

Head of Bootham School

Report to Quakers in Yorkshire – October 2021

Good morning Friends, and thank you so much for your welcome this morning. It is good to be back meeting with so many of you in person after not one but two years of my appearing virtually. Actually, I am going to credit myself with starting a trend, when in October 2019 I had to make a video of my annual report for this Quarterly Meeting as I was in the United States visiting several Quaker schools at the time. Who knew it would catch on to the point that, only a few short months later, everyone all over the world would be doing it!

Thank you, too, for the welcome and attention you have given to our College students this morning. I hope that you have been encouraged by their reflections on what it has been like being a student at a Quaker School during some very tough times, and, like me, you appreciate the resilience and positive outlook with which they have approached things.

I would like to spend the time available to me this morning reflecting on the challenges we faced as a school over the year just passed and, more specifically, the challenges we faced trying to be a Quaker school in light of the disruptions, impositions and privations that all schools faced during it.

There were the practical challenges of course -bubbles; zones; endless hand sanitisation; mass Lateral flow testing; lengthy risk assessments; blended learning (where teachers are teaching students at home simultaneously with those in the classroom...and even teaching from home to a full class of students); face covering policies (and politics).

Although hard work and, at times deeply frustrating, we managed to keep confirmed cases among staff and students across both parts of the school to single figures over the course of the year. This term...not so much!

On top of all that, we then had the imposition of the most onerous public exam system, in which schools -and, more precisely, their individual teachers- were required to set assessments, mark those

assessments and allocate grades following rigorous training, standardisation and preparation.

It was a monumental ask of already shattered colleagues but, as ever, they rose to the task and did all that was asked of them with the minimum of fuss.

In many ways our approach to individuals as a Quaker school -where knowledge of each student as a unique and equally valued individual, imbued with the divine spark- helped us in this process. We know our students really well; we care for them deeply as people, not as members of a cohort or 'grades in waiting' and cultivate that through the depth of relationships we forge. All of this was brought to bear helpfully in this process. We were delighted with the grades our students achieved after all that they had been through.

One of the things that I have increasingly appreciated in my time at Bootham is that to grow into an understanding of themselves and of their place in the world, our students need to be planted in community; we need the example, fellowship and the challenge of that community to discover that of God within us and within each other.

In some ways this was the biggest challenge we faced as a school; how to maintain -let alone strengthen- that vital sense of community at a time when we haven't been able to see that physical body in one place for over 18 months, and when you can't get parents/old scholars across the threshold.

We worked hard to try to keep that sense of community alive. Our periodic Reflect30 Quaker meeting for all members of our extended school family continued online, and attracted regular attendance from New Zealand and California as well as other parts of the UK and Europe. We have put on an excellent series of evening talks open to all, including students of the York ISSP schools, on topics ranging from the development of the Covid vaccine through to the benefits that refugees bring to the communities in which they settle.

Our unique Saturday morning parents' programme continued, covering topics such as sexual consent education, the adolescent

brain, and helping your child to manage anxiety in a pandemic. Many of these sessions were made available publicly as well.

At the Junior School, although parents were sadly not able to join us on-site, we still held our concerts, nativities and Christmas Fair, either for a school-only audience or on-line. And the end of the school year (particularly the important transition for our year 6 students) was still celebrated -outdoors- with gusto and a degree of pent-up joy.

The Junior School in particular found resonance drawing on aspects of 'hope and resilience' as the themes of this years' Quaker Week and report that their Quaker Stewards have made an excellent start: only last week, for example, they have asked the school to think about inequality in conjunction with Harvest and the Sustainable Development Goals – highlighting those who do not have sufficient food or access to clean water and the temptation for us to waste these precious resources.

One pressing question, so pivotal to our ethos and daily practice : how do you hold Meeting for Worship -arguably the most important symbol and expression of our Quaker practice on a daily basis- in a way that all can find meaningful when we are joining via televisions in form groups around the school? When we can't see each other? When ministry is impossible?

Well, we did! And we continue to do so, even though we still only have two year groups out of seven in the meeting hall each time, with the others scattered around the school.

Holding silence, and using it for reflection in especially trying times, continues to be a vital part of what we do...but the anticipation of finally being able to do that all together, in the same room, at the same time is sometimes almost too much to bear, not least as the promise of its return has been snatched away from us so often.

The importance of this practice to us, and the way that it largely unconsciously become such an important part of our young peoples' lives, was revealed most clearly and movingly in the severe challenge we faced in the immediate aftermath of the death of Peter Woodmansey, about whom our Reeves spoke just now.

On the Sunday last December on which we received the awful news of his passing, we opened up the Bootham meeting hall as a space where his friends and teachers could gather. Large numbers did. We offered cakes, hot chocolate, listening ears and a lot of love, but what arose and developed spontaneously from their grief -quite unintentionally- was the most wonderful, powerful and gathered Meeting for Worship. What struck me most forcibly was the way that so many of the young people were glad -and able- to use the silence to process their feelings and to wrestle with the news that had floored so many of them. It was natural -and of real comfort- to them to do so. This was a flowering, albeit in the worst and most unwanted of circumstances, of six years of becoming familiar with this way of being as a community. Their reaching out to one another for support -and to support- underlined the health and centrality of our emphasis on community. Their ministry was heartfelt, tear-laden and cathartic. And it is probably the only Quaker meeting in history to end with a small group of participants sitting on the floor, laughing together and singing songs from Disney films.

There has also, of course, been the challenge for us to examine our approach as a school both to issues of racial inequality and the issues arising from the murder of Sarah Everard and the Everyone's Invited movement.

Our reaction to both has been to place the response largely in the hands of students, working with staff in two working groups covering either topic. I have commissioned these to ascertain the scale of issues within the school, to provide forums for students to speak about them safely and to make recommendations about what we could do to most effectively bring change where we need to.

Perhaps the most significant change we have made this year -and one that we believe has strategic importance for us as a Quaker school- is the creation of a full-time non-teaching post of Head of Social Action.

The key purpose of role -which currently covers global citizenship, sustainability, Amnesty International, charitable fundraising, volunteering and community links- is to progressively turn the genuine assent that our students readily give to the principle that they have a role to play in making the world a better place for all, into action; to putting their time, efforts and priorities where their beliefs and hearts are. Kayleigh Oliver, who was appointed from a very strong field, has made an excellent start to this work.

I would like to take this opportunity to say a couple of 'thank yous' as I conclude. Firstly to Adrienne Richmond, who very sadly leaves The Mount at the end of this term, for her friendship, counsel and kindness over our shared time together working hard to ensure that the flame of Quaker education burns brightly in this city. I will miss her greatly...but nowhere near as much as The Mount will. And secondly, thank you, to those of you here who have supported the work of our schools through dark days, and in particular to the Quaker governors -among whom we have three enthusiastic new Friends who have embarked on their duties with energy, insight and a true servant heart- for all they do to support us.

So, at the end of another astonishingly trying and exhausting year, I am glad to report Bootham has not just survived, but is actually really flourishing, as you will hear further from our Clerk to the Governors' Meeting shortly. We have worked really hard to be true to our Quaker values, heritage and practices during strange times; as importantly, they have served us very well as we have stared down the challenges that have assailed our community.