

Tribute to John Overton Phipps

(Compiled by John Hill from memories and anecdotes supplied by Teachers, friends and old boys and read by Greg Deeley)

We gather here today to pay tribute to a most remarkable man.

John left numerous chapters of unfinished memoirs and one appropriate piece he wrote relevant to this ceremony to celebrate his life is:

“Now I am very old, I can look forward to taking the central part in such a ceremony myself. Unfortunately, it will be a non-speaking role, (I could do it all much better myself).”

John had a wide diversity of skills firstly as an Oxford classical scholar, a chorister with a love of English Church music and Bach, a master wordsmith with a prolific output, a fine sportsman, a very capable amateur actor in his younger days, an energetic walker and backpacker, a teacher, although with no teaching qualifications his lessons were a model of how to stimulate children, a keen gardener and agriculturalist especially with chickens and sheep, and with his commanding presence he had the ability to deliver his weekly talks to the boys – never speaking down to them, but awakening their young minds with ideas and concepts.

In another era he could easily have made the Church his profession, such was his enjoyment for giving these talks often lavishing hours on his preparations. He was a devout attendee of early morning communions as long as the service was from the Book of Common Prayer for he was a staunch traditionalist. His Christian leadership has enriched hundreds of lives and the spiritual tone which radiated from John raised education to a higher plane.

In John's early days he lived with his family in Barker Butts Lane, Coventry, starting his educational journey at Moseley Avenue Primary School. His parents encouraged him to get involved at the local St. George's Church, where he joined the choir and also performed with the drama society.

John went on to King Henry VIII School in Coventry. Here, as a fourth former he encountered an unusual streaming process in the playground by the headmaster, Mr. Burton. This Head, - referred to by another famous old boy Phillip Larkin as: 'the resident thug' - would shepherd the boys into the four corners of the playground according to their intended specialisation,

i.e. classics, mathematics, science or modern languages. It was important to Mr. Burton to have similar numbers in the four streams, so he did not hesitate to shout out the names of boys, who he thought would do just as well in another stream if they were standing in an over populated corner. John was standing firmly in the classics corner and fortunately for him, was not moved by the Head.

Friends remember John as a head boy, apparently this role, along with prefects – entailed the wearing of; “exceptionally silly caps with red tassels on top” however, his peers cannot recall whether he succumbed to wearing this garish headgear. He excelled at the classics, played rugby for the school and Warwickshire under 19’s and still found time for his amateur dramatics.

After school John went on to Magdalen College, Oxford to study classics which was undoubtedly his forte. He was regularly visited by his family sometimes to watch him play rugby or to visit places of interest.

Being a prolific writer, it was not surprising that, during this period at Oxford, hundreds of letters were exchanged between John and his family showing that there was a close tie between them. He also wrote stories under a pseudonym for ‘The Lady’ to earn himself some extra money.

Another sporting attribute was golf which he played at Finham Golf Club, and also visited other courses. One occasion on a trip to play at the Royal and Ancient with an old school friend, they slept rough in John’s Land Rover, parking near the coast. The pair awoke to find the tide rapidly advancing around them, so a quick drive through two feet of water saw them on their way through the village to the golf course.

John’s first employment was as a reporter for the Coventry Standard as a drama critic, but this post only lasted about 18 months until the paper was taken over by the Coventry Evening Telegraph.

His memoirs tell us that while out of work after being a reporter:

“ In 1957 a phone call from Mr. J. R. Sykes summoned him to the Coventry Preparatory School to be interviewed and persuaded to join the school as a sports master.”

Not surprisingly he was less than happy with his old headmaster for the recommendation.

Friends can remember him saying that he did not really want to teach, he wanted to write or act.

There can be no doubt that John's most important achievement, and we hope, his lasting contribution to society was the acquisition and successful development of Coventry Prep School, which alas is not the same today.

John was always greatly respected by his staff, not only the teaching, but also the administrative and domestic staff. He made everyone feel wanted and important and he had the gift of bringing out the best in people. He had an aura of goodness, a genuine Christian gentleness and care for everyone for whom he had responsibility.

This respect for John extended to the boys and to their parents, who were always very supportive and eager volunteers to help at Summer and Christmas Fayres and the annual Carol Service at St. James' Church in Styvechale, was always fully attended - John's 'sermon' being one of the highlights. Afterwards everyone would return to the Prep, for some of Mrs Brookes' wonderful mince pies.

