



# OLD ETONIAN ASSOCIATION

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**OEA LECTURE**

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Royal Geographical Society, 1 Kensington Gore, South  
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Thank you, Sir William, for your far too generous introduction, which perhaps demonstrates that you must have acquired at our school that elusive elixir known as Etonian charm - of which more later.

Of course I wondered why on earth you had invited me to give this lecture. But then I remembered that in your distinguished term of office as Lord Mayor of London you were renowned for giving your personal and philanthropic support to the cause of the Rehabilitation of Offenders.

Naturally I too am a strong supporter of this cause and may even help it along later this evening by pointing out some amusing similarities between old lags and old Etonians. In my attempt to answer the questions asked in the title of this lecture I will start further back.

On my last day at Eton after distributing my leaving photograph to my friends, along with about 250 other leavers, I went to Upper School to be given a valedictory address from our headmaster Robert Birley. Birley, a magisterial colossus, who enjoyed using occasional thespian touches, delivered one line in his speech which has lingered in my memory ever since.

*"You have been at this great school for five years" he declared "and I hope that you have learned one vitally important lesson, above all others, which will serve you well throughout your lives...." (long thespian pause.....) "I hope you have learned...." continued Birley...."how to be able to tell, when the other fellow..... is talking rot!"*

Now in the 61 years since hearing these words, as both a politician and now as a preacher I have probably talked more than my fair share of rot. I'll try to keep it to the minimum tonight.

Yet, strange though it sounds, I believe that during our actual school days many of us did learn how to keep the talking of rot to the minimum. Why? Because our first and most formative Eton experience was learning to live in the small community of a boys house.

My house RJNP's or Parr's was located at Mustians. It was presided over by my tutor whose rubicund countenance earned him the nickname "Purple Parr". Naturally his boys believed this was down to his fondness for a post prandial glass of Port. Purple Parr was a rather clever, tolerant, kindly housemaster with one touch of eccentricity when it came to forming his house list. He called it Parr's Quick Eye Test.

Now, for at least the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, let alone in earlier centuries, the way most boys got into Eton was to be put down for the school and for a house – at birth. That was why, in September 1942, my Canadian father, Squadron leader Bill Aitken, wearing the wartime uniform of a RAF Spitfire pilot, showed up at Eton to meet the young assistant Maths Master he had been told was the "coming man" – Mr RJN Parr.

Mr Parr said he didn't mind noting down the name of the newly born J. Aitken but added that nothing would be decided until I had taken what he called Parr's Quick Eye Test! So, 12 years later, when I came up from my Suffolk Private school to meet Mr Parr, he put his face right up close to mine, stared at me for a full thirty seconds through his bifocals, and eventually said: "You'll do". And so I duly boarded at RJNP's.

Apart from an occasional episode of Field Game success I think we at Parr's were regarded as a rather bum house – certainly not in the same league as the great games playing houses like Coleridge's or Graham-Campbell's. But with the wisdom of hindsight the story looks rather different.

For my peer group of house contemporaries has somehow turned out the following boys who, one way or another, made their mark in public life. From the Law we had three high achievers:

Carnwath Minimus – Robert Carnwath who ended up on the Mount Everest of his profession, as a Lord Justice of the Supreme Court, Lord Carnwath of Notting Hill.

Cripps Major - who, as Seddon Cripps QC, became a greatly respected Crown Court Judge.

And J.G Nutting who as Sir John Nutting QC, was for many years Senior Treasury Counsel, an eminent Recorder and *en passant* Chairman of White's.

In diplomacy, RJNP's had Gore-Booth Major who, after a long spell as Geoffrey Howe's Private Secretary, became as Sir David Gore-Booth, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and High Commissioner to India.

RJNP's in this period also produced two military men tough enough to become officers in the SAS. One was my fag Ranulph Fiennes who went on to be a world famous explorer.

The other was Neville Howard, sitting directly in the middle of this photograph the front row, who became C.O. of 22 SAS.

Among less martial contemporaries RJNP's produced one moderately successful movie actor: Clement von Franckenstein. He spent his entire career in Hollywood where he specialised in playing quintessentially British butlers and aristocrats.

