

History of the School

Quincentennial Commemoration Day Address

The opening from the Commemoration Day Address, September 2009, by the Headmaster, Dr Jon Cox in which he reflects upon the School's rich and colourful history as the RGS begins the celebrations to mark its quincentenary.

We meet this evening at the start of an auspicious and momentous year for the RGS: a year during which we celebrate the 500th year of the School's existence since its founding by Robert Becket in 1509. This evening's event, a review of the past year and a celebration of the very recent past, is a complement to the service of thanksgiving which we held in Guildford Cathedral earlier today to give thanks for the longevity of this great institution and the people whose generosity allowed it to flourish.

The RGS is a lucky school. I should, of course, qualify what I mean by that. It has had its share of good fortune over the 500 years of its existence. Indeed, its founding came about as a result of good fortune. Schools, like all other institutions these days, seem to be shackled by red tape and bureaucracy. It seems that not a day goes by without another flyer advertising courses of some sort or another which we must all go on if we are to teach properly, or manage others or exist in a safe environment. The most ridiculous of courses are on offer: a two-day course for teachers on how to use a ladder properly – one wonders what on earth they are doing on the second day, maybe that's when they learn how to climb down; a day dealing with 'The hazards of lost-property' – once again, one can imagine all sorts of unappealing images of earnest teachers learning to handle mouldy PE kit; and my personal favourite, a morning's entertainment during which one can learn 'Effective pupil movement in schools – heading in the right direction for success'. Red tape is slowly but surely strangling schools. One only has to note the reluctance of many schools to engage in tours and trips these days, curtailed due to the mountains of form filling and legalese, to recognise that something, somewhere has gone badly wrong. Last week's news that we will all have to be vetted if we regularly give our children's friends lifts to activities is another example of the dystopian world of red tape enveloping us all uncontrollably.

You will understand that I, like most other Headmasters and Headmistresses, become exceptionally frustrated by the ever lengthening list of regulations but, for once, I must counter my distaste of such bureaucracy and say hurray for red tape for it was as a result of this that the RGS came into being. We owe our existence to the sluggishness of the Tudor legal system. Our founder, Robert Becket, died in November 1509, his will being read on 3 November of that year. Becket, being a wealthy London merchant, had the financial means to indulge in philanthropy but this was not his preferred aim initially. As we heard this afternoon, he left money in his will to construct a new chantry in the parish of Southwark, where he lived and died, so that prayers could be said to smooth the passage of both he and his wife into heaven: an understandable act in those days of blind faith where paying for your heavenly berth was seen as an acceptable way of courting favour with the Almighty. But Becket was also aware, as we are, of the crippling nature of bureaucracy, and it would appear that the ecclesiastical wranglings in Tudor times was worse than most. Being a pragmatic man and not wanting his money tied up for years he stipulated in his will that, should the necessary license not be forthcoming within two years, the money should instead be used to create a school within Guildford. I am pleased to say that luck was on our side. After two years of administrative wrangling no chantry was licensed and, as a consequence, this school came into being. It was a very fortuitous beginning.

And the good luck didn't end there. Henry VIII's dissolution forced the Dominican friars who acted as the first school masters away from Guildford. The effect being that the School was very soon in dire straits, unable to afford to pay for a teacher. Luck was again on our side when an appeal to King Edward VI was successful and his Charter and the endowment associated with it ensured the School's survival. Benefactors such as the Austen

family, William Hamonde, Joseph Nettles, the Powell family and Arthur Valpy – names which reside in the consciousness of the School through their respective House associations, were also there to give much needed financial support at crucial times. The School has continued to chart choppy waters on occasions. In the mid-18th century, the Governors brought legal action against the Headmaster for ‘intolerable negligence’. They found out that he was continuing to draw his salary even though there had been no pupils at the School for over a year. To compound his foolishness, during that time his son, who had never been near the School, was suddenly awarded a scholarship. The School has never been so near to closing down than during this period in its history. Luckily we survived. A fire in 1962 could have been catastrophic but with a considerable amount of reconstruction and restoration the old Building survived. And the flames of political zeal then threatened the School with extinction in the 1970s when the education authority’s goal was to abolish selective schooling in a move which would have forced the RGS to be subsumed into the comprehensive system. We were fortunate at the time to have a Chairman of Governors, John Brown, who would not accept such a loss of identity and so it was that the RGS became an independent school in 1977. Again, the School was saved by the skin of its teeth.

When one considers the somewhat turbulent history of the RGS one can understand my assertion that to have survived for 500 years is a real achievement – this is a very fortunate school. But that was then and this prize-giving evening is all about now as we look back on the successes of the past twelve months. As we start our quinquennial celebrations, it is appropriate to take a long look at the School and to try to make an honest appraisal of how we compare now at the start of our sixth century. Does the School as we find it in 2009 do justice to the hard work, perseverance and inspiration of those who have played such an important part in its history? Would the key people in our history Robert Becket, Edward VI, Austen, Hamonde, John Brown, would they be pleased and proud of what the School has achieved as we start our next 500 years? I believe that the answer to this would be the most resounding ‘Yes’...

Headmaster, September 2009