



Northumberland & Newcastle Society

For Our Future Heritage

An Ancient Grammar School in Northumberland and Newcastle: place and tradition – but what of the future?

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An Ancient Grammar School in Northumberland and Newcastle: place and tradition – but what of the future?

A strong sense of place

The Newcastle upon Tyne Royal Grammar School knows its place. Founded in 1545 – or, at least, reckoning its foundation as the year in which the will of its founder, Thomas Horsley, was enacted – it has moved just three times in its long history, and never very far at that. It's occupied its present site in Jesmond since 1906. To those of us who know and love it, it is a unique place, special in its own right but also indissolubly linked to the city whose name it bears.

Now there's an odd line of thought, for a start. The RGS isn't unique. There are six other Royal Grammar schools around the country, namely Guildford and Worcester, which like Newcastle are nowadays independent schools: and Colchester, High Wycombe, Lancaster and Clitheroe, which remain state grammar schools.

I don't know the history of all seven, or particularly why they bear the name Royal. I do know that RGS High Wycombe, where I started teaching, took the name because its status was tidied up by Queen Elizabeth I, as ours was. You may know that, in the last years of her reign, Elizabeth (or, at least, her ministers) was tidying up various institutions: at the same time she established education as a charitable activity, something those who want to mess around with charitable status should bear in mind. It always seems to me that 400 years of legal precedent is not something to be set aside lightly or on a political whim.

Nowadays to call yourself a royal anything, I believe you need a letter from the Queen and a visit from the Lord Lieutenant: certainly that's what the Royal Northern Sinfonia enjoyed just a couple of years ago. No one's quite sure how or when the RGS became known by that name. It had otherwise been referred to as the Grammar School or the Free School. Fortunately for us, the school's status had been clarified and established (albeit as something of an afterthought) in an all-encompassing Royal Charter which is still kept in the North Tyneside Archives. So that charter apparently gave rise to people referring to the school by its regal epithet - and it stuck.

In fact, looking at our full and registered name – The Newcastle upon Tyne Royal Grammar School, which you can see inscribed in the very fine wrought iron gate on Eskdale Terrace – the name of the city is more important to the school's history and development than its regal connection.

The school was founded effectively in borrowed premises. I'm pretty sure that the school will have been in existence some years before that official date of 1545, because it grew up in another charitable institution, the Virgin Mary Hospital. That ancient charity was situated on a spot behind where the Central Station now is: I believe the site is actually under the

Stephenson railway sheds that are being renovated as part of the major Stephenson Quarter development now underway.

By the way, being Master of the hospital was a nice little earner in later years, since the successful incumbent was paid for running both school and hospital.

Something the school of that period, whenever it began, has in common with the 21st-Century RGS is a convenient city-centre location. Of course, back then the city was pretty small in any case, and proximity to a railway station wasn't a priority in the 16th Century! But its centrality became important in its strong link to the governance of the city.

There is a long-standing tradition that one of the first engagements of the new Lord Mayor is to visit the school. You may wonder why. It's hard to see much connection nowadays – and political differences over education have in the past perhaps caused some embarrassment. But Lord Mayors are good at rising above political disagreement and representing the city impartially.

The Lord Mayor visits us to this day because, for a century or two, he (it was only a he in those days) was elected in the schoolroom. I presume that its location, and the simple fact that it was a decent-sized room, meant that it was suitable for the council to assemble and count the votes. And there's one old print, at least, of RGS pupils chairing the Lord Mayor around the bounds in celebration.

I mentioned politics. I've known other schools where, as I hinted, Labour councils have done their best to disown a now-independent school, and deny its historic links. That's never happened, to my knowledge, in Newcastle, or not to any extent: that seems to me both a strength and an indicator of the school's place in the psyche of the city.

Indeed, when I arrived here seven years ago as the new Headmaster I was struck by the strength of feeling for the school. The local paper, local radio, people and indeed even those people in power recognise and take pride in the RGS, viewing it as one of the powerful traditions and success stories of the city. The city has many other strengths – and thank goodness its football team hasn't succumbed to demotion this season, although it was close. There is something about the North-East in general and Newcastle in particular that does pride and passion very well.

