

Summoned to teaching

John Thorn (1939-43)



▲ Portrait of John is shown with the permission of Winchester College.

He thought co-education worked well and is delighted to hear that girls are set to enter the Eighth Form at St Paul's. "How can you be promoting diversity if you only educate half the population?"

In his last year at Cambridge, John was considering academic research but changed his mind when Desmond Lee, the Head of Clifton College who had been his senior tutor at Corpus, "summoned him to teaching."

Before World War II, John lived in Chiswick (two doors down from the Madge family) and attended Colet Court. His first term at St Paul's coincided with the evacuation to Crowthorne and he never set foot as a pupil in Waterhouse's buildings in West Kensington.

Walter Oakeshott was High Master, who John describes as a "very great High Master. He was not a good organiser or administrator but he had the likes of Alan Cook to do that". Oakeshott left St Paul's in 1946 to take on the headship at Winchester.

John's memories of Crowthorne (where the boys were billeted) and Easthampstead Park (where they were taught) were of a time of few rules but very good behaviour. "Everyone just behaved because there was a war on". They bicycled the three miles from Crowthorne for lessons. He describes Crowthorne as "an ugly village with housing for Broadmoor workers. Its only redeeming feature was a cinema". In the 8th form, he switched from Classics to History and was taught by Mr Eynon Smith who "was dominating and rather frightening but was the greatest teaching influence on me without being a good teacher. We were lucky to be at school then because there was no obvious syllabus and Eynon Smith would unexpectedly teach us about the history of medicine or lurch into political theory". Eynon Smith was killed in an air raid in 1944 while staying at the house of the sister of Colet Court's Headmaster. Another master he

John Thorn (tallest in the back row) pictured here in his school days ▶



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remembers is George Rude who was openly a communist (not unusual in the Common Room during the 1930s and World War II) but could not keep order. There was little organised sport during the war. John describes himself as “adequate” at boxing. This did not suit the master in charge, Bo Langham, who was “an incredibly successful fanatic”.

He remembers two school friends well, Ian Collin (1939-43) and Keith Hamylton Jones (1937-42). Ian was Captain of School when John was a prefect, reprimanding John for not policing cycling assiduously enough. Ian spent three years in the RAF before reading History at Corpus with John and beating him at squash twice a week. The “delightfully mad” Keith joined the Welsh Guards on leaving school and, after being a POW, entered the FCO. John remembers that a posting to Warsaw ended abruptly after Keith tore down a poster of Stalin.

Joining the Navy was a strange choice as John could not swim and suffered terribly from seasickness. After initial training, he saw active service on HMS Eskimo in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans before arriving in Durban for a refit a few days after the Hiroshima bomb was dropped. On her return to England, Eskimo was scrapped and John was posted to HMS Zambesi. His final posting was in command of HMS Tumult. This did not end well with Tumult torn from her buoy in a gale and thrown on a mud bank when he was enjoying a weekend’s leave in London.

After the Navy, he took up his place at Cambridge leaving in 1949 with a first-class degree and “a very patchy knowledge of the Middle Ages”. While on leave from the Navy and at Corpus, he continued to attend the St Paul’s Christian Union becoming a House Party officer while at Cambridge. In his

autobiography ‘Road to Winchester’, John wrote, “I valued the friendship, the idealism, the vision of what human relationships could be which my visits to the House Parties gave me”.

John felt “ill-prepared for teaching” when he arrived at Clifton but appears to have mastered it quite quickly. He was soon head of history and, after marrying Veronica, took on a dayboy house which “I was to run fumblingly and uncertainly”. He liked Bristol particularly its wine merchants. In 1960, John received a letter inviting him to lunch with the then Lord Montgomery ((1902-06), School Governor 1948-68)) who was interested in him as the next High Master. “The job rightly went to Tom Howarth, one of Monty’s staff officers and then Second Master at Winchester; the hot favourite all along. And Tom was to do a wonderful job at St Paul’s.”

John attained his first headship in 1961 and stayed seven years at Repton School (still in the shadow of former Headmaster and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher) rather regretting taking the job. “I wasn’t good at it and didn’t like it. It was too gamesy. The staff room was sport dominated and it was very difficult to start up the intellectual life.”

In 1967, he learnt that his summoner to teaching, Desmond Lee, was to retire as Headmaster of Winchester College. Veronica was no lover of the Derbyshire countryside and encouraged John to apply. To his delight he discovered that Tom Howarth had not applied as he was on “a wave-crest and perhaps thinking that Winchester was unlikely to be as exciting as the academic forcing-house, now sited on the south bank of the Thames”. To his surprise at the age of 43, he was appointed. But “at Winchester, problems were not slow in coming... Drugs arrived at Winchester

about a year before I did”. One of the two friends John had on his arrival was Tony Wood (1937-42) with whom John had been billeted in Crowthorne. With the help of Tony, he set to and, during his time at Winchester with the sale of the The Malory Manuscript of Le Morte D’Arthur (discovered by Walter Oakeshott in the 1930s), Winchester introduced a bursary scheme and made its entrance examination more maintained school friendly.

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After retiring from Winchester, John had “my most enjoyable time as a teacher” preparing very able boys and girls at Portsmouth Grammar School for their Oxbridge entrance examinations. He thought co-education worked well and is delighted to hear that girls are set to enter the Eighth Form at St Paul’s. “How can you be promoting diversity if you only educate half the population?” Repton is now fully co-ed. “This was easy enough, given the space there; you just build a couple of new boarding houses”. At Winchester, “there was never any pressure for taking girls and it would have been a significant architectural challenge”.

Until a few months ago, John and his late wife, Veronica lived in Winchester when he acted for a time and “not very effectively” as a director of the Royal Opera House and as a trustee of the British Museum. He now lives in the Sunrise Home in Winchester. He would welcome any Pauline visitors. The conversation will not be dull.