Finally, RJNP boys in this period scored well in national politics. Our most exotic political figure was David Hart. He achieved fame, some would say notoriety, in Whitehall as a decidedly unorthodox Special Adviser to Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind.

Before that David Hart won the confidence of Margaret Thatcher. He served her as even more unorthodox and clandestine adviser throughout the 1984 miners' strike. Hart somehow managed to infiltrate the leadership of the National Union of Miners, bringing invaluable intelligence back to No 10, which helped to defeat the Arthur Scargill strike. Generously acknowledged in Thatcher's Memoirs, David Hart had his hour on the political stage and so did no less than three Cabinet Ministers from RJNP's.

The most successful of these was George Young who held over nine ministerial offices, including Leader of the House of Commons.

Secondly, there was Douglas Hogg, who served as Minister of Agriculture in John Major's Cabinet. George Young and Douglas Hogg ended their careers in the House of Lords.

The third RJNP Cabinet Minister, yours truly, ended up in a less comfortable House, HMP Belmarsh - but more of that later.

The serious point I am making about these twelve or so eventual public figures who were my contemporaries in Parr's is that it was difficult to be in their sharp witted and sharp-tongued peer group and talk rot.

Sitting around the coal fires of that era alongside a Carnwath, a Gore-Booth or a noisily argumentative Hogg or Hart you soon learned something about how to communicate and when not to communicate.

I discovered this latter skill rather early on, as a new boy during the Suez Crisis of 1956. With the political omniscience of a 13 year old, I criticised, forthrightly but quite wrongly, Johnny Nutting's father Sir Anthony Nutting MP for resigning from the Eden Government. Johnny Nutting took exception to my opinion. With fierce paternal loyalty he more or less laid me out with a vigorous punch! I have been rather careful about talking rot in Johnny's company ever since!

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So what else did we learn at Eton apart from the importance of not talking rot? Somehow or other, Eton gave us a lot of confidence. This sometimes tipped over into arrogance. But provided you tempered it by keeping in line with the prevailing Eton culture of 'Don't side' – the then jargon for 'Don't show off' – it was probably a plus.

Etonian self-confidence is a mysterious but real ingredient in many of our lives.

Where does it come from? Centuries of school traditions? The peculiarly Etonian chemistry between boys and beaks? The encouragement of individuality that derives from having one's own room from day one?

Or maybe it comes from that jingoistic verse from the *Eton Boating Song* which predicts how:

*Twenty years hence this weather,*

*May tempt us from office stools,*

And even though we will seem to the boys old fools, that's us OEs:

*But we'll swing together,*

*And swear by the best of schools*

My favourite story about this “best of schools” ingredient in our confidence involved one of my contemporaries, who was the son of a King. He was Crown Prince Birendra of Nepal, alas later assassinated in a palace coup. Birendra arrived as a new boy surrounded by an entourage, which included some sort of Grand Vizier figure roughly equivalent to our Lord Chamberlain.

This official was presented with a copy of Fixtures and a copy of the School List. In those pre-terrorist days, the School List had a column headed ‘Parent or Guardian’, which in great detail printed the full name, address and telephone number of every boy’s father.

When the Nepalese Lord Chamberlain looked at the School List entry alongside Birendra he let out a scream:

*“This must be suppressed at once! It can never be published!”* he shouted.  
*“It must be destroyed immediately!”*

*“What’s the matter my dear fellow?”* said Birendra’s House Master Mr PSH Lawrence. The gibbering Lord Chamberlain pointed to the Nepalese honours and titles printed after Birendra’s father’s name - HM King Mahendra. These were roughly the equivalent of KG, GCVO, KCB and so on but with incomprehensible names such as Yi Pong, Di Pong, D Bonki Di Bong and so on.

*“Don’t you realise that the last of these titles DiBonki Di Bong means: ‘And he is the son of God!’”* screamed the Lord High Chamberlain of Nepal.

Housemaster Lawrence did not bat an eyelid: *“Oh my dear fellow! Don’t worry about that!”* he said: *“We have the sons of many distinguished fathers here at Eton”*.

