

Headmaster's Report, Senior Prize Giving Speech Day, Friday 10th Nov 2017

The Welcome

Deputy Lieutenant of North Yorkshire, Mr Bill Cowling, Her Worshipful the Mayor of Harrogate, Cllr Anne Jones, Cllr Helen Swiers, Chair of North Yorkshire County Council, Mr and Mrs Martin Pearman, governors, staff, ladies and gentlemen, students past and present, parents, guests, welcome to Ripon Grammar School's Speech Day 2017.

I would particularly like to extend a warm welcome to our principal guests. First may I welcome Mr Bill Cowling who as Deputy Lord Lieutenant of North Yorkshire represents the Lord-Lieutenancy of the county and therefore joins us today as the Queen's representative. Mr Cowling is a farmer, sits on several agricultural committees, is a Director of the Great Yorkshire Show and a member of the regional Committee of the National Trust. Mr Cowling welcome.

Finally, last and by no means least, our guest speaker today is Reverend Professor David Wilkinson, Principal of St John's College, Durham. Professor Wilkinson's background is both rooted in science as much as in theology. As a scientist, his PHD research at Durham encompassed the study of star formation, the chemical evolution of galaxies and terrestrial mass extinctions. After this he trained for the Methodist ministry, studying at Cambridge and then working within the city of Liverpool and at its university. Returning to Durham in 1999 as a fellow at St John's College he has taught within the department of Theology and Religion delivering modules in both science and religion and exploring the dialogue and interchange between both disciplines. I note with interest his particular interest in the relationship between theology and contemporary culture, having written on topics with such fascinating and intriguing titles as the 'Spirituality of the Star Wars Films', 'Hawking, Dawkins and The Matrix' and my personal favourite- 'God, the Universe and Everything, 42 Days through faith and popular culture.' I can't begin to imagine what the significance of 42 could be! Perhaps one of my few regrets in not being able nowadays to commute daily up the A1 from Ripon to Durham, as I have over the last 5 years, is now the inability to listen to Professor Wilkinson's quite regular broadcasts on R4's Thought for the Day at 7:45. I am delighted that you have been able to join us today to present our prizes and address us.

The Report

Can I first start by thanking all those governors, staff and parents who have been so supportive in my first few weeks as headmaster of this great school. I am particularly indebted to the Strategic Leadership Team and the chair of governors Dr Peter Mason. Since getting this job people have usually asked me one of two questions.

1. What do you plan to do next? This has left me a little puzzled I have to say- retire? I have tentatively responded.
2. Are you enjoying it? This is usually followed by a rather quizzical look as though I might not be. Yes is my response- how could I not be?

It is of course traditional at this point for the headmaster to provide an exhaustive report on the major achievements of the school and all that has gone on in 2016-17. Well you may be in luck, in that since I wasn't here in 2016-17, I am of course limited in what I can say. However, what I can do is say 2 things.

First I can pay tribute to the work and achievements of my predecessor Martin Pearman. It is clearly evident that during his 12 years of stewardship the school developed enormously as a place of learning and in terms of the development of its co-curricular output, not to say anything of the fundamental changes brought forward in terms of the school's infrastructure. What is also clearly evident, in what people have said about Martin, is that he always put the students first, knew them all individually, and thus engendered a strong affection from all concerned. If I can do even a fraction of this I will be well pleased.

Second I can also say that the school is well placed to continue forging ahead in the future. This will have very little to do with me - headship is merely a stewardship and any one individual is merely part of a broader team. But it seems clear to me that with such a great body of students, a strong and dedicated professional staff and the affection and support the school holds within the wider community, that there is still a great desire to continue to build not just physically but also as a community. We are already, at 936, at our largest size in history, with a lower sixth form of 154 with 45 new entrants this year. We also continue to recruit and retain highly qualified staff, never more so than in our new teachers this year.

