

Old Philologists dinner 31 Oct 2012

First I must thank Gerald for his warm introduction and express my great surprise to having been invited to speak here today and my thanks for the implied compliment even on the night of Halloween when it is said ghosts and ghouls and spirits emerge from their haunts. So “Here I am”. I realise that many OP’s meet here each year to celebrate their shared experience of school life and also to indulge in unmitigated nostalgia. If that is what you want and expect from me – well I suppose you’re going to get it! – But understand that I’m from the 1940s!

Think back to 1939 – well quite a few of you can! The Government rushed to evacuate schools and children from the cities because there’s going to be immediate and total destruction from the air – or so they feared. My primary school went to Bedford. It didn’t happen then. But a year later the blitz did start and there was certainty of a Nazi invasion and the Dominions: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Rhodesia, India all cried out loud “Send us your children”. Many went privately but there was an outcry – why should only the children of those who can afford the passage get to safety? A government scheme CORB, Childrens Overseas Reception Board, was quickly organised and I was one of the first to get on the list for South Africa because my parents had family there. In all just under three thousand actually went under the government scheme although, by the time it ended, there had been over 200,000 applicants. Only 355 went to South Africa. Overseas evacuation all came to an abrupt end when the City of Benares was torpedoed and 83 child evacuees lost. There were a few survivors and I was pleased to meet one, Beth Cummings a few years ago who had clung for hours onto a raft. Our ship the Llanstephan Castle was still in the south Atlantic at that time on our four week journey which took that long because of the route we had to take to avoid U-boats. We were never aware of any imminent danger – but do I recall almost daily boat drills.

So in 1945 after five years in a Boarding school in Johannesburg a berth was eventually arranged on a Swedish ship– there was a tremendous demand for places on ships as there were countless people round the world all wanting passages home. After the normality of enjoying a prosperous sun-drenched beautiful nation it was back to Britain, in autumn, cold and wet, evidence of great destruction through bombing, and so dark, dirty and depressing, people weary, and everything seemed to be so small and cramped. I spent a lot of time in the first few months home walking alone on Hampstead Heath to enjoy space and open air.

And I had to be found a school. Several were approached before my return without success – I hadn’t taken any selection test – but Philip Wayne said he’d see me when I arrived. I have vivid memories of that interview – passed from one member of staff to another to discover what I knew. But two things got me in I’m sure. One was that I’d done Latin and the other that I’d passed grade six on the piano - which I had to prove! I was trailed along that corridor to the hall and fortunately remembered one of my pieces. Dicky clearly approved; but I had no French and there could be no way of taking Afrikaans to School Cert and I had no knowledge of British history – I knew all about

the Voortrekkers and Dingaan but that didn't help. I was put in 4A a class one year younger than me. And who was our form master? Could it have been anyone better than our highly esteemed President Rory Hands? And a great class they were. How they found me is for them to say – Eric has said that he was impressed by the fact that I had new smart clothes while theirs had survived rationing, overuse, ageing and repair. In those days we didn't have school uniform – just a cap with the beehive and tie –knitted blue with a yellow stripe. I suppose 5 years away from home in unfamiliar environments from the age of nine had forced on me the need to look after myself and to adapt quickly to new circumstances and had given me a level of self confidence which overcame any difficulty in adjusting. Rory immediately got me over the French problem by calling me up to his desk to give me the basics of French while the rest were getting on with work he'd set. For that I was and am most grateful.

For 20 years of headship I've had the responsibility of keeping a grammar school fully staffed needing to provide specialist teaching in a wide range of subjects. It's a Head's major task in fitting teachers to the curriculum at the best of times. I am sure Dickie Wayne had enormous difficulties in those early post-war years. The school just back from Cornwall - men were returning from the war and taking their jobs back and that meant others on temporary engagements had to go. And a variety of teachers seemed to pass through. For a time we learned Physics from Karel Reicz, former Czech pilot, who went on to become one of the country's leading film producers : Saturday Night and Sunday morning notably and French Lieutenant's Woman. Followed by Herr Freudenberger straight from Germany. I remember the sequence of Latin teachers we had – Kate Walker was one and a young man who, I'm embarrassed to say, we gave a rather rough time. We nick-named him Bouncing Bertie. He didn't last long! Remember Latin For Today –each new Latin teacher entered and asked where we'd got to – they all got the same reply – Ceres and Proserpina. We got to know that chapter quite well! But then Major Ken Crook returned and all was very quickly back and in order! Often still in his khaki army shirt and tie. Other memories – Arthur Breed who always had a flower in his button hole – even a daisy or dandelion if there was no other available in his garden. A brilliant maths teacher whose death we greatly mourned.

And as the sports ground was not yet available for rugby the main inter-house sport was a form of hand-ball unlike any in the Olympics – all conducted at floor level scoring goals by getting the ball under an upturned gym bench. And thinking of Olympics – did you realize when you were watching those Brownlee brothers swimming up and down the Serpentine in the triathlon that it was a sport invented by one of us? Canon Beeching – you've sung it “in three elements free to run, to ride, to swim” they do now in reverse order of course in the triathlon but it's surely a Philologically inspired sport!