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Whoever our fathers were or were not, the prevailing ethos of the school, then and now, is that you just had to get on with it. Self-reliance was the order of the day. For more in the manner of a university than a school, we were treated, from day one, like young adults.

We had to organise our own priorities and timings: to get our essays done; to get our saying lessons of poetry learned and declaimed; to complete our twice weekly runs to Locks and to choose from a rich tapestry of options our extra-curricular activities which in my case were: The Political Society, The Debating Society and drinking in Tap.

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In the middle of our rather frenetic Eton existence, I think we learned something about making friends and, in particular, about the distinction between friendliness and friendship.

Etonians are often affable and are taught to have good manners without needing to proclaim them, like Winchester does, in our school motto. Yet there is something about Eton, which seemed to help us build those deep friendships, which can last a lifetime. As Polonius says in Hamlet:

*"Those friends thou hast,  
and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;"*

When I was going through a bad patch in my life in a downwards spiral, which culminated in defeat, disgrace, divorce, bankruptcy and jail (a pretty good Royal Flush of crises by anyone's standards) people occasionally said to me: *"You must be finding out who your real friends are?"*

Yes, I did, and my hoops of steel club of closest friends were predominantly Etonian.

My best friend at school was Pearson Minor and 66 years later he is still my best friend in life. I first saw him on Agar's in 1956 running up and down a football pitch fiercely tackling boys twice his own size. He still does this today, but in the House of Lords, rather than on Agar's. Malcolm, now Lord Pearson of Rannoch was a rock of friendship to me during my fall from grace.

So were other OE stalwarts, such as Michael Alison, Sam Vestey, James Aykroyd my mess mate at Parr's and Johnny Nutting. Johnny, refusing to take a brief fee, delivered a passionately eloquent and highly effective two hour speech of mitigation for my plea of guilty to perjury charges at the Old Bailey - I might still be in HMP Belmarsh now if he hadn't batted so well for me!

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Political friends are not in the same league as personal hoops of steel club friends. When you are climbing the greasy pole at Westminster you have a multitude of fair-weather friends. Eton does better.

Let me say a word about both politics with a small 'p' and a large 'P' at Eton. Some years ago I was giving a talk to the sixth form at Harrow and a boy asked me this question:

*"Sir, why are Etonians so much better at politics than Harrovians?"*

Resisting the temptation to say "and at everything else...!" I responded by paying some predictable compliments to Sir Winston Churchill. But this Harrovian sixth former had done his homework and was able to reel off statistics about Eton's astonishingly high score on numbers of: MPs (including Labour MPs), Cabinet Ministers, Life Peers, and Prime Ministers.

"How do you explain this success?" demanded my questioner.

On the hoof, I think I came up with the right answer.

The explanation perhaps derives from the fact that even the most insignificant step up on the ladder of Eton life: Whether it is getting into Debate as a Junior House Prefect; or into the Library; or into Pop; or, at less exalted levels such as, becoming Assistant Secretary of the Butterfly and Moths Collection Club - a boy has to get elected by his peers.

So an Etonian learns a certain amount of small 'p' political skills. You have to be "*serviable*" - a hard to translate French word meaning 'eager to please - yet without appearing too eager'.

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On the big 'P' political stage, when I was at school, Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister. Astonishingly he had no less than nine Old Etonians in his Cabinet.

Some cartoonist drew a picture of School Yard with a notice hanging on it, which declared: "*Eton by appointment Cabinet Makers to HM The Queen*"

Of course everyone, including Etonians, laughed.

Even we knew that such days of entitlement, privilege, the grouse moor image and so on were coming to an end. So, who would ever have believed that since Macmillan there have been three more OE British Prime Ministers with a Tug or KS now in charge of our destiny!

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One aspect of our small 'p' political and social skills is that Etonians can be surprisingly good at getting along with what the Book of Common Prayer calls: "All sorts and conditions of men".

Now this goes against the caricature view of Eton as a toffee-nosed tribe of upper class twits who cannot relate to anyone outside our introverted social circle.

