



# ST BENEDICT'S SCHOOL

a m i n i m i s i n c i p e

## ST BENEDICT'S PRIZE GIVING SPEECH: SUMMER 2018

The writer and poet Gervase Phinn recalls visiting a Yorkshire primary school, where he came across a piece of writing in small scrawling handwriting:

"I asked the boy whose work it was whether he had any help with it", Phinn writes. "He shook his head. Well, it was quite a small masterpiece he had written, and I remember the words well:

*Yesterday, yesterday, yesterday:*

*Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow.*

*Today, today, today:*

*Hope, hope, hope.*

*Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow:*

*Love, love, love.*

"What a wonderful little poem, I told him. He thought for a while, and stared at me with large, sad eyes. And then he announced: 'They are my spelling corrections, Sir.'"

The boy in Phinn's story may well have gone on to write a beautiful poem afterwards, but he had to learn the vocabulary first. You need a firm grasp of the basics - a structure, a framework, a set of grammatical or mathematical rules before you can go deeper, be creative, break the rules and branch out in different directions.

And yet, taken too far, 'back to basics' can end up in a very dry, Gradgrindian 'Nothing but facts' sort of approach, which is not likely to engage young people, and we need to be a bit more creative than that.

Almost 100 years ago now, describing such methods, Albert Einstein said it was "nothing short of a miracle that the (then) modern methods of instruction had not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry."

So how do we nurture that "holy curiosity", not just keeping it alive, but helping it to grow and flourish?

And what are the key ingredients for the outstanding education we aspire to offer our students at St Benedict's?

Well, it seems to me that we have to understand three things.

**Firstly**, the process of education at St Benedict's needs to encourage an increasing love of learning for its own sake, so that our students become intellectually curious and get actively engaged in their learning.

The Helikon Centre for Academic Challenge was officially opened in January and is proving to be as vibrant and as popular as we hoped it would be, with several talks, discussions and workshops every week, drawing in pupils of all ages.

Research projects this year have included the Form 3 "Who am I" project, projects undertaken by member of the Lower Sixth on subjects such as Chaos Theory, The economic impact of Football, and the development of Artificial Intelligence.

And we have also seen huge growth in the Extended Project Qualification (the EPQ) this year, with over 40 in the Lower Sixth and 30 in the U4th presenting and writing in recent weeks on a wide range of fascinating subjects including: block chain and bitcoin, eco-friendly domestic energy and xenotransplantation.

Of course, focused and effective research does not happen without careful guidance from teachers, and more of the teaching staff than ever are acting as EPQ supervisors and tutors.

We are significantly raising the bar on academic expectations at St Benedict's. Being ambitious for our pupils- which actually means believing in them – contributes to their well-being. By urging them to achieve, and to be ambitious

for themselves - we are giving a focus to their learning, helping them to fulfil their potential, and so to grow in confidence.

Many of our pupils have taken part in national academic competitions this year, and a number have excelled.

Aine McColgan achieved a Gold Award in the UK Chemistry Olympiad, while Toby McDonald and Max Lubowiecki got Silver Awards.

In the UK Maths Challenge, no fewer than 20 St Benedict's pupils gained Gold awards, and several were then invited to take part in the Olympiad competition and Royal Institution masterclasses.

It is a cause for concern that, nationally, the number of students taking modern languages A levels in the UK has fallen by over a third in just a decade. The fact that A level languages remain popular at St Benedict's is partly down to initiatives such as exchanges and modern languages performance opportunities: A level German students gave an excellent performance earlier this year of *Der Besuch der alten Dame* by Dürrenmatt. And, at the beginning of this term, *Linguafest* was a vibrant celebration of European languages and culture, through music, drama, dance and literature, performed by over 200 students throughout the school.

In our annual Science Fair, Lower 4th pupils impressed over 300 local primary school children with their scientific investigations, on such diverse topics as: 'Are fingerprint patterns inherited?' and 'How do muscles move bones?'

Meanwhile, a new science magazine has been launched by a couple of our sixth formers – the first edition of *Novus* is hot off the press – and a very good read.

And, in another pupil-led initiative, a working party is looking at how to reduce consumption of single-use plastics at St Benedict's.

There has been a huge number of trips for our pupils this year; all of them in their different ways have been an opportunity for wonder and for intellectual curiosity. Last October our Classicists went to Greece, visiting Delphi, Corinth and Mycenae, while Economics and Business Studies students visited Vietnam and Historians went on a trip to Russia, to name but a few.

We have also launched the St Benedict's Lecture Series this year. In a very entertaining presentation, Ann Widdecombe spoke in April about a Post Brexit Britain (and a great deal more besides including *Strictly Come Dancing* and the

*Big Brother House*). And this coming October Professor Francis Campbell - Vice Chancellor of St Mary's University Twickenham, and former British Ambassador to the Vatican - will give a different view of Brexit, and will talk about its impact on UK-Irish relations.

And, last November also saw the first Richard Baker Science Lecture, given by OP Dr Francis Cuss, who spoke about his career in medical research

**The second thing** we have to understand if we are to provide successfully an outstanding all-round education for our pupils is about well-being and happiness. How can we help our pupils to understand, and manage, their mental health - to be happy, resilient and comfortable in their own skin?

Well, education has to be about the development of the whole person - about the development of character, by discovering what you're really interested in - what makes you tick – whether it's sport, or drama, music, or the CCF.

