



A tribute to Richard Allen, Head Master of Ranelagh School 1971 - 1993

The Ranelagh Years

Many of you will have had the privilege of knowing Richard Allen for far longer and far better, but it is my privilege to be working as headteacher in the school to which he gave such exemplary service as Headmaster, and it is about his years at Ranelagh School that I wish to pay tribute.

When Richard wrote to ask me to speak on the occasion of his funeral, he sent me a copy of some notes he had prepared for those involved. There he described his time as Headmaster at Ranelagh as being mostly taken up with *writing letters, telling off children, taking assembly and looking very important*. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

A friend and former colleague of mine is convinced that the single most important characteristic you must be in possession of as a school leader is courage. Those of you who have read Richard's extremely well-researched history of Ranelagh School will be well aware that he possessed courage in abundance. When he was appointed Headmaster in 1971, at the relatively young age of 32, he would have been aware of the question marks hanging over the future of the school. Clearly, he was prepared for a challenge, but I suspect that he might not have anticipated that the uncertainty with which he, governors and the staff were faced would last for almost *all* of his first decade as Headmaster. Courage was most certainly called for.

The hugely onerous task which faced him was that of steering the school through the turbulent waters of school reorganisation. He had to lead and manage the process of transforming the Ranelagh from a two-form entry Church of England Voluntary Aided grammar school, of 440 pupils, to a four-form entry comprehensive school with the capacity for twice that number. And he had to achieve this without compromising the well-established traditions and values sitting at the heart of the school.

Of course, when he arrived, the decision to become comprehensive had not yet been made. Richard's job as Headmaster was to research the alternatives – a task at which he was characteristically meticulous – he then had to formulate a vision for the reorganised school and articulate this to the Governors, the Oxford Diocese, the Department for Education and Science and a town council whose attitude towards the school was, at that time, *decidedly unfriendly*.

This didn't just call for courage; Richard required tenacity and the skills of an accomplished diplomat. Remember too, that he would have been managing the anxieties amongst the parent body; parents who had worked hard to secure entry for their children to a *grammar* school, now considered the possibility that, with conversion to *comprehensive* status, there would be a fall in standards.

But Richard was resolute that Ranelagh would remain what he described as *an orderly, well-disciplined and happy community*. He was determined to preserve all that was held precious at the school. It is to his credit, that not only did the school survive the transition, as a result of his clear vision and meticulous planning, it went on to flourish and thrive.

As a headteacher myself, I am acutely aware of the skill Richard would also have to exhibit in order to manage the delicate flower which is staff morale. By the time it was finally agreed in 1978 to expand and become comprehensive, the school's future had been the subject of question for thirteen years. That level of prolonged uncertainty can leave feelings at a very low ebb. Nevertheless, Richard's handling of this was sensitive and skillful – a precursor of the way in which he was later to manage the low morale which permeated the profession in the 1980s. This was a time of widespread national unrest amongst teachers, yet there were relatively few repercussions at Ranelagh, a consequence of the sensitivity shown on all sides. Richard appreciated the importance of clear communication with staff and he took care to nurture

relationships. If you examine the teaching staff list in the appendix of his history of Ranelagh, you will see that many teachers gave long and loyal service to the school – a factor which had much to do with the caliber of Richard’s leadership.

Having finally achieved approval of, and funding for, the school’s expansion in 1978, it is important not to gloss over the challenges Richard then faced in terms of the physical realisation of the project. Building plans, costings, tenders etc all had to be produced - within six months! It did, I know, rob his wife, Pam and daughters, Sarah, Louise and, indeed, Richard himself of the relaxed school holiday they might have been anticipating that summer. It is to his enormous credit, and pride, that having been delayed until well into the middle of the autumn term, when the new Scott building was finally finished in 1980, serious study and learning was interrupted by the sum total of only one hour to allow classes to move into their new accommodation and adopt the revised timetable.

If the 1970s had been a source of very significant challenge for Richard, he was in no danger of settling down to a quiet time of it in the decade which followed. In addition to adjusting to its growing and changing intake, this was an era in which the school experienced a whole raft of changes, driven to a large extent, by government legislation.

