

“Egged on by a battery of critics” / Guardian / October 12 1990



Mark Piggott ... made tea drinking

Authority figure to the pupils, argumentative slob to the teachers, mini-Hitler to the youth workers... the schoolkeeper has an image problem, as Mark Piggott discovered

You know why it's called an alarm clock when it goes off at five in the morning. You lie, stunned, knowing that if you don't get up the cleaners will be locked out in the rain, and life won't be worth living. You just have time to dress in the dark before shivering your way down to the bus stop. When you get to work you have to unlock the gates, the door and the alarm door, and turn off the alarm before it goes off down at the local nick. It's not easy being a schoolkeeper.

I discovered all this and more as a temporary assistant schoolkeeper at a large London comprehensive. To the kids, the schoolkeeper is just another figure of authority, telling them not to write on the walls or set light to the teachers. But imagine school without us. It's our job to keep the school safe, clean, warm and secure. Every morning while the kids slumber on we're cleaning the toilets, emptying the bins and sweeping the yard. If we stopped for just one week, perhaps they wouldn't treat us with such contempt.

But it isn't just the kids. To the teachers we're seen as difficult, argumentative slobs, who'd sooner read the tabloids and eat bacon butties than do any work (well, who wouldn't?) To the youth workers we're mini-Hitlers, corrupting the youth with our bigoted views. To the people who come in for evening classes we seem like petty, small-time jail wardens, jangling keys and refusing to let them use classrooms. But when you've been at work for 12 hours already, the prospect of another three watching the kids from the youth centre destroying the building doesn't always make you a model of sweetness and light.

Some of the jobs we had to do I would not wish on any of you. One weekend the freezer in the biology lab was accidentally switched off. So by Monday morning all the things you get in biology labs - the rats, bulls' eyeballs and cows' lungs- were rotting and had to be disposed of. Guess who did it?

A popular myth is that when the kids are on holiday, so are the schoolkeepers. I wish it were true, but in reality the holidays are the time when every corridor, gym, theatre and classroom gets scrubbed. Twice.

It's not all gloom of course. You don't have to eat the school dinners. There are no detentions. And for the head schoolkeeper there's the real perk - your own little house. The little house at our school was a concrete bunker under the dining room. As our schoolhouse was right opposite the local estate where most of our trouble makers come from, no wonder it was designed like a bunker.

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Our new schoolkeeper, unimpressed by threats of windows broken and worse, had his own deterrent to would-be offenders - two Rottweilers. “One of these days,” he would growl in the mess room, “I’ll be over that estate with me dogs.”

What exactly he would do over the estate with his dogs remained unclear. We just nodded agreement into our tea.

This is the best perk of being a schoolkeeper: drinking gallons of tea. If you don’t like tea, forget it. There’s something in the very fabric of the mess room that induces manic tea drinking, and the afore-mentioned butty eating and tabloid reading on a heroic scale. The mess is the only refuge for the schoolkeeper; woe betide any teacher or pupil who ventures within.

We must have had a certain grudging respect from the kids though. On the last day of term, as in most schools, we were the target for sustained egg pelting. The kids were all out and the doors locked. We were told that every egg thrown must be mopped up straight away, as to do it when dry is almost impossible. So every time an egg was thrown the doors were unlocked and I was dispatched with a bucket of hot water to clear it up. Apart from the humiliation, there was the very real risk of being egged myself. To this day I do not know why no one egged me, but if any of you are reading this, thanks.

Ends

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