

Speech Day July 1926

It was not until the school had been in existence for six years that a formal Speech Day was held. The occasion was happy and successful. It was characterised by the presence of the Founder in the chair; by an address by Sir Michael Sadler, KCSI, CB.; and by a speech by the Headmaster J.H. Simpson, in which he spoke at length about Rendcomb. This is what he said:

“ . . . this is our first Speech Day. I am also thinking of it - and I hope that many others here are, too - as our sixth Parents' Day. My mind goes back to a very different gathering in 1920, when a small band of some two dozen persons watched with a gallant attempt at cheerfulness from the shelter of their umbrellas some very primitive athletic sports. Since 1920 every year has brought a larger number of parents, and it is delightful to see so many here today. Though our annual gatherings may in future be larger in numbers, I sincerely trust that they will not lose altogether their formality and the sense of a family gathering that has made them in the past not only an enjoyable but a very valuable event in the College year. We who are working here are always glad to welcome parents, and I often wish that our actual position and the local system of transport made the College more accessible to those parents who are only able to come on Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

It is time for me to turn to some of the bare facts of our history. The College opened in June 1920 with 12 boys. At the present moment the school list contains 57 names, and next term we shall have 60 boys, probably as large a number as can be satisfactorily accommodated in our present arrangements. Since we began 83 boys in all have entered the College, of whom 61 were previously educated in the Public Elementary Schools of this county. Twenty-six have passed out of the College, and I will tell you something of their destinations in a few minutes. They show that our school, though comparatively small, has to perform a fairly wide diversity of functions. I may mention that at the present moment the ages of the boys range from 11 to just over 19, and that we have boys who have taken their School Certificates a year or more ago engaged on advanced work in three groupings of subjects.

I think, however, that you want something rather more human than mere facts and figures, and that you would like me to tell you - so far as I can in a few minutes what kind of school we have been trying to make in the past six years, and how far we have succeeded in our aim. Of the many questions that are put to me about the College, two are far the commonest, and I don't think I can do better than try to answer them. They are “How does Rendcomb differ from other schools!” and “What do Rendcomb boys do when they leave?”

I prefer to express the first rather differently, and to ask “What are the essential features without which the school life would be altogether different!” First of all, I should put without hesitation the fact that our boys represent such a wide variety of homes, locality and earlier education. The longer we go on, the more convinced I am of the wisdom of the Governing Body in throwing open the College, which was originally almost confined to boys from the Elementary Schools of this county, to boys from outside the county whose parents wish to send them here instead of to a Preparatory School or Public School. And I am proud to think that, as a result, we have a singularly closely-knit community, derived from many sources, but living together with no consciousness of deference, unless it is the consciousness that all types of home and family have something to learn from each other. Visitors sometimes express surprise at this, but I believe it to be literally true.

Secondly, we believe that we stand for a deeper trust and a larger freedom - though I know that word is a very ambiguous one - than prevails at most boarding schools. I do not, of course, mean that nobody ever has to do anything that he does not like to do. That would be a poor preparation for life. But I believe that once you have the framework, as it were, of school society established on wholesome and sensible lines, the fewer the rules and restrictions there are to interfere with the individual the better his chance of growing into a many-sided personality. I believe, too, that trust - real trust, that does not ask too many questions and keep pulling up the roots to see how the plant is growing - is nearly always in the long run justified. And I am glad, though not in the least surprised, to tell you that in the past six years that liberty and the trust that it implies have been extraordinarily seldom abused. Just as important is the freedom of discussion and decision that has been exercised, first by all the boys, and now by the senior boys, in their general meeting. This responsibility extends to many sides of school life that are usually kept mainly or wholly in the hands of masters, and I believe the training it gives is of the highest value. I should like to thank the Governing Body for allowing me some three or four years ago to start a scheme of school economics that has very greatly helped the growth of this responsibility, and is, I believe, capable of much further development.

