

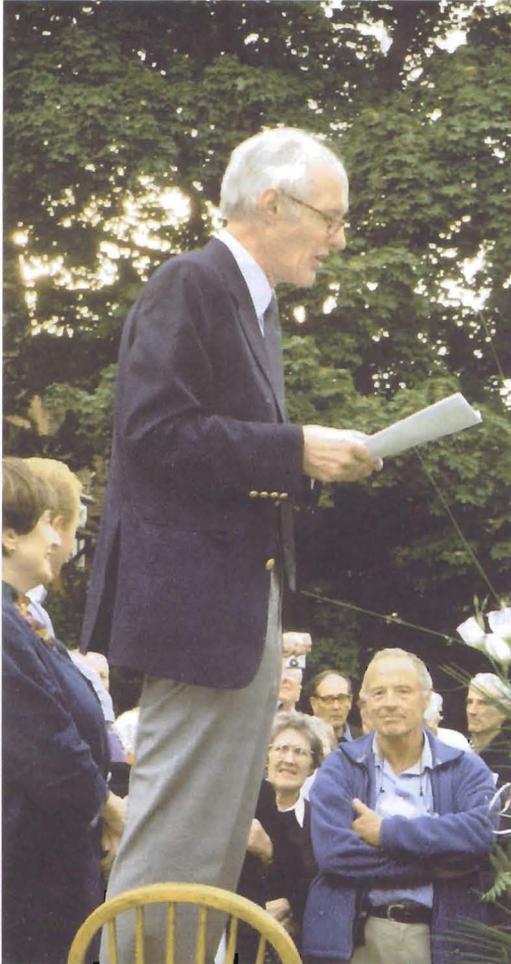
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Tony Newton (Lord Newton of Braintree)

1948-55

President 2001-2

My first and easiest task is to welcome you to what is certainly the biggest OS gathering for many years. People have clearly come not only from many parts of Britain, but from many parts of the world. We hope you will find it both worthwhile and enjoyable – and that you can find whoever you're looking for.



Tony giving his Presidential Address
Photo Anne Hirst

It was, of course, a huge effort and since, historically, the President has played an active role in organising these occasions, I should make it clear that, on this one, no credit at all belongs to me: I accepted the position on the basis that others would do the work.

But I do want to express my thanks to them. It would be invidious to pick out many names, since so many have made a contribution. I think it is right, nevertheless, to mention Nigel McTear and Tom Robinson, who have worked tirelessly, and Hilary Halter who has done such an amazing job on the Tercentenary Book.

That said, it was, of course, flattering to be asked to undertake the figurehead role for the Old Scholars on this tremendous 300th Anniversary occasion. And pleasing, because, although my family connection with the School is not as great as some, it is quite a strong one.

My mother and aunt, the latter now 90 and living in Amsterdam, were here in the 1920s. My brother and I were here together with his wife, my sister-in-law, in the late forties and early fifties. And I have a stepdaughter who was here in the 1980s. For myself, I have no doubt that FSSW has been a major influence on the whole of my life.

But however flattering and pleasing, today seemed a long way off at the time, and there comes the moment when you have to think of what to say. At one stage, it was being suggested that I should speak for something like an hour in what would be rather like a verbal autobiography. You will be glad to know that I resisted this.

Indeed, the idea filled me with horror, partly because I have neither the inclination nor the application to have written the real thing, so it would have been a large labour, and partly because I have little doubt you would all have faded away long before I finished. My demands on your attention time will therefore be much more modest.

Inevitably, the first thoughts to which such an occasion gives rise are reminiscence and nostalgia – and I'm sure there will be buckets of that over the weekend. I am certainly not immune.

I am very conscious, though, that the time span covered here is enormous, that the external world has changed hugely and that the School will have changed with it, so that the memories and perceptions of someone like me may bear little relation to those of people here in more recent years, just as I might find it difficult to relate to the experiences of those who were here before or during the War.

But I cannot resist a few snapshots from the memory, remote though they may seem to some.

I remember arriving in 1948, crying for half-an-hour, and then being as happy as a cricket for the next seven years. And being so foolish as to tell someone that I didn't like my middle name, Harold – with the predictable result that no-one called me anything else for the whole time I was here, and even now some of you will find it hard to think of me by any other name.

I remember wondering whether I was going to live for years on sandwiches (the Kitchen was being re-done), aluminium jugs of lukewarm milk at teatime, and

endless tapioca pudding which we knew as frogspawn. And a flourishing trade in coupons for sweets which were still rationed as they had been during the War.

I remember the boredom of Sundays: Meeting in the morning, Pig Drive (compulsory walk) in the afternoon, writing to your parents in the evening. And, on a rather different note, I remember from my first years, a boy dying from polio, a disease now thankfully eradicated, and all of us being sent home before the end of term as a precaution.

From my middle years at School, I remember doing rather well when we were asked to speak for two minutes without repetition of pause: when combined with an ability to say very little at great length, you may think that this was good training for my later career.

And perhaps I ought to confess, on this occasion, that I remember being distinctly grumpy about OS weekends, which in those days took place when we were all at School. "Boring old gaffers trying to re-live their youth", I thought, oblivious to the fact that I was destined to become exactly that.

In the end, though, for me at least, it is not this sort of thing or particular incidents which really stick in the mind. It is the people.

I will not embarrass my contemporaries with tales of their peccadilloes. Apart from anything else, there is too big a risk that they might remember some back.

I am on safer ground with the Staff, not because they are mostly, unhappily, no longer around, but because the names I remember so readily are ones which will strike a chord with many more cohorts than my own.

