

## Old Philologists Annual Dinner 2013

### Sir Michael Pepper's Speech

I should like to thank the committee for inviting me to give the after dinner speech here this evening. It is of course a bit of a gamble inviting a University Professor as they do have a reputation of going on a bit in the presence of an audience.

There is the story of an after dinner speaker in the USA from Yale University who took as his subject the letters which make up the name Yale and spoke for 20 minutes on each of the themes Youth, Achievement, Leadership and Enterprise. When he sat down the Chairman thanked him profusely and added "We are very grateful that you come from Yale and not the Massachusetts Institute of Technology"

However rest assured I do not propose to speak on topics associated with each of the letters comprising St Marylebone Grammar School. Due to the use of electronic watches it is difficult now for a speaker to judge when he has gone on for too long, there was a time when a speaker knew he should bring his remarks to a close when the Chair or President held his watch to his ear and then after a few more minutes started shaking it.

I started at Marylebone in 1953, which seems an awfully long time ago now. Whilst thinking about what to say I wondered about life in that year, it was very different - Winston Churchill was Prime Minister, the London smogs were still present and for small boys one good feature was the abolition of sweet rationing earlier that year, a decision from which the nation's teeth have never recovered. The police were very much occupied with dealing with thefts of lorries packed with powdered eggs which were readily disposable in those days.

Yet looking around at my former classmates it seems to me that we all look pretty much the same which I suppose illustrates the tricks that the human mind can play upon us.

I was interviewed by Philip Wayne, who asked me what sports I played, when I replied football and cricket he said "You will have to adapt to Rugby if you come here but we are enthusiastic about cricket", and we then got on to a discussion in which he asked me to demonstrate how to bowl off breaks and leg breaks. I remember running up and down the headmaster's study and offering to demonstrate with an apple. Fortunately he declined this suggestion as, if accepted, there was a good chance that my Marylebone career would have come to a premature end in a heap of broken glass.

Like many of us one of the first introductions to the School was Maths and English with "Snapper" Snape, who inspired us by standing on the desk to make a point with trousers a few inches too short and then by lifting morale if we genuinely didn't understand anything. If, however, he thought you weren't trying he didn't tell you off or admonish you, no you just found yourself sat on or he came to share your desk and gradually pushed you on to the floor. It was a marvellously inspirational experience.

I do recall history with Basil Blakeway, I don't know why he was called Basil, but he enthused us and I still have a love affair with history and military history as we first learned when looking at the English Civil War manoeuvres of Prince Rupert, Fairfax and Cromwell.

Harold Llewellyn-Smith was a fairly remote figure particularly for those of us on the science side. It was only on one occasion that I saw him enter a class. Tom Blackburn, whose daughter wrote an unflattering biography of him a couple of years ago, decided to show us how to climb up the doorway without using hands - only feet and back and wriggling his way up. When Tom was at an angle of 30 degrees to the

horizontal and about 4 feet above the ground in walked the headmaster, we all stood up except Tom who couldn't. Having said good morning to each other the head retreated and Tom continued his climb.

Our medicals with "Doc" Burrows always come to mind, I think it was years later at an OP's dinner in 1981 when he was present that I learned his name was Norman. The health of generations of school boys was assured by passing through his hands, literally -- looking up and coughing if you recall. His humorous comments on anatomy enlivened proceedings in the rather chilly medical room.

One has flashbacks of memory which suddenly come into the mind, quite often when I smell damp clothing I remember trying to dry clothes in the Mill after being caught in heavy rain in Forest Green. Most memories were more pleasant, occasionally being in the Parrot pretending not to see the Masters and their pretending not to see us, although more often we headed for an inn further afield. For many of the boys it was their first introduction to beer and cider with unfortunate effects.

