

Head's Blog – Lent 2009

Monday 12th January

Ruth and I would like to issue a somewhat belated "Happy New Year" to you all for what, one hopes will be despite economic gloom, a prosperous 2009. As I explained to my colleagues from all three parts of the School at the outset in last week's training day, we would be naive to believe that our community will be immune to the downturn in the economy during the coming 12 months. However, we will be striving to support in whatever way we are able those whose circumstances change as a result of the harshness of current economic realities. We are seeking to divert greater funding into means-tested bursary support and we would advise those who are suffering hardship that we have funding, albeit limited, for which confidential applications can be made to the Bursar.

The comment which one dreads of "the benefits of the holiday have already evaporated" is one already overheard amongst my colleagues at the end of the opening week of the Lent Term; life is eternally full and demanding. We have embarked upon our normal business of scholarship examinations, external A level module examinations and the S9 CCF Induction day followed by the CCF Information Evening for parents. On a point of detail from this coming Friday those pupils in the CCF will be allowed to either come to School wearing their CCF uniforms or they may change as soon as they arrive in School and before House Assembly on a Friday morning. The reason behind this is to try to maximize the time available in the afternoon for activities.

This Wednesday we receive for their preliminary visit ahead of the March Inspection, our two Lead Inspectors, Mr Dillon and Mr Nunn. They will gain their first taste, warts and all, of Wellingborough School on a working day. All of the parental questionnaires have been returned to them in complete confidence and I thank you for your prompt responses.

Parents in the Senior School will be receiving correspondence from the Bursar regarding the texting service "ClarionCall" which we have piloted in the Prep School for emergency purposes or instant response messaging. It is crucial to the efficiency of this service that your contact details are correct and the letter provides details of how these can be checked.

If we are in a position where severe weather impacts upon School then our response will be via the website, the School answering service and the texting service once the latter is in place.

Forthcoming events for which I would like to issue a reminder are : the Sports Tour Quiz Night on Friday 23rd and the slightly more glamorous Casino Night on Saturday 31st . In the first week of February we have two Chapel services, House Evensong (Marsh, Weymouth, Cripps and Platt's) on Thursday 5th and the Civic Service (for S12 and S13) on Sunday 8th February. Parents are most welcome at both services. Finally throughout the month of February our Art Exhibition will be running in The Castle Theatre with pupils' work exhibited from all three parts of the School.

Monday 19th January

We have been alerted to the fact that changes in the train timetables have caused our pupils who travel from Market Harborough and Kettering enforced changes in their schedules. Charlie Novell in his inimitable fashion has attempted to accommodate as many pupils as possible with an increased number of minibus runs to and from the station both morning and evening. We are acutely conscious of wanting to avoid a situation where pupils are left in railway station waiting rooms in the evening. We are keen to hear of any suggestions on this or any other matter related to our post-4.10 p.m. provision. This week we are carrying out an analysis of the extent to which we have pupils remaining on site each evening waiting to be picked up after 5.30 p.m. as well as to gain an update on activities' involvement. Our aim is to gain an up-to-date picture of the movements of all pupils in order to ensure that we are taking reasonable steps so that pupils are safe until they are picked up and certainly not as a means of restricting pupils' freedoms. Currently the lock-up of the houses begins at 5.45 p.m. We will be considering an advised cut-off pick-up time.

As well as watching a full day of sports fixtures on Saturday a large number of parents supported their sons and daughters from Year 7-13 who were competing at Abington Park in the County Cross Country Championships. The testing hills and energy-sapping heavy mud were a true test of cross country character; Charlie Macdonell became U13 County Champion whilst Guy Marshman, Emily Bowe, James Lambert and Amy Hulley all achieved top three placings but it provided as much pleasure to see those who found the going even tougher showing real determination and they are deserving of praise.

The ISI Inspectors have paid their preliminary visit and both Mr Dillon and Mr Nunn complimented us on the reception which they had received. They return over the next two weeks to carry out further research ahead of the full March Inspection.