It is also worth remembering what is sometimes forgotten or simply not realised that we belong to a select group of state boarding schools. Boarding is an integral part of our school life and gives that added sense of community. The 2 houses are definitely in good heart, boarding numbers are healthy and it is of course to be noted that this all comes after an Ofsted Boarding inspection last year which recognised our provision as outstanding which concluded that RGS had a 'strong boarding community that supports boarders to realise their potential and provides them with a good springboard to the next step in life.' I would like to publically thank Marita Murray, Deputy Head, and all the boarding house parents and staff for their dedicated work in achieving this result and continuing to maintain such high standards.

2016-17

However, I will, if I may, give you some important information from last year to prove my point further.

Results of course were extremely pleasing. At A Level 55.9% of grades were at A*-A, and A*-B results were likewise strong at 79.1%. 23% of the grades were A* with 14 students getting 3 or more A* grades. It was also good to see that there was little differentiation between the genders in terms of results and also how well the new intake in Year 12 progressed. Headline rates will of course only tell us half the story and our 'value added' – the measure by which we are judged to be adding value to our performance at GCSE shows RGS continuing to strengthen year on year with an overall 'T score' of 2 for 2016-17 placing the school in the top 10% nationally. What I think is remarkable here is that this extra value comes on top of high value added at GCSE- something which many schools find hard to achieve.

I always refrain from mentioning individual departments, but I do think it is worth mentioning the success of our students taking the Extended Project Qualification- this year 29 students chose to take the qualification of which 14 scored A* grades, 6 scored A grades, 7 scored B grades. In most cases the EPQ score was the highest, or equal highest grade achieved, and it was certainly of considerable influence in university offers and allocation of places. Mr Fell tells me that the quality of the projects was outstanding, and the examination board reported that they are highly impressed by the quality of the work of our students, and of the administration of the project by our centre. I think of key value is the measure this places on our students as independent learners and justifiably ready to face the rigours of university life.

At GCSE success was equally marked. 63.9% of grades were A*-A/9-7 across all subjects. The new 9-1 grading was taken in the stride of the mathematics and English departments who posted impressive results. All students achieved at least a grade 4 in English and Mathematics meaning that 100% of students achieved 5A*-C or equivalent including EM. Furthermore 9 of our students joined a select group of 2000 students nationally who scored achieved straight 9s in English Language, Literature and Mathematics. This is a remarkable statistic- and for those eager to work out the answer this is 0.45% of the total number of pupils who gained these grades.

Again our value added measure of 2 indicates progress within the top 10% of schools. The governments new Progress 8 measure while not without its critics recorded a fantastic score of 0.82 [1 signifying a grade above expectations] placing RGS in the top 100 maintained schools nationally. Particularly pleasing was also the excellent

success on this measure of our neighbour Outwood Academy, which suggests that students in Ripon are well served educationally and must place Ripon as one of the top places to be educated in the country.

Of course some may argue that Ripon Grammar is merely an exam factory. Of course, that's a misnomer, we don't manufacture exams- that's the job of the examination boards. Are we a results factory? Well in one sense we are, but let's be clear, results for good or ill are one gateway- to future success. This was an excellent year for the School with the highest number of First Choice acceptances on record and a healthy number placed at Russell group universities. But are we just about producing results? Then no, of course not. Results I would argue are merely the by-product- what we are about is producing well rounded ambitious people, eager to learn, eager to work hard but also eager to make the world a better place for the role they are about to play. So let's also celebrate the success of those students who chose not to go to university but who chose instead pathways into employment or apprenticeships to fulfil their dreams and aspirations too.

In order therefore to provide this with a little context and of course prefacing my point by stating that I did not have the privilege to know these young people I asked Mr Fell to provide a little more detail and what he told me and what I tell you know captures I guess only a microcosm of our leaves talents, abilities and passions. Mr Fell writes:

'This was a real year for performers, with Josh Belward and Grace Branch going off to study theatre courses, whilst Amelia Dodds has embarked upon a Commercial Dance course at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts. Joy Sutcliffe, meanwhile, is studying music at Durham, and Robert Wilmore is on a Music Production course at Leeds Metropolitan University. Sofia Robinson, although studying a Philosophy course at KCL, has made it clear that she will be doing a LOT of singing at the same time, and Billie Tweddle's English and Art History course at Sussex will also, inevitably see her music career blossom alongside, and Grace Eyles continues to perform during her gap year.

