

History Assembly

In recent days, my thoughts have been much on the past. I find history fascinating and moving. So much of who we are and what we can achieve is guided by the context in which we find ourselves. And that context is our history. I recently had an insight into our shared history at Merchant Taylors'. Before Christmas, an old boy contacted the school. He had come across three ancient reels of film in his attic, labelled 'MTS 1931 - 1933'. These fragile relics of the past were brought into school and were transferred into a digital format. I would like to show you some of the footage – I have chosen a section that focuses upon 1933. It forms an amazing record of the first summer at Moor Park, when the school had just moved out to what was then our brand-new buildings here. The recordings, made on a fairly primitive camera, show our sports day, a water polo match in an unheated outdoor pool which was just behind where the Drama Studio is today, CCF manoeuvres and also some of the life of the school, and in doing so give a sense of the lives of the young men who were the pupils at MTS then, 82 years ago.

I am going to show you an edited version of the films, created by our own Mr Vignal. The song that you will hear as you watch is called 'As Time Goes By', written in 1931 for the great film 'Casablanca'. History surrounds us in the tiniest of details. Look at the buildings in the background – try to work out where the events are taking place. Certainly, when you look at some of the clothes and the behaviours you cannot fail to notice the differences to our present. But even more importantly, look to see the things that remain unchanged. The sense of humour, the determination to do one's best, the friendships.

Show film

An extra-ordinary record, isn't it? Remarkable to think that the youngest pupil in that film would have been 11 at the time and, if still alive, would now be 93. The equivalent distance in time, for the youngest in this room, would place us in the year 2097. It was remarkable to see all those young men engaged in their CCF activities.

Who amongst them guessed that just six years later, many of them would be in uniform once again, fighting for their country against the Nazis.

The buildings remain so familiar - they have weathered the years between remarkably well. In thinking about the film, I have come to realise that so much of what we value about our school has its roots in the past – in a shared experience and a shared history that takes each of us separate individuals and gives us a common background. When we see things like that film, we get a shock of recognition to see that the corridors and fields that are so familiar to us, were not always quite the same, and were thronged with others, different from us, but linked to us by indissoluble bonds. When you walk around our school, you walk in the footprints of the generations that have gone before you. And others yet unborn will walk in your footsteps.

There is a lot about the school today that should make us all very proud. Your academic achievements are superb; our sports teams are justly feared by our opponents; never has entry to the school been more competitive and challenging. Yes, we can all be very proud of what Merchant Taylors' School is today. But there is more. We have a history in our school that should also be a source of pride. We can look around us at buildings and playing fields

where 83 years of study and skill and hope and expectation have played themselves out over the generations. But that is just the latest chapter of a school that reaches back 454 years to its beginnings in Central London under Richard Mulcaster - a brilliant Head Master, but one who was also described as prone to "quarrelling and injurious speech." The history of our school is written in books, and it is also written in the stones and bricks around us. More importantly, it is written in the hearts of all those who have come to Merchant Taylors' School and lived and studied here. That *was* true of those men, whose faces you have just seen, who have now gone on before us. That *is* now true of each of you. And it *will* be true of others, in their turn, in the times to come. It is our duty to pass on the torch to them as it was passed to us.