

## **Speech by Harold Williams (Headmaster at SGS) 1975 – almost certainly at the Old Secundrians dinner**

Having for some years been a diner and a listener, not a speaker, at this function, I have mixed emotions at finding myself facing an audience that I hope regards itself as captive. On the one hand, a long experience as a speakee rather than a speaker has developed in me a marked preference for brevity in after dinner speeches. On the other hand I feel that if I'm going to unburden myself of all the telling and witty phrases that have been accumulating in my mind over the years it's now or never and I don't care how long it takes.

I'm reminded of a speech day in those far off days when they occupied the South Parade Pier theatre in an afternoon in November. The speaker was a Brigadier – a formidable figure he was, very thin, seven feet tall and superbly dressed in full regimentals. We stood in respectful silence as the platform party, led by Harry Mills, and the then Chairman of Governors, Mrs Sharpe, made its way down the carpeted aisle to the stage, silent apart from the impressive jingling of the Brigadiers spurs. He sat on the stage like the personification of the spirit of Wellington until the time came for him to speak. He got up and said something like this – “Well, all my life I've had two unfulfilled ambitions – to do a turn on a pier and to be rude to a Headmaster and this afternoon I've got the chance to do both”. He then proceeded to enjoy himself and so did we!

I'm even more encouraged to be leisurely by the fact that nobody else will be allowed to speak tonight so there can't be any urgency for me to sit down again. So, gentlemen, you have been warned.

To share the privilege of a platform with Alan Tuggey is, of course, a great pleasure. To my mind he exemplifies the best of the qualities of those men who have kept the Old Secundrians vigorous over the years. He has, as we all know, accepted office in the Association in a quite selfless way modestly and effectively supporting and strengthening a group of men with happy memories like his. The association owes him a great debt. But I had better not follow this line or I shall be unable to resist naming other equally devoted Old Secundrians, the Frank Barters and Stan Davis's, for example. And Stan, having for so many years having been a colleague too, I might be tempted to name those long serving colleagues whose names come up when Old Secundrians meet - the Roland Chattertons who stood for so much of what the Southern has meant. So I dare not begin to attempt to name individuals but merely express on behalf of the school my thanks to the man who occupies the chair this evening, so admirably for us.

I've noticed that speakers at this dinner, and dinners like it, are sensible enough not to refer to their own schooldays, sorely as they may be tempted. The reason, I suppose, is obvious: this is an exercise in nostalgia, and when every table is absorbed in nostalgia, who wants nostalgia second-hand? And in any case, however ripe in years the speaker

may be he must still be a young whippersnapper to some of his audience - how can he impress men who were men before he was a boy? So keep off the golden past is a golden motto! Yet when I considered what I might say tonight my mind went back inevitably, it seemed, not to my own schooldays but to the first post-war old boys' dinner of my own school. It was a school not unlike the Southern; it took boys from ordinary homes, it worked them hard and enabled them to compete with the ablest of the land and, like the Southern its old boys included successful scholars, civil servants, engineers, teachers – an untold number of professional men who had reason to be grateful to it. I was certainly grateful to it and, recently demobilised looked forward to renewing old acquaintance. And also to hearing the speaker. He was a former headmaster whom I remembered from the thirties with affection and respect which has remained with me ever since. At that time, 1946, he had recently moved to a new College of Education and it may have been the anxieties of the new post which gave his speech a surprisingly earnest note. It surprised me anyway. It concerned threats to the academic standards and traditional values which he, as Head, had done so much to cherish – and it ended in a ringing assertion of the need to preserve the best of the old whilst welcoming the best of the new. It was not a pessimistic speech though it was cautious. Its note, as I have said, took me by surprise and I couldn't immediately judge what had given rise to it. Looking back, of course, it is obvious that my old Head was talking about the effect of the 1944 Education Act with its tripartite division of secondary schools.

He could have made a speech very like that one today could he not? He could have expressed in general the same anxieties, the same hopes. And memories of that occasion, almost 30 years ago, hearten me greatly. And now perhaps it is obvious what the trend of my remarks is going to be. I am going to say, perhaps, that as that speaker may have had fears which proved to be groundless, so may we in retrospect dismiss our present doubts and anxieties.

So let me say first, as clearly as I can, that with the marvellous record of the maintained grammar schools in the country – and I have spent nearly all of my working life in one – no-one is more concerned than I to emphasize the danger in change in any reorganisation, of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, of foolishly discarding the old because it is old, because it is unfashionable, because it is square, untrendy, whatever you like. But I just don't believe that's going to be allowed to happen.

When I look at the list of men and women appointed to senior positions in the new Portsmouth comprehensives, when I attend their meetings and discussions and listen to the painstaking, dedicated and professional tasks they are setting themselves I cannot be other than hopeful about the times to come. They express frustrations about facilities, equipment, accommodation, finance but I have yet to hear a cynical word from senior colleagues about the importance of the educational venture or their determination to get it right as far as in them lies. No-one who has worked with Hayden Brenna, for example, can question for a moment his resolve not to let go of what was worth keeping in the past (though I must add that he, like the rest of us, is aware that it is folly – and a very dangerous folly – to assume that a mixed comprehensive of 1100 can be or ought to be the same as a Boys' Grammar School of 850).

