

All teachers great and small

Teaching may have changed a lot in the last 25 years, but the humour, pathos and little victories Andy Seed recalls from his time as an NQT illustrate why it was, and still is, a priceless profession...

Twenty-five years ago, newly qualified teacher Andy Seed moved to a remote village in the Yorkshire Dales with his wife Barbara, anticipating breathtaking views the gentle simplicity of the countryside.

The picturesque scenery did not disappoint, but life as a primary school teacher was anything but simple.

In his new book, *All Teachers Great and Small*, Andy tells the story of his first year at Cragthwaite Primary School – how he bravely negotiated the vagaries of the local dialect, made disastrous bids to provide a family home, naively and hilariously tried out new-fangled

ideas in a school stuck in a 1950s time warp, and ultimately discovered a little part of England he was proud to call home.

This story, which is taken from the opening of his book, describes a particularly muggy summer's day, and some of the inspired, alarming, inert, dynamic, unaware and wonderful children Andy had the pleasure of teaching.

Sylvia

They sat together but were worlds apart. The first child, a girl of eight, was prim and demure. Her pleated skirt was crisp, her hair meticulously tied back and her shoes shining. She was called Sylvia Hammond.

The boy next to her was a year older and considerably larger. His face, glowing with perspiration, was a conglomeration of freckles, snot and mud. The torn knee of his trousers bumped involuntarily against his desk and he squirmed with unbridled energy, chewing at black fingernails and frowning powerfully. He could no longer hold his silence.

'Mr Seed, it's too 'ot in here and this book's boring.'

'Barney, will you please put your hand up if you have something to say.'

I couldn't deny it, though. The June sun streaming in through the large windows made the classroom stifflingly warm. I was

reading a story but only half of the twenty-four children were listening. All of them looked hot and uncomfortable; a few were yawning. It had been a long day. I closed the book and took pity.

'I tell you what, Class Three, since you all look so tired, shall we go outside and have a little game?' There was a cheer accompanied by a sudden alertness.

'Can we play rounders?' a voice called out.

'No, not that sort of game – I meant like a thinking game, sitting in a circle.' There was a groan.

'I know!' Barney's hand shot up. 'What about British Bulldog?' This time I frowned. ▶



A couple of minutes later the class was assembled in a large circle on the cool grass under the chestnut tree outside the classroom. Instinctively, all of them began picking at the grass and daisies.

'Now, who has a sensible suggestion for a quiet game we can play sitting down?' A hand went up right away. It was Sylvia's.

'Can we play "guess the famous person"? And can I go first? I've thought of one already.'

'An excellent idea.' Sylvia had plenty of those. She was a mature girl, and someone I'd found that I could rely on throughout the year.

'Can I whisper it to you, Mr Seed? Then you can help me if you need to.'

'OK, that's a very sensible thought, Sylvia.' I moved a few paces away from the circle of children and leant in her

direction. Sylvia cupped her hands, craned towards my ear and spat in it.

'Ooo, sorry Mr Seed.'

'Never mind, Sylvia, I'm sure it was an accident,' I said, applying a hankie. 'Now who's your famous person?'

'It's Hururr Thate.'

'Who's Hururr Thate?'

'What?'

'You said Hururr Thate.'

'I didn't.'

'Sorry Sylvia, you'll have to whisper a bit louder.'

'It's Henry VIII.'

'Oh, right – great idea. The others'll know him from our Tudors topic.' I returned to the circle with Sylvia, relieved that I didn't have to adjudicate on Hururr Thate.

The waiting children were now stretched out on the ground and busy with ants, whistling grass and daisy chains. Fergus had obtained a worm.

'Right, everybody, put everything down and sit up.' They were reluctant, but did so. 'This is how the game works. Sylvia's thought of a famous person and you all have to guess who it is. You can ask her questions, but she can only answer "yes" or "no". We've played this game before, back in the Autumn Term, if you remember.' I certainly remembered it – an endless succession of pop stars. There were a few hazy nods. Sylvia smiled a lot.

'Is it a man?' blurted out Eve.

'Hands up please, or it'll be chaos.' I turned towards Sylvia, who quickly responded.

'Yes, it's a man.'

Nathan's hand went up.

'Is he British?'

'Yes,' said Sylvia, still smiling.

Carol was next.

'Do you know him?'

