



The Epsom Report

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Opinion polls are today part of the staple fare of the national press, so as an experiment, the Ep. conducted a survey at the end of the Michaelmas Term, aided and abetted by the Scouts. 337 questionnaires were sent out to all Vth and VIth formers, with questions ranging over every topic from careers to co-education; 77% were returned. Now, here is the complete analysis of the results, which have already been given a hearing by the XVI Club. I hope that the comments are reasonably objective, and that cold, hard statistics will help to confirm or destroy some common rumours. According to Carlyle, "a witty statesman said, you might prove anything by figures." I shall be well satisfied if we have managed to prove just a few.

The first group of questions dealt with family background, from which it was established that 10% of parents live overseas, and 37% of boys have or had brothers at Epsom. For comparison, we took an equivalent sample of boys fifty years ago — with some interesting results. The proportion of boys whose fathers are doctors, for example, has dropped from 70% to 42%. The ratio is even lower in day-houses where, incidentally, there are more businessmen's sons than in any of the boarding houses. One comforting fact, perhaps is that whereas in 1920 only 1 boy in 17 was the son of an O.E., the ratio has now risen to 1 in 7.

Work and the academic curriculum were the main subjects of the next series of questions. In answer to the question, "How often do you use the school library?" 59% (perhaps rather disconcerting) answered "Seldom", although only 5% never use the facilities. Possibly the proportions from house to house indicate how difficult it is to work in each! Certainly, arts students use school library facilities far more frequently than scientists — 57% of all arts students "regularly" against 32% of all scientists. Understandable, of course, since their subjects probably demand more research than science. Far fewer people were found to use their house libraries "regularly" — perhaps an indictment of house librarians — and far more "never". House libraries are intended to provide more fiction and paperbacks than the school library, and this probably explains why dayboys tend to use them less. They have far more opportunity to use local libraries, buy paperbacks from further afield, or just watch the TV instead.

Suggestions for extra school subjects came thick and fast, including almost every language from Polish to Vietnamese, a host of technical accomplishments like cooking, dancing, knitting, practical plumbing and tax evasion, and many, more intriguing topics such as witchcraft, civilization, and even occult lore and astrology instead of divinity. The top ten, in the following order were sex education (including sex manners, sex at 'S' level, V.D. information and co-educational group therapy), economics, ethics, philosophy, psychology, Spanish, metalwork, politics, Chinese and engineering.

Results for the questions about careers were somewhat alarming. All of the boys in the sample were over 15, most were over 16, and nearly 60% of them have not taken any careers guidance — whether because they have decided already, are not sufficiently interested or have not been given enough opportunity. There is very little difference between houses, or between science and arts students. Although, to be fair, the percentage answering "yes" was higher in the older age bracket, one brief careers lecture for new VIth formers does not really seem enough, and the gap often has to be filled by advice from housemasters.

CAREERS & THE CURRICULUM

One of the most controversial subjects in the questionnaires was that of religion, but the results may surprise many. Just over half of the sample were Confirmed, and the drop-out rate among these (i.e. the percentage of lapsed communicants) was no more than 17%, a situation which, while not ideal, is probably better than the national average. 82% take communion at least once a month and obviously, corporate communion as an occasional alternative to mattins has had a large effect here.

In the answers to the questions on voluntary chapel, predictably, the largest single group was in favour of completely voluntary services (42%), but they were in fact outnumbered by those who want some element of compulsory worship — not necessarily seven days a week. An equal proportion, for instance, would like chapel to be compulsory on Sundays and voluntary during the week, and this middle-of-the-road course was emphasised in the other questions: 57% would come at least once a month to Sunday chapel (24% would come every week) and 53% would come at least two or three times a week. For dayboys, however, compulsory Sunday chapel is obviously the chief bugbear: far more of them wanted voluntary services on Sundays, and would attend less frequently than boarders on Sundays.

The final question in this group was, "Would you like to see more services conducted by boys?" Many were not bothered either way but those who were, were strongly against. Of course, the introduction of house prayers may have discouraged interest in "student participation" within the Chapel walls, but one suspects that most of those opposed would just rather not be involved: they fear embarrassment, are not keen to take responsibility for the standard achieved, and prefer their role of reluctant audience.