And St Benedict's, with its incredibly rich co-curricular life could not be better equipped to build the confidence and self-esteem which is so essential to feel fulfilled.

Indeed, it's been another superb year for co-curricular activities.

The Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme is thriving, with ever increasing numbers getting involved - trekking in the Chilterns, South Downs and Snowdonia.

The Molveno Holiday took some of our Lower 4th pupils to Italy at half term – *and* we won the annual Molveno football match once again this year!

This year's head of St Benedict's CCF, Cadet RSM Trinity Yau, has been awarded a Deputy Lieutenant's Certificate for outstanding service.

And a team of Lower 5<sup>th</sup> cadets took part in, and won, a competition run by the Royal Engineers at Chatham. Cadets can try their hand at anything, and they have done this year – from taking part in an assault boat time trial, to bulldozer driving, and even bricklaying.

The ARTS are flourishing and there have been some truly impressive performances this year.

Drama has explored the theme of war, with the middle school performing a collection of songs and scenes about *Life in World War I*, followed by the Fifth Form production of James Graham's play *Bassett*, in which a group of teenagers consider war, race and national identity. And the main school production was a very poignant performance of *Oh! What a lovely war*.

The annual Dance Show presented *A Night at the Movies*, and involved over 180 dancers.

The choirs sang Carl Jenkins' *The Armed Man* in November; the Abbey Choir toured to Hungary; and jazz ensembles gave us a wonderful evening of music last term, following an afternoon of workshops and rehearsals with professional musicians.

Finally, the Art Department opened its doors to put on the annual Art Show last week – a stunning display of creativity and skill from our GCSE and A level pupils.

The Sports Department has continued to train and turn out boys and girls teams every week, playing fixtures against a range of top schools.

In rugby, Ben Keen, the St Benedict's 1<sup>st</sup> XV Captain, has been selected to represent the Lambs U18s team this season.

The U12 rugby squad won the Middlesex Cup, and the U13s have won the Plate.

Nine St Benedict's hockey players have been selected to represent Middlesex County.

Hockey and Netball teams toured Malaysia last summer and the U14 and U15 cricket teams toured Sri Lanka at Easter

St Benedict's had a record number of finalists this year at the Public Schools Fencing Championships this year, with Alberto Mascioli from the Lower 5<sup>th</sup> winning the Junior Foil trophy.

Not only are students here given every opportunity to find their talents and to develop them to the full, they are also enabled to learn that happiness can be achieved through helping other people.

We have a voluntary service programme which, even by the standards of Catholic schools, is exceptional in its reach. For example:

- The pupil mentoring programme has been developed significantly this year, so that older pupils offer support and advice to their younger peers
- Members of the SVP have hosted parties each term for elderly people, and have helped out in a homeless shelter at weekends
- In partnership with the choral ensemble VOCES8, our young leaders learn how to work effectively with primary school children, encouraging them to enjoy singing. And, next term, they will run a day of music here, working alongside the singers from VOCES8
- The Lourdes Pilgrimage took 20 of our students to France at Easter, where they helped disabled pilgrims of all ages
- And the Foundation of Goodness is a charity which helps victims of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka. While they were in Sri Lanka on tour our cricketers visited the foundation, where they met some of the happiest children they have ever met – and those smiles on the faces of children who had absolutely nothing in the world must surely be a valuable lesson in the true nature of happiness.

So we are an outward-facing school, seeking to promote concern and compassion for other people in the world – whether in Ealing or on the Indian subcontinent. This hallmark of Catholic education – upholding social justice and looking beyond ourselves – helps to give us a sense of perspective and a set of values which go well beyond the sort of narrow, neurotic education you sometimes find elsewhere

I strongly believe that an interest in, and concern for, other people, coupled with a wide range of co-curricular interests will help our young people to be resilient adults: not just in the world of work but to be a fully thriving human beings, well-grounded and able to make a valuable contribution to society.

**And the third thing** we need to consider, if we are to provide an excellent all-round education, is what we are actually preparing our students *for*.

What sorts of jobs are they likely to be offered? What impact will technology and Artificial Intelligence have on the work they do?

This is why the biggest event by far that we have held in the school over the past year was the Careers Fair last November. It was an amazing opportunity for our students to consider possible future employment, attended by more

than 150 companies representing careers from accountancy and archaeology to music and medicine.

Given the rapid advances in digital technology, in particular, the employment landscape will certainly change over the next five to ten years. It's likely that computers will take over at least some quite sophisticated tasks (maybe even some of the roles currently undertaken by professionals such as accountants, solicitors and doctors)

It's crucial, therefore, that we enable young people to develop fully the *human* qualities sought by employers - the ability to empathise, and to work as part of a team; to be able to put forward a good argument, and to be creative and imaginative in finding solutions.

These qualities will stand our students, the Old Priorians of tomorrow, in good stead, in the world of work as well as more widely in their lives – and they are precisely the things which our curriculum is designed to promote.

It's certainly not the easiest time to be young, with the chaos of Brexit, the rising cost of a university education, an excessively steep housing ladder, and ever-increasing competition in a shifting jobs market.

But let's not forget that education should be a joy.

It should open doors and enable children to find their gifts and to discern how to use them for their own benefit, and also for the good of others.

The holistic education offered at St Benedict's does all of this. It is catholic in the purest sense – all embracing; inclusive and unlimited. And the value and relevance of a St Benedict's education is therefore arguably greater now than it has *ever* been.

Andrew Johnson, Headmaster of St Benedict's

June 2018