

A Eulogy in Celebration of the Life of John Stevenson OBE

05 December 1932 – 24 October 2018

Thank you, Charles for inviting me to have the honour of speaking. Your lifelong companionship to John is greatly admired and today, we can see from the excellent turnout, the love and high esteem in which you are both held.

John Stevenson OBE was one of the most kind, charismatic and erudite people I ever met. Born in Hazel Grove, Stockport, not far from Manchester, John attended Stockport Grammar School.

In his early years, John had a good treble voice – he sang ‘Oh! for the wings of a dove’ in concerts, publicly.

He later won a Scholarship to Oxford – St Catherine’s College (where the great historian, Sir Alan Bullock was the founding Master). Once there, John read English. His fellow students were – Tarquin Olivier, later film director, whose father was the famous Sir Laurence – and John remained in touch with Tarquin and his mother, the actress, Jill Esmond over many years. Another contemporary was Michael Heseltine. His Tutors were Lord David Cecil as well as John Batley and his wife, Iris Murdock with whom he became firm friends. Another tutor was Whyston Auden, that is, WH Auden, who became John’s mentor and friend.

From his Oxford University Dramatic Society days, John was pals with such people as Alan Bennett, Ned Sherrin, Russell Harty and Bryan Kelly (the composer) and Alan Shallcross and so on, all who became household names.

Another friend from the Manchester days was Brian Epstein – The Beatles Manager. In an Elizabethan Masque, John performed in front of Princess Margaret and afterwards was presented to her.

Whilst at Oxford, John was taught to play the organ by John Webster (who had played for Sir Harold Wilson’s wedding in 1940).

John’s creative streak took on another strand when he wrote songs for Patricia Routledge to sing in Croydon at the Fairfield Halls.

However, at first, John kept his musical and dramatic talents under a bushel as he made his way in the world of Education as an English teacher, in not the easiest of places, first in Peckham, then in Earlsfield; next, he went to north London to Parliament Hill as Deputy Head where, in fact, HM The Queen visited.

John was always innovative in finding new ways to engage his pupils in learning. The ‘Son et Lumière’ he produced for the students and staff to perform on the lawn of The White Tower (Tower of London) was stunning. This was the first time for such an occasion of this nature and it ran to packed houses for 4 or 5 nights.

Finally, John became Headmaster of the all girls, Church of England School, St Marylebone. He was the first male Head of an all girls’ school. For many, John became the, ‘father figure’ and he was genuinely keen and interested that every girl should achieve her best. John rescued the school from closure, turning its fortunes on its head by leading it to become highly successful, popular and oversubscribed by ten applicants for every single place and we regularly had over 70 appeals a year against non admission. John regretted that we didn’t have any more space.

In 1991, John spearheaded raising £2M for the bi-centenary Appeal to build a new wing with facilities for both Science and the Arts as well as an urban garden.

On 30 December 1992, he was awarded the OBE for services to Education and to Charity. He went to Buckingham Palace to be presented with his OBE by HM The Queen.

Learning of John's sad and sudden passing, several past pupils and former colleagues have been in touch to pay their respects to 'Mr Stevenson', since he was always known to both parties, even staff, as 'Mr Stevenson' and never John. It took me over two years to call him, 'John' such was the respect he commanded. Exasperated one day, he gave me an ultimatum - 'Call me John or I will forever have to call you Mrs Parmley'!

Here are some of the wonderful things that pupils and staff have said:

"I remember him arriving at the school during my second or third year there; he was one of those rare teachers who could make Shakespeare's "Hamlet" appealing to 15 year-old".

"He really was a remarkable man who turned that school around through his tireless pursuit of the recognition of effort as well as that of achievement."

"I have a very clear recollection of being called (to the HM's study) to be told off about a sports day poster I had designed depicting several teachers running a race but I'd drawn Mr Stevenson bringing up the rear, on his hands and knees! He really told me off before dissolving into absolute fits of laughter.

"He was a very significant person in the history of the school".

"One thing that impressed me was how well John knew the students. As I recall, he was invariably out in the playground at the start and end of the school day smiling benevolently at the girls and often engaging them in conversation. I think they really appreciated the fact that he did not remain a remote, distant figure of authority. His (8am) Latin classes must have been highly organised, but no doubt John's sense of humour was occasionally to the fore."

"When John was appointed, staff at Parliament Hill assured colleagues that he had a great sense of humour. In fact, Margaret Weiss whose arm John had twisted to leave PH to lead the Maths department at SMS told colleagues how mischievous John could be but he was a man of high principles and high standards. They saw plenty of John's quest for high standards in both dress and performance for each pupil to reach her potential but during his first term, no-one saw a glimmer of his sense of humour.... that was.... until the Staff Christmas entertainment for the pupils, when he walked onto the stage, wearing, to my colleague's recollection, a pair of pyjamas stuffed into Wellington boots, topped with a frankly disreputable raincoat, and a flat cap on his head. The shock was electric and the girls were hysterical. He then uttered a lengthy monologue in a broad Yorkshire accent - It brought the house down.