Last Friday's introduction of the practice of the CCF wearing their uniform either to School or once they arrive was felt to have been a success in the sense that 20 minutes was gained at the start of the afternoon's activities and, as this was the aim, we will continue the experiment for the foreseeable future. Last Friday also saw the arrival of Lt. Col Steve Bruce (RM) in his capacity as our new Head of the Royal Marines Section. We are delighted and hugely privileged to have acquired the services of someone with 28 years of operational professional experience and contacts.

We would like to draw readers' attention to the good news which we received last week that Stephanie Read has been offered a place at Girton College, Cambridge for September to read Classics.

The annual Scholarship process continues this week as we move on to the interviewing stage where those who have impressed in their practical assessments or have performed well in the academic papers will be questioned in greater detail about their knowledge and understanding.

Monday 26th January

Andrew Marr referred this weekend to the universal sense of gloom and doom which was evidenced in the Sunday newspapers : "Britain is going to the dogs" was his succinct assessment of the mood of the nation, or at least of the headline writers. Although we have, as ever, our own problems we are determined to remain positive and I witnessed much in the last week to enable me to write a cheery blog.

A full week of Scholarship interviews, with the prospect of another seven days ahead, has warmed the heart and reminded one of the thrill in indulging in intellectual conversation with inquisitive youth. It is something for which, amidst our headlong race to cram in a GCSE syllabus, we seem to have less and less opportunity.

This Saturday's social entertainment is the Casino Royale Evening, last week it was the Sports Quiz organized in support of the summer tour to New Zealand and the Cook Islands. The evening was a huge and enjoyable success with pupils, parents and staff all contributing to the jovial atmosphere. Those of us who could sadly recall the name of the dog who rescued the World Cup in 1966 or the names of all of the Australian Test Match grounds were pitting our wits against experts who appeared to know everything about "Wags" and "Wags' Culture". Controversy was kept to a minimum thanks to the draconian compere Mr Ramsden.

Despite the early morning frost in Bedford which prevented the girls from traveling further than the Tesco roundabout, we again saw some excellent efforts from the Cross-Country runners at the League match on the Uppingham hill and from the boys in the competitive afternoon football fixtures against Bedford Modern.

However, one of the biggest thrills probably came from the efforts of 36 members of the Young Enterprise teams at the Milton Keynes Trade Fair. Pride of place went to the S12 team "adeo" with their biodegradable plant pots, who, competing against over 60 schools in Bedfordshire, Buckingham and Hertfordshire were joint winners of the whole Fair. Other prizes were won by "eloquence" with their "pop-a-bags". The S10 team "M-Pire" selling its customized i-pod covers, won third prize for its customer care. The other two S10 companies, "Exceeding Expectations" and "Altitude" both performed well. Once again thanks are due to Mrs Matthews and a large number of parents who supported the pupils.

Further to my comments last week about our surveying of our post-school provision we will be analyzing the feedback which we have received today.

A further reminder that on Sunday 8th February we will be looking forward to receiving in Chapel parents of sixth formers along with members of the local Wellingborough community for our annual "Civic Service" which marks our links with a variety of community groups.

Monday 2nd February

Although we have not found ourselves in the grip of the extreme snow and ice experienced by many today, we took the decision to close at 3.15 p.m. to allow our 900 pupils and over 120 staff to make their way home in relative safety. This decision and the logistics which it required, inevitably received praise and thanks from some, criticism from others. We made use of the newly introduced ClarionCall instant text-messaging service to inform as many parents as possible. We hope that any teething problems with this service will be ironed out as soon as possible, although we managed to clear the site by 4p.m. of all but three pupils. I would like to publicly thank the receptionists in each part of the School for the even tempered manner in which they have fielded enquiries. As advertised we will continue to publicise adverse weather decisions at the earliest opportunity via ClarionCall and the Website as well as on the School's answering service.

