

Icons of the school laboratory

I have few lasting memories of my school days: a field trip to Gibraltar Point on the east coast of England, where we caught and marked crickets in a hilarious attempt at mark-release-recapture; sitting on the lip of a cirque after walking up a glacial valley on the Isle of Skye in North West Scotland; a damp and foggy Duke of Edinburgh hike through the Yorkshire Dales, where I twisted my knee on some heather and ended up on crutches for a fortnight!

Not all my strongest school memories were spent outside the classroom but, looking back, the rest and probably the most vivid, all have one thing in common...the school science laboratory. Hours spent smashing up celery with a pestle and mortar to test the effects of catalase concentration on the rate of hydrogen peroxide decomposition, fiddling with apparatus to set up visking tubing for an osmosis practical, or swirling a conical flask with one hand, operating a burette with the other and going goggle-eyed wondering if the solution I was staring at was ever going to turn purple!

Most of my memories involve specific pieces of school science laboratory equipment; these iconic, and now warmly familiar, bits of kit helped to ignite my interest in science through practical work. I have put together a list of my own icons of the school science laboratory. I like to think that I am not alone with my rose-tinted (safety-spectacled!) memories of school science, so I invite you to share your own icons, memories and pictures, both old and new, via #WhatsInMyTray.

The Gratnells tray

Walking into my school's science labs to find neat rows of brightly coloured Gratnells trays full of equipment on the benches meant only one thing – a practical class! The change in mood of students entering the room was often palpable. Practical lessons were everyone's favourite, and varied hugely. Within those infinitely versatile trays, we found many other icons of the school science laboratory and that gave us some clues as to what we would be investigating. We were well trained too: at the end of every practical class we returned the equipment back to the trays and either stacked or grouped them at the back of the room, or slotted them straight into the technician's trolley ready for return to the prep room. The iconic Gratnells tray was the perfect and ever-present partner to every practical class.



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Bunsen burner

The top of everyone's list as the best thing to find in your tray, teamed with the familiar smell of the smoke from the burning spill used to light it! I'm not sure if it is the thrill of working with fire, the mesmerising lure of the yellow or blue flame, or just how wrong things can go, which give the Bunsen burner its truly iconic status!

Tripod stands

Triangular or round, often wobbly and a little soot-blackened, usually accompanied by a rusting, encrusted piece of gauze balanced on top. A nightmare to separate just one from a stack!

Boss, stand and clamp

Bringing back childhood memories of construction sets or Meccano, teamed with a happy sense of satisfaction that came with putting everything together and it not toppling over! The basis of many a Christmas Chemistree and the source of much frustration every time you had to separate the one piece you needed from a jumbled tray of metal parts.

Lab coats

Be it the scramble to get a clean one, or the joy of personalising your own, usually white but occasionally tie-dyed, few things are more synonymous with school science laboratories than a lab coat.

Van der Graaf Generator

Can make your hair stand on end, literally! Learning about static electricity was fun because of this fab piece of kit. Stand on an upturned Gratnells tray to get the best effects – its strong insulating properties will stop the electrons from reaching the ground.



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Safety specs

Often too big and usually scratched, unless you were lucky enough to get your hands on the new 'wrap around' ones, the ultimate safety accessory.

Dissection tray, tweezers and scalpel

It was such a rarity to be let loose with anything sharp at school that heart, lung and even flower dissections were a real novelty. Usually messy and always fiddly, working out how best to hold the scalpel, tiny scissors or fine tweezers while desperately trying not to cut the wrong thing!

Nitrile/latex gloves

The puff of latex powder before it was banned, either too tight or so baggy that you couldn't pick anything up. Twanging them off across the room into the bin came complete with a 100% guarantee of sweaty palms.

Microscope

Providing a view into a fascinating and otherwise unseen world. Preparing the slides, rotating the objective lenses and desperately trying to see something through the eyepiece without crashing the stage into the lens and cracking your coverslip!

Science lab technician

Usually wearing a lab coat, often spotted pushing a tray-filled trolley and highly skilled at making things work. Ever present behind the scenes, but sometimes found front and centre performing spectacular demonstrations. A true icon: no school science lab is complete without a technician at its heart.

These are just a few of our favourites. What are your icons of the school science laboratory? Share your photographs and memories with us via @gratnells and #WhatsInMyTray



Dr. Katherine Forsey,
Gratnells Learning Rooms
& STEM Consultant.