

Headmasters Blog – Trinity Term 2010

Monday 5th July

It is that time of year when those who are unfamiliar with the way in which schools operate believe that teachers are “winding down” to long, lazy summer holidays. There is no discernable “winding down” that I can see despite this final week being predominantly one of Adventure Training and a variety of activities. This is, it is worth commenting, against the background of media headlines about an impending exam disaster and also Michael Gove’s plans to fundamentally alter the structure of A levels within 5 years. For too many years we have sought stability but that looks increasingly unlikely and for some the summer break will include reviewing what has been done and modifying for the future.

It was a matter of immense pride that Saturday’s Open Day across all three parts of the School was, aided by sunshine and a cooling breeze, an unqualified success : sportsmen and woman, musicians, public speakers and debaters all played their part in helping staff to show the School off to best effect and the only losers were those who, without good reason, decided not to attend. Schools without major events like this are missing something in a community sense. The huge numbers of parents of pupils of all ages and OWs certainly appeared to enjoy the occasion. The unsung heroes and heroines of the Estates team, the caterers and backstage crew made the occasion special and when OWs tell you that they can’t believe how much change they notice on the site, one is reminded that we sometimes overlook things in front of our very eyes because we are always looking to the next project. The Opening Ceremony of the newly-refurbished Fryer’s House conducted by Brian Leadsom (OW) did, however, make many appreciate the superb work done by the Estates team and the good sense of the Governors in backing the scheme.

And finally I have spent part of today winning support for new possible bus routes from Thrapston and Towcester directions but they will not happen without parents making direct contact with us and the other part of my day was supporting the words of Phil Canale (OW) who was organizing workshops for S12 pupils during which he was explaining the importance of body language and first impressions : “short, tight skirts are not appropriate for school or the office” he said!

Monday 28th June

The fact that Dr Alison Mowbray’s Prizegiving address and visit lasted longer than planned perhaps indicates that not only did she feel comfortable but that she was well-received; Alison’s affable manner in handling requests to touch her Olympic medal and to answer questions about her Olympic experiences was commented upon by many. I have heard numerous people comment upon how inspiring they found her words of encouragement to go out and seize new opportunities.

The Year 11 pupils who completed their GCSEs last week returned to school in their gleaming suits though some girls’ skirts were on the short side indeed one e-mail I received this morning spoke of the boys being smarter than the girls! It is also worthy of note that we had 10 new 6th formers who have started with us as well.

This week we complete our planning for Saturday’s Open Day and again it is a great shame that a small minority will not benefit from this community day because these occasions are such important events in the calendar; as one parent wrote this morning “we chose Wellingborough partly because of its history and rituals which seem to have been lost in many other places”. We have been blessed with good weather recently and we pray that this continues. Speaking of prayer, we have for some time debated in our Spiritual Working Group about the introduction of broadening the opportunities for worship in Chapel. On Tuesday morning Reverend Martin Walker and Rev Christine Ostler will conduct Morning Prayer between 7.45 and 8.10 a.m.

This afternoon's Fiddlefest involving strings players from all three parts of the School was living testament to the increasing profile and the benefits of the Strings initiative. The Blues Band was particularly well-received in local primary schools last Tuesday, musicians played before Prizegiving and on Saturday evening they played heartily before the Summer Ball though the revelers drinking their champagne perhaps did not show their full appreciation. I am looking forward eagerly to the Brass Bonanza in Chapel on Thursday at 4.30 following a day of workshops with an RAF Brass Quintet. There will be a retiring collection in aid of "Help For Heroes".

On Saturday the 1st XI hosted a touring side from Yarra Valley Grammar School, Melbourne and the game ended in a thrilling tied score (WS 234-4 and Yarra 234-8) with our win being determined by having lost fewer wickets. Pride of place in a superb batting performance after an indifferent start, went to Charlie Macdonell who, although only in Year 10, scored a magnificent century; it was a pleasure to watch such memorable sport – unlike Sunday afternoon!

Monday 21st June

Time is short, life hectic, speeches are to be written and reports completed. Crises beset us when we least expect or need them! Life is full of inconveniences but let us think of those who are completing their Public Examinations because they will have time to relax. Tuesday's Prizewinners' visit to Oxford to tour selected colleges and to purchase books from Blackwell's is a real educational treat. On Thursday there will be a new generation of 6th formers who arrive for Prizegiving in new or borrowed, pristine suits. They will have thrown away their school uniform or hopefully passed them on to the Uniform Exchange. Others are being informed of their internal exam marks and some will, no doubt, be selective in which they pass on over the dinner table. How many of us have used the phrase "Mr X hasn't marked it yet"?

