

George Smuga - Rector 1998 - 2009

In the long history of The Royal High School, a decade is but a blink of the eye. But for me it marked a highly memorable period in my career. I felt privileged to be appointed to the post and still feel privileged to have been in a position to make a small contribution to the school's long and distinguished history.

Looking back I can pick out a number of themes or developments which marked my period as Rector. I do not in any way claim sole credit for any of these as the school is a complex organization and many people - staff, students, parents and former pupils - all make their own contribution to these developments. I will also not make strong claims that there was some grand strategy or master plan devised on taking on the mantle of Rector. Of course a school leader will aim to find out the strengths and weaknesses of his or her school and plan to build on the former and improve on the latter. But we are all subject to the priorities of our political masters - at both local and national level - as well as having to adapt to the demands of society and the economy in which we find ourselves.

On taking over as Rector in June 1998, my first impressions of the school were of its history and traditions and its proud record of scholastic achievement. This hit me quickly as one of my first duties was to officiate at prize-giving only a few weeks into office. I have only vague memories of being plunged into this ceremony but I do recall the helpful words of my Depute - the redoubtable Dr John Murray - when I asked for some advice. "Act with Rectorial gravitas, George, and you will do fine!" Anyway I survived and went on to perform many more prize-givings with increasing confidence but with no less pleasure.



So I quickly came to realise the importance of history and traditions in the life of the school - something as a historian I came to enjoy greatly and loved finding out more about the school in preparation for FP Dinners, to reply to queries from former pupils and to respond to other requests to speak about the school at such diverse events as the Sir Walter Scott Club Annual Dinner and the Cambridge Society Dinner. The prize-giving also underlined for me the long-standing commitment to academic excellence with its vast array of prizes and the outstanding achievements of so many prize-winners, not least the school dux. And at every

subsequent prize-giving I was continually astounded at not just the academic achievements of the school duxes but also of the wider scope of their interests - musical, sporting, their contributions to the community and so on. These young men and women were by no means closet students beaver away over their books but people leading very full and positive lives.

However, as I came to know the school better I came to realise that there were areas for development if the school was to continue to serve the needs of all its students. The most obvious area for improvement was the very poor physical condition of the school building. Large parts of the school were quite simply not fit for purpose - pupils being taught in huts, out-dated practical classrooms, very poor social areas including toilets (of which more later). A very active School Council led by the indefatigable Martin Pearce was leading a campaign to persuade the local authority to place the school in the capital programme for a refurbishment if not a new build. In addition they had begun an innovative programme of self-help by painting classrooms. I have always felt that we cannot expect young people to value education if we condemn them to be taught in slum buildings.

It was also clear that despite the achievements of the prize-winners, the school was "punching below its weight" generally in terms of academic attainment. This was at a time when more national publicity was being given to school examination results, to targets and to league tables. The school basically needed to do better

and this was highlighted in an HMI Inspection which took place in 1999. The report was overall very positive but indicated a path for improvement in terms of examination attainment. Incidentally the local press reported not on the good work of the school highlighted in the report but on the critical comments about the accommodation especially the state of the pupil toilets. Frustrating at the time but it did help to push the case for improvements to the building.

Thirdly the school was clearly not the school of Regent Road, nor the school of Barnton in the 1960's. It was now firmly a local authority comprehensive with a fairly wide intake in terms of social and academic catchment. This had clear implications for learning and teaching and for pastoral care if we were to become a successful and inclusive school.

Fourthly the school - as does any school - had to take on board national initiatives. At the time of my appointment the main curriculum challenge was Higher Still but many more initiatives were to come over the horizon during the decade.

These then were the main challenges which defined the period of the school's history during the period 1998 to 2009.

The battle to have the school accommodation problems resolved were met when the local authority agreed to put The Royal High School into its Phase One PPP/PFI programme. There is a whole chapter to be written in itself over this decision - not just in terms of the building programme, the disruption to the school life as we sought to run a normal school in the midst of a construction site but also in terms of the political rights and wrongs of the means of financing such a programme and the subsequent scandals arising from work not being done to standard. However the school emerged from the programme with a greatly improved set of accommodation, with more up-to-date facilities and resources and with better pupil toilets!

