at Alderman Knight by attending a 'Fun Day' at Coln House Special School, where groups of pupils from each special school in the county were invited to come over.

I did well in my exams in the summer of 1991 - I got a B grade for 'A' level maths (a year early - joint top with one other person) and a C for GCSE English. The bad news was in the 'AS' computing - I got a U grade fail (as I thought I would) partly because I wasn't too interested in the theory work in the second year (too much of it was related to the real world of businesses and there seemed to be hardly any on programming or 'discrete maths') and partly because Mr Bennett did not 'spoon-feed' me enough; I decided not to retake it. I didn't do very well in my project work for 'AS' computing either - it had to be as other people wanted it, not as I wanted it. But I probably became the first special school pupil or ex-special school pupil (with mild or severe learning difficulties) to pass an 'A' level out of the whole county (if not the whole country), and I was the first pupil from Alderman Knight to even sit GCSE English let alone get a 'good' grade in it (the subject had been simply known as 'language' at Alderman Knight). To mark my achievement in mathematics, Tewkesbury School awarded me a 'special maths prize' (a book token) at their Presentation Evening in November. None of this would have been possible if it had not been for the dedication of both Mrs Hendon and Mr Glazier, so my greatest thanks really go to them. Mrs Hendon was probably the best teacher I have ever had.

Full-Time Sixth Former at Tewkesbury School

In September 1991, at the age of 17, I became a full-time member of the Sixth Form at the comprehensive school, where the headmaster was Mr Cotter. The sixth formers no longer wore uniform and were placed in tutor groups of around 20 students. They would remain in the same tutor group until they left school. My new tutor was Mrs Storey (based in the sixth form block) and I also got to know Mr Hale (Head of Sixth Form). I had already started my 'A' level further maths course (with Mr Angood). To broaden my studies, I started a GCSE double award science course with a fourth year group (top set) but after a couple of months, it was decided that the all-new, pilot vocational Intermediate GNVQ course (worth 4 GCSEs at grade C) would be more appropriate for me, so I switched over to prepare for the one year sixth form course which would begin the following September. I 'prepared' for the GNVQ by doing the 'introductory' module and some 'prep' modules on a one-to-one basis with a learning support worker (Mrs Webb), which involved visiting a local water treatment works and making a burglar alarm. I also joined in with the other sixth formers for PE and non-examined general studies lessons from the start of the academic year. Another change since I left Alderman Knight was that I took packed lunches instead of meals prepared in the school kitchen.

Of course, it took some time to get to know the ropes as a full member. The transition from Alderman Knight to Tewkesbury School (however gradual) was certainly no easier than the transition from J1 to J4 seven years before, or the transition from Bettridge School to Alderman Knight two years before that. There were a few setbacks. At breaktimes, a group of third year (year 9) boys came over and encouraged me to do silly things like smashing up a discarded old porcelain sink and smashing glass objects in the large incinerator. I found myself in Mr Hale's office twice during the autumn term of 1991. The first occasion was when I was accused of threatening physical violence to Mrs Webb. I didn't mean to actually threaten physical violence to Mrs Webb, though I had become rather annoyed with her when she refused to let me eat my packed lunches in her special needs tutorial room - I think I said something like, "What happens if I break down the door (to the special needs room)" - nevertheless, Mr Hale took me into his room and boomed at me, "*You are a man, not a boy, YOU ARE A MAN!*" during his stern lecture. (I think I had to write an apology to Mrs Webb.) The second occasion was when I was caught smashing glass objects in the incinerator. On both occasions I was threatened with suspension - even expulsion - though I thankfully never got those sanctions, but it gave a hint that if I was integrated into a mainstream school as a full-time member at a younger age, I might well have got into far more serious trouble. However, those were my last significant incidents of misbehaviour - I managed to knuckle down and stay out of trouble during the remainder of my schooldays, and indeed, my education beyond.