At the same speech Day to which I referred earlier – was it the same? It may have been – I’m assuming it was – Harry Mills, in his annual report, referred to the spirit and tone of the school and said it rested in the care of a number of men in the prime of their careers – between the ages of 35 and 50 he said - whom, with his well known gift of phrase, he called a power group. He was thinking, of course, of such men as Arthur Hitchins, Cyril Tooze, Reg Fulwood, Sid Parnell, Stan Davies, Rowland Chatterton, Jim Thomas. The phrase gained some currency for a while in the staff room and a few legs were pulled from time to time. Harry was right of course. The school was lucky indeed to have the services of men of their calibre and they will not be forgotten by those whom they taught or those who worked with them. But it’s been lucky too in their successors. Dedicated, hardworking, inspiring teachers are still to be found and, thank God, many of them have found their way to the Southern. So, said change, we find factors that do not change.

And the boys of the Southern, have they changed? Heaven knows, enough has been said and written about the changing adolescent, enough statistics published to confront and contradict one another on that topic.

The School Magazine has recently (and belatedly) appeared and I’ve been comparing it with one of the first “Secundrians” with which I was personally concerned in December 1951. Ron Sonnet, now the Deputy Head, was the then boy editor. What one strikes one at once are not the differences but the similarities. There are changes of course. In the Old Secundrians notes the Christmas dinner dance at Kimbell’s is said to have cost 6/- or 3/6d if you had left school in the last three years and included a sit-down supper. The House system (blue, brown, yellow, green) is not mentioned in the 1974 edition nor is the CCF – then ably led by Barry Cousins. But the 1974 edition carries reports of the Council for Education in World Citizenship and under the heading of Community Service describes some of the sponsored events by which our boys in the recent past have raised hundreds of pounds for charity (since then, by the way, our boys have raised £70 for the British Heart Foundation Fund by a sponsored swim). The Parent-Staff Association is spoken of in the earlier magazine as a very young infant – indeed, as Jack Westfold as its Secretary; I am glad to report that it has never faltered and is as flourishing today as ever, with well established traditions of its own. And perhaps I may pause there to remind this meeting of what is obvious to those of us who work in the school – that the school would be a much poorer place without the efforts made on our behalf by the parents of our boys. If I say that without the PSA we should not have had our War Memorial organ, our heated swimming pool, our minibus and many of the instruments of the orchestra, not to mention the many transfusions of cash into the school funds from time to time and the other services taken for granted, you will understand why I and my colleagues are so delighted to have Mrs Craig, the PSA Chairman with us tonight. Thank you for inviting her.

As I have said it is the continuity of effort and achievement which strikes one most. The school orchestra, under Arthur Hitchins’s baton in those days, is smaller than it was but it still provides enjoyable twice-yearly concerts and Ian Watson’s energy shows no signs of flagging. Our latest annual school play is well spoken of in 1974 as Saxon Walker’s productions were in 1951.

Kevin and two others played for the Portsmouth under 15 side. In basketball, once very much a minority sport, the school is a force in the land. In the past 5 or 6 years our senior team have won the national championships once and been defeated finalists twice. This year, 1975, we reached the last 8. Two of our players Stephen Bowden and David Wilson are full internationals at the under 19 level and recently played in the England team which defeated Ireland.

Five of our boys last year represented Portsmouth in the National Schools Sailing Championship. Seven of our athletes and five of our swimmers competed for Portsmouth and two of the swimmers also represented Hampshire. The school tennis team – still coached by Bob Burnett – were runners up in the south-east Hants league. In the Portsmouth Schools swimming championship, just completed, we had boys in every event open to us and won the senior cup. Two of our cross-country runners came 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> in a triangular county match recently and have been chosen to represent Hampshire in the English Counties Championships. Hockey, introduced by Adrian Bolge ten or twelve years ago and nurtured by him ever since, is second only to soccer in popularity as a winter sport. As for soccer, last year saw the introduction of the Hampshire Schools Senior league. Games are now played on Wednesdays and our boys found the competition especially against large sixth form colleges very stiff but this season we have been doing well. I remember when I first came to the school for interview, I was introduced to Charlie Hoare who invited me, if I had time that day to see our under 15 side play in the Evening News cup final. Last Spring I was at Fratton Park to see our team win that cup once again. The first year soccer team last year won 30 of its 32 matches, including the Hampshire Cup, the Portsmouth Cup and the Portsmouth League Championship.

The school's reputation for chess has never been higher. The senior team competing for the first time in 1974 won the Sunday Times National knockout championship from an original entry of 961 schools and so far this year have already won the zone final. The under 16 team won the Hampshire Schools tournament and three members played in a Hampshire Schools team which came third in an English Counties competition. Peter Lee and Glenn Lambert have also played at national level. The chess notes in the Portsmouth News bear constant witness to the success of our teams at all ages – a splendid tribute to the work of Cdr John Peters who retired last summer.

Finally, let me mention one item which came too late for the magazine but which demonstrates that one other worthwhile tradition has not been lost sight of. In the 1951 edition, to which I referred earlier there is mention of the academic successes of such boys as Harry Arnold and Geoff Holden. In December of last year (1974) John Whitehead of Upper Sixth was awarded an Open Exhibition in English at Exeter College Cambridge.

So, when I say that I am optimistic for the future, I am merely asserting what I have never had occasion to doubt, that with teachers like those we've had and the continuing fine quality of the boys (girls too from next year) that reach us at 11 (12 from next year!) and

leave us at 16 or 18, we can face the future with confidence. Mr Chairman, I hope we have looked after the good name of the Southern which you and so many others have held so high.

Harold Williams  
1975