
Memories of The Cherwell School

PHILIP HUCKIN

ABSTRACT On 13 July 2013, the Cherwell School in Oxford celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Among the speakers was Philip Huckin, a pupil at the opening of the school in 1963 who went on to work in education for more than 33 years, mostly in comprehensive schools and often in socially challenging areas. This is the text of his speech.

So where do I begin? The time has flown and it is hard to believe that nearly 50 years have passed since I walked up the school drive in September 1963. It comes as a shock to realise that I am now in the same position as the old pupils who came to share their memories with us during the 50th celebration of the secondary school in which I was teaching in 1986. Then we were looking back to 1936, a time before I was born and an era that encompassed the childhood of my parents. So now the wheel has come full circle.

Back to the Cherwell School and the context in which it was fashioned. The school was created from the closure of the 11-15 sections of North Oxford and Central Oxford schools. These schools catered for the 80% of children who failed the 11+ in the city and it was their lot to finish their education in environments that had not changed since their creation at the end of the nineteenth century. Pupils who passed the 11+ examination went to well-resourced grammar schools, with laboratories, gymnasiums, playing fields and well-appointed classrooms, but those children who failed the examination were often taught in out-of-date classrooms with one teacher covering all the subjects. It is therefore not surprising to learn that national examinations were not available, pupils left school at 15 and it was assumed that they would go, if very lucky – boys, that is - into skilled craft apprenticeships or, failing that, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs in factories. In the case of girls the situation was bleaker, with very few opportunities for further education or training. The children who failed the 11+ were not expected to thrive in an academic environment and it was accepted that their abilities were fixed and unchanging, such was the confidence of the education establishment in the 11+ exam.

Onto this scene burst the Cherwell Secondary Modern School, led by the remarkable headteacher Eric Baldwin and a team of enthusiastic and committed staff who told the 323 young people in their care that they were not failures. Eric Baldwin visited all the children and young people who were destined to attend the school in July 1963 and told them of the opportunities that would be available to them in the new school: laboratories, workshops, gymnasiums, playing fields (rather than playgrounds and yards), and the opportunity to study French: an unheard-of opportunity for children who had failed the 11+. He raised not only the hopes of the students, but also the aspirations of the parents. A limit of achievement was removed and the philosophy of the school, regularly repeated, was that every child has talents and no limit should be placed on their achievement.

The school opened two weeks late, due to a delay in building (what has changed?), and as we gathered in the playground I realised that the majority of the faces around me were unknown. It was a shotgun marriage, not only pupils from a number of different schools that had lost all their secondary-age students, but also teachers from those schools and new and very young staff. A total of 12 teaching staff for 323 students, which compares with today's establishment of 1800 students, 139 teaching staff, 74 support staff, 29 administrators and 6 caretakers. It was unheard of in those days for graduates to teach in secondary modern schools, but the vision and energy of Eric Baldwin had convinced young teachers entering the profession to join the school, and cleverly, he had also convinced very experienced teachers to join the staff. This was a perfect mix and the students benefited from their expertise and commitment.

It wasn't all plain sailing, of course: the classroom block wasn't available until the Easter of 1964 and classes were held in temporary locations. I remember taking French in the staff room, whilst the teaching staff crammed into the medical room and an adjacent office. There were also some potentially more challenging incidents, as, for example, when taking French in a science laboratory. Eric Baldwin, a fluent French speaker, was teaching 1A, my class, when a girl put up her hand to complain of a strong smell. The headteacher in enthusiastic full flow wasn't about to be stopped and told her it wasn't a problem. However, other hands went up and a number of people said they felt sick. It was only when one bright member of the class got down on the floor to locate the hissing sound that it became apparent that the pipes had not been connected to the gas taps on the work benches and the smell was gas. When this was pointed out to the head he kept his cool, rapidly breaking into English and organising the evacuation of the classroom.

Various initiatives took place in the early life of the school, including the setting up of a tuck shop run from a caravan to enable maths to be taught in a practical context. The shop was highly successful and the company's shares were floated on the school market, with dividends paid as the profits grew. However, the scheme was somewhat compromised when resourceful students sold their shares to staff and eventually the enterprise had to be shut down

when the teaching staff threatened to become majority shareholders in the company.

The extra-curricular life of the school was incredibly rich, with numerous societies and clubs covering natural history, art, drama, film, cooking, music and sport. Staff gave freely of their time after school and the lights stayed on in the buildings in the evenings and at weekends. Trips took place to historical sites; students visited galleries and museums; regular opera productions, concerts and plays attracted large audiences; students stayed in outward bound centres to develop skills in canoeing, climbing and pot holing; and families hosted French students in their homes as part of regular student exchanges.