There was much discussion over whether there would be a new build or a refurbishment. The eventual choice of refurbishment meant we worked for three years in a building site but we were able to retain some of the features of the school which were so important for the traditions of the school. In particular we retained the school hall and the memorial door. A new build would no doubt have had an all-purpose dining hall come community centre come assembly area and I feared that much of the school traditions around prize-giving might not have survived. Full credit was due to staff and pupils who produced high quality work during this time despite all the disruption.

The decade also saw the school adopt a wide range of strategies to improve our attainment levels. These had considerable success - the Sunday Times ran an annual list of the top 50 performing state schools in Scotland. In 2002 the school was ranked 33rd; in 2004 we were 24th; in 2005 we were 20th and in 2006 we were 16th. This was the result again of a huge amount of hard work by staff and pupils and was commended when the school was inspected by HMI in 2007 when they identified one of the Key Strengths of the school as "the very high levels of attainment at all stages".

Of course the focus on exam performance did not mean that other aspects of achievement were forgotten. If anything the school flourished with staff providing a huge range of opportunities for pupils to develop their extra-curricular activities. Our Sports Co-ordinators - first John Ellis followed by Pete Clark - initiated a wide variety of sporting activities ranging from rugby, football (boys and girls), hockey, basketball, swimming, fencing, cricket, badminton to curling. At one point the largest participation activity was dance with over 130 pupils being involved. The annual Secret Policeman's Ball became a highlight and the school even entered a show (We Will Rock You) in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to highly favourable reviews. Pupils still enjoyed and benefited from the music exchange with Munich and had great success in debating when in 2003 our debating team won the Donald Dewar Law Society debating competition, the first state school to win it! Again this was picked up in the 2007 HMI report where another Key Strength was "Staff commitment to providing a rich and broad programme of extra-curricular opportunities to enhance pupils' achievement."

The school also devoted a great deal of time to broadening our approaches to learning and teaching to take

account of the more comprehensive intake to the school to ensure that we were catering for the needs of all our pupils. I recall at an FP dinner outlining some statistics to highlight the comprehensive nature of our student body. At that point our S1 intake was 220 - the reading ability of that intake ranged from 6.09 years to 16+. 65 pupils had a reading age below their chronological age and of this number 23 had a reading age of 9 or below. At the other level 27 pupils had a reading age of 15/16. A huge spread for staff to accommodate. We had pupils with dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, hearing or visual impairment, English as a second language plus such disorders as Asperger's and auditory sequential memory problems. Plus we had pupils with all sorts of social, emotional and behavioural problems. In addition I pointed out that we were a multi-cultural school with 53 pupils having a foreign language other than English as their main home language.

Staff required all manner of teaching strategies to help deliver to such a wide variety of needs and it is to the credit of the staff that they worked hard to find innovative approaches to make their lessons accessible to all. Again the 2007 HMI report identified the "well-targeted support provided by all staff for pupils with specific additional support needs" as a Key Strength of the school. Finally the work of our Guidance Department underpinned all that we were aiming to do to provide an inclusive education for all of our pupils and again in the HMI report of 2007, in the section on Quality Indicators, Personal and Social Development was graded "excellent" - the first such grade to be given to an Edinburgh school at that time.

In conclusion, then, these were from a Rector's perspective the main challenges and successes of the period 1998 to 2009. I personally was seconded in 2008 to work with the Scottish Government as a Professional Adviser to take forward Curriculum for Excellence and my Depute, David Simpson, ably acted as Acting Rector till the appointment of Jane Firth as rector in 2009. In my final address to the FP Dinner in 2008, I expressed my hope that during my time as Rector we had all worked to continue the school's long-standing reputation for excellence, to honour and maintain its history and traditions whilst ensuring the school was providing an education fit for the 21st century. I finished by quoting one sentence from the HMI report where it said that "the Head Teacher, along with staff had been successful in creating a culture within school which embraced change."

I was fortunate to work with so many talented and committed staff and it would be invidious to mention only a few by name. However a Head Teacher tends to work on a daily basis with a small number of people and I was honoured to work closely with two remarkable colleagues in John Murray and Neil Sutherland who between them contributed over 65 years to the school. I was grateful to all the Heads of Department with whom I worked and to my Guidance team and of course a school also depends on support staff and my thanks are due to them all from janitors to office staff.