Significantly, far fewer people want voluntary games than voluntary chapel, and the majority (71%) are in favour of compulsory sport two or three times a week — only a very slight modification of the present system. About two thirds of the school, moreover, regard sport as an important part of their education, if only, as one person wrote, as "a vital recreation in between hard work". Answers to subsequent questions revealed that winter major sports (rugger, hockey) are more popular than those played in the summer, like cricket and athletics. Favourite minor sports for the Lent Term are squash, golf, swimming, cross-country and fencing in descending order of popularity; for the summer, tennis, golf, swimming, sailing and squash. Thus, overall, golf is the most popular minor sport played at Epsom at present. For the discontented, there was a chance to suggest some new sports. Predictably, soccer stood out well in the lead with over a hundred supporters, followed by basketball, badminton and judo. The aficionados of curling, motor-racing, ten-pin bowling, yoga, snake-catching and tiddlywinks will have to go elsewhere for their recreation.

Closely related to how people spend their afternoons were the questions on how they spend their Wednesday afternoons in particular. A higher proportion than might be imagined still belong to the CCF (including the RAF). Scouts, Social Service, and the Estates Group combined account for less than one fifth of the total. Exactly half the CCF are "conscripts"; the remainder are members either because they find it quite enjoyable (22%), or because they can find no preferable alternative (27%). One jaded individual crossed out "enjoyable" and substituted "hilarious"; another, reflecting the views of a large number, said that it was "quite enjoyable at camps." What we were trying to find out was why so many people — who claim they dislike the CCF — remain members even after their term of service is over? One person gave a possible answer: "too lazy to get out": the onus of obtaining discharge rests on each individual, and many prefer not to take the trouble. A more disturbing reason is that there are no satisfactory alternatives available to some 54 people. Making the CCF voluntary, as the vast majority wish, would not help them, and they may be one answer to why (despite widespread dissatisfaction with the CCF) its rivals do not significantly grow in size. The prospect is not improved by the shortage of new suggestions: there were no fewer than 102 requests for more sport of one kind or another, including football and "ordinary games". Some of the more novel ideas included Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes, life-saving and first-aid of various sorts; metalwork, more time for societies to organise outings, etc., a full-time theatre group, and driving lessons. Among the more basic suggestions were pleas for "legal meetings with Sutton High", free days and time to "recuperate, read Punch and sleep", while one boy, confronted with this question, enigmatically wrote, "You bet".

We next asked a few questions to help ourselves. The most popular sections of the Ep are apparently, in descending order, literary contributions, reviews and reports, house notes, sport and societies. Those who find the present Ep "interesting" like house notes best, but those who find it boring prefer literary contributions. Which only goes to prove the adage about pleasing none of the people all of the time. Asked for what they would like to see more of, it became clear that most readers want to see more illustrations and more general writing (original contributions, articles, interviews, etc.) at the expense of official reportage — and several wrote, "Less sports coverage". A balance must obviously be struck between the Ep.'s duties to stimulate and entertain, and to record for posterity.

Just about half the sample were satisfied with the amount of spare time they get, another 44% would like more; a tiny blackleg minority think they have too much already! But how do people spend their spare time? About 60% take part in extra-curricular activities organised by the school; playing a musical instrument, choir, art, pottery, acting and carpentry. The proportion of musicians (33% of the whole sample) is commendably high but the other activities are on the whole minority interests — catering for 20% or less of the total. There are roughly twice as many arts students as scientists engaged in these pursuits.

On the other hand, scientists seem to be rather more "clubable" than their literary and linguistic colleagues; the proportion of arts students belonging to no society at all is 11% higher than among science students, and there is a slightly higher quota of scientists belonging to four societies or more. As far as the society scene goes we found 25 extant; of these 6 have elective membership (the "prestige" societies) and their size is accordingly small. Of the "open" societies, the Cinema Society is the real giant with 105 members, followed by the N.H.S. (70), the Medical (51), and the Science (43). Altogether, there are only 6 societies with 20 members or more. There are two looking very sick with under 10 members apiece, and a third, the Fascist Society, which boasts only one member — presumably President, Secretary and Founder as well. Only 15% of the school belong to no society at all; two individuals hold the joint record with 7 societies each to their credit.