Last week was a good one for "Adeo" the successful Young Enterprise company who attracted further media attention for their victory at the Milton Keynes Trade Fair. Both local BBC radio and Anglia TV interviewed the team and thereby drawing further attention to their newest product, biodegradable "good-bye bags" for loved animals who have passed to another life! Having worked closely with Wellingborough Prison they have now struck up an interesting relationship with Poddington Garden Centre. It is not difficult, as a Headmaster, to extol the virtues of pupils with this sort of initiative.

This week, weather permitting, should see a Prep School Tudor-themed Day, a UCAS Information Evening, an Evening to promote the America Drama Exchange and a House Evensong which will be attended by Nicola Willis of Africaid who will be updating us on the situation in Zimbabwe. We will also be attending the Open Morning at Great Houghton for their parents who are seeking information to inform them when making choices about senior schools. The Pianists' Concert and Information Evening on the proposed Morocco Trip will be re-scheduled as they have fallen foul of the weather.

Following last week's audit of our post-school provision we are now looking at the viability of an early bus as well as the current 5.30 p.m. buses along with other options. One aim is to enforce a cut-off point by which time we would expect pupils to have been picked up and therefore enable us to have a set lock-up time for the Houses. The suggestion is that from that point we would then have one central supervised facility for Senior School pupils whilst they waited for their pick-up.

Recent recipients of the Headmaster's Commendation for excellent work have been S9 Hollie Blaber (English), Max Billson and Harry Knibbs (Spanish), S11 Ollie Chapman and Connie Shingles (Sports Studies). It has been a pleasure to speak with each of these pupils about their broader understanding and gain an insight into their work.

It was also enjoyable to watch from the touchline some excellent Prep School Hockey performances against The Perse Girls, Cambridge as well as a brilliant team victory at Welbeck College in the Midlands Independent Schools' Cross Country League from the U15 boys' team of Guy Marshman, Charlie McDonnell, Tom Southern and Rory Bowe against the strength of, amongst others, Uppingham and Oundle. The other team of the week must be the Year 10 girls' Netball squad which became district champions and progresses through to the next round of representative competition. This continuing successful profile across all sports against numerically larger schools provides the evidence to support our claim that we, metaphorically, "punch above our weight".

Monday 9th February

It has been an interesting week, one dominated by the adverse weather conditions during which, along with the majority of the rest of the country, we have been beset by snow and ice both on site and around the county. We have battled against a variety of sometimes vague, occasionally contradictory weather forecasts and now find ourselves, in common with many others, fighting a shortage of salt for paths and the drives with yet more snow to come. Our list of cancellations includes the Information Evenings for UCAS and for the proposed Morocco Trip and the US Drama Exchange, House Evensong, all sports fixtures, the Civic Service and the House Music Competition. Throughout this our teaching and support staff have been towers of strength. I have been delighted to receive praise on behalf of the estates team who have cleared paths and dug out and pushed cars when necessary. We are also grateful for the positive response to the "ClarionCall" instant messaging service which we will be seeking to develop further. Our decisions have, on each occasion, been judgements based upon the situation as we saw it. On Friday morning we were caught out, along with many others, by the "Great Weather Man in the Sky" who initiated the snow blizzard at 8.10 a.m. just as our "rush-hour" was reaching its height. Walking a tightrope between fortitude in keeping the School open for business and not wishing to compromise safety, has been no small challenge! However, the experiences of the last 7 days and the photography on the website will provide fitting, lasting memories.

One event which did escape the freeze was the annual Art Exhibition at The Castle Theatre. Pupils' work from all three parts of the School is on display throughout February and the high standards of recent years were again in evidence. Even superlatives were inadequate but the rich variety of art work was stunning and pupils and Art staff deserve the highest of praise; the reputation of Art across the School has been rightly recognized in the Press as quite outstanding. If readers have not seen this please take the time to do so.

