

An Old Colleger's Apologia

[This is the text of an after-dinner speech made in June 2015 by Anthony Hodson at the Old Collegers Dinner, a biennial occasion at Eton College. Anthony was a KS (Kings Scholar) in the 1950 'election', as was his friend from childhood Gillespie Robertson, chairman of the Old Colleger's Association.]

I remember Dr Cyril Alington preaching in Chapel, just a few years before he died. He must have made some striking points, but I can't now remember them.

There is one, perhaps apocryphal, saying of his, though, that has really stuck in my mind.

When he was Headmaster, an enthusiastic mother, asked him: "What do you prepare our boys for, Dr Alington?" He replied: "For death, madam – for death!"

Shocking, perhaps. But, listening a few weeks ago to Tony Little's powerful speech to the OEA, I felt that Dr Alington had hit the same button. We really need to be useful to other people before we go.

Forgive me if I now talk a bit about myself – I'd normally hesitate, but Gillespie did ask! I'd like to share three life-strands that pass directly through College – useful, I hope, but were they useful enough for Dr Alington? You be the judge!!

I will introduce each strand with a little episode. Here goes ...!

59 years ago less a week, at sea off north-west Australia, clad in protective clothing, I walked out into a nuclear fall-out cloud to reset the scientific instruments on the bows of HMS Diana. The meteorologists for the G2 atom test experiment had got it wrong, and by the time we found the cloud, the instruments had run their course. Someone had to volunteer to reset them. The professional scientists declined the privilege, so Ordinary Seaman Hodson, 19-year old coopted member of the ship's Scientific Party, did it.

My first assignment as a scientist! When I visit a modern warship, I look for the anti-fallout gadgetry engendered by these tests – and it is there!! Was I useful? Who knows??

Let's go back.

Gillespie Robertson and I shared the same prep-school, West Downs – he the able all-rounder, me the quirky dreamer, fascinated by science, maths, and things that work. In the Scholarship exam, there was a question in the maths paper, about sheep and goats, with and without horns. This was boolean algebra, and totally new to me. I was intrigued and evidently answered the question well,

for John Herbert, head of Maths, had me awarded an immediate scholarship. This annoyed the West Downs beaks, who thought Gillespie far worthier. But here he is anyway!

John Herbert and Charlie Mayes, head of Physics, stimulated and inspired. Just two of us went down the same mathematical road. The other was the late Nicky Howard OS, a lifelong friend. As a powerful player in GCHQ, he helped bring down the Soviet Union, and was awarded the NATO Distinguished Service Medal, the only non-US citizen to have won it. He passed the Alington test, I think.

By my last year in Physics, I was alone, and worked alone, with no competition for the School Physics Prize. Charlie Mayes was often ill, and so I was often brought in to teach lower divs. Teaching later became an important part of my professional life.

As a National Service sailor, HMS Diana was my first ship, with a big role in the 1956 Montebello G2 Atom Tests. With my physics background, I managed to attach myself to the Scientific Party of professionals, and this led to the episode that I related.

After the Navy, I went to Balliol to read Maths, and on to a good job in Avionics in Elliott Flight Automation. I loved it, and rose – perhaps too fast? – to Divisional Chief Systems Engineer at age 28. At 37, I was a senior manager for Sperry Gyroscope, responsible for a big portfolio of development projects, but I realised by 40 that being a techie, not a manager, was my strength and satisfaction. So I got my eye back in by moonlighting as a software expert in one of my own projects.

Not long after, ICL offered me a job as an internal systems consultant. In 1980, Maggie Thatcher restored the pound, ICL's export market collapsed – and tens of thousands of managers and marketeers were fired. As a techie, I survived. Nobody was really clear what ICL stood for any more, because the room-sized computers of old had vanished like dinosaurs. In the disarray, in 1986, I managed to corner a piece of new and challenging international technology – called X.500; my small team designed the ICL product, and I became an international expert.

Bosses couldn't understand what I was up to and threatened me with the sack, but one team in ICL wanted the technology, so the product took off. In 1993, I left ICL and founded my own successful X.500 consultancy.