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A few people complained that no society catered for their interests, so we asked some questions about how people spend their holidays as well. Half of the school's cinema-goers took the safe course and said "occasionally" when asked how frequently they visited the local picture-palace — which must be taken as less than four times a year. 34% go once or twice every vacation. Far fewer go to the theatre more than once a year — there are obviously a lot of panto fans — and far more never go. 31% in fact do nothing in the holidays: "enjoy myself", wrote one; "have a holiday", wrote another; "sleep", wrote a third. A mere 4% claimed to take part in local activities, although a further 23% play some sort of sport, many in local clubs, thus boosting the proportion somewhat. Rather surprisingly, over half the school take a job in the holidays, although a few of them sound rather bizarre. The G.P.O. and the High Street shop-keeper rate as the top employers of labour; most of the rest find manual work of some sort, be it farming, decorating, gardening, building or just labouring. Only a handful opt for desk jobs, while there are a few who find more colourful posts: working in Christmas panto, for a local newspaper, or even as a mortuary assistant. Some must have highly entertaining holidays, like the gentleman who spends his time shooting tourists, or the blase bon viveur who wrote, "usual activities: wine, women, song, etc", while others are satisfied with more limited horizons, like the person who said, "Caddy, play golf daily, enjoy myself, spend money and relax (in Golf Club House)".

The results of the survey's brief digression into personal taste are naturally somewhat difficult to analyze, but surprisingly, the most popular category was that of "serious" books. I suppose it all depends on what you take seriously. Otherwise, science fiction and detective novels were the favourites, with short stories, historical novels and classics as runners-up. One person candidly confessed he "also likes a good porno". No surprises in the question on music, but for those still in doubt, "others" was variously defined as light music, blues, rock, folk, underground, steel guitar, West Coast, soul and cow. The last question probed at Epsom College affluence — which is generally pretty high nearly all those questioned own radios — 61% own record-players, 77% boast of cameras, and about 40% tape-recorders. And electric razors. (A select 5% owned cars). And people wonder why the Bursar has had to place a brake on electricity consumption!

THE EP

SPARE

SCHOOL

The last section of all dealt with school life in general. On the question of girls taking 'A' levels at Epsom, most people would be in favour — with some reservations. One boy apprehensively wrote, "Yes, if they can stand it", and one Forest traitor dismissed the fair sex as "too much of a distraction." He was not the only one: the house (Holman) with almost the highest percentage of boys who had taken part in any school activities with girls also voted overwhelmingly against girls taking exams at Epsom. A case of familiarity . . . ? Only a third of those who wanted to see girls at Epsom had taken part in any activities with them; so had a third of those who want to keep girls out.

In answer to the question, "Do you think houses are too strictly segregated?" the majority replied "yes", perhaps indicating a case for some relaxation of the stringent rules about visiting. Holman, however, maintaining its conservative stance, wants to continue in splendid isolation.

Accommodation may vary considerably in each house — from Wilson, where every boy has a study, to Granville, where the percentage was only 71%. The oldest boy without a study was 17.5 (Forest); the youngest with one was 15.4 (Fayrer, Wilson). In most houses, boys with studies considered them adequate; a considerable proportion of those in Fayrer (38%) and Granville (29%) found them generous, but the Forest and Holman studies would appear to be far less than adequate. The question on privacy was inevitably subjective: curiously, the problem is not necessarily related to accomodation. 30 people suffering from lack of privacy found their studies adequate, and 8 actually thought them generous! Several did think, however, that the situation was worse in the junior half of the school, and nearly all of those without studies claimed to suffer from lack of privacy.

Overall, the school are against the stick, but only by a narrow majority. Obviously, standards of discipline are not necessarily consistent throughout the school, and Crawford, Fayrer, Granville and Holman in fact voted for the retention of caning. Several qualified their answers by specifically objecting to caning by boys, but only one person considered the problem of alternative deterrents — the chief barrier to the abolition of corporal punishment.

On the last question there were, understandably, a large number of abstentions, but the majority would send their sons here! One confidently expects there to "be no Epsom College when I have a son," and we had quite a few lengthy manifestoes, giving exact reasons why people would not be sending their offspring to Epsom. One tried to lay down conditions: co-education, the admission of a quota of state-aided pupils, studies for all boarders and more autonomy for houses; another was worried about the apparent contradiction between good individual attention and "the suppression of individuality". One conclusive point emerges. In only one boarding house was there a majority of "ayes"; one person replied "not as a boarder", and it would seem that dayboys have a happier time of it than their boarding colleagues.

My thanks to Mr. Davidson-Kelly, who kindly duplicated the questionnaires; the Scouts, who assisted with the adding-up; and all those who took part in the survey. I only hope that they enjoyed filling in the answers as much as we enjoyed reading them — even the individual who ambiguously advocated "producing stupid questionnaires" as a new Wednesday afternoon activity!

M. K. Sheppard.

FROM DAY TO DAY

CONCLUSIONS