This Thursday will be a day of sadness with the funeral at All Saints Church of Major Derek Hooton, OBE, JP, OW (1939-45) and former Governor as well as being a former Mayor of Wellingborough. Derek was also Chairman of the Nevill Trust which generously supports the School with funding for bursaries and numerous educational projects. He was a lifelong supporter of the School and we will miss him, his genuine caring nature and his smile; he was a gentleman.

Monday 23rd February

Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent all play a key role this week and I am delighted to be able to support this with an informal Communion service in Chapel on Wednesday which one hopes will be the first in regular short communion services for pupils, staff and parents alike. We also hold a House Evensong on Thursday evening for Garne's Fryer's, Parker-Stejne's and Nevill.

We do not normally come up for air at this stage of the Lent Term and with the imminent March 16th ISI Inspection week rapidly approaching, the teaching staff are to be seen running in ever-decreasing circles. We are now in the midst of GCSE Trial examinations, trying to recover lost teaching ground resulting from snow days and re-arranging events such as the Pianists' Concert, affected by cancellations. To emphasise the continued support for cultural development, this week sees separate groups of pupils visiting London for a Shakespeare day at The Globe Theatre, lectures on the Aeneid and for a GCSE Music Conference.

The Half Term S9/10 ski trip to Zell am See in Austria returned, if not in one piece, full of good cheer and having enjoyed a superb time which was due in no small part to the efforts of Mr Farley and his team.

This week sees the GCSE Choices Evening on Tuesday where current S9 pupils and their parents are afforded an opportunity to hear subject choice presentations and discuss options with Heads of Department before making their choices by the 2nd March deadline.

Praise is due to Mr Williams' Enrichment team which currently has reached the heady position of leaders in the 49-strong national "Shares4Schools" league table with a gain of 12.9% on their original investment. Trailing in their wake are such eminent establishments as Eton College, The Perse School Cambridge, Bradford Grammar School.

The former Headmaster and current OW President, Graham Garrett, will be returning to his old stomping ground on Friday evening to host a Musical Evening which will contribute its profits to the School Foundation but will allow many old friends to meet and recall memories of musical soirees which were regular calendar events here in the 1980s.

Monday 2nd March

The attendance at Prep and Pre-Prep Open Mornings last Saturday suggested a continued healthy interest in the School despite the economic recession which is quite obviously affecting so many. We remain realistic yet upbeat about our own position. At a meeting of Headmasters from across the Midlands and East Anglia, I was struck by the way in which no schools, including many of the so-called prestigious ones, are proving to be immune. I also last week took up an invitation to visit Spratton Hall School to meet parents and take an Assembly and was heartened to meet so many who spoke warmly of their perceptions of Wellingborough. I did manage to stir up something of a hornet's nest with my theme of the adverse impact of text messaging, MSN and Facebook on young people's sleep patterns. As I explained to our own pupils last week, there is no substitute for a good night's sleep!

When I arrived at Wellingborough I was regaled with tales of "Candlelit Suppers" which, once my curiosity had been answered, proved to have been musical soirees under the auspices of Graham Garrett, Headmaster 1973-93. It was, therefore, an honour to host a Musical Evening on Friday in the Senior School Hall with its superb acoustics. Graham Garrett and Stephen Ostler (Director of Music 1969-94), along with our own flautist Peter Baxter, Bernard Lanskey (Director of Singapore Conservatoire) with soprano Felicitas Fuchs and violinist Rachel Lanskey provided us with rich entertainment. Pieces from amongst others Brahms, Debussy, Gluck, Handel, Strauss and Mozart were offset by the audience participation finale which included a hearty rendition of the Flanders and Swann favourite "The

Hippopotamus Song" (Mud! Mud! Glorious mud!) All of the profits from the evening have been donated to the Development Foundation Fund.

I have just received the programme for Wednesday's Spring Concert at The Castle. This likewise provides a range of musical tastes from Coldplay to Charpentier, Miles Davis to Beethoven. We are looking forward to hearing Prep School ensembles, Senior School Blues Band, House choirs and the Friday Singers. There remain only a few tickets available from the Box Office. Many of our musicians will also be participating in the Rotary Musical Festival, this year hosted by Wollaston School, running throughout next week.