So the sense of place is important for the RGS. If you go back centuries, there weren't many people receiving an education – outside the Catholic Church, that is. It was monasteries and cathedrals that were the places of education. Even Eton didn't arrive, after all, until the reign of Henry VI in the 15th Century.

The History of the RGS, part-written and compiled by former head of history Brian Mains, suggests that the school may have grown up precisely because, as it happens, Newcastle wasn't a city dominated by churches. It was dominated by coal, and by river trade. Whatever the reason, there were people who wanted to educate their sons (sorry: educating daughters came rather later!).

I suppose, though I can't prove, that the wealthiest, the ruling classes did indeed send their

sons off to Eton. But that wasn't available for everyone. Take John Lilburne, for example: freeborn John, the Leveller, famous as a regicide in that he was one of the signatories of the death warrant for Charles I. He was the son of Richard Lilburne, a landowner of estates of Thickley Punchardon and elsewhere in Co Durham. He was born in 1614 and by his own account was educated in Newcastle, at the RGS. So his father was a man of some standing, but not perhaps sufficient to send his son away to the far end of the country to be educated.

Move on two centuries, and you have the Scott brothers (John and William) and Cuthbert Collingwood in the same position. Their fathers were men of local substance, though the Collingwood family at least had fallen on hard times. So the future Lord Eldon, Baron Stowell and Admiral Lord Collingwood were educated at the humble but apparently reasonably effective Royal Grammar School in Newcastle, before making their marks on the greater world.

In many ways the school was unpretentious, priding itself on producing pretty well trained clerks: after all, someone had to write the records and add up the accounts. But the school did send boys off to university: I think, in greater profusion to Cambridge than to Oxford. I always want mischievously (and anachronistically) to suggest that's because the railway line was so much more convenient, let alone the A1.

But one element had eluded me until I read it in the school History. The distance was so great that boys from the North-East arriving somewhere as far south as Cambridge found people speaking almost a foreign language. So it was important that the school should send students to a college and a tutor in Cambridge who understood the way they talked: hence the school's stronger connections with some colleges than others, all of it to do with sheer intelligibility.

It seems far-fetched now: but ask any southerner on their first visit to a pub, a football match or any other place in Newcastle where Geordie is properly spoken (or ta'aked reet), and they may still be very much at sea. So Collingwood might travel from Morpeth as far as Newcastle to be educated: Lilburne from Sunderland, the place of his birth at any rate. Newcastle was both a centre, and quite far enough for anyone to travel from Northumberland or County Durham. The South was simply a long, long way away.

Moving to modern times, we still feel that! I frequently joke, in my newspaper column and elsewhere, that up here we have a real problem with government and with London. The trouble with government is that Westminster is so far away. It simply doesn't connect with us. There could only be one thing worse than having Westminster so far away from us: and that would be having it close!

Even now the young people who leave the RGS, boys and now girls, frequently feel the same way. We send 15 to 20 boys and girls to Oxford and Cambridge every year. In the old days when there were league tables in such things (it's about the only thing there isn't a league table for nowadays!), that might have seemed a slightly low figure compared to other similar schools in different parts of the country. But geography plays a part.

Many young people here, however bright (and they certainly are bright!), don't feel the need to go to London (UCL, King's, Imperial) or even to Oxbridge when they have Durham, a top university and a World Heritage site, just 12 minutes away by train. They can also look north to the best that Scotland has to offer, among them Edinburgh and the ancient St Andrews. Manchester and Sheffield, Leeds and Glasgow: all are high-quality universities, many of them particularly attractive to medics or engineers. Why go south?

Why indeed? It's tempting to be a bit cosy and to say we've got all we need up here and, don't forget, Newcastle itself is one of the top 20 universities in the country, highly thought of: a number of our students choose to stay here and go to Newcastle – not out of a lack of adventurousness, but because it's a good university. And maybe because it offered them a place when others didn't.

That would suggest, then, that young people stay here. But they don't. London, let alone overseas business centres, attracts many of our students who go into financial or commercial services. Whatever their choice of universities, they are not tied to the apron-strings of Newcastle. As an educationist, I consider it my duty to encourage them to spread their wings and move to wherever their career and aspirations take them (after all, we're teaching fledglings to fly the nest). Nonetheless, I can see that the very success of education in any area sometimes merely encourages its products to leave it, and thus to leave the area the poorer. I don't have an answer to that conundrum.