This week I am searching for inspiration for a speech but thankful that Dr Alison Mowbray will provide the bulk of that for the audience in the marquee on Thursday afternoon. It is a pity that a visit from a Holocaust survivor was not this week rather than next Tuesday because what could have been more inspirational? The Summer Ball, the social occasion of the year, looms on Saturday. Our Careers Awareness Week is designed to do just that – inspire - for our pupils; we will have an opportunity in patriotic fashion to cheer on England on Wednesday in their crucial World Cup game though if you are uninterested in football you probably think the country is going to the dogs! We can cheer on Northamptonshire on Tuesday as we host a County 2nd XI Cricket fixture conjuring up images of the old days when John Player Sunday League games were played on The Grove and Ian Botham hit sixes at will over London Road. The sun is shining on us this week!

Monday 24th May

The re-design of the website one trusts provides visitors with a fresh picture of School life and I invite comments about the content, the layout or the navigation.

Inevitably there are swathes of pink, even red, skin in evidence this morning despite the fact that we are minus three year groups who are either on study leave or in the examination halls. One of my glorious images of the term to date was, following an early successful finish to Saturday's U14 XI home game against Bloxham, an Australian was to be found soaking the square hosepipe in hand dressed only in shorts, wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen! Images came back into mind from my own days teaching in Oz, being implored to "slip, slap, slop" – it was a sight to behold because usually our resident Aussie is bemoaning damp wickets and grey skies!

We are attempting a new venture this week when on Wednesday we welcome the parents of Senior School leavers in for drinks and nibbles in order to launch a former parents' group. The cynics have immediately quizzed us assuming that this was a ploy to simply extract donations; those of us who combat cynicism on a daily basis have no qualms in retorting that the impetus for the lunch came from parents themselves and as a result our benevolence knows no bounds because we are picking up the "tab"! I am sure that all attendees will enjoy themselves and hopefully open up a channel for regular future social gatherings.

Last Friday's Leavers' frivolities made for an emotional day in Houses, at the drinks reception and lunch, during the OW presentation from Mr Askham and then at the Chapel Service though the references by some leavers to "partying" seemed to outweigh the many other memories which obviously exist. Readers might also be interested to hear that we did hold a soft drinks and nibbles gathering for those leaving from S11 during which we sought their views on their time at School here and their reasons for leaving. The outcomes appear to be complimentary whilst providing, as any form of self-review should, food for further thought.

This week our focus is very firmly on the S9 and S10 year groups and we have begun already a review of their academic focus as the warm weather lulls them into believing that they too are really on study leave. Elsewhere the House Drama performances on Thursday evening traditionally reflect the best of pupil directing and producing and the Prep School's Mrs Lucy Leakey faces the unenviable task of deciding winners.

Monday 10th May

The leaders of the three main political parties would probably concede that there is little chance of placating everyone even within their own parties. At this time of year we echo that sentiment as there are deliberations taking place over the award of Academic Prizes, Colours, Heads of House and Heads of School appointments as well as interviews for teaching posts. Not that it will avoid criticisms of decisions taken but it might help to issue a reminder of the criteria which we employ. School Prefects and Heads of School are appointed following a selection procedure which allows pupils and teaching staff to make recommendations to the Headmaster, whose decision is final. The selection procedure typically includes writing a letter of application, interviews at House level and an interview with a member of the Senior Leadership team. The teams of School and House Prefects are selected taking into account the individual personalities and the tasks which they are required to perform. Whilst we would include in our consideration the involvement of a pupil in the life of the School, this is not a reward for past commitment and we would expect that our prefects at every level would represent a range of academic prowess and co-curricular involvement. There is not a template for our perfect prefect and of course we try to ensure that it is clear that being "good" for the selection period is not enough!

Prizes are awarded according to criteria which are specific for the "named" prizes. Academic subject prizes are awarded for excellence in a particular subject, coupled with sustained effort and interest. We wish to acknowledge as many of our successful pupils as possible and so, for each year, there is a prize for academic excellence, the recipient of which may have been nominated for more than one individual subject prize. This allows additional prizes to be awarded to other individuals who may not be the highest achiever in a subject, but who have maintained a high standard coupled with the effort and interest expected from someone worthy of a prize. In some subjects a prize is not awarded annually where it is felt there is no one who meets these criteria.

