



THORNTONIAN DAYS

Newsletter of The Old Thorntonians Association (Clapham)

"Education is the leading of human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of them."
John Ruskin (1819-1900)

No 19

March 2012

Annual General Meeting

The fifth AGM was held at Lambeth Academy on Saturday 17 March 2012, with 10 members present. The main items discussed or reported were:

- Jimmy Hill OBE was re-elected as President for a further year. The other Committee members elected to serve until 31 March 2013 are:

Chairman: (Vacancy; the Vice-Chairman and/or other Committee members will continue to act in this capacity as required)

Vice-Chairman: Brian Bloice

Secretary: Ted Hayward

Treasurer: Terry Lawlor

Co-opted: Mike SurrIDGE (as local representative); Jeff Green (as immediate past Chairman)

Entry-year representatives:

1930s/1940s: Brian Robinson

1950s: Chris Bishop

1960s: Peter Greenwood

1970s/1980s: (Vacancy).

- The examined statement of account for the year ended 31 December 2011 was adopted (copy attached).
- Subscriptions: on the recommendation of the Management Committee, it was agreed that a. in view of the Association's healthy financial position, and the lack of any foreseeable major commitments for 2012 and beyond, no charge be levied for the year from 1 January 2012 for those in membership at 31 December 2011 and wishing to renew for a further 12 months; b. the standard fee (£10 for Full members, £6 for Associates) would still be paid by those joining (or rejoining, after a break) on and after 1 January 2012.

The next AGM has been booked for **Saturday 23 March 2013**, again at Lambeth Academy.

Current Membership

110, including three Associates.

Honours Boards

The five boards for the years 1918-50 are now on permanent display in the Conference Room at Lambeth Academy. For those with internet access, one photo, showing this set, appears in the Pupils (2) gallery. The remaining entries, for 1951-68, are listed on the large composite board presented to and stored at Lambeth College, South Side. Further information will be given via the website and in the newsletter once the College has decided on the final, long-term location of this remaining board.

Reminiscences

Two OTs have been prompted by the item in the previous issue on Mr H Smethurst's departure from the school.

From **Brian Robinson** (1948-53):

I always recall Mr Smethurst whenever looking up Gilbert and Sullivan.

When I was in the Vth year Mr Smethurst was timetabled by “Taffy” Evans to teach us Religious Instruction. I can only imagine the clash of swords over this one. As we all know, a Smith and Wesson beats four Aces, so poor old Smethurst started to tackle our R.I. Bibles were handed out – silence; and then Mr Smethurst said, in exasperation, "Look, lads, it's no good – I don't believe a word of this. If you give me a hand to get that piano in the corridor in here, we can do a few songs to raise the spirits!" As one youth, we dashed out and willingly hauled in the piano.

He explained a bit about Gilbert and Sullivan and handed out libretti so mysteriously to hand! We enthusiastically roared, “If you want to know who we are, we are gentlemen of Japan.....” All our eyes were opened to G & S that day.

Next week we shoved the piano into the classroom before Smethurst got there and he was taken aback. “We really ought not – but what the blazes!” We raised the welkin with “Behold the Lord High Executioner, an officer of noble rank and title”, prophetically as it turned out, as Mr Evans happened by. He poked his head into the classroom: “Would you see me at break, Mr Smethurst?” I suspect he gave Smethurst a hearty rollicking, judging by the absence of any repeat performance. So it was thereafter Song of Solomon, in print, of course.

I am sure dear old Smethurst is on a celestial cloud accompanying himself on a harp (to “Taffy”, of course) to “I am a courtier ...and I advance to kiss your hand....”

The difficulties referred to in the valedictory note for Mr Smethurst were that the G & S copyright holders, Doyley Carte Opera Company, refused permission for us to perform *The Mikado*. The reason given was that they were doing a London season at Sadlers Wells at the same time! How's that for pettiness? The copyright having expired, we now can sing “...with joyous shout and ringing cheer” any time or anywhere we like.