Tradition

Remembering the title of this talk, you might be forgiven for suspecting that I've forgotten about the next bit, the question of tradition. And, given the school's history, you might find that curious.

As it happens, I always feel that the two elements are bound up, one with another. We are conscious that our fine 1906 Jesmond building oozes tradition. When we add new buildings to it, we are very conscious of that. The single row of buildings with a few additions around the edges, which was how the school would have looked even in 1990, is now very much a U-shape. I remember a recent Chairman of Governors observing sharply that we've increased the teaching space by more than 50%, but increased the number of pupils by only 20%. That kind of maths suggests it's not good business! But in our defence I'd say the days are gone when you could stick kids in serried ranks and get them taught.

We are conscious, though, that our buildings exude tradition. Walk into the 1906 Main Hall, with its fine war memorial and organ added in the early 1920s (even if the reminder *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* is a little stark), and you feel the tradition creeping out of the panelling.

We should never take that lightly. Indeed, when we started planning our current phase of further development – which you may have noticed from the urban motorway, because it's pretty obvious from that viewpoint – we naturally priced up the alternatives. Would it be better to sell our prime site and move out to a green-field alternative, perhaps somewhere out to the north-west but still with the advantage of a Metro service?

We did the sums: but in truth there was probably a deeper reality than the mere maths of comparative land and building costs. Indeed, the lack of tradition and of longstanding focal point, the lack of message (albeit a very old-fashioned one) is a challenge for any school in new buildings. Some independent schools have built fine new buildings in recent decades: but it's hard starting the traditions from scratch.

Certainly the same issue faces maintained schools built or rebuilt, and not before time, in recent government programmes. I remember in about 1990, in the state-controlled Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe, being told to park well away from the buildings, because there was a danger that the gutters would fall on our vehicles! Successive governments ignored school and hospital buildings for decades, and you might be justified in regarding Building Schools for the Future and the latest, less costly, Coalition/Tory plan as being too little, too late.

School buildings make statements – or should do. It's not a clearly defined statement, in truth, when you look at our Main Hall with its pillars, its panelling, its lofty ceiling and its war memorial. But they are somehow strongly redolent of the tradition of learning: in the quality of building (and it is well built), there is perhaps also an affirmation of the pursuit of excellence, of doing everything as well as we can.

This kind of statement always put me in mind of the Headmaster in Alan Bennett's hilarious play, *Forty Years On*. In it a rebellious young teacher remarks that the trouble with his headmagisterial insistence on standards is that those very standards are out of date. "Of course they are," he replies (preferably in a John Gielgud voice): "That's what makes them standards!"

Interestingly, we all know that the Main Hall, with its remarkably uncomfortable but very impressive oak pews, reflects an outmoded view of how we educate. So it is necessary that we build, for example, up-to-the-minute science facilities, a theatre of almost professional quality, and most lately a new swimming-pool (25 metres long, rather than the old 25 yards, and six lanes instead of four). If we are going to pursue excellence in the school, we need modern and excellent facilities.

So I think somewhere in this lies a mix of the old and the new, of the traditional, the forward-looking and the aspirational. There's another building planned: we don't have a timescale yet. At the heart of it will lie a library. We have quite an elegant one at present: but its size is totally inadequate for a sixth form of 360 A level students, let alone the other nearly 1000 pupils in the school.

What is the library of the future? I'm happy to receive suggestions on a postcard! We feel the demise of the book has been over-exaggerated: it seems a very human thing to wish to curl up with a book. But reference material is increasingly online, and students are similarly producing work digitally rather than with pen and ink (except, ironically, in the exam hall!). So we are doing some serious "future-thinking" with regard to that. And it's exciting, because a new building can offer tremendous opportunities for significant curricular reform.

Well, the Northumberland and Newcastle Society is rather a good watchdog when it comes to that. I'm sure several members have scrutinised with care our latest and future building plans. And I suspect that, if you felt we were getting things wrong, we would hear about it pretty quickly!