As I couldn't take my packed lunches in Mrs Webb's special needs tutorial room, I decided to eat them outside, whatever the weather. (The only other allowable place was in the sixth form block - I didn't like the milling crowd of people or the loud music at breaktimes.) Another thing that I didn't like about Tewkesbury School was the large number of girls - to me, they're weapons of mass distraction! At Alderman Knight, I was used to a fairly tolerable gender ratio of 1.7 boys to every girl - in my later years at that school the ratio became even more biased towards boys (around 2 boys to every girl) but whenever I went over to the big school, I found that there were rather more girls than boys. (When I was in M1 and M2, there was only one girl in my class, and M4 was an all-boys class when I was in it.) Anyway, I thought it was best to completely take no notice of the other gender whatsoever (excepting the staff) and pretend they didn't exist (indeed, it made me feel 'big' and 'special' to do so!). I concentrated on my academic work - I found that the 'A' level further maths was a lot more demanding than the single subject 'A' level (as I expected it to be - since only those with a strong chance of getting the top grade in the single subject are normally allowed to do further maths). I found the mechanics component to be the most difficult (especially as I hardly had any proper physics lessons). The highest academic achievers always seemed to have the least interest in the opposite gender - the best schools in the country for exam results (e.g. Winchester and St Paul's) are still mostly single-sex and it is hardly surprising to me that childless women are twice as likely to have 'A' levels as mothers. Anyway, I have a reputation to live up to!

Nevertheless, the academic side went well, and in the summer of 1992, I retook 'A' level maths and gained an A grade - with Merit in the optional, more challenging special paper ('S' level). I also managed to pass 'A' level further maths with grade D after one year (Mr Angood thought that the grade D was 'impressive', as most of the work was self taught), and I got my picture in the front page of the local Echo again. (I also got my picture in another local paper - the Tewkesbury Admag.) I had achieved the two 'A' levels required for university entrance and Mr Cotter said that it was like 'winning the pools' when I had achieved those grades. Whilst only one other student gained an A in 'A' level maths that year, I was the only one to achieve an 'S' level in the subject (three candidates sat for 'S' level). And I was the only one to pass 'A' level further maths (since I was the only one in the class).

I was to stay at school for one more year, where I no longer needed any helpers or support staff. In September 1992, a new Head of Sixth Form arrived (Mr Reilly) and I started the new vocational Intermediate GNVQ course proper, where I received lessons in two subject areas - business studies and health and social care (these lessons actually began in November after the 'introductory' work had finished). Tewkesbury School was one of the few schools in the country piloting the new GNVQ and it was entirely assessed by coursework with no final exams at the end (though there were a few tests in which the pass mark was 80%). I also began a GCSE course in social science. I still continued with maths but it took a 'back seat' during my final year - I was mainly aiming to improve my further maths grade and learn the statistics part of the syllabus. In November, I managed to join a party of lower sixth formers on a residential school journey (Monday to Friday) to Snowdonia (in North Wales), where we did things like canoeing, orienteering, walking along the gorge, sleeping rough (in a 'bivvy') and climbing to the top of Snowdonia (when we got to the top, it was bitterly cold and covered in snow). (The only mishap on this trip was when I was placed with two girls for the orienteering - I was given a good telling off for straying away and generally not doing what I had been asked to do, but they ensured that there was at least one boy in my group for the remaining activities of the trip.) I even got to interview Mr Walsh about his life history as part of my health and social care course, the following month.

In the spring term of 1993, I obtained a C in a mock further maths paper and continued to get good marks in the coursework required for the other subjects (those for social science included a 'personal research' - mine was on 'Social background still heavily influences educational achievement'). In my final term, I wrote a very long essay entitled 'History of education in England and Wales' for health and social care - it ran to more

than 18,000 words and the teacher (Mr Dixon, head of history) gave me the unusual accolade of an 'A+'. (I was then fascinated by the evolution of our education system, e.g. the 1944 Education Act giving rise to the 'eleven plus' and the tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools - Mr Walsh went to a technical school). I found that I had three exams in two days in the month of June - the first further maths paper was on the afternoon of the 22nd June, and the second further maths paper clashed with the GCSE social science paper the following afternoon, so I decided to get the further maths out of the way in the following morning. After my exams, I still had two or three weeks to finish my GNVQ work before I finished school. (I finally left on Wednesday 14th July.) On the whole, I enjoyed my final year at school (there were hardly any problems) - it was seen as a good preparation for the degree course at the local college of higher education, starting in the autumn. (As I had already achieved the requirement of a D and E at 'A' level - I was given an unconditional acceptance.)