A date for next week's diary is the AGM of WSSPA "Friends" which takes place in the Meeting Room on Wednesday 11th March at 7.30 p.m.

Monday 9th March

Comic Relief has not been, despite its national profile, a day which we have officially observed in the Senior School. This week the School Council came forward with a proposal for pupils to have an Own Clothes Day including a red item, on Friday 13th March and I am happy to accept this because it is important that we are seen to be supporting the School Council as well as this worthy cause. Other proposals were put to me and I was greatly impressed with the representatives from each year with whom I met. Ideas on "Healthy Schools" and "Eco Schools" initiatives, House Dinners, 6th Form privileges and the Enrichment Programme were voiced and I will give due consideration to each.

The mention of House Dinners prompts a plea that there will be no permission granted for pupils who ask to miss part of the normal programme for Friday afternoons on the day of a House Dinner. Much as we want each and every dinner guest to arrive with hair, clothes and general appearance in immaculate state this cannot be at the expense of missing lessons or CCF or DoFE commitments. It also reminds one of the necessity for maintaining strict guidelines on the consumption of alcohol for 6th formers. House Dinners and the decorum and appropriate conduct, we believe, are important features of the broader educational experience and we expect high standards of behaviour. Some argue that we should not hold them at all, others believe that they should be completely "dry" events; this argument rages in every school in the country. I sincerely hope that we can trust all of our 6th formers to act as positive role models to show that a good time can be had with either a small amount of wine or indeed with soft drinks alone.

The Joint Prep and Senior School Concert at The Castle saw, as ever, an interesting array of musical tastes being catered for and congratulations are in order for the large number of participants of all ages and their music teachers. In addition to the Weymouth and Marsh Choirs we heard the Friday Singers perform two excellent pieces and the reconstructed Blues Band play two technically challenging Miles Davis numbers with great skill. One should note that we are beginning to see the fruits of both the strings and brass emphasis in the Prep and Pre-Prep Schools. We look forward to increasing numbers of instrumentalists taking part in these occasions. One area of School music of which we are consistently proud is the Chapel Choir under Mr Runnells and tickets for their joint concert with the Wellingborough School Singers on Saturday 21st March in All Saints Church are still available at Senior School Reception.

This week we have an S12 UCAS Information Evening, the WSSPA ("Friends") AGM and the S13 Parents' Evening as well as the preparation for next week's Inspection with which to contend. A level Module results are revealed on Thursday and we hope that they bring good news. We also wish well to our Cross Country Runners who climb the hills of Cumbria in the Midlands and North of England Independent Schools' Championships, those musicians taking part in the Rotary Music Festival and our S9 Rotary Public Speaking team of Helen Amos, Alice Gividen and Helen Gent who appear in the Midlands' Finals next Sunday.

Roles of responsibility at both House and School level are important decisions to make in all schools. Following what has, at times, been an arduous application process involving written applications, interviews and training evenings, we are due to make initial School Prefect appointments this week. In any situation where there are limited places for a larger number of worthy young people there is inevitable disappointment. Decisions have been made, not on a whim but after considerable consultation and we hope that those who are selected live up to our hopes and those who have not at this stage gain responsibility at House level or perhaps are promoted at a later date.

Monday 16th March

Weekends are always busy at Wellingborough but this most recent one even more so than normal; whilst many of us were either trekking up to the remotest parts of Cumbria to watch Cross Country or to Loughborough to support our Public Speakers or with DofE team members or to Kimbolton or Bromsgrove for sports fixtures, others were putting finishing touches to preparation for this week's Inspection.