Eventually the ground was available and we had that fearful train journey from Marylebone to Sudbury on trains with ancient rolling-stock without corridors and therefore no staff supervision. The total mayhem that ensued in those carriages cannot be imagined – and I recall the frantic rush to get the return train when there was barely time to change out of wet and muddy boots. Did we have showers there?

Drama and music were always very evident throughout the year and balanced all the serious study that went on. I got involved in school plays and well remember the Battles of Agincourt and Bosworth being fought on that tiny stage. Entry from stage right was not easy as you had to be concealed there during a scene break sometimes for lengthy periods. And you could sure that half way through the second night the lights would all fuse and you'd just carry on in the dark. Jimmy Ball (Sir James now) and I had the notable distinction of being part of the first post war school drama trip to Belgium in 1947 with 12th Night. We were just a couple of very small part attendants to Dickie's Count Orsino. I don't doubt Jim and I could still repeat scene one right from "If music be the food of love" through to the end.

And Forest Green – that really was one of Dickie Wayne's greatest contributions to education in acquiring that site. Every school I've known has tried to get even a small similar experience for its pupils because so much is learned. I've seen classes totally transformed by a week away climbing mountains in Wales. To think that every Marylebone boy went for a week every year. It must have taken an enormous amount of organising particularly as food was still rationed.

I must say when I went to Forest Green a few years ago I was shocked to see how things have changed. Flush toilets and hot and cold water and cooking stoves? Rubbish! They've all gone soft! Do you remember how we washed? Collect a chipped enamel bowl from the building known as the garage (before the days of plastic of course). Dip it in the stream running across the front of the mill area and prop it on a table or ledge nearby to wash. And remember the fun we had in the swimming pool –clear fresh water – did anyone get ill from it? Health and Safety have a lot to answer for. And the latrines – that wonderful wooden structure in the corner of the field – how many seater was it? Five? Where we meditated cheek to cheek as it were –putting the world to right and in some danger of setting the place alight with our Woodbines or Craven A. And expeditions and holiday camps and catering: stirring those dixies over the open trench with a wood fire and the joys of being on squad duty. Who was the master who announced as we got off the coach on arrival that the first meal would be served in two hours time at the top of Leith Hill? At Summer Camp the night wide games up there and walking the Pilgrim's way across Surrey with Kingston Derry and arriving back in advance of his group who came in two hours later as he put it "having made some interesting detours over Hurtwood common". And on that trip coming across a river near Guilford and stripping off in a secluded spot to swim across carrying our clothes overhead. Just a few of my happy memories –we all have them. How we were made to see the world and to live with our eyes open and to live in support of each other. That sort of activity and experience creates any school into a real community and gives all the best memories.

What else may we specially value of SMGS? We may not all have been happy with the innovation that has been much copied in schools in the Friday afternoon sixth form Facultative period. We were introduced to culture and knowledge outside the restriction of the exam-dominated curriculum. I remember Gerald Gibson opening up fascinating aspects of the world of maths we wouldn't have met otherwise. And Dickie

himself gave us Art and Music Appreciation – how to look at and understand paintings and the structure of classical musical compositions. And when we think back to those who educated us we know they were what we describe with affection as real characters with real dedication to their profession and who gave unstintingly to the boys' welfare – I can just mention a few Willis, Bluett, Derry, Gibson, Hedges, Warre-Cornish, Breed, Crook, Snape, Leatham, Kate and Rory Hands, Padell, Harrison, Bailie, Blakeway, Tom Blackburn (such a brilliant poet but such a tortured soul – read his daughter's biography "The Three of us" – quite the most moving you'll ever read) - these are just some by whom our lives have been moulded. There were many more of course then and since.

Allow me a personal experience. An aunt of mine died and her daughter, my cousin Joan, thought, as I was in education, that I'd be interested in having some school prizes that our uncle Walter had won at school and which our aunt had kept as a reminder of her brother who died young.. When I got them I was astonished to recognise the imprint on the front which I had also received on one of my prizes! The Philological school stamp. They knew I had been at Marylebone Grammar but had never associated it with the Philological school that uncle Walter had attended. Second Form First prize in 1886 and signed by William Moore, Headmaster: "Self Help" and "Character" two leather bound volumes by Samuel Smiles about self-improvement and personal development! Great stuff!

A final thought about my prize. Awarded me in 1950. The Senior Mathematics prize and the label written in the fair hand of Francis Warre-Cornish. What did I receive for the maths prize? Something on Calculus? Relativity? The Riemann Hypothesis? NO! The Oxford Book of English Verse – that's what Marylebone Grammar School represents – a gift reflecting the finest culture and the best appreciation of what is really of value in this world. I've used this prize far more than any maths book I might have been given and I value it very highly.

Give thanks with me for the education we were fortunate enough to receive at the hands of these giants and raise a glass to the memory of the school we honour with respect with so much affection : Marylebone Grammar School.

John Turner (1945 – 1950)