

## What does Merchant Taylors' School stand for?

This morning I would like to think about identity – what is it that defines and describes something. Let us take as a first example, a football team. What is its core identity? What makes it the thing that it is? Is it the kit they wear? No, that changes every season. Is it the players? No they are bought and sold. It can't be the manager, who can be fired at a whim, nor the owner, nor the location where the football team plays – they all change. Nor is it the fans, however loyal they are: new ones will join and old ones will die. Is it then just the name? Certainly that seems to be the most enduring aspect of a football club. But who would wish to cling to such a shallow and empty sense of identity? No. We want a football club, especially a club in which we have invested our loyalty, to mean something more, to have an identity greater than simply its name. We want it to mean something, to stand for something, to have core values.

What is true of a football club is doubly true of a school. The same questions we asked of the football club can be asked of Merchant Taylors' School. Our identity is not bound up in the school's location: we have moved three times in our history. It is not linked to the staff, the Head Master or even the pupils - all change over time. It is not our uniform or even our reputation, enviable though that has always been. And yet we all, I hope, wish to assert an identity that is more than simply the words of our name. Over the last half term, I have been working with different groups of senior staff, asking this very question. What is our identity? What do we stand for? What is *our* essence? These questions are fundamental; they take on even greater force in current times, when at least one, and possibly two, political parties see no value in independent education and are contemplating our abolition.

We wished to state our identity as simply as possible, and to craft something individual to this school. Of course Merchant Taylors' School stands for excellence, and we are excellent. Of course, Merchant Taylors' School believes in fostering the happiness of its pupils, and we do. Of course Merchant Taylors' School is a safe environment. But the same could be said of many other schools. We wondered if we could find something unique, or at least pertinent especially to us. Out of a longer document emerged five words that I think we can assert as our identity. Five words that can serve, like a flag, as something around which to rally. They are these: innovation, bravery, confidence, inspiration and joy.

Innovation is important to us, as we are constantly striving to find new ways to do better. This is not a community that stands still. We want you to be constantly reinventing yourselves, discovering new methods and techniques of working. We want you to strive to develop in character as well as finding new ways to express yourself – it is all about discovering new aspects of yourself. The teachers support you by challenging themselves to improve their teaching. That is why we have such a sophisticated Teaching and Learning Group in the staff room, where teachers explore specific things they can do in the classroom, their strategic teaching goals, and even the theory and philosophy that lies behind and underpins teaching. Teachers in this school are rewarded for undertaking research into teaching and learning, and their work has been expressed physically in new designs for classrooms. You will know that two English classrooms are unusual in their look and use. You will see that some of these ideas have been transplanted into the classrooms of the new Edward Evans Geography Building. Innovation and a restless search for self-improvement underpin everything we do in the school.

We are able to innovate because we are brave. It is easy to stay the same, it is easy to hide from challenge, it is easy to let others take the first step. It takes bravery to demand more of ourselves. Bravery comes in many forms. This school certainly knows about physical

bravery. Three Victoria Crosses and more than 300 medals and citations earned in the First World War have set the scene for the rest of the century. It takes physical bravery to make that last ditch tackle in rugby, or face down fast bowling in cricket, or run out against a short corner in hockey. Nor should we ignore the bravery that allows us to step into the spotlight on the stage, or pick up our instrument to perform. But bravery is also so much more. Moral bravery is when you stand up for what you know is right, whatever the odds. Indeed, morality means little without the bravery to act on your beliefs and values. Intellectual bravery is also at the core of what we do. It means never settling on an easy answer. It means we challenge ourselves to be rigorous in our analysis - it means we are ready to step back from and overturn even cherished notions, if the evidence requires it.

And because we are brave in our pursuit of innovation, we grow in confidence. Our confidence is not swagger and braggadocio. It is the quiet knowledge that we understand ourselves, that we have sight of our strengths and our weaknesses and that therefore the ground is secure under our feet. We have faith in ourselves, and we have faith in others. When you are dealing in understated brilliance, confidence is priced in. It is a confidence that expresses itself in understatement. A confidence that reassures others, even as it reaches out for even greater achievement. Never mistake confidence for arrogance. Confidence is a quiet glow, an inner certainty. It is founded upon a bedrock of self belief, whilst arrogance nervously reaches out for the approval of others.

And with confidence, we can begin to inspire others. Inspiration is absolutely at the heart of Merchant Taylors' School. Our teachers love their subject. The reason they teach here is because they wish to inspire in you a similar passion. They do this through their superlative communication skills and their innovative teaching methods. We wish to inspire you, so that you can pick up the torch and carry it forward. But inspiration does not just flow from teacher to pupil. At Merchant Taylors', we wish you to inspire each other. That can happen in a thousand different ways. It can happen on the sports fields, where a team rallies and finds a new way to win the game, perhaps because one or two players put their hands up to take responsibility and their teammates found themselves inspired to follow. It can happen in the classroom, discussing an idea around a table. It can happen in a club or society where ideas are exchanged and challenged. It can happen on the stage, when performers lead each other to even greater heights. Never wait to be inspired by others - see what you can do to be the inspiration yourself. And don't forget to inspire your teachers too - they are lifted by your quick insight or thoughtful question.

And so we come to our final word – joy. Joy is not, and should not, be a goal. It is instead an outcome, an emergent feature of a successful community. If we are innovative, if we are brave, if we are confident and if we are inspirational, we will also be joyful. By joy I do not mean contentment, or even happiness. Joy is something more. Contentment and happiness reassure and nurture and hold you. Joy uplifts and transports you. I hope that Merchant Taylors' School uplifts and transports. I hope that it is transformative in its impact, carrying us all onwards and upwards.

These five words are bold statements of intent. I believe that they are both descriptive of the experience of this school, and that they are also a route map to even greater success in the future. There is yet one more word to consider, a word which describes the context in which the other words can exist. That word is community. This school is a community of pupils, teaching staff and support staff. We showed that before half term when we all stood in silent memory of Peter Pumilia, a member of our porters team. We are always stronger in a team, and that team is made up of every person in this school. But every team must have a purpose beyond itself - our community's final duty is to serve the wider community in which we

exist. That is why we reach out to other local schools, charities and organisations to use our strength to serve those in greater need. That is why we share our facilities, that we nurture choirs and other worthwhile activities in other schools, that we run Charity Drive, that we host and nurture disabled children in Phab and in the thousands of other acts of outreach and care. We are stronger because we share; we are richer because we give.

This, gentlemen, is our identity. This is Merchant Taylors'. We are gathered in a noble cause - one worthy to be part of, one worthy to promote and one worthy to defend.