



40 years of Brown Rigg School

## **Brown Rigg the Final Chapter.....or maybe not!**

In 1984 came the shock news that Brown Rigg School was to be closed, the Northumberland Education Committee, who ran the place, being unwilling to spend the £1.2 million required to bring the school up to the required standard for a modern facility. This was a great shock to both pupils and staff alike, many of whom had come to regard Brown Rigg as a second home and their fellow pupils as an extended family.

To make matters worse, the closure was a long, slow process, with the school being gradually wound down and by the final term, there were only a few pupils left and in place of the lively chatter and banter, the school took on an eerie, ghostly quietness which was very upsetting for those who were left. As one pupil described it, "When we heard about the closure, we were shocked and upset. There were some of us who had to stay on to sit exams but the rest were to be distributed around the county, some going to board at Haydon Bridge while the others were sent to day schools. The news attracted much media attention, it was in all the local newspapers and a TV film crew came to do a piece and filmed us in our dorms and around the grounds". There was also a mass meeting of the school's 42 employees who attempted to show the Education Authority the error of their ways but, sadly, money spoke louder than words.

1984 began as normal and the lessons and activities carried on, they all knew that the school's time was short but made the best of it. Some pupils left after the Easter term and Mr. Maine took over from Mr. Walton as Headmaster, the strain of the closure taking a toll on the man who had overseen Brown Rigg for almost 20 years. The few pupils who were left found themselves with time on their hands as lessons were wound down. They kept busy tidying up the dormitories, stripping the beds; cleaning out lockers and helping the domestic staff stack up desks and chairs. The farm animals were sold off, all the pigs, ducks, (and hens which had guaranteed the school canteen a regular supply of fresh eggs!) as were the horses from the riding school which the pupils had enjoyed grooming and caring for, in addition to riding out over the fells, and their paddock fell empty and silent.

Leaving Brown Rigg was a traumatic time for many of the pupils, as one commented, "I hated my last day, I was upset and scared of having to go to a new school. Brown Rigg had changed my life, I loved it there and I would miss it. But that part of my life was at an end and there was no chance of ever going back. There are always questions that cannot be answered; I can never understand why Brown Rigg, such a successful school, was closed. It was a landmark, Brown Rigg was a special place and will always remain so, my two years there were the best and happiest of my life".

And so Brown Rigg School closed its doors and went into virtual hibernation, unused and, it seemed, unwanted. Long grass and weeds grew on the once pristine centre lawn; the buildings became run down and semi derelict with wooden slats missing and the shutters hanging off. Eventually, the Northumberland National Park authorities ordered the demolition of several of the dormitories and the classroom block and it looked like the end of the road for a place that had been a unique trailblazer in education and played such a significant part in people's lives.

But the story of Brown Rigg wasn't completely finished and a new chapter in the old school's life was about to begin when, in 1993, former pupil, John Mowatt, purchased part of the site to develop as a caravan park and what had formerly been the school's football pitch became home to tents, motorhomes and caravans, with tourists pitching up where games had once been keenly fought. The former Tyne dormitory became the site's offices and social hall, while the Mowatts turned Tweed dorm into a comfortable family home. The site has flourished and today is a magnet for tourists from all over the world.

Another significant step in Brown Rigg's renaissance has been the development of the former school science block and sick bay into a number of self catering lodges while the old assembly hall has been refurbished and converted into a function room. Morag and Richard Kent, the enthusiastic young couple behind the development, have created a superb holiday location with the lodges boasting every amenity including picnic tables so that guests (Who, inevitably, include many former school pupils) can sit outside and enjoy the superb views of the North Tyne Valley. With these wonderful developments enjoying considerable success, it looks like the Brown Rigg story is set to run and run for quite a considerable time.

Another significant chapter in the Brown Rigg story and the part it played in the lives of its pupils is the remarkable and outstanding success of the school reunions which bring hundreds of people back to Bellingham to relive those happy days. Over a weekend, they can visit their old school, wander round Bellingham village or take a trip to any number of place where, years ago, they used to hike to every Sunday. Despite the passing years, there is still a huge swell of affection for the school and the Brown Rigg reunions, which started in 1996 and are held every two years, see hordes of enthusiastic former pupils from all over the world streaming back to enjoy the sights, the scenes and the memories of a place that gave all of them **"The Happiest Days Of Their Lives"**.