As a direct result, the size of the Governing Board was expanded and with it, the breadth of responsibility it was expected to undertake; GCSEs replaced O’ levels and CSEs; schools saw the introduction of the National Curriculum, and Local Financial Management of Schools was introduced, meaning that instead of being responsible for a relatively modest budget of £60,000 for books and equipment, Richard and the governors had to grapple with the strategic management of a budget of well over £100,000.

Not all of the challenges Richard managed as headteacher were quite as monumental as the school’s reorganisation, or those resulting from changes in legislation. Day-to-day problems included a persistently leaking roof which resulted in much dashing about by the caretaker with buckets to catch water when it rained. It was necessary to cope with the impact of local construction work as Bracknell Town evolved and expanded. On another occasion Richard had to watch as 70 elm trees in the school grounds were felled following an attack of Dutch elm

disease. And in 1975 he managed the sensitivities associated with the *radical* decision that it was no longer necessary for male and female teachers to occupy separate staff rooms!

Whatever the scale of change or challenge, as Headmaster Richard remained steadfast in his commitment to building on the firm foundations laid by previous generations. He saw it as his responsibility to open *the window to innovation only where it could blend with tradition*. I know that he took quiet pleasure in the fact that the traditions he protected and some that he established himself are still very much alive and well in the school today. When he visited me at Ranelagh shortly after I had been appointed in 2015, the School Captains took Richard on a tour of the school and I was delighted that he was able to recognise in them the qualities of confidence, courtesy and grace which he had promoted in students during his headship. They in turn were utterly charmed by this former headteacher who provided such lively and fascinating commentary upon the history of their school.

As well as courage, another important quality Richard demonstrated as headteacher was his capacity to genuinely engage with the school community. His ability to remember, not only the names of every pupil attending the school, but also to recognise their parents is legendary. What an enviable talent!

Being in residence in the Headmaster's house until the family moved to Wokingham in 1983, inevitably meant that he was a very hands-on headteacher. In spite of carrying a huge weight of responsibility, he also maintained a teaching commitment and throughout his time at Ranelagh, he actively demonstrated a deep-rooted appreciation of the value of the extra-curricular life of the school. He knew that the plays, concerts and operas; the clubs and societies, the educational visits and the sporting activities which formed part of the school's annual cycle of events were fundamentally important to the learning and development of young people. Whatever changes were taking place, this aspect of school life flourished during the period of his headship. And Richard himself joined in the fun. He was a member of the staff cricket team playing against the School. One year he had the good fortune to hit the winning run – a four straight back over the bowler's head. Sadly, this winning streak didn't last; the following year he was out first ball. School musicals also featured his talents – typically he took parts which enabled him to meet and greet the audience in the corridor on their arrival and then appear on stage in the second act!

Finally, throughout his time as Headmaster at Ranelagh, Richard remained deeply committed to the religious and spiritual life of the school. He reaffirmed Ranelagh's relationship with Holy Trinity Church in Bracknell, where termly Eucharist was, and continues to be, celebrated by the staff and pupils. In 1982, following the death of staff member, Rev'd Welsh, he became licensed as a Reader in the Diocese of Oxford thus enabling him to take Donald's place in leading termly Evensong in the school. But his commitment was also exemplified in the ethos and values he and his staff took care to nurture on a day-by-day basis. In the Epilogue to his history of Ranelagh he tellingly wrote: *It is to be hoped that the concern and the care in all that has been done at the school, are witness to the love of God.* I am certain that Richard's service as Headmaster of the school, about which he cared so deeply, was, indeed, witness to that love.

I wish I had known Richard better, and for longer. Sadly, that was not to be, but I would like to conclude by sharing with you some of the comments from his former pupils, who did know him well. To them he was known as 'Flash', (though no one was able to tell me why). In their tributes to him, they have reflected upon his attention to detail, exemplified by his fastidious time-keeping and his laser-like ability to spot a pupil with a top button carelessly left undone at some considerable distance. They speak fondly of his *presence* and of the *respect* he was able to command. They describe him as *one of a kind; a truly exceptional man.* And finally, they speak of the fact that it is huge testament to him and to the work he did to nurture and protect all that was good about the school that so many past pupils have, in time, chosen to send *their* children to Ranelagh.

Beverley Stevens

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