I first discovered how wrong this was back in 1961 when I was involved in an episode, which made tabloid headlines: "**Eton Boys roll out Red Carpet to welcome Scottish Miners**"

This all began at the Political Society. We invited the wildest, most left wing, socialist firebrand in the House of Commons to speak. He was Emrys Hughes MP, son-in-law of Keir Hardie, and close friend of Nye Bevan. Emrys Hughes did not disappoint us. He delivered a ferocious attack on private education, worthy of a modern Dennis Skinner or Jeremy Corbyn. But somewhat to his dismay, Emrys was not only listened to but applauded with exquisite politeness. Fearing that he had not gone far enough, Emrys Hughes, in the closing moments upped the ante by launching into an attack on Eton because.....

Wait for it.....not a single one of the school's Old Boys had ever become a coal miner!

As the President of the Political Society, I had to respond to this obvious rot.

Replying with some rot of my own I said that:

*"The failure to deliver Old Etonian Miners was not the fault of Eton but the fault of the National Union of Miners!"*

Because, while every other institution wanting to recruit Etonians, such as: The City of London; The Foreign Office or the Brigade of Guards all sent their representatives down to Eton to meet the Careers Masters offering us work experience or internships, the NUM had never lifted a finger in our direction. Emrys Hughes interrupted by shouting:

*"I hereby challenge Eton to send a dozen boys to the Barony Colliery in my constituency!"*

He ranted on:

*"You'll come down the pits, you'll work on the coalface, and you'll see the greatness of a Miner's life. I hereby challenge you to accept this invitation now!"*

Fortified by a glass or two of the Provost's port at dinner, I shouted back:

*"We hereby accept your invitation."*

The Provost, Sir Claude Elliott, turned white. But a couple of days later the invitation from the Barony Colliery NUM branch arrived and in January 1961 a dozen members of the Eton Political Society headed north to South Ayrshire.

I remember that week, and the one that followed it a few months later at Eton, as one of the most interesting episodes of my young life. Going down the pit and working on the coalface of the antiquated Barony Colliery was a tough assignment. I still vividly recall lying on my back, chipping away with a pickaxe at the coal seam and having to fill a crate with a gigajoule of coal (a miner's daily quota). It was hard work in dirty, unhealthy underground conditions. But, of course, we were not going to admit that Etonians couldn't do it. So, we just got on with it.

And when we came to the surface at the end of the shift, after our pit baths with the miners some of whom were our age we enjoyed socialising with them, drinking the same beer, fancying the same girls and dancing at the same parties. We thoroughly enjoyed our week especially living with the miners' families who hosted us.

In the middle of the next half the miners wrote asking if they could come down and make a reciprocal visit to us at Eton. The Provost again went white. But Headmaster Birley, whose mild liberalism had somehow earned him the nickname "Red Robert", was enthusiastic.

So a dozen or so young Scottish miners came and stayed at Eton, attending Divs, going to Chapel, living in boys' houses and participating in the ordinary life of the school. One extraordinary feature of the visit was the extent of the media coverage.

This photograph of me standing with the miners in School Yard was on the front page of *The Sunday Times*. Jack de Manio interviewed us on the *Today* programme and a lot of tabloid codswallop about "A great breakthrough in the Class War" made headlines.

But the real result was that the miners and the Etonians got on and thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. One of those miners Jimmy Tanner pictured in the middle here remained a friend ending his days living in a council house, which I helped him find, in Ramsgate my constituency.

All this was a tale of its time but it reflects the point that Eton somehow teaches us how to engage and communicate across social and geographical frontiers.

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That miners and Etonians episode was a surprising success but it's worth saying that one of our school's invisible virtues may have been that it taught us how to handle failure and the ups and downs of life's rollercoaster ride.

My own time at Eton, except perhaps my last couple of halves, was replete with failure. Thanks to childhood TB I was useless at games. I failed so badly I was even dropped from the House Side. Tardy book, Detention, Rips, White tickets, being on the Bill, getting six of the best for failing to run the full distance to Locks were all part of life.

