

For every fan of Grange Hill there's a defining, mind-scorching memory. Maybe it's Suzanne Ross, strolling insolently down the school corridor, decked out like a Blitz Club bopper. Or maybe it's Zammo McGuire's celebrated descent into smack addiction? Or what about when Danny Kendall, that pint-sized rebel with a cause, was found dead in the back seat of a car? It might even be the moment when – and I'm having to look this up as it was way after my time – Kevin Jenkins accidentally took a tab of acid.

Grange Hill was alive on our telly sets for three full decades; that's quite a cultural journey – from Saturday Night Fever to I Kissed a Girl, from CB radios to iTunes, from Roger Moore to Daniel Craig. At its birth it was a bracingly subversive series, a hot injection of Alan Clarke-esque social realism into a schedule dominated by jolly japes and wizard wheezes. Apart from Please Sir (whose pupils were all played by farcically obvious twentysomethings), comprehensive and secondary modern schools barely registered on the small screen. Almost certainly reflecting the privileged, fee-paid education of its commissioning editors, most schools on TV, whether on Billy Bunter or Whacko, were unapologetically private. If you were working class in the 1960s or 70s, school life on television looked as terrifyingly alien as Skaro or the moon landings.

Phil Redmond, Grange Hill's creator, was never an obvious BBC staffer. A fiery left-winger of the old school and card-carrying Scouser, he was an odd fit for the Oxbridge-fat BBC of the 1970s. But there he was, writing a series about a racially mixed secondary modern (later comprehensive) North London school for BBC1. There must have been some stiff-shirts at TV Centre who were probably muttering, "Yes, this is all very good and stuff, but isn't it a bit ITV?"

Even though that first series feels as though it's holding back on its full revolutionary zeal (Redmond called those series one storylines "Boys Own adventures"), it still manages a bold statement of intent with its very first scene. It's not Tucker Jenkins we follow through the school gates on that first day of term, but Benny Green. Ethnic representation on TV was shockingly low in the 1970s, so kicking off your series with a black kid wandering into a red-brick secondary school in North London was an incendiary a moment in children's TV as the opening chords of Pretty Vacant were in music. It's perhaps no surprise, incidentally, that Grange Hill was birthed in the wake of punk. Although Redmond was a few years older than the first wave of punk rockers, he shared Johnny Rotten and Jimmy Pursey's rabble-rousing class warrior heart.

That first series was only nine episodes long, and structured so it was essentially one story per episode. It wasn't until series two, when Redmond was rewarded with an 18-episode, twice-a-week run, that Grange Hill discovered its groove. This change of format, and the sense of trust that must have come with it, freed Redmond up to tell more complex, challenging and Mary Whitehouse-baiting stories in a rich, long-form narrative structure. Much is made of Grange Hill's trailblazing nature in regards to its working class characters, but it's in its fearless narrative ambitions that it was equally as insurgent. Each series of Grange Hill was 18 episodes of ambitious long-form storytelling, in an era when most television was defiantly episodic. Only soap operas, of which, remember, there were only Coronation Street, Crossroads and Emmerdale Farm on TV when Grange Hill made its debut, told stories over a such a drawn-out run. It's one of the big reasons this series is plugged so profoundly into our memories. If Redmond hadn't had the luxury of building up his storylines about vandalism or the abolition of

school uniform or Zammo's plunge into heroin addiction (which was plotted through two seasons of the show), it's doubtful they'd have had the emotional thwack they had.

I was only hazily aware of the hijinks of Tucker Jenkins and co in 1978. They were 11 and was eight. A three-year gulf, but it might as well be a 30-year one when you're that age. I looked admiringly up to these secondary modern rascallions, but Grange Hill always came into focus more when the new intake synced with your own move to big school. For me, it was the pupils of series five in 1982 (okay, I'd started comp in September '81, but frustratingly Grange Hill's new school year was never scheduled to start at the same time as real life), where Zammo, Roland, Fay, Jonah, Annette, et al, made their first appearances. By then the Class of '78 – Tucker, Trisha, Benny, Justin, and the rest – were being phased out of the show (either the school didn't have a sixth form then, or none of that year could be arsed to join it) and Tucker, Alan and Tommy would find themselves their own, Boys from the Blackstuff-apeing BBC2 spin-off, Tucker's Luck.

If there's a Grange Hill moment that will be scratched onto the series' headstone, it's probably Zammo, crawling around on that toilet floor, desperately trying to scoop up the heroin girlfriend Jackie had just slapped out of his hands. The storyline was deftly penned and grittily executed, a bold, unpatronising and visceral exploration of scag addiction scheduled in between John Craven's Newsround and Fax!. Sadly, it's forever wedded in popular memory with the comically naff "Just Say No" single and campaign, which managed to be as dumbo-headed and patronising as the TV storyline was complex and mature.

As children's TV caught up with Grange Hill (it's hard to imagine Byker Grove and Murphy's Mob existing without Grange Hill's radical and irreverent spirit), it struggled to stay ahead of the game. I stopped watching in the late 1980s, once the last of the 1982 intake finally bowed out. I could never understand why, in the 1990s and 2000s, producers never thought of bringing one of the originals back in a supporting role, if only to keep a few older viewers on-side. Couldn't the willowy Justin Bennett have graduated as a history teacher or "Stewpot" Stewart nab the job of school caretaker? What about Pogo Patterson as a hapless school inspector or Claire Scott as the sexy new gym mistress? They really did miss an epic trick there.

Of course, its most iconic character finally did make a return in 2003. Todd Carty, by then freed of his EastEnders obligations, made a headline-grabbing cameo as Tucker, dropping off his 11-year-old nephew "Togger" outside the school gates on the first day of term. It was a little kiss to the past, 25 years after that first episode, that someone like Steven Moffat would have been proud of.

2007 was full of excited chatter about the impending 30th anniversary of Grange Hill. A grand documentary was planned, and talk began to brew of a feature film, reuniting the various casts of yesteryear. Everything was gearing up for a nostalgia-spunk of celebrations, and then – out of nowhere – Grange Hill was cancelled. And only two days before its 30th birthday too. Bless you for that, Auntie.

Looking back, what seemed unthinkable at the time appears fatally inevitable now. Having been moved to the CBBC channel in 2007, it had been retooled and refocused to accommodate the channel's new 6-12 age remit. That must have been suffocating for Redmond, whose fire was still burning strong even after three decades.

When the end eventually came, Phil Redmond brought back the series' leather jacketed figurehead and gave him a speech that was as passionately political as anything in the series' catalogue. "In my day, this place was about people," he tells his nephew, "today, it's all about numbers."

"Grange Hill was for everyone," he went on, in what would be the series' closing monologue. "That's what makes me so angry. If kids like you can't go here, where can they go, eh? That's the great thing about this place. You can be anything that you wanna be. Every year is a fresh start. Every year is a clean sheet."

Cue end titles.

I would say I miss Grange Hill, but – truth is – I wouldn't be watching it now, even if it was still on. My daughter however misses Grange Hill, even if she's never heard of it. There's so little homegrown drama on teatime telly now, that children rarely see their own lives reflected back at them. And there's a generation of kids now that will never ever know the words "Flippin' 'eck".