Readers might also be interested in the fact that I seek out regularly work which my colleagues regard as of exceptional quality. I then, having seen the work, invite pupils in to discuss the content and associated issues. The most recent examples have been four high quality essays from Yr 10 : a piece on Dickens by Sharim Saeed and essays on Hitler and the Third Reich from Mille Mulcahey, Alice Gividen and David Beharry. In addition to their cards of congratulations these pupils receive a Headmaster's Commendation which is equivalent to five normal commendations.

Along with Susan Barnhurst, I will be starting individual UCAS consultation with the S12 following the completion of their AS examinations, to ensure that they are making headway with UCAS preparation and planning.

On Friday evening as a parent I am looking forward, with many others, to being wined and dined by the Prep School Year 8s as they host a Dinner party at the end of their Chartwells' apprenticeship. Having tasted the offerings in one of the practice sessions we are due for a high quality "Come Dine With Me" experience!

I am informed that the third and final day of the London Road Appeal Hearing is Tuesday 18th May. Through the two days last week, both sides presented their evidence, called and cross examined each others' witnesses but there was insufficient time to make the closing statements. The inquiry was therefore adjourned until 18th May and the outcome of our appeal will then be delivered within 7 weeks. We also await with a good deal of interest the effect of the re-configuration of the junction and the new road markings and filter lanes outside of Schoolbut I will resist the temptation to mention the 21 weeks' work which began today in Sheep Street.

Last Friday 24 CCF cadets led by Jonathan Belk and Mr Garfirth did us proud carrying the flags at the Opening Parade of the annual Waendal Walk as organised by Mrs. Bull and led Ben Humphries. This evening at the County Finals of Young Enterprise our two surviving Year 10 teams "Evolution" and "Driftwood" presented with real skill winning 4/6 categories.

The beginning of the run-in to the breaking of bonds with School gets underway with a series of barbeques and dinners and then lunches and services the following week. The AS Study Leave means that this is the last full week where we have all of the 2009-10 School cohort present.

Monday 3rd May

A former colleague, a regular weekly Blog-reader, suggested to me at the weekend that there had been relatively little content which was controversial of late and enquired as to whether the Headmaster was mellowing. Let it be known that there is little chance of this: I addressed the Oxbridge Dinner on Friday at Lincoln College, Oxford and expressed opinions about the conclusions which one might draw about social engineering in the world of University admissions and the vagaries of the decisions faced by a number of our applicants. I also expressed my growing concerns about the way in which the madness not only compounds the inevitable teenage angst which has always existed but also the propensity for young people the length and breadth of the UK to feel that drugs, prescription and otherwise, legal and illegal are the answer. I suggested that a fact-finding visit to A&E on Friday and Saturday nights should be compulsory for all teenagers.

This week I have passed to the Committee of WSSPA (formerly "Friends") a draft of a letter which, once they have expressed their views, I intend to send to our parents with reference to the impact of drinking especially the hideous practice of "binge-drinking". I look forward to working with the new Chairman David Brackenbury and his committee and want to publicly acknowledge the work of the outgoing committee and the Chair, Caroline Anstee whose enthusiasm for the School has been so evident.

There are a number of posts for which we will be interviewing in the next two weeks : Head of Maths and part-time Psychology in the Senior School, Head of ICT and Deputy Head (Pastoral) in the Prep School and the newly-created post of Website Administrator.

Last week all of those 6th formers who were privileged to have heard Capt. Harry Parker's account of his Afghanistan experience and life as an amputee perhaps gave more than a fleeting thought to the fact that so many of us spend too much time and energy in complaining about trivia and too little to our relative good fortune.

This is the week of our Appeal in respect of the proposed London Road Entrance and whilst this is taking place many of us will have our attention focused on the mayhem to be created by the re-surfacing work due each day between 9.30 a.m. and 4 p.m. this week.

Finally I return to the Oxbridge Dinner where I was delighted to meet again young OWs Ayo Ajanaku (02-08), Rita Chow (02-05), Naomi Gibbs (02-07) and Richard Saynor (97-04) and hear of their continuing successes. We were also indebted to Julien Amey (57-68) who proposed the toast to The School and provided an insight into the international business world and the debt he owed to his Wellingborough education.

So, at last we see an end in sight to the interminable "spin" of the election run-in and one awaits the answer to the questions as to whether we will benefit from, or be savaged by, the election of any of the three leading parties and will we see the success of those with Wellingborough School connections – Michael Ellis, Andrea Leadsom and Peter Bone?

Monday 26th April

The fallout from the Icelandic volcano meant that eight staff and 25 pupils had a slightly longer than anticipated Easter break and now that most have returned we have been hearing of an intriguing insight into a whole range of experiences; those with exams rapidly approaching have been mercifully "rescued" in time.