In my exams in the summer of 1993, I upgraded my 'A' level further maths to a B grade (once again as the only candidate) - I also achieved a B grade in GCSE social science, despite the exam clashes. And I passed the Intermediate GNVQ (in health and social care), so I got the equivalent of another four GCSE passes at grade C. Everybody was very pleased of me and Tewkesbury School gave me a 'special achievement award' (their top prize) just after I left (which was another book token).

First Degree

In October of that year, I started a three-year BSc Mathematics with Computing degree course at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education. Before I started there, I had to choose a 'major' and a 'minor' subject - maths was my 'major' subject and computing my 'minor' subject. This degree course was very different from school in that it was a modular course, divided into 30 modules or five modules per semester (half-year). I had to do two computing modules per semester for my first and second years, though in my final year, I was allowed to specialise entirely in mathematics. Some of the computing modules required me to write programs using yet another programming language - Turbo C++. In my final year, I had to do a major project (worth a double module - 20% of my final year marks). For my major project, I chose the rather new topic of fractals (which I found highly fascinating), and I not only wrote a big report about it but also wrote some computer programs that drew some of these fractal images, which included the Dragon curve and Julia and Mandelbrot sets. Unlike 'A' levels at school, which was assessed entirely by exams, the assessment for my degree course was mostly by coursework assignments (including some group work), with only a few traditional exams or tests involved. This made it possible to predict my likely degree classification a few months in advance.

I had a few helpers ('mentors') during my time there in order to offer support and take notes (as I would have felt very isolated). I enjoyed the 'monster library' there with its thousands of books (and I still do so now) - I particularly enjoyed reading the books from the education section, learning how schools and the education system used to be like in the past. Another plus was that the youth club for people with learning difficulties that I was a member of during the 1990s (called the 'Shaftesbury Club') was based at this college!

I generally enjoyed my time at college (there were few problems). In the summer of 1996, I graduated with first class honours in Mathematics with Computing and I was absolutely chuffed when I received my result. More than made up for the disappointment in the football when we were beaten by Germany on penalties yet again, this time in the Euro 96 semi-final. My overall mark was 71% - so I only just made the top degree classification! Of the 30 modules that I took over the three years, not one of them was graded below a 2:1 (or 60%) - and this includes the eight modules in computing, so I more than made up for my U in 'AS' computing (Mr Glazier had better read this!). My maths tutor (Neville Mozley) even put me down for a prize (in view of my autism) - but I didn't get one that time! I had an excellent graduation ceremony in November of that year - the college recorded it all on video and we bought a copy of it for posterity.

Open University

After I graduated (or just before), my maths tutors recommended that I do a Master's degree with the Open University (OU) next (a taught course with no projects or dissertations). As it was normally too late to start the course in February 1997, I had to wait until the following year. In the meantime, I did a third year undergraduate maths module (Complex Analysis) with the OU in 1997, and didn't do too well in it - I only got a grade 3 (a 2:2 mark), since the OU placed much more emphasis on exams rather than coursework (different to what I've been accustomed to at college).

In February 1998, I officially started the Master of Science (MSc) in Mathematics course (a proper postgraduate degree - not to be confused with the undergraduate MMath degrees offered by some universities), which required me to pass six modules. I decided to take it easy and do one module a year (in case I find it too difficult), and yes, I did actually manage to achieve the MSc degree in December 2003 without requiring any resits.