Books have been written on the benefits to the United Kingdom and United States of the flow of German refugees into the countries following the rise of Hitler. However those of us who did physics at Marylebone don't need a book to inform us, as we had the superb teaching of Hugo Freudenberger. His working on the board instilled in me how to perform calculations by stating that Pi is 3, 9 is 10, 5 is 4 and if you do it right the answer comes out to high accuracy. This is becoming a lost art as I realised when years later I did such calculations in front of students, they would pull out calculators and didn't have a clue about approximations or mental arithmetic. Such was Hugo's imprint that if the calculation goes wrong I sometimes stand back and say "Now wait a moment" to the surprise of those about me. Speaking about calculations, the Chairman of a company once wanted to assess the capabilities of the management. He gave a problem in mental arithmetic to the Managing Director such as 23 times 17, the MD's response was "I'll set up a task force and look into it", when the question was posed to the Research Director he said "To how many decimal places would you like the answer". The Financial Director when presented with the challenge looked quizzically at the Chairman and said "What sort of answer would you like".

On leaving Marylebone, I went to Reading University to read Physics and stayed on for a Ph.D. I met a few OP's when there, when I started I was in the same Hall as Brian Lawley who was school captain in my year. I lost contact with him shortly after but it is remarkable how often one comes across OP's in the course of a career. I once tried to use the OP connection to get a table at the restaurant of the celebrity chef Shaun Hill in Ludlow. Unfortunately the restaurant was fully booked and I couldn't get in but we had a good discussion of our schooldays. I'm sure that Shaun would make a very entertaining after dinner speaker in future.

After a couple of years of post-doctoral research in industry I went to Cambridge to develop a new area of research on semiconductor nanostructures, initially for one year which stretched into 40 and I ended up as a Professor. Professors of Physics are regarded as fairly benign if eccentric, or even slightly mad creatures, unlike other disciplines. You may know the story about the May Day military parade in the Soviet Union when it existed. Missiles trundled across Red Square followed by tanks and heavy armour but at the back was a lorry containing some middle aged men in grey suits. "Who are they" asked one member of the Politburo to another, he replied "That is our secret weapon – they are Professors of Economics in the West"

More recently I moved to UCL and have a Visiting Professorship in Oxford but as I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up, and still don't, I always had two, sometimes three, jobs one in the university and one in industry. Initially I shared my Cambridge position with one at GEC and then when, unfortunately, the large UK electronics companies virtually disappeared I set up a research company for the electronics company Toshiba. We then spun off another company to develop an imaging technology which involved much negotiation with venture capital organisations. Doing business in Japan was always very pleasurable as after technical discussions we went out to a very good dinner with excellent wine. After

many glasses and toasts I was often called upon to choose the final bottle. Converting the Yen price into Pounds involved dividing by 150 which at that time in the evening I was not capable of doing with any degree of accuracy and would have had a better chance of deriving the equations of Einstein's theory of Relativity. As a result we had quite a few outstanding bottles when I left a zero out of my division.

When we read in the newspapers about the low level of skills in the country, which employers complain about, and our poor standing of the country in the international education tables, it seems inconceivable to OP's with our experience of Marylebone. In Cambridge we had many international visitors who put their children into local neighbourhood schools and Russians were always surprised to find their offspring came top in maths. One visitor was even more surprised when his daughter came top in English grammar !

In my career, I travel a fair amount and once in Taiwan I was given a talk on their educational system, I asked what proportion of the school population leave at 16. The reply was "Only those from rich families as they don't have to worry about good jobs". Unfortunately in the UK we still have poverty and deprivation and these are used as reasons for lack of achievement and ambition which is the opposite of the situation in many of the emerging industrial nations.

Often we read about political parties putting forward policies directed towards the so-called aspirational classes. If our politicians had experience of jobs before being elected to the Commons they might realise that in the world of today there are entire aspirational nations. I never cease to be surprised that so many of the people instrumental in destroying the Grammar Schools send their children to schools such as Eton and City of London. It takes hypocrisy to an almost undreamt of level.

The boarding schools of the UK are full of pupils from emerging nations and these countries would be delighted for a Marylebone Grammar in their midst. Although the school has disappeared, the values which it represented are still present in the country and there are signs that they will return under different names such as academies, or maybe some free schools.

So on an optimistic note let us rise and toast the memory of the school.