Roger Govus (1955-61) writes:

The valet on Mr Smethurst, always referred to as "Harry" when out of earshot, brought memories of lessons in that corner room on the first floor. With one functioning eye, he seemed bit austere to this eleven-year-old. He managed to extract from us a version of the Hallelujah Chorus and even now, as much as I enjoy the music, I cannot listen to the “King of Kings” passage without a constriction in the throat at memories of struggling to reach those top notes.

Harold Noah, a former member of the teaching staff [see also item in previous issue], offers an interesting crop of reminiscences of his time at Clapham:

In 1946 I graduated from the London School of Economics with a BSc (Econ) degree. After a couple of years I enrolled at King's College London to do a Teachers Diploma course. This required a period of classroom internship, which I undertook at HTS, one of the relatively few secondary grammar schools that offered economics at the Higher Schools (now Advanced) Certificate level.

My internship at Henry Thornton turned immediately into a full-time position on the staff. The incumbent Economics teacher, W R John, retired [see *issue 13, August 2010, for further details of his tenure, etc Ed*], and I was immediately offered his vacant position. This suited me very well, and I remained on the staff for 11 years until 1960, when I resigned to begin PhD study at Columbia University in New York. Although my principal assignment was to teach Economics, I also taught English and History classes, but only to the junior classes. At Henry Thornton I expanded the Economics offerings down from the Advanced to the General level certificate. I also organized a couple of school holidays to Switzerland, based at the hotel *Weisses Rössli* in Brunnen on Lake Luzern, where I had negotiated remarkably cheap rates. If I remember correctly, it did not cost much more than £30 a head to provide a 14-day holiday, including rail-and-ferry fare, full board and lodging, and a number of excursions.

I greatly enjoyed my decade at the school. Its relatively small enrolment (about 450) and correspondingly small staff gave it a family feeling. Our teachers' common room was convivial, collegial, and embraced many activities. There was a small group that tackled the *Times* crossword each morning. During the lunch break Solly May presided over chess and Kriegspiel games. A football pools syndicate took in considerable funds each week, though I cannot remember much in the way of profit therefrom. Ditto a Premium Bond syndicate. There was also much discussion in an informal way about individual boys, their strengths and weaknesses. I learned a lot from many of my colleagues, especially so from Messrs Cooper, Jeremy, May and Aufricht. My whole experience of teaching at HTS made a solid foundation for my subsequent career in education in the United States, and I remain grateful for that.

I regarded myself as quite privileged to have the chance to introduce smart youngsters to Economics in those post-war years. I was pretty convinced at the time that state-guided rationality was the key to just (and efficient!) economic policies. I know that I leaned over backwards to try to keep my Economics classes free of tendentious party political issues. I hope I succeeded, though I'm not too sure that I always pulled it off. I remember having big arguments in the staff room with Solly May and Dr Aufricht, who were both devotees of Friedrich Hayek's extreme laissez-faire views (May without knowing who Hayek was; Aufricht knowing only

too well). They had much to say that was right, I believe now; I was certainly wrong in my total rejection of their views. Mine at the time were too much coloured by the recent experiences of the depression and the war, both of which in their different ways seemed to justify dirigisme in economic affairs.

During my time at HTS I served under three head masters: W D Evans, Bruce Gaskin and B J F Dorrington. Evans was head master when I arrived. He interfered little in the day-to-day running of the school, instead closeting himself in his private office, tucked away under some stairs at the opposite end of the building from the school secretary's busy office. By 1951 he had retired and was succeeded by Gaskin, his polar opposite as far as involvement with the life of the school and the teaching staff was concerned. Gaskin aspired to interest the teaching staff into becoming partners with him in remaking the curricula and organisation of the school. He aimed to elevate its academic standards and tone to come closer to the levels set by neighbouring schools with better reputations. He specialised in exhortation at frequent staff meetings, as well as the cultivation of friendly personal relations with individual teachers and a generally easy, non-bureaucratic manner. To some extent, the response he received must have disappointed him. Many teachers were not enthusiastic about his vision for the school (or for any grand vision of anything), and he soon sensed their resistance to change. He must have looked around for other opportunities. By the beginning of 1956 he had departed for a head master's position at Moseley, a suburb of Birmingham. Here is a link to an appreciation of Gaskin at Moseley Grammar School: <http://www.moseleians.co.uk/index.asp?id=104&Title=Former%20Heads#Gaskin>. I was sorry to see him go. He fitted well my notion of what a progressive head of school should be, much more so than did either his predecessor or successor.