Thirdly, we are glad to think that our life is a simple one, in which, so far as the requirements of ordinary school work allow, we try to look after ourselves, and not depend too much upon the labours of other people. I believe there was far more to be said than is commonly allowed for the old Public School fagging, which, I am told, is falling into disuse. Its weakness was that it was done for privileged individuals rather than for the community, and that the heaviest labour often fell to the weakest to perform. At Rendcomb boys do a great many things - and do them cheerfully - but they do them all in turn and for the common good, (in the way of everyday

service) I want to emphasize this because I sometimes find an impression abroad that because we live in a large country house in surroundings of unusual beauty, our life is therefore a luxurious one. A friend of mine was asked not long ago by apparently intelligent people whether it was true that every boy here had his private bathroom; and whether Rendcomb boys dressed for dinner every night!

These remarks, and indeed others, are not worth resenting, but they seem to show that some of our neighbours possess a vivid constructive imagination. I repeat that the life of the boys is strenuous and simple. I do not know that I would have it more Spartan than it is at present, but I would certainly not have it less so.

A fourth feature of the College that I should like to mention is the importance that we attach to work with the hands as well as to work with books. Manual work is not an “extra” or a side-show, but an integral and compulsory part of the curriculum. In this connection, I should like to refer gratefully to the work of Mr. Booth, who is leaving us this term. He has established here a really high standard of manual work, and I hope that many of those present will look at some of the specimens of woodwork done by his pupils that are exhibited in the front hall.

I have selected certain outstanding features of the College life for special comment. I think I may add that the ordinary out-of-school activities of a boarding school are flourishing. Perhaps I may be allowed to say a word or two about our games. I have been particularly pleased with our football, and I think you will agree that this is not unreasonable when I tell you that our team has frequently met and defeated the teams of schools very considerably larger than ourselves and containing a much greater proportion of older boys. But though pleased by our successes at Association football - and hoping to keep up the tradition - we have not forgotten that there is another, and, if I may say so, vastly superior kind of football, at which moreover this county has several times lately won the championship, and we hope to experiment with that game after Christmas. Our cricket is still somewhat rudimentary. This is due primarily to the fact that this glorious countryside, so rich in everything else that is pleasant, is singularly poor in the stretches of level ground twenty-two yards long. I cannot hold out any hope for some time to come of Rendcomb helping to win back the Ashes. But a good many people here play cricket with vigour and enjoyment, and that, after all, though as a nation we seem rather inclined to forget it, is the principal object of the game.

With regard to the other question “What do boys do when they leave Rendcomb?” I should like to say two things, and I believe that I am expressing the view of the Governing Body.

First, we do not, of course, undertake to find work for boys on leaving school. I don't see how any school could do that. But we do all we can to find suitable openings for them, and have in fact already found such openings for a number of boys. As things point at present, I do not believe that it will become harder to find these openings, but rather I may find it difficult always to supply boys when I am asked for them.

Secondly, it is no essential part of our aim to place a boy in a position socially more attractive, or more lucrative, than he would have occupied if he had been educated elsewhere; but rather to train him to be a good citizen, while pursuing the vocation for which his character, tastes and ability best fit him. I believe that we have made a successful start in that direction, and I should like to give you some details showing the variety of occupations in which our old boys are already engaged. I will take first of all the 24 boys who entered the College in its first year of existence. Of these, two have succeeded in winning the Scholarships of the Board of Agriculture for the Sons of Rural Workers. One of them, Albert Smith, won a Class I Scholarship enabling him to go to one of the older Universities, for three or four years, and he has already been a year in residence at Oriel College, Oxford. Another is an apprentice with a leading firm of engineers in the North. Another is an Aircraft Apprentice in the R.A.F. Two are learning their business in the motor industry, one, I believe, in exceptionally favourable circumstances. One is already making his mark in theatrical design. One is in a bank. Two others are using vocationally the skill in manual work that they first showed here, and one of these is learning under the happiest auspices the art of making beautiful furniture. One is teaching, and four have entered into various forms of commercial career. Of the seven who are still with us one is going to Oxford in October, three intend eventually to enter the teaching profession, one hopes to go to India, and one within the last few days has been awarded a scholarship at the Merchant Venturers' College of Technology at Bristol. That seems to me a rather remarkable variety of occupations, and I think you will agree with me that what are usually called the “black-coated” ones do not unduly predominate.

