

WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

Broadcaster and author **Simon Mayo** has more experience of how secondary education can vary than most of us...

In 1970, things were looking pretty good really, educationally speaking. I'd spent a happy few years at St John's Primary in Croydon and, having passed my 11+, was all ready to take up a place at John Ruskin, the local grammar. I wasn't a particularly high flier, but I enjoyed school (a gold star reader I'll have you know) and looking forward to the next stage of the journey.

However, my father was a head teacher. And before I started at John Ruskin, he was offered, and accepted, a job in the West Midlands. We moved to Solihull – and if there were such a thing as a voodoo doll representing the LEA there at the time, I'd still be sticking pins in it, because they absolutely refused to recognise the 11+ I'd taken, insisting that I sit for theirs instead. I did. And I failed.

I understand that Arden High School in Knowle is now a thriving academy. Back then, I'm afraid, it was an archetypal secondary modern of its time, and little more than a dumping ground for children who'd been judged as hopeless cases by the age of eleven. I spent the first term of my secondary school career there, and it was a time of abject misery for me. I have no good memories of that place at all, and even now the thought of setting foot back in one of those grim buildings chills my blood a little. When I needed a picture of glumness for my last book, I gave *Itch* some of my memories from this time and it worked a treat.

My parents fought long and hard to get the LEA to change its mind about accepting the original 11+ result, but the authority wouldn't budge, and so my mother found a teaching job in order to bring in enough extra money to send me to Solihull School, which was independent. Things definitely improved from this point, and when we moved again, three years later, I was able to join the grammar school in Worthing, which soon after became a comprehensive. I'm not sure too many other people can claim to have experienced so many versions of a UK state education in one lifetime.

Chopping and changing schools doesn't make settling in easy. Decades later, I still get an uneasy feeling around the time of the start of each new academic year – there's a certain turn in the weather and shift in the atmosphere



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SIMON MAYO HAS WORKED ON BBC RADIO SINCE 1981 AND IS NOW THE PRESENTER OF DRIVETIME ON BBC RADIO 2, WHICH FEATURES THE RADIO 2 BOOK CLUB. HIS DEBUT CHILDREN'S BOOK, *ITCH*, FOLLOWS THE ADVENTURES OF A SCIENCE LOVING 14-YEAR-OLD BOY WHOSE DISCOVERY OF A NEW ELEMENT TAKES HIM ON A THRILLING ADVENTURE AND PUTS HIS LIFE IN REAL DANGER. *ITCH* (CORGI, £6.99) WAS SHORTLISTED FOR THE SPECSAVERS BRITISH BOOK AWARDS. THE SEQUEL, *ITCH ROCKS* (DOUBLEDAY, £10.99), WAS PUBLISHED IN FEBRUARY.

that recalls the insecurity that came with every 'fresh start' back then; knowing that friendship groups would already have been established, and wondering how things would be done differently. I always seemed to be, in the words of the Eagles, the New Kid In Town.

I don't want to make it my secondary education sound like a Dickensian tale of gloom and doom, though, because it wasn't. I may have been slightly on the edge of things, but apart from at Arden, there were plenty of good times – I enjoyed getting involved backstage with drama productions at Worthing sixth form college, and can still remember my special effects cues for *King Lear*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Crucible*. Academically, you could say that I was a late developer, I suppose, getting average O level results; two Bs and a C at A level; and then a solid 2.1 in history and politics from the University of Warwick.

It's interesting, seeing the system a second time round through our kids (Ben, the eldest, finishes at University this year; Natasha is currently on a gap year; and Joe is 13), as well as from the perspective of family members who are headteachers – not just my parents, but my sister, and my wife's father, too (we're a family that's steeped in education; I would have been a teacher as well if I hadn't got a job with BBC Radio Nottingham before starting my PGCE). I've visited many schools in order to talk about *Itch* and *Itch Rocks*, my children's books with their geeky, somewhat

outcast, 14-year-old hero – whom my elder son has concluded is probably me – and I was even invited to speak at a Solihull School speech day, which was one of the most surreal experiences of my life.

Overall, the impression I get is that things have definitely changed, and largely for the better. There's more choice for parents now, and although there are still some excellent grammars around, I don't see children being marked as successes or failures because of how they perform in a single exam when they're 11. And if I really had to, I might even go back and visit Arden if I were invited, despite the fact that the mere idea terrifies me. Just to confirm that it, too, is not the school it used to be.