I enjoyed my six years studying for this qualification (which required a First or a 2:1). The maths was a lot more challenging than what I encountered at undergraduate level since, for example, at postgraduate level one has to show a deeper understanding. Study with the OU is more time consuming than at conventional universities for most people - I had to read all the course materials and be my own lecturer.

I normally spent two days a week on my maths. I normally did other things on other days of the week (in order to pursue my other interests and avoid isolation). Since March 1999, I have attended a centre at Gloucestershire Group Homes (for autistic people) in Nailsworth once a week and now go there twice a week. Since May 2000, I have also attended a learning centre for people with learning difficulties in Gloucester called 'Look Forward', normally every Monday. I am unable to take up normal employment due to my condition (e.g. inability to live independently or communicate with strangers). I had even been classified as 80% disabled!

My six modules were (in chronological order):- Analytic Number Theory I, Non-linear Ordinary Differential Equations, Matrix Groups, Fractal Geometry, Coding Theory and Applied Complex Variables. I had to pass each module by obtaining at least 40% in both the coursework element (four assignments) and the examination (taken in October). Each examination was three hours (I had an extra half hour due to my disabilities) and for the last four modules, I have managed to sit these exams at Tewkesbury School.

My overall mark was 75% (90% for the coursework and 61% for the exams), which was about par for the course. This degree is unclassified (i.e. no grades, just pass or fail), perhaps reflecting its difficulty compared to undergraduate degrees. I found the exams were a lot harder than the assignments since I had to tackle the long and searching questions in three and a half hours rather than seven or eight weeks. Of my six modules, I found that Fractal Geometry was the most interesting - I achieved 81% in the exam. I thoroughly enjoyed my graduation ceremony in April 2004 - as a master's graduate, I got to wear a blue gown, which made me feel a bit like Superman!

I am still undecided about what I plan to study next since I do not yet fully understand what a PhD involves - it is very different to what I have done before since it involves doing one 'monster project'! I am currently taking a break from maths for the time being, and doing other things that interest me.

So, despite not being able to have the opportunity to take GCSE Science or even GCSE Physics, I am now *Master of Science!!!*

My Achievements In A Nutshell

J1 to 'A' level Maths in Seven Years! Truly amazing!

Out of J1 like a rocket - hit the maths road to stardom! Collected maths certificates like other boys collected scouts badges - GCSE and 'A' level a year early, then 'S' level and 'A' level Further Maths (won a special Tewkesbury School Prize on two occasions - was also in the front page of the Echo twice), then First Class Honours and now Master's degree. Brownie points also in athletics - won both the senior boys' 400m and 1500m in the Gloucestershire inter-special school athletics in July 1990 (won the 1500m again the following year). And won a camera and £200 for Alderman Knight for the phrase "British potatoes make the most of a meal because like Britannia they rule the Vitamin C's" at the age of 12. No one in the world can beat that when they have been to a school for those with severe learning difficulties!

Supremely successful at being Peter Pan - never voted, never bought alcohol or drunk alcohol in public, never driven a car or motorcycle, never had a girlfriend, never gambled, never smoked, never been in a nightclub, never had a credit card, never left home, never watched a '15' or '18' rated film in a cinema, this list goes on. I would rather 'disgo' than 'disco'! I am strongly of the school of thought that if a particular activity involved minimum age restrictions, I wouldn't enjoy it anyway as people usually had the most fun when they were children. For example, I would like to see marriage abolished - it seems to ruin the lives of some people. Just a single failure though: I had to leave school when I was 19.

Pity about the slipping record though - in Mr Walsh's Book on no fewer than eight occasions!

Postscript

As I was studying for my master's degree, I heard that Gloucestershire County Council were planning to close Alderman Knight School and other special schools for those with mild learning difficulties in the county, and integrate their pupils 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 website. 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, for example, the requirement 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.

Final Word

Even that waiting area has now long since gone! Has Mrs Hendon still kept any of my old star books? I've improved so much that those star books could be of use to help save the school!