Among other boys who have left, at least one is going to Australia, one is already in Newfoundland, and another is a cadet in one of the leading shipping firms. I am particularly pleased to mention these last, partly because I feel that in many ways our school life is a suitable preparation for those who intend to settle overseas, and partly because I hope we shall always have a number of boys who prefer a career that involves an element of adventure to the policy of “safety first.”

So much for the occupations of old boys. I have plenty of evidence that in those occupations they are as a whole doing justice to themselves. When those who are teaching or employing them write to me - as they have done more than once - and say “Send us more like them” I feel that there is probably not much wrong with the lines on, which we are working. I don't mean that I am yet satisfied - when a headmaster is satisfied it is time for

him to go - but I feel that things are moving in the right direction.

There remains to me only the very happy duty of acknowledging my debt to those who have shared in the pioneering work of making a new school. I think that everyone who knows or understands anything at all about Rendcomb will agree with me that immeasurably my largest debt is to my wife. I am glad to think that there are many here among boys and parents, and especially, perhaps among old boys, who realise what she has meant and means to the College.

I am very grateful, too, to my colleagues. The friendly and informal relationship that has always been here between boys and masters is one of the most valuable elements in our school life. I do not believe that I could have colleagues more in sympathy with the aims and spirit of the College, more devoted to the best interests of their pupils, and more tolerant of the many failings of their headmaster. I have no time to give them all the praise that is their due, but I feel that I must mention gratefully the trouble that Mr. Richings has taken in producing the play that you will see later in the afternoon.

It seems to me, too, that if I may say so, Rendcomb has been very fortunate in its parents. A great headmaster once observed "Boys are always reasonable; assistant masters sometimes; parents ..." I leave you to supply the missing adverb. I will not venture to comment on his first two observations, but since I have been at Rendcomb I have had the best reasons for disagreeing with his third. It is quite certain that Rendcomb even more than most schools, would cease to do much good if parents and staff did not regard each other as working together for the same end in mutual confidence. I feel very grateful to our parents, who have always cooperated most cheerfully in everything that we have asked them to undertake, if I may make a digression, I should like to say now how we appreciate the generous response that has been made by parents and others, too - to the Pavilion Fund. I am glad to be able to tell you that that fund only requires another £20 or £30 to enable us to erect a building worthy of its surroundings.

I shall always think that the College was exceedingly fortunate in the first 12 boys with whom we started six years ago. I don't mean that they were all saints or geniuses, because they weren't. But between them they did a good many things rather well, and they were all very different from each other. Some could play games, and some could act. Some from the first were hard workers, and some worked, shall we say, with discretion. But between them they were eminently fitted to make the life of the College the many-sided thing that school life should be. Among those twelve I should like to mention by name four who during the past year have been the senior prefects at the head of the four groups into which the College is divided for games and general organisation - Dakin and Daubeny, who together have done so much for our games, and much besides, Raggatt and White. They have done very fine service here. Three of them are entering the teaching profession, and I have often thought that if it were my job to have to start another school in a few years' time, the first thing I would do would be to telegraph for the whole lot to come and help me.

I have already been talking for too long. But now that I am virtually at an end, I am steering from what it is fashionable to call a conflict. I know such a good way of ending, but an innate honesty forbids me to use it as my own. On three separate occasions, divided by considerable spaces of time and distance, I remember being present at school speech days when each headmaster or headmistress concluded with Miranda's familiar lines in the play, some scenes from which (if the weather permits) we hope to put before you in the grounds outside:

"O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in it!"

Now, though I can't possibly use those words again after all that, they express exactly what I feel. This little school world that Mr. Wills has caused to be created contains many goodly creatures, whose "goodliness" has been a revelation to me during the past six years, and makes me confident that our College has before it a happy and interesting future.

References:

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