Mr Dorrington had no pretensions to academic achievement himself, nor was he interested in having the boys ape the scholastic ambitions or social manners of other schools. He wanted a well-disciplined establishment in which boys and staff knew their proper places and undertook their respective jobs of learning and teaching quietly and without fuss. He tried to be something of a martinet, but his bark was always worse than his bite. My relations with him were businesslike, not friendly. Nonetheless, I found him to be very supportive when our 3-year-old son Michael died of leukaemia in 1957, as well as when I wanted to introduce an elementary Russian language course, and even when I requested leave to take a month off to go the US to give some lectures at Macalester College in St Paul, Minnesota. He was still head master when I left the school in 1960.

With the help of an Old Moseleian (Keith Townsend) the Editor has recently been able to contact Meriel (Mel) Vlaeminke, one of **Mr Gaskin's** three daughters, and those OTs who were at the school during his tenure as Head Master at HTS may be interested in her memories of that period:

My sisters and I don't remember much about Henry Thornton because we were quite young (we were born 1945, 1948 & 1949) and as the family was given an "upmarket" council house in West Byfleet, Surrey, my father had to travel and was out of the house most of every day. I do remember talk of the cost of his rail season ticket! I vaguely remember coming to the school (on sports day?) and some of the names ring a bell – Gribble, Bramble and Jeremy of the staff, also John Edmunds, who used to come and visit us in Birmingham on occasions when he was doing TV continuity there.

In fact, my Dad wasn't all that youthful for his first headship at the age of 42. He was a brilliant man, intellectually and sportswise (he was a top county tennis player and won the local tennis club championship for years, both in West Byfleet and in Moseley, Birmingham), but had delayed going for a headship partly because of the War and partly because as an atheist and socialist (and a man of great conscience), he wasn't sure he should "lead" a traditional type of school.

I have much more vivid memories of Moseley Grammar School, not least because we lived on the premises (and have published a history of the school). My older sister [Celia] and I went on to long careers in education, with the history of education becoming my "specialist subject" - so I am particularly interested in your work for the former Henry Thornton School.

I'm really enjoying these memories of my Dad. Obviously it's a part of his professional life we were too young to know much about, but it's interesting how much it all fits with what he went on to do at Moseley. Mr Noah's recollections are particularly pertinent in that respect, including Dad's belief in broadening the curriculum and in encouraging every single pupil, not just the academic ones (he was always proud of former Moseleians like Jasper Carrott and members of the Electric Light Orchestra). I'm sure some of his views were influenced by his own education at Liverpool College – his father had become Water Engineer for the city – where he went into the sixth form at a ridiculously early age, winning his first Oxford Scholarship at the age of 14 (the first of five!), which meant that he dropped most school subjects, especially sciences, too young and also for a while struggled doing sport with much bigger boys – he was consequently always opposed to too much specialisation and to fast-tracking or "hot-housing" clever pupils.

My older sister remembers a few more snippets: Margaret Miles (later Dame Margaret Miles), who became head of one of London's first comprehensive schools at around the same time, was a friend and ally of Dad's and encouraged him to apply for the Henry Thornton headship to try to move the school forward. When London experienced "pea-

souper” fogs, he couldn't get home, but slept on a camp bed in the office (he never slept much anyway), and kept a razor and a clean shirt there just in case!

