

Head of Bootham School
Report to Quakers in Yorkshire
Saturday October 16th 2020

Looking back on the things we have had to deal with as a school over the past twelve months I would have to say that it has -without a doubt- been the most challenging I've ever had to manage in nearly 16 years as a Headmaster. At the end of it, however, I find myself more proud of Bootham and more convinced of the value of its Quaker foundations that I ever have been.

From the awful and deeply upsetting loss of a much loved and long serving colleague -Richard Burton- at the very start of the year; through two unexpected and -if I may be so bold as to say so- quite unnecessary snap inspections in October and February; encompassing a couple of the most difficult pastoral and disciplinary situations we have ever had to deal with; all the way to the total state-enforced shut of the school on March 20th (and all that both preceded and has followed that) it was a year that has kept on giving: generously, willingly and with a knowing wink on its smirking face.

To quote Lenin (if indeed it was Lenin): *"There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen."* That is certainly what life felt like in March and early April. In some ways, so did the whole year!

But...

Looking back on it I'm not so sure that it was as much of an '*annus horribilis*' as it might first appear; and while I wouldn't go so far as to label it an '*annus mirabilis*' I think that there are far more positives emerging from it than I could possibly have imagined there would be.

Indeed, I would actually suggest that Bootham School has emerged stronger at the end of the year than it was at the start of it.

Even through the debacle of the two no-notice inspections we endured either side of Christmas there were surprising positives to be found. All the comments I received by email and in person from parents without exception, were hugely supportive. They revealed the trust that I hope I can say with confidence exists among our parent body regarding our ability to look after and care for our students, as well as an appreciation of the straightforward and transparent way in which we try to communicate difficult news whenever we are in a position to have to.

And then the wretched virus came into view, providing all of us with the first hints of dilemmas, decisions and challenges that we had not experienced before and were thus certainly not prepared for.

It is often said that adversity builds character. I agree to an extent, but would argue, with greater nuance, that although living through adverse situations can refine certain characteristics within a person, adversity does not build character as much as it actually reveals true character.

And I think that's true of institutions as well. I think it's true of Bootham School last year, and all that we stand for

Junior School slot:

As I look back on the year **I'm proud** of the way that the pandemic has underscored the sense of community we are developing ever more strongly here; of how that is increasingly embracing not just staff and students but parents and old scholars, all of whom have played a role in piloting us through this time.

Parents have continued to turn up -albeit virtually- to Reflect30 and the parenting sessions which have arisen from the unique Saturday parents' programme we are establishing here; no other school in the country, certainly that I know of, is doing anything similar.

Earlier in the year, as part of our Bootham Proud campaign students were asked to submit what **they** were most proud of about Bootham...and the word 'community' came out more strongly than any other. It's a word I have heard repeated by staff, students and their parents over and over again in the correspondence I have had and the surveying we have done.

That deep sense of community is clearly highly valued by people, and, I believe, has only been strengthened by recent events.

I'm proud, too, of the resilience that all members of the school have shown in the face of the unexpected, the unwanted and downright unusual. The resilience that my colleagues have shown in changing their work habits and methods and priorities and skills, whilst still seeming cheerful and, above all, being caring has been astonishing to observe.

And, above all, the resilience that our young people have shown in handling and facing down the challenges they have been presented with (particularly the big one for them: being cut off from their friends from months at a time) has been inspirational; the way they have kept going, sometimes through tightly gritted teeth and visible uncertainty, is remarkable.

I am proud also, of the way that our priorities and values as a school were so clearly vindicated over these months. We set out from the beginning of lockdown to offer 'care and connection' as our first priority; all but a tiny handful of the huge number of emails, letters, cards and other comments received from parents and students over this time have given great cause for believing that this approach has been valued, effective and exactly what was needed.

In particular, I've appreciated reading the many comments about how much parents have loved overhearing the nature of the interactions between teachers and students, often

covertly through bedroom doors when lingering innocently on the landing, and realised for the first time in **fact** what they have known in theory: just *how* special that relationship between teachers and students actually is here.

In the end, though, as much as I am proud of what Bootham as a school community has achieved, of how it has survived, of how it has responded, of how it has grown, I am most proud of what its individual members have given, to make that possible.

I would like to pay as warm and heartfelt a tribute as I can to my colleagues, who have been simply extraordinary over the past seven months.

Their contribution has, at times, been as sacrificial in the toll it has taken as it has been selfless in its motivation. In short, I am in awe of how my colleagues have responded and how they have served this community.

One final thought to finish with.

Earlier on in this talk, I said that we were not prepared for the challenges that the arrival of Covid-19 would throw at us. Perhaps, on reflection, that's not completely true. From one point of view it is: in that we didn't have the knowledge and experience that we now possess, and we've had to make it all up as we've gone along, encountering unforeseen obstacles and decision points along the way. Nothing could have prepared us for the specifics.

On the other hand, whilst the practicalities were new to us, time has shown that we **were** actually very well prepared. Well prepared in terms of the firm and enduring foundations upon which we have been able to build our response.

We have been well prepared through the time-tested Quaker principles of our school, which compel us to put love of people, the building of community and the primacy of higher

purpose at the very heart of all we do, and that have served us very well indeed.

Well prepared in being able to tap deeply into the aquifer of heartfelt commitment and service that my colleagues bring to work everyday; into the life affirming responsiveness of the young people that we serve; and into the support we all get from the parent body.

Given all that, it is perhaps not so surprising that, looking back at what should by rights have been an *annus horribilis* we have seen enough evidence of it being much closer in outcome to an *annus mirabilis* to truly encourage, reward and sustain us for what is still to come.

I have been proud of Bootham School from the moment I was chosen to lead it. But never more so than during the Covid Summer of 2020.