The young: their view of the future

But what of the young people who use these buildings and facilities? What is their view of planning, of the preservation of the old, and of development of the new? Do they feel there are environmental issues – in their school, let alone in their own neighbourhoods?

It's a hard one to answer. Some of it has to do with age. Some with being teenagers, perhaps: and some with how much space and time they have left in their busy and aspirational lives to worry about such things.

Our Junior School starts at age seven. So our younger students (up to the age of 11) are full of predictably green thinking. They are great about recycling: everything goes in the right bins, and is carefully sorted. They are good about turning off lights, and there are notices all around the Junior School classrooms reminding them to do so.

Litter isn't an issue: they're tidy, biddable and thoughtful.

Is the same true in the Senior School, with 11-18-year-olds? Well, yes – and no. Once you start to deal with teenagers, (as with adults) perhaps, you can perceive a gap between theory and practice. They are absolutely certain that we shouldn't waste, and that we should recycle carefully. Yet my colleagues are sometimes horrified by how much of our rather good school lunches is left on plates and thrown away. (By the way, we can't even send wasted food to the pigs nowadays: there's a health regulation against it).

Similarly, although we have recycling bins around the place, with separate ones for glass, plastics and paper, it's somewhat depressing how often the wrong things are put in the wrong receptacle. Is it wilful? Are they thoughtless, and do they not give a damn?

Again, perhaps it's a teenaged, or just a busy thing. In theory, they feel very strongly that we should do things right. In practice, older students will drop rather more litter than the younger, and they won't take the same care about putting the right things in the right bin. Any of you who have had teenage children may well have thought the same thing. They know the theory and the virtue of a tidy bedroom: but was theirs ever tidy?

Busy lives: time to care?

In their defence, our students at the RGS are ridiculously busy. We have a powerful philosophy that promotes engagement outside the classroom as well as in it. So even those aiming to get straight As and A*s at A level, in order to win places at the very top universities, are still playing rugby, hockey or netball right through the winter, leading the school's musical ensembles, taking lead roles in plays and debating in competitions all over the country. We remain convinced – and push the message hard – that those who achieve most highly in the classroom and exam hall are those most fully engaged outside it.

They are highly motivated, highly organised for the most part and work very hard: so in their defence I might say there's little room left in their lives to campaign or even to be hugely thoughtful about environmental issues.

But that doesn't mean that they're thoughtless. Interestingly, our students often complain about how un-green our buildings are. They suggest double-glazing the entire 1906 building. My Bursar has a fainting fit at that point. The cost would be astronomical. Besides, in our defence we might claim that planners would be sticky about it in a conservation area.

No such guilt about the newer buildings, because building regulations require us to do particular things. So a significant element of the heating for our new swimming pool and sports hall comes from ground-source pipes laid during a previous minor development that created a new playground and running track for the Junior School. Underneath that specially soft tarmac is a maze of pipes a little over a metre down: apparently it produces a lot of warmth and slashes our energy needs. But have we covered our new roofs in photo-voltaic panels in order to harness the sun's energy? No. I guess it's all about balancing cost and advantage, maintenance and manageability.

I implied just now that our students are too busy to worry themselves about good causes. I didn't mean to imply that. Though they are ridiculously committed to their studies and wider school work, many of them are hugely generous with their time. We are proud of the amount of charitable fundraising done within the school. Large numbers of sixth formers go out every week on a variety of forms of community service in primary schools, old people's homes and the like.

Teachers too: surprising numbers of my colleagues on the teaching staff send emails round to all of us asking us to sponsor them as they do marathons, half-marathons, crazy cycle challenges or those ironman events that nearly kill them!

Similarly, although GAP years in the form of a year out before university have declined in popularity, it's amazing how many of our young people, at some stage in the few years after leaving school, go and do voluntary work overseas, raise money or awareness and, in short, make a difference to their world.

Local involvement?

So are they getting involved in the sorts of issues that interest the Northumberland and Newcastle Society? You're all volunteers, partly out of sheer interest but largely, I presume, out of a motive to protect, preserve, even develop and promote the heritage of this glorious region. As you look around and find there are more grey hairs than black or brown in the room (I include myself there), how can you be sure that your work will be carried on by the next generation?