One interesting boy who failed at Eton was Eric Blair KS. He went on being a failure into most of his early adult life. But he eventually became the most influential and acclaimed OE writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the pseudonym: George Orwell. One of his great lines was: *"Never trust an autobiography - unless it is about failure"*.

I am keeping Orwell's dictum in mind as I now move autobiographically towards the end of this lecture by saying something about my greatest failure – serving a prison sentence.

Now I am in the rare position of being able to tell you that there are intriguing comparisons to be made between HMP Belmarsh and HMP Eton.

The early weeks for a new boy, in both establishments, are not for the faint hearted. You have to learn a new language. You have to adapt to strange new customs, a bewildering regime, an exotic uniform and quixotic rules all of which are apparently completely normal to everyone who is already within the institution but not to you!

What many new Etonians and new prisoners try to do is to find something that they can do well to help them find their feet in their new and alien planet.

Now, I struck lucky at HMP Belmarsh. During my first few days as an inmate in Britain's highest security prison I kept my head down, talked no rot and just tried to get on with it and survive.

But one morning during Association – the jail tea break roughly equivalent to Chambers – a young prisoner drew me aside and said in conspiratorial whisper:

*"I've got a problem. Could you help me?"*

*"My problem is that I've just had a letter from my brief. But I can't read it. Could you read it to me?"*

When I read him this letter it gave him the bad news that he and his wife and his young son were about to be evicted from their council flat in Lambeth for non-payment of rent.

Now this sent the prisoner into climbing up the wall with screams and shouts such as:

*"What shall I do...? My wife and kid are going to be on the street..what shall I do?"*

Considering the two of us were prisoners in HMP Belmarsh this guy could not have come to a more expert source of advice to answer his question. Because for the previous 24 years as an MP I had been handling eviction cases at my constituency surgeries. So I knew all the loopholes in the system, which could postpone eviction. But after explaining these and saying that they would work if my new acquaintance sent a letter to the Lambeth Council his face fell and he said:

*"But I've got another problem. I don't do no reading nor no writing neither. Could you write the letter for me?"*

So I wrote a two-page letter of appeal for him, which he was kind enough to say was quite good. But then he did something completely unexpected. Instead of putting the letter in his pocket or in the post box he transformed himself into an 18<sup>th</sup> century Town Crier and holding the letter aloft he set off down the wings shouting over and over again:

*"Hey Guys, this MP geezer of ours; he's got fantastic joined up writing!"*

Now my graphological skills were a gift from Eton. The 1950s Drawing School's master, Wilfred Blunt, had given me and one or two others who were hopeless at painting, lessons in calligraphy. Suddenly they were coming in useful. For as soon as my writing skills became known, thanks to the Town Crier, a queue used to form outside my cell every evening.

It consisted of fellow prisoners wanting letters read to them or written for them – often on the most intimate subjects imaginable. Of course, this activity became the butt of some good-natured prison humour.

One old lag said to me:

*"Jonno – do you realise that with all this letter writing business of yours you is making a fantastic impact – on the girls of Brixton. They can't believe the sudden improvement in the love letters that they are getting from this nick!"*

Be that as it may, the letter writing helped me to have a much better prison experience than I expected.

I really got to know my fellow prisoners well. I got accepted by the hard men – the Big Faces – perhaps as a result of "serviable" political skills not unlike oiling for Pop. Of course, I got mocked and knocked occasionally but guess which subject was the cause of most teasing? Having been to school at Eton. It was a good-natured mickey taking.

For example, when a colourful jail character known as the Big Dipper of Brixton instructed me on the art of removing someone's wallet or watch he would say:

*"I bet they didn't teach you that at Eton!"*

One way and another I had a good prison journey which also became a spiritual journey. Indeed when I was released I made another unusual career move.

I headed for the one institution in Britain, which had worse food and more uncomfortable beds than a prison. This was an Anglican Theological College, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

Returning, at the age of 57, to an academic life of having to pass exams and submit weekly essays was challenging. Yet to my amazement, thanks to Eton, I found I had not entirely lost the ability to study.