Celia thinks that E M Forster once gave the address at Speech Day, because of his family connection with Marianne Thornton. [*Celia is correct, on both counts, in her recall of E M Forster. The School Notes section of the 1954 issue of The Thorntonian records that he presented the prizes in 1952 (although I've found no trace of either a report of the ceremony – the magazine wasn't published in 1953, when it would normally have appeared – or the programme for that year's distribution of prizes); and Marianne Thornton, Henry's daughter, was his paternal great-aunt. The 1956 issue includes an appreciation of Bruce Gaskin's service to the school; a copy will appear in the next newsletter. Ed*]

From the Pages of *The Thorntonian*

Spring 1936:

OUR CONNEXION WITH THE FIRST ENGLISH FILM

It was a man from Bristol – W. Friese-Greene – who received the first patent for a band of celluloid film perforated like the ones we use to-day. This was in 1889. Mr. Friese-Greene's film (taken in Hyde Park) and his general interest in the cinema brought him almost to poverty. It was because of financial difficulties that Friese-Greene could not present his invention to the paying public, and not until six years later was the first public cinema performance given in Paris by the Lumière brothers.

However, upon that film was based the claim of Friese-Greene to be the inventor of cinematography. Thomas Edison insisted that the credit should go to the Bristol man, and subsequently Friese-Greene was declared the inventor of the cinemas.

Mr. Friese-Greene's two sons were educated at Battersea County School, the predecessor of Henry Thornton School. The elder left in 1923, the younger in 1927.

And that is the way in which Henry Thornton School is connected with the first English film.

Editor's note: readers may be aware (or may like to know) that there is a BBC video, The Lost World of Friese-Greene, produced in conjunction with the British Film Institute. It's presented by Dan Cruikshank and re-enacts a fascinating car journey from Land's End to John O'Groats undertaken and filmed by William's son Claude Friese-Greene (1898-1943) in 1924. The original film, which he called The Open Road, also demonstrates his experimental colour process, Natural Colour.

Autumn 1963:

SCHOOL NOTES [EXTRACTS]

An important new trophy was awarded at Speech Day for the first time, the C.E. Jeremy trophy for outstanding service to sport by a boy during the year. The operative word is service, for the recipient of the trophy is to be one of those otherwise unsung heroes who quietly give their time and efforts to do those jobs without which the sporting stars of the school would be unable to shine. It is a most worthwhile award, and its presentation reminds us of the valuable work done by many backroom boys in all spheres of the school's life. The first holder of the trophy was M. Ball. [*Any subsequent holders among today's readership? Ed*]

An innovation was made this year in the routine of our morning services. Once a week Mr. Davies leads the school in a service held in French, the lesson, hymn and the prayers being all in that language. One boy remarked that it seemed strange to be praying to a French God. In the shock of surprise to which this comment bore witness the value of this service was shown. It is high time that many people came to realise that God is not exclusively British.

The following staff left the school at the end of the summer term: Mr C.B. Bonner to enjoy what will no doubt be a very active retirement [*valeté in next issue*]; and Mr R.A Shakespeare to concentrate on freelance writing.

The Staff v. School cricket match this year was one of the finest ever held. In the tension-filled last minutes of the match, the staff only just failed to overhaul what had at first seemed to be a colossal total. The final scores were: School 195-7 dec., Staff 193. ...Mr. McKie set a solid foundation for the rest of his team to build on when he made a staunch half-century. Mr. Shakespeare brought victory within reach with a quick 49, and one could see (most satisfying to the Staff and ample recompense for stiff muscles and ageing reflexes!) creases [*sic!*] of concern on the faces of the previously unbeaten 1st XI. However, perhaps justice was done in the outcome of the match.

A new event in the school calendar this year was the Cross Country Race. The winner of the Senior race was P. Eliardis; P. Cambridge won the Intermediate and S. Lee the Junior. It was no easy task to organise the whole school in a vast sports ground on a cold afternoon, and the success of the event was due to the endeavours of the whole staff. [*Plus, of course, the presence and participation of pupils! Ed*]

The Editor welcomes contributions for future issues. Please post or e-mail them to:
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