Vivas Schola Regia

George Smuga address - The Royal High School Club – Annual Dinner

The Roxburgh Hotel –14 March, 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen; Guests and Former Pupils

I am once again delighted to be invited to come to the Club's annual dinner and give an account of the school's achievements over the past year.

This is a particularly important occasion for me tonight for, as you may know I am at the moment not the working Rector of The Royal High School because from Monday of last week I have taken up a new post as a Professional Adviser to the Scottish Government to work on a new curriculum reform called "Curriculum for Excellence". The post is technically a secondment for a period of 18 to 23 months and my new Senior Depute, David Simpson, who took over from Neil Sutherland, will be acting Head Teacher in my absence. So I hope you do not feel short-changed in not having the "real" Rector standing in front of you but given the timing of the change-over we all felt it appropriate that I should do this speech. Also there are stories circulating that I may not return to the school at the end of my secondment – now in my very short time with the Scottish Government I have learned the value of the phrase – "you may think that, I could not possibly comment". But on the basis that this may well be my last address to you I may take the opportunity later to say a few words of farewell.

After a few days in Victoria Quay, I now realise what a unique working environment a school is – I have been in schools now for a long time – as a pupil first and then as a teacher and manager (or leader as we now say) – in fact my father somewhat wryly commented when I told him about my secondment – "well George I'm glad that after 55 years you are finally leaving school"

I started my teaching career as a young teacher of History and Modern Studies in Portobello High School in the early 1970's.

The 1970's -A period I now realise which is rooted in the history books brought to life in the recent TV series "Life on Mars". For me a time of starting my teaching career. But what changes we have seen since then!

In the early 1970's – James and David have a square go at the back gate – a crowd gathers and watches with respectful enthusiasm – James is victorious and the crowd disperses. Next day the miscreants are called to the Rector's office, are given what was technically called in those days 'a good bollocking', shake hands and become long-term mates occasionally reminiscing about it in the pub in later years. 2008 – the incident is caught on the school CCTV, the police are summoned, both boys are charged and become subject to restorative justice. Meanwhile the fight has been filmed on several mobile phones and ends up on You Tube.

Ah – if only I knew what a golden age it was in which to start my teaching career.

(Now – given my new post - I must point out that the previous account in no way represents the views of the Scottish Government and are entirely the ramblings of a Head Teacher reaching the twilight of his career!)

But what you are here tonight to find out is how your old school is doing – and I am delighted to tell you that it is in excellent form. And I can say that this is not just my opinion but is the reasoned and informed judgement of Her Majesty's Inspectorate because the school was given a full inspection in April 2007 with the report coming out in September. Now if you want to know about the school of today I would heartily recommend the report to you – it is a relatively short read of 19 pages with the approval of the plain English stamp on it. You can read it on the HMIE web-site or get a copy from HMIE in Dundee.

This was of course a very stressful time for everyone at school but the end product has been highly positive and we are all delighted to see the good things we believe existed at the school being publicly highlighted in this official report. HMIE reports have a structure and at the beginning they identify the Key Strengths of the school. These were:

- A very positive school ethos and climate for learning
 - Motivated pupils who took a pride in their school
 - Very high levels of attainment at all stages
 - Well-targeted support provided by all staff for pupils with specific additional support needs
 - Staff commitment to providing a rich and broad programme of extra-curricular opportunities to enhance pupils' achievement
 - (and with extreme perspicacity they identified as their final Key Strength) the leadership of the Head Teacher
- Apart from the last one not a bad set of Key Strengths to sum up an excellent school – positive school ethos, motivated

pupils with pride in their school, very high levels of attainment, support for pupils with needs, an excellent programme of extra-curricular opportunities!

The report concludes with a summary of key areas with an evaluative rating against each one – HMle rates are graded on a six point scale from unsatisfactory to excellent (excellent being the holy grail of “outstanding, sector leading” with the rest in between being weak, adequate (what a dreadful phrase for what is defined as being “strengths just outweigh weaknesses – gentlemen imagine your feeling on being told your performance was adequate!)).

Our school report received out of 17 categories – 7 goods, 9 very goods and one excellent for personal and social development, the first Edinburgh secondary to receive an excellent accolade). Ladies and gentlemen – this was in HMle language an excellent outcome, the best HMle report to date amongst Edinburgh schools and one which as FPs you can be extremely proud of.