In short, you can't. But I don't think you should be gloomy. Just as Shakespeare described so eloquently the Seven Ages of Man, I think there's a time and a tide for all of us, and moments when our interests and even our campaigning energies take us in different directions. For the young, perhaps doing something about famine or disaster overseas, even (for medics)

joining Médecins Sans Frontières, is more glamorous and sets the pulse racing more than the kind of work you do – for now.

I feel the same way when I go to the Sage. I can't believe how lucky we are to have a concert hall, let alone a resident orchestra, of such quality – and that's before all the visiting groups come in. But in the classical concerts I attend, my wife Katherine and I are painfully aware of being very much at the young end of the audience. I don't feel that way at work!

Similarly, although I find it less pronounced at the RGS than I have done in other places, former students of even the greatest schools tend not to start attending reunion dinners until they are at least in their 50s. To me, as a teacher, somehow that feels right. They should, to some extent anyway, spread their wings, shake the dust of the school from their feet (to mix a metaphor or two) and move on, tackling the next series of challenges and excitements in the big wide world. It's why they leave home for university, after all: it's very much a rite of passage, even though I fear we patronise if we tell them how they ought to feel and behave.

In the same way, few of our students think of being teachers when they leave the school: yet I sense increasing numbers are going into the profession. I don't have any firm figures, but I'm not convinced that many of them plan to go from university straight into teaching: frequently they try some other things first, and then make that decision.

My own daughters, two of them, are both teachers now, and aged around 30. But each of them avoided teaching like the plague for three or four years after university, deciding only then that they wanted to do a job that has real values and changes lives. I'm very proud of them.

When I interview young teachers, perhaps for their first job, those in their mid-twenties who have done something else first are invariably more mature, more focused and readier to go into that vocational career.

This makes some of the things that excite me, such as preserving and protecting old buildings (I have a lot of sympathy with your work) - even a bit of campaigning through my column for the protection of the arts from savage cuts in funding - right for me now. They might not have attracted me when I was 28, though: and I don't think that's a problem.

The future in their hands

Indeed, when schools start to preach, instead of truly educating, they tend to patronise – and, frankly, they bore the pants off their students. Everything we do in schools needs to encourage them to become altruistic, to be generous with their talents, to appreciate their good fortune and develop a desire and a need to put something back. But education in that sense must be non-specific. We can't tell them what is the right cause for them, what is more important and what is less so. We hope that the process of education helps them to develop judgement: and it is their judgement which they must exercise for themselves.

I don't think the generation currently in school and university fails to care for the things

that motivate this society. They won't readily bulldoze landmark buildings or insensitively turn the magnificent Warkworth Castle into a Disney-style theme park! But just now those things may not be in the centre of their computer screen, at the heart of their world-view (which probably is through a computer screen).

I always have great faith in the young. Most of the time they make sound judgements, and they do things right. Besides, if they look at our generation or the generation before, they can see what a mess we've made of the world. Two world wars in the last century: I wonder if they will manage to avoid repeating that disastrous record in this.

But they won't be simply told! Education isn't, and shouldn't seek to be, indoctrination. Just as Alan Bennett's Headmaster character accepted that his standards were out of date, and defended the fact as their *raison d'être*, we have to accept that the next generation will form its own view.

In that recent film, *A Royal Night Out*, set on the evening of VE Day, the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret are permitted by their protective royal parents to go out from the palace and mingle with the crowds. That much is fact: the remainder of a cleverly crafted script is imaginary.

Elizabeth saves Margaret from a tight spot and is in turn rescued by Jack, a rebellious airman who's gone AWOL. Their brief, finely drawn friendship illustrates the social gulf between them. In a cleverly contrived moment of foresight the future queen observes quietly that the future belongs to Jack's class, not hers.

The next generation(s) will make their own decisions. Naturally we hope they'll make the right ones. Education helps, one hopes, to inform those future judgments. As an outcome, then, education isn't neat and predictable: to the despair of politicians, it's messy and frequently arbitrary.

But I wouldn't have it any other way!



Northumberland & Newcastle Society

For Our Future Heritage

Founded in 1924 the Northumberland & Newcastle Society continues to have influence in protecting the environmental wealth and heritage of the County and City as it has for the last 90 years.

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