Sylvia giggled. 'No.'

Malcolm's hand went up.

'Does he play music?'

This time Sylvia looked towards me for guidance. I nodded, recalling that Henry had been very musical, amongst his many other interests.

'Yes,' she said. Suddenly, about fifteen hands shot in the

air. I pointed to Barney.

'George Michael!' He looked at Sylvia expectantly. She had her hand in front of her mouth, but her eyes were clearly laughing.

'Er, no.' I pointed at a succession of other hopefuls.

'Elton John?'

'No.'

'David Bowie?'

'No.'

'Michael Jackson?'

'No – he's American anyway, you div.'

After another five similar names, I intervened. 'I think you need to stop guessing who it is, and ask some questions to find out something about the person.' Barney's hand went up. 'Is he in the charts at the moment?' Well, at least it was a start. More hands were raised.

'Does he play guitar?'

'No.'

'Drums?'

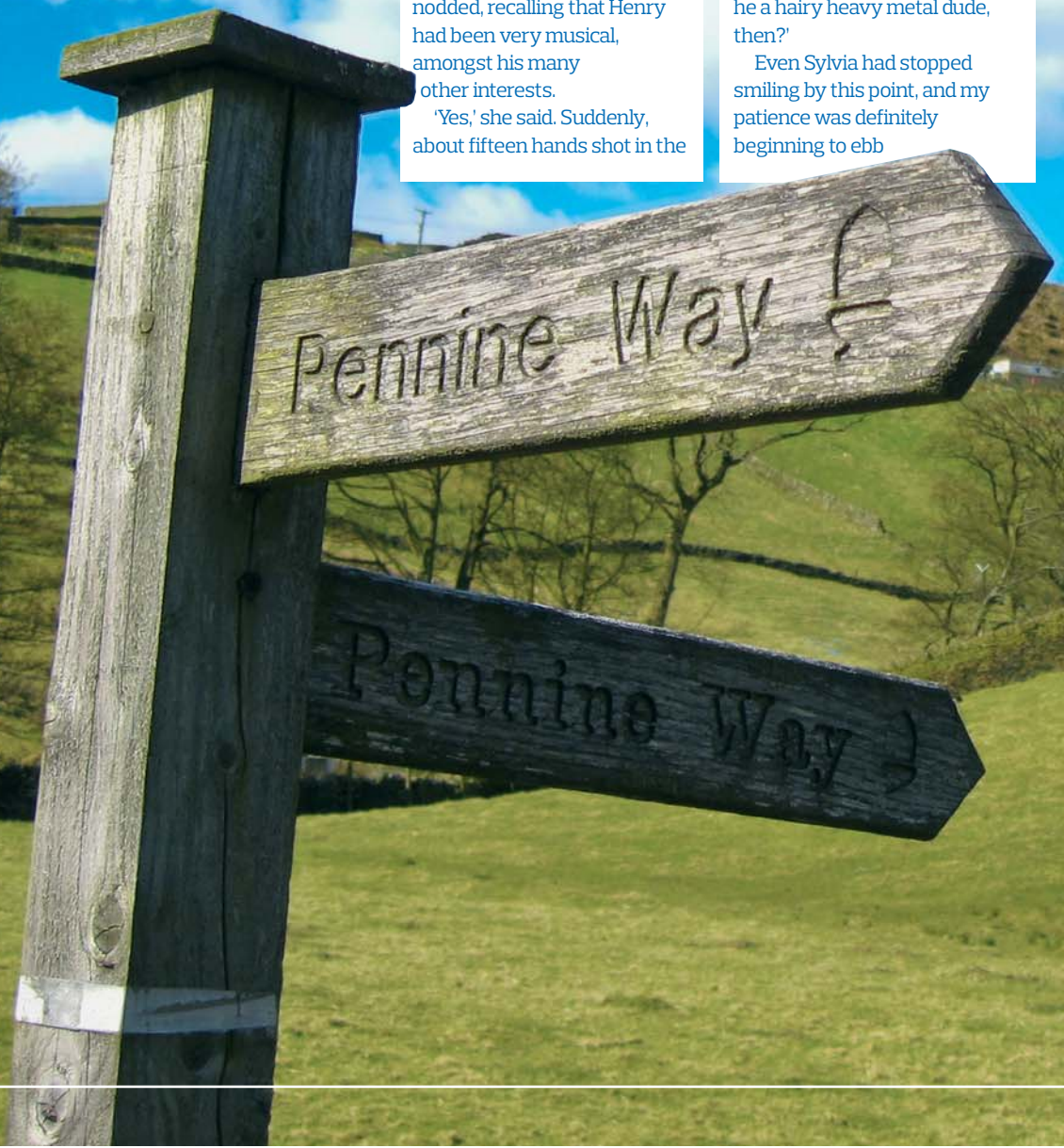
'No.'