I have always believed – and you have heard me here often speak to you on this – that a good school delivers for its pupils the opportunity to attain excellent exam results plus the opportunity to develop as excellent young men and women through its programme of personal and social development – I can honestly say The Royal High School does this.

You have heard me frequently give details of our exam results – tonight I will focus on the other half of this equation with a few examples of our broader achievements. And I must start with “We Will Rock You” – in August 2007 the school entered a production on the official Edinburgh Festival Fringe (the first school to do so) – it was an imaginative, bold and very risky enterprise. It was a glorious success – it ran from Tuesday through to Saturday with a Saturday matinee and played to full houses apart from Saturday matinee when I believe there were 18 tickets left. The reaction was amazing – I received many letters, e-mails and phone calls from the public congratulating the school. Can I quote a few:

“I was absolutely astounded that a school could put on such a professional production”

“The show wouldn’t have been out of place on the West End”

“It was an extremely professional performance with many talented teenagers taking part” – remember there were no adults in the cast

“I felt so proud that one Edinburgh school by itself can produce such an outstanding performance”

I know I could stand here for much longer telling you of all the first rate things happening at the school – of the rugby and football and hockey – of the new ventures taking place – dance, cheerleading, swimming, fencing – of the successes in these various activities – in swimming we have a national champion in the boys’ 200m backstroke and in badminton we have the east of Scotland under 19 boys’ singles’ champion. Our under 16 football team who as under 15’s won their league for the first time in its 58 year history; the 7s tournament winners at Balerno and Preston Lodge; the two silver and two bronze medals won at the Scottish Schools Athletics Championships at Grangemouth in June. But I will conclude by mentioning one remarkable success to highlight a name for the future (Patrick Saddler) – one of our S5 boys has just been selected to play for the MCC Schools’ team (the only Scottish-based player) in the Spirit of Cricket Festival in India later this month having represented Scotland last year in a tournament in South Africa.

All of the above are only possible because of the first-rate teachers and young people we have at the school – I am delighted tonight that at the school table we have Pete Clark, long-standing teacher of Modern Studies, excellent musician and now our school sports’ co-ordinator. Without Pete our list of extra-curricular sport and sporting achievement would be much reduced. We also have Janette Shearer, PT Guidance, - Janette is one of those teachers any school would pay extra to have – a first-rate Maths teacher but no school event can take place without Janette working away in the background. “We Will Rock You” was the success it was because of – among other things - Pete’s musical direction and Janette’s front of house work. Along with academic qualifications, we all remember our teachers who had an influence on us – last week at the London Club dinner, the guest speaker was George Pascoe-Watson, the political editor of The Sun – now like me you probably think that must be a cushy job given the amount of politics in the paper – but as you know the Sun has a massive influence on political life and their support is earnestly courted by leading politicians – anyway what did Pascoe-Watson remember about his time at Royal High – Pete Clark’s Modern Studies teaching, Tom Bacciarelli and John Murray for their rugby and Music trips to Munich. Pete and Janette – on behalf of the school my fullest thanks. We also have four of our senior pupils with us tonight – Megan, school captain, Calum and Gavin our vice captains and Becky one of our nation captains. Reference to “We Will Rock You”

Ladies and Gentlemen – you have much to be proud of with your old school.

I am very proud to have been Rector for the past ten years and hope I have done my small part in continuing to make the school successful and maintaining and enhancing its long-standing reputation for excellence. I was particularly pleased

with one comment from the HMle report where it said “the Head Teacher, along with staff had been successful in creating a culture within the school which embraced change”. I firmly believe that the school has been the unique establishment it is because of its continual evolution and adaptation to change – if we do not change we perish.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have been honoured and privileged to have been Rector at this unique and special school. I thank you as a Club for your support to me and to the school and I thank the Presidents with whom I have had the pleasure to work – Raymond Paul, Andy Forgan, Norrie Arthur, David Rutherford, Stuart MacMillan, Jim Inch, Alan Grossett, Colin Blaikie, Robin Boog and of course Val Tudball – and running like a thread through all those years the massive help of Rab Forman – can I thank you all for your help and friendship. I look forward to continuing on a personal level my connections with the club and hope to meet with you at future dinners, even if I am not standing here giving this address.

Ladies and Gentlemen – Vivas Schola Regia