

Who are we?

I would like to start with a couple of weeks of wonderful sport.

In hockey we played Kingston Grammar and Sir William Borlase. The standout of these games came from the U13B's match who put on a thrilling display of hockey and fought hard to draw 4-4 against KGS, with the pick of the goals coming from Sid Embleton and Fred Butler and a MOM performance from goalkeeper Rory Heredia. The 3rds and U3rds have made tremendous progress this term.

Last weekend our rugby teams played 12 fixtures against Magdalen College School, with two games I would like to highlight; the first coming from the U16A's match, securing a very narrow victory against a team they lost to heavily in their U14 season. Mr Hale said "This was without doubt this group of boys' greatest triumph in a Merchant Taylors' shirt to date, as their diligence, teamwork and discipline shone through." The second came from the U14C team match where external coach Mr Samuel said that "In my twenty years of coaching, I have never seen a better performance from a team at C level. Their attitude, commitment and skill levels were way up there. A brilliant performance from both an individual and team perspective.

This block was the perfect preparation for our rugby teams as rugby week followed, with 34 games played under lights. Every rugby team in the school was given the opportunity to compete. Fixtures were played against Mill Hill, Reading Blue Coat, Skinners School, & Chesham Prep. The week was concluded with our 1st XV on Friday night in one of the most closely fought battles I have seen in many years.

Both teams played out of their skins but sadly our boys had the game snatched in the final kick of the game. Sport can be cruel sometimes, but what a spectacle it was to see them fight and play the way they did for the full 70 minutes.

Our players showed unbelievable discipline and commitment. It was great to see such passionate support for the team as well. Hundreds came along and cheered their hearts out. I loved it when we all got behind the players and roared our support as they fought it out, yard by yard, against a big and highly effective opposition.

However, I didn't enjoy the occasional elements of football chanting – we have to guard against that – we are better than that. There was a moment when that rather yobbish football chant went up 'who are you?'

I don't want to spoil a brilliant rugby week and a brilliant game with a rebuke, but let's not have any more of that. It implies that we are rather special and the opposition are insignificant, and that is not the spirit of this school, nor the spirit in which the game was played.

However, it does give me the opportunity to develop the thought and share something that may not be widely known within the school, unless you were at St Barnabas Day at the start of term. The thought is not 'who are you?', but 'who are we?' Well, what we are, as a school is rather special. In ways that you might not have realised.

Who are we? We are a great school. What does a great school do for its pupils? It should offer four things:

- Inspirational teaching that will remain with the pupil for the rest of his life.
- Introduction to ideas and experiences that will be transformative
- Delivery of a smooth transition to the next stage of education
- Support in the early years of a career

Merchant Taylors' School does all of those things, and we have been doing the same for hundreds of years, and with an influence way beyond the bounds of the school.

Let me give you the example of two teachers you probably haven't heard of, called Thomas Jenkins and John Cottam. Both received their education at Merchant Taylors' School. They went on to teach in a small school in an apparently unimportant town in Warwickshire. The time is the 1570s and 1580s. They would not now be remembered, but for the bright-eyed young man who sat in their classroom and absorbed all they could teach him. That young man was William Shakespeare. Jenkins and Cottam taught Shakespeare through his whole school career. Here, I draw upon the research of Peter Ackroyd.

Shakespeare's education in theatre began at his school. Jenkins and Cottam had both been in the first cohorts of students under our first Head Master, Robert Mulcaster. Mulcaster's system of teaching recommended learning through drama, especially through acting. Jenkins and Cottam taught others in the way they themselves were taught, with acting and performance at the heart of learning.

Thus, we can definitely say that Merchant Taylors' schoolmasters were offering inspirational teaching that would remain with their pupils for the rest of their life. In this case, they developed a love of acting and theatre in probably the most extra-ordinary playwright of all time.

What about the second test of a great school? It should offer an introduction to ideas and experiences that are transformative. Thomas Jenkins OMT was an expert classicist, and we know that he introduced Shakespeare to the Roman poet Ovid, and his famous poem *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare quotes from Ovid continually. In one of his earliest plays, *Titus Andronicus*, one of the characters brings a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on stage. In later life, Shakespeare was said to possess the 'soul' of Ovid in his own verses. Transformative indeed, in accordance with our second test: to provide an introduction to ideas and experiences that will change lives.

When Jenkins resigned in 1579, he found his own replacement in another Merchant Taylors' scholar – John Cottam. John Cottam saw Shakespeare through to the end of his formal schooling. There is a tradition that Shakespeare then went to the country to be a schoolmaster. We are able to link him to a devout Lancastrian Catholic, Alexander Hoghton.

But how does Shakespeare get from Stratford to Lancashire? Guess who lived next to the Hoghtons - the Cottam family. The Hoghtons and the Cottams were great friends. John Cottam, Shakespeare's schoolteacher, was a member of that Cottam family. He is described in Alexander Hoghton's will as 'his servant'. It seems natural to me that John Cottam would recommend his most brilliant student to be schoolmaster to the Hoghton children. In doing so, I think the Merchant Taylors' influence has certainly passed the third test of a great school – the delivery of a smooth transition to the next stage of education.

There's more. The Hoghtons were also very close to the Earls of Derby. Most importantly, Lord Strange, the Fifth Earl of Derby, kept a group of actors called Lord Strange's Men. This group toured the country and were also well known in London. From his links with John Cottam, Shakespeare had access to Lord Strange's men – an acting company that we know performed at least two of Shakespeare's earliest plays. With one move, we can take the young Shakespeare from provincial schoolmastering to the stages of London.

Surely this passes the final test – that a great school will support old boys in the early years of their career. We are a great school, and this little bit of unknown history suggests that we always have been.

Two Merchant Taylors' scholars changed the world of literature. They taught Shakespeare Latin, gave him a love of drama through acting in the schoolroom, introduced him to the greatest influence

on his writing, got him a job as a teacher and then placed him on his path into acting. They made the young Shakespeare into the Shakespeare we know today. Without any exaggeration, the greatest writer of all time could not have fulfilled his potential without Thomas Jenkins and John Cottam.

Both OMTs. Both teachers. Both steeped in the methods of Merchant Taylors'. Part of our history. A history we continue today, in our wonderful work.

Who are we? We are history like that. We are musicians on Thursday evening, and warriors on Flagstaff on Friday evening. We are scholars. We are artists. We are actors. We are mathematicians, scientists and engineers. We are confident in ourselves – so much so that we can extend a generous courtesy to all. A courteous welcome to all visitors to the school.

Let's have no more 'Who are you?' Not when we know who we are.