The roadworks, although apparently nearing completion are still causing us and the emergency services in particular, much angst. It appears that we have larger islands, re-tarmaced paths, some increased width on Broadway and some new streetlights but drivers will make up their own minds as to whether the expense has been worthwhile; we are told that there will be further disruption when the whole junction is resurfaced. The London Road Appeal is scheduled for 6th May but we are informed that the date for submission for public comment has now passed. We are told that objections largely now focus on the negative impact upon the beauty of the entrance to Wellingborough if an entrance is created for the School on London Road the implication being that this argument is more powerful than the safety of pupils.

There has been much debate in School in our consultation meetings regarding ethos and the type of education which we provide in "the Wellingborough Experience". It is the time of year when blood-pressure rises, panic sets in when the immediacy of examinations is realized and teachers want as much time as possible with their pupils. We have certainly during the last 6 years sold ourselves on the rounded education; the balance between reaching academic potential and experiencing co-curricular challenges is one which is a constant headache for those of us who believe idleness is one of the deadly sins. In this context the Silver Duke of Edinburgh Award participants in Shropshire, the RAF team achieving a superb 5th place in the national Air Squadron Trophy at Cranwell, the competitiveness of our cricket teams against MCS Oxford, our tennis players at Stowe all gained welcome release from their revision. Primesh Patel's 88* for the 1st XI at Oxford, Josie Colclough's first and Shona Duffus' second placings in the shooting element at Cranwell are worthy of individual praise.

The Year 8 pupils are in their last term in the Prep School and they have been experiencing evening instruction from Darren Tinkler, Chartwell's Chef and Nutritionist ahead of their Dinner for parents in two weeks' time whilst the hugely talented U13 girls' hockey team have again qualified as Midlands champions for this week's National Finals in Nottingham.

This week we will be holding our annual Sports Award Evening and on Friday the annual Oxbridge Dinner which this year is being held at Lincoln College, Oxford. Next week sees the Launch evenings for parents for both the proposed Bolivia Expedition (Wednesday 5th May at 6pm) & Golden Triangle Sports Tour in 2012 (Thursday 6th May at 6 pm) and I would urge parents to indicate their attendance at one or both of these events via Senior School Reception.

Jonathan Shanklin from the British Antarctic Survey visited the school last Wednesday; Jon discovered the hole in the ozone layer and now "heads" much of the research in the Antarctic. He also has discovered various comets. This coming week Captain Harry Parker from the Rifles Regiment will be talking to Year 13 in the Prep School Hall at 1.10 pm Wednesday 28th April 2010. Harry studied History of Art before taking up a place at Sandhurst. He has served in the army for 4 years and at the age of 27 fought in Iraq and more recently Afghanistan. After 6 weeks he returned to Headley Court as an amputee for rehabilitation. For those of you who watched the BBC documentary "Wounded" you will agree the courage and determination that these soldiers show is unquestionable and Harry Parker is no exception. Inspirational in every way, he will be talking about what he did as he left school, the training in the army, the reality of war and his experience before and after being injured. Taking further the themes of inspiration and experiencing a rounded education, I have this week received further correspondence from Charlotte Mullinor (OW) after she completed the 35-day trans-Pacific leg of her Global Challenge. I have also completed arrangements for our Prizegiving Speaker (Thursday June 24th). She is Dr Alison Mowbray, an academic with a PhD in Genetic Engineering from Cambridge and Olympic silver-medal winning rower. If readers are interested in inspiration even closer to home then look no further than 78 Derngate where pupils' art has been placed on a month's display in an Exhibition created by the Senior and Prep School Art Departments reflecting the highest of standards to which they contribute.

I would like to issue a reminder to parents of the School Calendar and the commitments to major events expected from pupils this term including Prizegiving and Open Day and the last week of term arrangements: all pupils are expected to be present for both of these events and engaged in authorized School activities throughout the final week of term until Friday 9th July at 1 pm.

Following on from Dr Aric Sigmund's visit in March, another of our early-term discussions has been over the approach to Alcohol. Although direct and hard-hitting with its clear message about the negative neurological impact upon the teenage brain as a result of alcohol use certainly before the age of 16. The visit needs to be built upon and I will be writing to parents about handling parties & drinking, tying this in with school event planning and our own protocols. Perhaps we send out mixed messages, perhaps it is that some parents bury their head in the sand as far as a drinking culture is concerned and sometimes some blithely allow their children to drink. This is a concern to all of us who are involved with young people in whatever capacity.