John organised a summer camp for boys in the sixth form, also attended by some parents of the boys and staff. There were as many as sixty who would sleep under canvas, with the boys doing their own catering. It always amazed John how the boys could get such enjoyment out of the strange concoctions which they produced on their cooking stoves. These camps were in Kielder Forest, Exmoor, The Brecon Beacons, Snowdonia, The Lake District and many other parts of the country. In addition John organised many small camps for six to eight boys at a time because he thought that it built confidence, self reliance and fitness.

An essential part of the camps was trekking round the countryside in all weathers on walks chosen by John to bring out local historical and geographical features that he would explain to the boys at sparsely integrated breaks. In the local area for several years, an all day walk took place encircling the Coventry outskirts, with welcome breaks for refreshments in sheds and barns in Longford and Allesley.

During John's time the school had an excellent record of academic achievement. Nearly all the children passed the common Entrance Exam to the public or private school of their choice. This provided a sound foundation for the children's future at institutions of higher education.

John had an unquenchable love of books and was extremely well read. He experienced enormous pleasure from introducing to the children, the great

works of literature. This was done with enormous enthusiasm backed up with a quirky sense of humour. He always presented a benign, good humoured, fatherly presence to the children but with a strong inner core that would not tolerate bad behaviour or indiscipline. The importance of good manners and treating each other with respect were strongly emphasised. He also had very strong religious beliefs and moral values which underpinned his life. He tried very hard to show the children the importance of these values in their lives also.

As headmaster, John constantly thought of the children's well being and always put them first.

He tried to involve the children in his love of animals by introducing and breeding firstly chickens and secondly sheep. This agricultural venture expanded with chickens taking over the tennis court and more sheep arriving at school. The children loved being involved with these animals by looking after them and being present at the hatching of chicks and the birth of lambs. The sheep were allowed to graze on the school field and the hallowed turf of the cricket pitch during the winter months, much to the annoyance of the sports master.

John was also a keen gardener delighting in planting shrubs and trees, and took a great interest in lilies. John once returned from a R.H.S. show with several specimens to cross pollinate, resulting in 37 of his own varieties.

With the passage of time, John began to worry about the future of the school. He felt that no provision had been made should anything happen to him. Instead of selling the site for commercial development he insisted that it continued to be a school, once again putting the welfare of the children and staff to the fore. The school was sold to the Coventry School Foundation and this action, perhaps more than any other illustrates the integrity, generosity and compassion of John Phipps.

John was a perfectionist who believed that the use of quality materials lead to reduced maintenance costs. When replacing rainwater hoppers he chose lead, not only having them specially cast but also incorporating the School Crest and motto.

When a fire inspector insisted on 'EXIT' signs being fixed over certain doors, adding that they were usually green plastic with yellow lettering, John was furious, but to comply with the law he had signs made in green marble with gold leaf lettering.

Following John's retirement in 1992 he moved with his sheep to a small farm in Ardens Grafton where he devoted his time for many years becoming a specialist in rare breeds of sheep.

His love of wood manifested itself in most aspects of his life. At The Prep School extensive use of oak was used in the construction of the new dining hall. When a beech tree was felled at the school it was planked and carefully stacked for future use as the squash court floor, he certainly saw the value in the loss of a great tree.

During refurbishment of the school, most replacement windows and door frames were made from West African Iroko, and the doors in English Oak. His joiner, recalls when an oak beam was needed for the school they went to a timber yard firstly to select a top quality tree, then the chosen trunk was sawn in quarters only for John to reject the first offering, but then choose another quarter as being suitable for the beam.

Iroko was used for making tables and benches. One pupil remembers John saying, "One of the qualities of the wood was that it would maintain a nice shine as it was regularly polished by boys' backsides as they slid into their seats."

At Home Farm the refurbishment included window frames made from greenheart, a South American hardwood. He had various craftsman made items such as oak doors, a hand-made oak dining table, and a bespoke cedar wardrobe.

And finally, an example that emphasises John's charming eccentricity and his love of wood. There was a special tree, which needed felling on the farm, this was planked and stored to 'season', in the barn. Notes were recently found on his computer under the heading of "Funeral" which read:

"I have some excellent dry wych elm in plank, from which a decent carpenter could fettle up a coffin. Anything sham – in other words a 'casket' will not be appreciated by the departed spirit. We do have to encourage makers of real coffins".

So, this is the man we all knew, respected, appreciated, challenged, often provoked but ultimately deep down, loved and admired.