Some of us, perhaps in a minority, believe that Cross Country ought to be a compulsory sport for the whole population. Certainly its character-building qualities were amply demonstrated in the wilds of Sedbergh with water jumps, steeplechase fences and energy-sapping mud combined to test legs, lungs and hearts. Guy Marshman's victory in the Junior Boys' event was evidence of a young man with enormous talent; the U15 boys were unlucky because a tumble at one of the jumps cost them victory but the efforts of every single boy who ran in both races should be acknowledged. All of those who made the journey including Mr Farley and Mr Sandal did the School proud.

Equally proud were Mr Askham and Mrs Rodgers as the S9 Public Speaking team of Helen Gent, Alice Gividen and Helen Amos reached the national finals in Somerset next month. Their victory is the first time in 10 years that a Wellingborough team has achieved this success.

Friday's Comic Relief day was a great success – much red was on display and thanks should go to all who helped the day run so smoothly including Dominic Major for his lunchtime stand-up comedy spot!

We all eagerly await the latest edition of the Arts Review Magazine produced by pupils in Enrichment and which is available at a cost of £1.00. Anticipation is also in the air as 44 pupils take part on Tuesday in the Young Enterprise Area Finals at the Diamond Centre from 6.00pm. and a reminder about two forthcoming concerts : the Wellingborough Singers on Saturday evening and the Rock, Pop and Blues Concert next Thursday evening.

Last week's Rotary Music Festival saw a number of Wellingborough winners including Weymouth House Choir but pride of place should go to Kishan Thakrar, P5, who not only took 1st place in Junior Woodwind, playing the descant recorder but then returned to beat the winners of the strings, woodwind, brass and piano sections to be awarded "Wellingborough Junior Musician of the Year 2009". Kishan will be playing on stage at The Castle with other winners on Wednesday 18th March.

Finally I should mention the WSSPA, the Senior School Parents' Association which last week held its AGM. Under the leadership of Caroline Anstee it is proving to be hugely supportive in both a fundraising context and in terms of moral support for Senior School life. I was asked to mention that details of this year's Summer Ball - the highlight of the social calendar - will be revealed shortly!

Monday 23rd March

We enter the last week of this hectic term with, amongst many other things, the prospect of another Rock Pop and Blues Concert which always pleases the audience, a visit by Johnnie Leach with his presentations on Drug Awareness and Friday's Easter services.

Accolades have been rightly directed towards all of the Young Enterprise teams for their success at the Area Finals last week and "adeo" and "eloquence" proceed through to the County Finals at The Guildhall, Northampton in April. Special mention should also be made of the members of the Chapel Choir who sang superbly as they took part in the Wellingborough Singers' Concert on Saturday evening. The Old Wellingburian Day, also last Saturday, saw well over 60 of our former students, mostly aged 19-25 playing football, hockey and running cross-country against school teams. The sporting nature of the contests reflected well on all concerned and we were indebted to those, not least of whom was the ever-efficient Debbie Whittemore, who organized behind the scenes. Those who struggle to rise from their beds for Saturday fixtures were put to shame by one OW in his twenties, Laurence Smith, because he cycled from South London in 5 1/2 hours and then played a full 90 minutes of football, all before lunch! Others expending physical and mental energies were the Duke of Edinburgh team members who were putting finishing touches to their preparations for the assessed expeditions next term.

Hearing of former pupils and colleagues is always a pleasure and news from Julia Jones, erstwhile Prep School Head, is to be shared with others; as we bemoan our spluttering economy and a society which is often self-centred, Julia e-mailed from over the Channel in reply to my enquiring as to her well-being and to update me on her leaving present from last July : "We are fine. The concrete mixer is also fine but has left home temporarily as a neighbour needed him. Here in 1940s rural France, there is very much a sharing culture, together with a barter economy which we enjoy greatly. So the commune is delighted with our baby concrete mixer which is very portable and reaches the parts that other concrete mixers cannot manage!"

Lastly parents who have asked already about our ISI Inspection visitors' findings will have, like ourselves, to wait for 6-7 weeks before the final Report becomes public. Although a shroud of secrecy surrounds the detailed report, the initial feedback indicated that they were impressed with all three parts of the School and the reception which they received from the whole community.