X.500 created a mini-industry that still serves public key distribution, part of Identity Management. The technology – based on my product and others like it – still helps protect the commercial identity of large business enterprises.

Was I Useful enough, professionally? I wouldn't stake my death on it! Let's move on.

At the 2014 Christmas concert in St Mary's Church Winkfield, not far from here, a 13-year old Korean boy, Daniel Kim, gave a short recital on his clarinet, with breath-taking flair and skill. He takes up his Eton Music Scholarship in the autumn this year.

I'm musical impresario for this annual concert, and can help young musicians like Danny gain useful public performance experience.

Back to College ...

As a musical new Colleger, I was accepted by Dr Sidney Watson as a boy-alto in the Auxiliary Choir – about 12 Collegers, who sang with the professionals for Sunday evensong. A good entry point to musical life at Eton.

Later I had an inspirational oboe teacher, Claude Taylor, and started winning competitions. Sidney Watson took me on as a project, and taught me harmony, composition, and the organ.

This was a great time for College music, encouraged by Master in College Steve McWatters. Hugo Meynell composed Handelian works for us to perform. We instrumentalists often got together to make music – I think of Julian Hall, John Waterhouse, Ben de la Mare, Ralph Hawtrey, and many others. We performed in the Headmaster's occasional musical soirées, where one of my own early compositions was heard (Ralph Hawtrey as 3rd oboe!). Music was in College air. Giles Whittome played jazz and 'flight of the bumblebee', David Lort-Philips played Chopin, and there was much much more.

Music remains a passion. My oboe grew up and became a bassoon – I am the bassoonist of an excellent local wind-band playing rock, jazz, you name it. I give back what Sidney Watson gave me, by teaching young people music theory and by organ-playing in church. And I still compose, mostly for our church choir. Useful? St Peter, please think so!

A third strand:

In spring 2014, in a state primary school, 9 children aged 9-11, with their teacher – me – as Jupiter, acted out part of my Latin play 'The Dulcifax' – the nice-maker, mostly by heart to a family audience. Vulcan made the dulcifax – a gadget to make people nice. Intended for Cupid, it gets into the hands of two young children, causing a lot of bother for Jupiter.

Returning to Eton days, as a new Colleger, I was competent at Latin, but not good enough for Tiger Wykes, who taught the new intake of KSs in 1950. He

made my life a misery, much of it spent in Penal Servitude in DCW's pupil-room.

So I was demoted – to Reggie Colquhoun's div. Reggie was an inspirational teacher and the Greek set book was Odyssey Book 6. I was captivated by the beautiful princess Nausikaa as she encountered a battered Odysseus – and I have been in love with her ever since! My wife does know!

Another later inspirational teacher was the Head Master, Robert Birley, who taught divinity and lots more to senior boys. His deeply intelligent and liberal views of philosophy, politics and religion contributed to my life view.

In 1996, considered civilised by now, I was invited to progress towards Master of the Mercers' Company, and became Master in 2001. The Mercers are heavily involved in educational governance, and I enjoyed being seriously involved with some great schools.

In 2004, as a school governor in my own right, I started teaching a Minimus Latin course at a local primary school – yes, the Latin (and Greek) were still in there, if rusty – thank you Nausikaa. I discovered a talent for teaching children, and have done it ever since, in small single-year classes, with the odd parent thrown in!

I have written five Latin plays for the children, including *Dulcifex*. To de-rust my Latin composition (and resurrect Greek), I took an Open University honours Degree in Classics (and Music), graduating in 2012. Sucks to Tiger Wykes! R I P.

My teaching has, I believe, helped about 100 children gain confidence, a love of learning, a better understanding of humanity, and just a little Latin!

That's it. I have gained great satisfaction from these strands, and I hope that they have been useful as well as satisfying my natural enthusiasms. There would have been quicker ways to achieve riches - but what is the ultimate value of that?

Will I pass Dr Alington's criterion? Heaven knows.

Anthony Hodson
June 2015