At times we had to see the parents of a pupil whose behaviour had become unacceptable. (I hope that John still retained his skill for impromptu Limerick writing later in life). Many a time, John would spot the arrival at the school gate of a recalcitrant pupil and parents. By the time they reached his first floor office, John would have composed a pertinent Limerick that he would read out to the assembled

staff seconds before there was a knock on his office door. We would be creased up trying to contain our giggles whilst John, straight faced, delivered a stern lecture to

the hapless parents and child telling the parents it was all their fault for sending their daughter to school in, as he would say, "an uneducable frame of mind".

John's support of staff was legendary. I think we all felt that he supported us through thick and thin (as long as we were not being stupid!). I remember one teacher going to see him one lunch time to admit that she had just 'given a child a piece of her mind', and he might get 'adverse feedback'. His immediate reply was, "Not to worry, any complaints and I shall say you did it on my behalf....." We always felt that he was doing his best for the school, for the pupils and for us.

John's general approach was 'hands-on' and 'hands-off' at the same time. Always on the prowl round the school, rather than sitting in state in his study which he had painted himself in Stevenson Red (you can see this in the photo on the back of the service sheet), on his sorties into classrooms, he would quietly sit in lessons observing and absorbing what was what. He learned every girl's name very quickly. He asked to see a copy of every letter that heads of year sent out to parents. We were concerned that this was to check up on us but he assured us it was merely to keep his finger on the pulse and to have no surprises. We understood this and it worked well.

Then there were the Champagne cocktails - the first Christmas, staff were surprised to be invited into the library after the end of the day, to be poured proper champagne cocktails, complete with a dash of brandy and real champagne poured over a Demerara sugar cube, served by John. Colleagues were indeed impressed both by his style and by his generosity. In subsequent years, assuming the role of Head Chef, John organised the senior team into cooking a three course luncheon which was lovingly prepared and served in the food technology classroom to the entire staff of some sixty people

There's so much more I could recount but one final memory from St Marylebone days was when on a Friday afternoon, a little old lady with two well-trimmed poodles arrived in the courtyard by the school's reception. She had come to complain to the HM that her dogs should be white but they were now pink!!! They had been caught in the crossfire of a water, flour and tomato ketchup fight some girls were having in Regent's Park to celebrate the end of their exams! Nothing daunted, John commiserated with the elderly lady and somehow managed to convince her that her doggies were much more charming in pink! If he were she, he would be taking them home to photograph them before the effect wore off! And so, with dropped jaw, she turned on her heel, strutted down the path and left the site. As Mrs Cowie, John's Secretary said, "It happens to them all - in like lions, out like lambs - that's the Mr Stevenson effect".

In the words of one of my colleagues, "He was the best Head I ever worked under and I remember him with great affection." Well, I second that. Several of us learned our craft of leadership from John and we have much for which to thank him. And so, in conclusion, just to add that whilst living in London, John became an Hon Steward at Westminster Abbey - a great honour for him. I was John's Deputy and only found out by accident when attending a service at the Abbey. He was always such a private person despite displaying, at times, a gregarious nature. When HM at St Marylebone, John bought Bramfield Folly - a retreat from London for weekends & holidays. He designed the interior with a four seasons theme and, with some help

from Charles, decorated it – even making the curtains and ceiling canopies. He helped to plan and plant out the garden and trees in the surrounding park and walled garden and established an orchard, too. The Folly has featured in two books and in the latest edition of English Country Homes. The Cottage was restored for his father and featured in the book 'The English Cottage.'

In retirement, John hardly retired! At Harleston Country Market, he joined the board and became chairman – he stopped it being closed and it is now the most successful in Norfolk. Produce from the garden and orchard is sold there.

He became involved in Bullock Fair Charity shop, Harleston which supports the East Anglia Air Ambulance 'EACH' the childrens' hospice, local youth clubs, local 'hopper' bus service. John raised well over £1M in a very few years: This is now the best shop of its nature in the area!

John appeared in two of the nation's favourite TV programmes: 'Songs of Praise' and 'Antiques Road Show'. A film for Eastern Arts was made at the Folly and also a TV programme, the 'Collectors' Lot' – shown for five days on Channel 4 Half hour. Latterly, John worked endlessly in the garden and grounds of Bramfield Folly and cottage as well as playing for services in local churches. He was extremely witty, altruistic, intelligent and generous with his time and talent. It is fitting that today, on the Feast of St Cecilia, patron saint of Music, that we pay tribute to a wonderful man. John will be greatly missed by many.

May John's soul rest in peace and rise in glory.