'I know – synthesiser!'

'No.'

Barney had another try. 'Is he a hairy heavy metal dude, then?'

Even Sylvia had stopped smiling by this point, and my patience was definitely beginning to ebb



'Look, you haven't learnt anything about him at all,' I said. 'You don't even know if he's alive.' George lifted his arm.

'Is he alive?'

'No.'

There was an undercurrent of muttering at this point, then Jack proffered an answer.

'John Lennon?'

Sylvia's shake of the head brought more grumbling from the children, who had by now slouched back on to the grass. Eve spoke again.

'Can't we 'ave a clue – we're getting nowhere.' It was a very good suggestion: I looked at Sylvia, who responded right away.

'Forget about the music and find out when he was alive.' Good clue. Anita was the first to act on it.

'Did he die this year?'

'No.'

Terry followed up quickly.

'Did he die last year?'

'No.'

I coughed; Isaac raised a hand very slowly, his face creased with thought.

'Did he 'ave glasses?'

No.'

I stepped in again.

'Think much further back in time, and try to find out what his job was.'

There was a pause and then Hugh signalled to speak.

'Was he a Victorian?' Ah, this was better, and Sylvia tried to make her 'no' sound encouraging. Barney, clearly frustrated, had another go.

'Was he a footballer?'

'No.'

'Was he a politician?' said Rose.

'Errr, not quite.' Sylvia was beginning to get enthusiastic again. I looked at the ragged ring of children. Most of them had given up long ago, but my eyes landed on Hugh. I could see that his mind was working hard on this, and he looked like he was clearly on the scent. Biting his lip, he raised a hand once more.

'Was . . . was he a member of the royal family?'

'Yes! Yes!' Sylvia began to jiggle with excitement. Hugh kept his hand in the air and continued.

'Was he a king?'

Yes, yes, he was!

Suddenly, from nowhere, Barney exploded forward from the ground, lifting his whole body with a leap of

Who'd be a teacher?

TWO MOMENTS FROM ANDY'S TEACHING CAREER THAT WOULDN'T HAPPEN IN ANY OTHER JOB...

HURRAH FOR SEWAGE!

Following a class visit to a water treatment works I crazily decided that we'd build a working model of a sewage farm. After hours of work, filthy water was emptied into a tank and the class avidly watched its slow progress through plastic tubes and filters, spontaneously breaking out into applause when clear-ish water emerged at the bottom. The moment was somewhat tempered, however, when a girl drank the collecting pot.

DAWSON'S PEAK

I recall a skinny little boy called Michael joining Reception aged 4. He had two older brothers in the juniors who were excellent footballers and Michael joined in with their games at playtime even though he never got a touch of the ball. His amazing determination to succeed saw him get into the school team when he was just 7, however, and today Michael Dawson is captain of Spurs in the Premier League and an England International.

revelation, and thrust a finger towards Sylvia.

'I've got, I've got it – Elvis!'

Sylvia's patience ran out soon after this and she told them the answer, which produced groans of disappointment. Several children turned around, expecting me to tell them what to do next. They had to wait: I was hiding behind my hankie, wiping my eyes and picturing Bluff King Hal wooing Anne Boleyn at Hampton Court with 'You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog'.

This was what I faced every day as a new teacher with my own class: a society of extraordinary individuals who were by turns crazy, inspired, alarming, inert, dynamic, unaware and wonderful. Their capacity for misunderstanding was only exceeded by their enthusiasm and ability to leave me incredulous. No college training, manual, advice or indeed anything could have prepared me for moments like this. I loved it.

Find out more

All Teachers Great and Small by Andy Seed is published by Headline (headline.co.uk, ISBN 978-0-7553-6212-7, hardback, £14.99).

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ANDY SEED | AUTHOR AND TEACHER