The caring professions have benefited hugely from this year group, with 7 medical students (Zoe Langham, Tom Lewis, Charlotte Martin, Jenny Unwin, Airlie Mason, Alicia Micklefield and Emma Wilkinson), 5 veterinary students (Ella Atherton, Hannah Foster, Francesca Haldane, Rachael Pond and Georgie Sutton-Walker), a nurse (Ella Borchard) and an occupational therapist (Georgie Kessell), as well as a pharmacist (Katie Moorhouse) and 5 psychologists (Imogen Bligh, Avinash Kumar, Charlie Thorpe, Dana Turner and Meghan Williamson).

The engineers, builders and designers of the future are well represented, with 3 engineers (Matthew Doyle, Patrick Moon and Charles Wild) a materials science engineer (Ella Almond), an electronic engineer (Alex Cavell-Taylor), a design engineer (Pip Lorimer), an architect (Christina Scullion) and a mechanical engineer (Martha Stevenson).

Alongside a large number of students taking demanding degree courses at university this year, there are some particularly interesting and eclectic choices- with Susie Dinning studying Chinese and Linguistics, Fikayo Adeyemi taking Philosophy and Physics, Lucy Kettlewell studying for a degree in Criminology and Social Policy, Katie Brown focusing on Zoology with Animal Behaviour, Lauren Pybus embarked upon a prestigious Higher Apprenticeship with McVities and Katie Veitch studying theology, Religion and Philosophy of Religion next year. Two talented artists, in Lydia Poole and Tom Hogan, have meanwhile begun their careers with Art Foundation Degrees,).

This was an aspirational year group, as the list of destinations attests, (let alone the further choices that will be made by those taking a gap year and making decisions this coming year); but it was also a strong, caring and supportive group. Perhaps the best testament to this is that, whilst there were those in the year group who had to face immense, and at times unimaginable personal challenges during their time here, they did indeed rise to those challenges with tremendous success, and they did so with the concern, care and friendship of their peers behind them.'

I am sure you will agree ladies and gentlemen that this list captures the essence of what I hope RGS has done, does now, and will continue to do- support and help develop the outstanding leaders, carers, professionals of the future.

It of course took the computer 'Deep Thought' in Douglas Adam's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy 7.5million years to come to the answer that the meaning of Life is 42. As the computer cleverly maintains of course the answer to life is unfathomable because nobody knows what the actual question really is and states that an even more powerful computer is required. This of course is earth - with living beings required over 10 million years to develop the question. Of course you may well know that in Douglas Adam's mind, earth is destroyed to make way for a pan-galactic hyperspace bypass for these 10 million years come to fruition. While our leavers of 2017 therefore may never finally discover the ultimate answers to anything I do hope, barring earth's destruction to make way for a bypass, that they leave this school always curious to ask the right questions. It is only through asking the question that we ever gain proximity to an answer.

Successes of this Term

We have of course started this year in true RGS style with a customary academic endeavour. This was clearly communicated to me when I interviewed all our upper sixth in small groups at the start of term. They all spoke in support of the school, [could they do otherwise you might ask?] but I did feel there was a genuine acknowledgment that they enjoyed the academic pressure [by and large] and recognised the excellent teaching and support the school provides. Those who were new to the school spoke warmly of how well they felt they had integrated. To the question, 'what do you think needs to improve', there were inevitably some well-reasoned responses, but occasionally an embarrassed pause suggested that on the whole they thought the school supported them very well. This is indeed supported by our latest Kirkland Rowell survey which drew a 71% response rate from students of whom 49% rated the school as very good [that's the highest rating by the way] and 42% good with a substantial subjects rated as outstanding.