You may remember that Department of Education ad: "No-one ever forgets a good teacher." It certainly rang a bell with me, and I recall many. Let me just mention some of those who come to mind.

Gerald Littleboy, the Head, a commanding figure and much respected. **Jennie Ellinor**, Deputy Head; seen by some as rather stern and forbidding, but with whom I got on very well. **Margaret Yapp**, Latin; **Stanley Pumphrey**, Chemistry and Physics; **Kelvin Osborn**, French; **Richard Wright**, Maths; **Jeff Follett**, Sport; **Richard Sturge**, Music; **Ken Whitlow**, a dedicated teacher and a great off-spinner; **Barney Jacob**, from whom generations learned of highly metamorphosed pre-Cambrian rocks in Geomorphology.

To all of these, and more, I, along with many others, owe a great deal. And to no-one more, I must say, than the late, great **Cyril Mummery**, whom I visited at his home in South Road when his health was finally failing, not long before his death, and whose memorial service at the Meeting House so many Old Scholars, including me, made a special effort to attend. A lot of people will be sad that he didn't make it to be here today.

I can't be sure whether he engendered my interest in History or whether I already had it. But he certainly nurtured and sustained it, and with it my interest in politics. And he certainly had a greater influence on my life than anyone apart from my parents to whom I am eternally grateful for putting me in his path. He also taught me an important lesson when I returned after O Levels with what I thought was a rather good mark in History: "You should have done even better", he said. And of course he was right.

In passing, I should add that I remember him also as what might be called an interesting cricketer. As a bowler, he was like an elephant charging. As a batsman, he was either bowled middle stump or the ball went like lightning across the boundary.

It was Cyril who suggested that I should try for Oxford. And I duly tried, succeeded, and went. My horizons already widened by FSSW, widened still further: new perspectives, new sorts of people, often from very different backgrounds and many far cleverer than I.

Again, it is people that stick in the mind. Some are names you would recognise: for example, Peter Jay and Brian Walden, already the outstanding debater of his generation. Many others are ones who, unless you're into politics, you might not, but who became cabinet ministers or, in the case of Alan Haselhurst, the MP for Saffron Walden. To give you the flavour in the year 1958, the presidents of the Oxford University Conservative Association were successively Paul Channon, Kenneth Baker and myself. All of us became ministers of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet and are now 'Tory Peers'.

In all honesty, I'm not sure how much work most of us really did. I seem to remember that the group of which I was part spent most of its time discussing politics over coffee. But I got a reasonably respectable degree, somewhat to the surprise of my economics tutor who wrote to me saying that I must have done some very effective late revision.

Thus armed, politics overwhelmed money, and I took a job in the Conservative Party Research Department instead of a much more lucrative one I was offered on the *Financial Times*.

In due course I got on the Conservative candidates list. I became candidate for Sheffield Brightside – a place where the Labour votes need a bucket and the Conservative votes a thimble. It's called cutting your teeth – more like extraction.

Then candidate for Braintree. In February 1974 I won by a whisker, in October 1974 by only half a whisker, in fact only as

a result of the last two or three ballot boxes. Thereafter, for the next 20 years it got rather better from my point of view, that is, until 1997. And within a few months I had migrated to the rather calmer waters of the House of Lords.

Someone introducing me at a dinner I was addressing the other evening, having pointed out that I had been in both Margaret Thatcher's cabinet and in John Major's cabinet, characterised me as a 'survivor'. It is not a word I would have chosen, given its slight hint of deviousness and trimming. I can, however, hardly deny, as a statement of fact, that I was one of a handful of people who were members of the Conservative government of 1979-97, from the beginning to the end. Whether you regard that as a boast or a confession is a matter for you.

People often ask me what were the highs and lows and I suppose what most sticks in the mind is the moment of difficulty, drama or crisis. The vote in 1979 which felled the Labour government, in which Brian Walden's refusal to vote was a key factor; the night when I heard about the Danish vote against the Maastricht Treaty, which triggered off difficulties which continue to this day; Britain's exit from the ERM, which I learned of when I was about to be interviewed on the New Zealand equivalent of the *Today* programme; the day in 1990 when Margaret Thatcher told us she had decided to stand down; being interviewed by Brian Walden on TV when John Major was reported to have threatened to call an election but could not be contacted because he was in the desert at El Alamein; receiving the news outside the cabinet room in 1996 that BSE was now thought to be linked to CJD.

If that seems a string of 'downs', I can only say that they are far outweighed by the various ways in which I felt that, as a

minister, I had been able to move the world forward a bit; in social security, in health, and in the working of the House of Commons.

I have certainly never regretted it – though I can't say I would like to go back to it now.

But I am in danger of breaking through the autobiographical restraint, and over-indulging myself. So let me conclude by trying to relate all this, however inadequately, to the fundamental purpose of this weekend, which is to celebrate 300 years of an institution which has been so important to all of us.

What did FSSW do for me?

A good education, certainly.

A huge opportunity, certainly.

Beyond that, the question is not perhaps fully answerable, because which of us can really distinguish between what was innate and what was formative.

But what I know is that I find myself very often saying to people, sometimes puzzled by where I'm coming from, that they need to know I had a Quaker education.

What do I mean by that? I think I mean a value-set, an ethos, an attitude to life: a respect for the individual, a belief in toleration, a willingness to try to put myself in other people's shoes, even when I think they are wrong – and perhaps above all, that 'feeling of the meeting' which I translate as a powerful desire to seek consensus rather than confrontation.

It has its downsides: some of my colleagues, if I may adapt a phrase once used about someone else, thought I was too reasonable by half. But it has far more upsides, and I would change none of it.

Let us thank the School for its three centuries of service and wish it well for the fourth.