Kimbolton School

I went to school in a large village called Kimbolton in the county of Cambridgeshire. In recent years I have been reminded of my time there by, strangely enough, the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. The first and most obvious reason is that Kimbolton is a castle school; just as Hogwarts is the castle school for Harry and his friends.

Hogwarts is of course filled with ghosts, such as Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington — better known as Nearly Headless Nick: But Kimbolton also has a reputation for being haunted and in fact lays claim to a very famous ghost. This is Katherine of Aragon — the first wife of Henry VIII. She was sent there in April 1534 after refusing to accept the legality of Henry's divorce proceedings. When I arrived there as a first year in September 1971,1 was told that her ghost was often seen — but only from the knees upwards. This, I was told, was because she walked on the original rather than the later modern floors. I am ashamed to confess that at times we set up "ghostly" tricks to scare our friends. These usually involved almost invisible fishing lines being used to "mysteriously" open and close cupboards or move chairs.

There are other comparisons to be made however. In Harry Potter's Hogwarts School there are four "houses"; Gryfinndor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and the dark house, Slytherin. The four houses being named after famous headmasters of Hogwarts' past. At Kimbolton we also had four houses named for the same reason. They were called Ingram's, Bailey's, Dawson's and Gibbard's. As I recall there were no sinister connotations with any house although probably the Slytherin equivalent was Gibbard's. At the time Gibbard's was the house for "day boys" who lived at home and travelled to school each day. The other houses were for the "borders" that lived in the castle. The dayboys were nicknamed "day bugs" and the residents were called "border bugs". I was a day bug.

There were common rooms and detentions which I suppose all schools still have. But few schools, like Kimbolton, have narrow, long corridors lined with portraits whose eyes seem to follow you round! Mind you — none of our paintings spoke to us as they sometimes do at Hogwarts! Kimbolton also has a fantastic staircase in the castle and huge murals by the Italian Rococo painter Pellegrini.

Apart from the castle, ghosts and houses there were other comparisons to Hogwarts. The teachers (who were called masters) also wore black gowns and addressed us only by our surnames. We pupils had to wear suits and ties to school and actually were not allowed to take our jackets off unless the day was exceptionally hot. But there were some fairly important differences too.

Firstly Kimbolton, at the time I was there, was a school only for boys. It has changed since, but then we had no Hermione Grangers to fight against evil with. We played football and cricket rather than Quidditch and took "O" Levels rather than OWLS. That is "Ordinary" Level exams rather than "Ordinary Wizarding Levels". But still, looking back on it all, I have to say that I, at least, thought the place was rather magical.

Both teachers and students in the narrator's school...

1. ...had to follow a certain dress code.
2. ...were dressed in school uniform.
3. ...were addressed by their surnames.
4. ...could be compared to the ones in Hogwarts.