This term has of course been extremely busy outside of the classroom. To highlight just a few: There have been art trips to London and Paris, a French exchange at half term, a very successful U15 rugby trip to Paris, house drama is about to start. Perhaps most impressive has been the experience of Charity Week held just before half term. To me this exemplified many of the great attributes of the school. I am not talking about my part as a talking reindeer in the staff play, though Mr Griggs performance as Princess Elsa was a sight to be seen, but sumo wrestling, a colour run and a film night for Year 7 where just a few of the memorable efforts which have so far raised over £11,000 and counting for the childrens' cancer charity Candlelighters. Particularly impressive has been the organisational work, determination and sheer good humour of the school officers ably led by Head Boy Ben Pimley and Head Girl Annissa Cook. My weekly meetings with them are always something to look forward to.

The arts of course continue to flourish with James Turner in the U6 recently named one of 100 top Young Poets by Foyle at an awards ceremony in London, in October. Music goes from strength to strength and alongside impromptu singing at break time, there have been 2 beautifully sung choral evensongs in the cathedral, and a fantastic autumn concert which displayed a breath taking variety of instrumental and choral ensembles- a real testament to the strength of the music at the school and we look forward this term to such events as the Christmas Concert and festival of carols.

In sport the 1st XI Hockey team have continued to build on the indoor and outdoor successes of last year's U16 team and are currently Area and County Champions and will play in the NE semi-finals on Monday. In netball the 1st team are area champions and play in the county championships tomorrow. Of particular note has been the major success of Amy McKenzie in being selected to join the Leeds Rhinos netball academy. Boys sport has also continued to flourish with hard fought local fixtures in football and the 1st XV rugby team continue to build on their success of last year after winning the White Rose and reaching the final of the Yorkshire Cup and are now through to the final 16 of

the National Vase. Key to their success has been the towering presence of Ted Wainwright who only last week was selected for the U17 England rugby squad – a fantastic success. We continue to wait with eager anticipation the construction of the new 3G pitch which, given that planning permission has been consented, will hopefully begin soon in the New Year. At this point I would also like to thank the continued support our parents give either through the Activities Fund or the generous support of the Parents Association for funding our minibus, travel expenses and items of school kit. It is most appreciated and many of our fixtures simply couldn't exist without this support. Don't cancel the direct debit!

Finally we continue to be mindful of our estate and remain ambitious to see a steady improvement, building on the advances made in recent years. Behind ambitious projects like sixth form centres and sports halls lie the less glamorous day to day work involved in replacing showers cubicles and washbasins, fixing windows, improving classroom lighting installing new fire escapes and dishwashers etc. for which I would like to thank the estates team and support from North Yorkshire.

Our Values

As a school we continue to think carefully about what we stand for. It was a question which I posed the Leadership Team at the start of the term. The values we came up with were the following- kindness, curiosity, aspiration, empathy, inclusivity and community. And while I know that mission statements and such ilk might be dismissed rather pejoratively as the work of 'mind-set gurus' and 'management speak analysts' I do think that if you live out your values in everyday life then remarkable things can happen. It requires all to be committed however to build such a values based school. I would hope that we already fulfil many of these aspirations.

Thinking on this the other day I was reminded of a poem by the American humourist and journalist Erma Bombeck. I thought this was relevant and she says this:

I see children like kites- you spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground.

You run with them until you are breathless- they crash, they hit the rooftop, you patch and comfort, adjust and teach.

You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they will fly.

Finally they are airborne.

They need a bit more string and you keep letting it out.

But with each twist of the ball of twine, there is a sadness that goes with the joy...and you know it won't be long before this beautiful creature will snap the lifeline that binds you together, and will soar, free and alone.

Only then will you know that you did your job.

Well actually, I don't quite agree with her. As a parent I would hope that the tie with one's children never quite breaks- that there is always a sense of home and a sense of belonging- always a place of refuge in times of trouble- a thread perhaps, but a strong thread.

I think that's why the ties of one's schooling are often there too for many – maybe extremely thin, but they should never quite snap. Yes we might never physically return, yes we might lose old friends, but a good school which is based on strong values enters our soul, provides us with the formative lessons and experiences that never quite leave us. We should always retain affection and a memory. That's why teaching is such a noble profession – building the values of each successive generation in partnership with parents.

And so finally perhaps such ties might occasionally pull back on our leavers- those kites about so high into the sky- who maybe one day will come back- for surely there will always be something in your heart which makes you a proud Old Riponian?