Raising money for charities also became a key feature of school life, with students involved in numerous fund-raising events, including sponsored swims, walks, sales, and on one occasion the collection of coins going out of use during decimalisation. The head was quite happy to close the school for a day to facilitate these activities and had a remarkable ability to get well-known personalities to come to speak to the school. One memorable occasion was when Des Wilson, the founder of Shelter, came to the school to congratulate us on raising a large sum of money for the charity. His speech was electrifying and to this day I remember his injunction that we should be angry about poverty and turn that anger to its solution.

Eric Baldwin and his staff also undertook numerous initiatives, some of which in the context of the time were highly innovative. I remember, as head boy, being involved in the writing of constitution for the new school council. This took place in my parents' back garden with Francis Josephs, the first head of sixth form and my A-level English teacher. I also took part in a local radio broadcast with Eric Baldwin and a group of students to explain this ground-breaking school council initiative.

While education in its broadest sense was taking place, the curriculum continued to develop. Within two years of its opening, the school entered students for the new Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), and for the first time young people who had failed the 11+ were able to take a recognised national examination. The syllabuses were ground breaking and innovative and a Grade 1 was recognised as equivalent to an O-level pass. This opened doors for students and enabled them to embark, by stages, often through further education, on academic and vocational courses leading to higher education or the professions. However, barriers were still high and students had to take both O levels and CSEs, meaning that exams often took place from April until July, an exhausting and demanding schedule.

In 1968 the first sixth form, with 12 students in total, opened and I was one of its first members. Eric Baldwin refused to accept that we would have to transfer to grammar schools and he initiated a small number of A-level courses in the school. I am told that he camped out at the education offices in Oxford until he got his way and some tired officials, exasperated by his stubbornness, christened the school The Baldwin Academy. An ironic label perhaps, but in reality a testament to his commitment to seeing that a wrong was righted and

we got a fair deal from the system. He also negotiated an agreement with the academically renowned Oxford High School for Girls which enabled a small number of students to attend that school to study A levels which were not available in the Cherwell. This led to my study of A-level history with a group of 12 female students, a very new experience for them and their teachers. I remember a few interesting moments: coming round a corner to see girls sunbathing in their bras; girls not talking to me in case their friends thought they were making a pass at me; and, finally, being told that a teacher had told them, when they first entered the school, that they would end up over the road (at the Cherwell) if they didn't work. All I can say is that I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Oxford High and obtained the highest grade possible due to the quality of the teaching I received.

Looking out into the room, as I make this presentation, I can see the faces of my Cherwell School contemporaries. These include a radio broadcaster and consultant, with a long career in that medium, a chartered accountant, a computer programmer, a motor engineer, a primary school teacher and a specialist in advertising and marketing, former students who took full advantage of the wonderful educational opportunity that was The Cherwell School. I hope you will forgive me if I also tell you of how the school helped me to achieve my potential and gave me a rich and fulfilling life. I took O levels and CSEs and spent 3 years in the sixth form so that I could take A-level history at the Girls High School. I was incredibly lucky to be taught by two academically gifted teachers in the Oxford High School, and a wonderful Welsh art teacher, David Morgan, and an inspirational English teacher, Francis Josephs, in the Cherwell. A technically superb PE teacher, Peter Capel-Smith, coached me in rugby and athletics, and Geoff Thomas, a brilliant musician, nurtured my musical ability. It was the skills of these teachers that enabled me to win a rugby youth county cap, play rugby for my university, undertake solo work and sing in top-quality choirs, including Lincoln Cathedral, and go on to study art and history at the University College of Wales Aberystwyth. I qualified as an art teacher in 1976, and during my 34 years in education as a teacher, middle manager, deputy headteacher and, finally, education adviser, I have tried to give back to students and teaching colleagues some of the skills and knowledge I received from those remarkable people. Little did I think when I walked through the doors of the school in September 1963 that I would be the first student in the school to obtain a university degree. I am now living in mid-Wales and painting full time, with a series of exhibitions planned over the next three years, and on Wednesday of this week I graduated with a master's in fine art from my old university, Aberystwyth. I think that my art teacher David Morgan, a Welsh speaker, would approve, as I am now learning Welsh, although I still can't bring myself to support the Welsh rugby team.

PHILIP HUCKIN worked as an art and design teacher in secondary schools from 1976 until 2002. During this time he managed departments and faculties while at the same time overseeing teaching and learning as a member of a senior management team. Post 2002 he worked as a KS3 consultant for an education authority, wrote art and design teaching and learning materials for the Department of Education, managed the curriculum and teaching and learning as deputy headteacher at High Ridge Specialist Sports College in Scunthorpe, joined a senior management team that brought a school out of Special Measures in 6 months and concluded his career as an education adviser in January 2010. Since leaving the world of education he has completed an MA in fine arts and has a number of exhibitions planned in England and Wales over the next two years, as well as contributing drawings to a new collection of Welsh language poetry to be published in the spring of 2015. *Correspondence:* huckin@keelby.plus.com