I cannot pretend I worked hard academically at school. It simply was not the culture as it is today. The worst insult in our 1950s vocabulary was to be called "A sap" – a hard worker. We tended to coast along as William Johnson Cory's famous house master's report on the young Rosebery put it: "*Seeking the palm without the dust*".

But perhaps not quite. Every so often one would encounter a truly inspirational beak who at least temporarily transformed a laid-back boy into an industrious boy.

I think with gratitude of ancient beaks like historian Brian Rees who was also a brilliant producer of Shakespeare's and Marlowe's plays. Then there was Claude Taylor who, at a time when Eton did not even teach English at A Level, nevertheless fired me up on George Orwell and Morris West. I also remember Legge Lambart taking me through the Odes and Ars Poetica of Horace. And Tim Card introducing me to economics and in Private Business to Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. So, when a good teacher or an interesting subject caught my imagination, I would work hard.

And I guess that was why this Kappa F blocker who started in Lower Fourth emerged 45 years later from the Examination Schools of Oxford with a First in Theology. I apologise for breaking the 'No siding' code here!

Wycliffe Hall, a full-blown university college specialised in turning out priests. But I had no interest in being ordained. I thought that I would be useless at Vicaring – too old, too unsuitable, too unworthy and so on.

So although I remained a churchgoer and a lay prison visitor, I spent the next 15 years back in the secular world. Now it will not have escaped your notice that I am wearing a dog collar. I am today an ordained Anglican priest and prison chaplain. How on earth did that happen? You may be amazed to hear that it happened largely because of Eton and Old Etonians.

In the closing moments of this lecture, I will attempt a high-risk enterprise almost equivalent to trying to walk on water. I will make out the case for saying that among its many invisible qualities, Eton is a school that can inspire not only good secular values but also good spiritual values. Who inspired me?

While at Eton I think I was probably as non-religious schoolboy as you could find. However, when it came to my confirmation, I was prepared for it by a remarkable school Chaplain, an inspired Birley appointment, the Revd R E Sadleir. Mr Sadleir told me once or twice how pleased he was that I was taking my confirmation seriously.

I am not sure I really believed him although I do recall being stirred by the beauty of College Chapel with its great Evie Hone east window, the anthems by the Choir, the occasional visiting preacher such as Fr Trevor Huddleston and The Founder's Prayer.

However, a few years ago I discovered my Eton Confirmation prayer book dated March 22 1958. Here it is in my hand today. It does seem to show that Mr Sadleir was right. At the age of 15 I did take confirmation seriously, making lists of causes and people to pray for including a page headed: "Prayers for unpopular boys". If any of my Eton contemporaries are here today, Don't worry! I'm not going to put it on the screen!

Alas, those Confirmation teachings and disciplines faded. For the next 40 years I chased after the glittering prizes of Mammon – power, money, fame and so on – and look where it got me!

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In the spiritual world the question is sometimes asked: “Who planted the first seed?”

In my case the answer is clear. It was the remarkable School Chaplain The Revd R E Sadleir with whom I stayed friends in adult life. The seeds took a long time to germinate. But when the first shoots of my revived spiritual awareness began to surface it was a handful of OEs who did most to nurture them.

One key OE Friend who had trained for priesthood but went into politics instead was Michael Alison. For many years I thought he was the dullest MP in the House of Commons. But when I was in trouble I discovered he was the kindest.

Michael had been the churchwarden of what was then an obscure church in Kensington, Holy Trinity Brompton. He served there in the days when it was the sort of church where the Vicar took sherry after Matins with the small elderly congregation. But HTB exploded into becoming the mega evangelical church of the Anglican world: The home and birthplace of the Alpha Course.

Two remarkable OE Vicars of HTB who became my mentors and friends were responsible for this: Sandy Millar (President of Pop and incidentally my dancing partner at the Caledonian Society) and Nicky Gumbel.

In their company I met and was inspired by another Alpha Fellow priest and OE – Justin Welby, later to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. Of course I'm missing out a lot here. But the point to leave with you is that I think Eton and OEs underplay the profound spiritual influence of the school.

We can't measure the influence, although numerically it is interesting that today there are now at least 95 OE Vicars – and growing. None of us think of ourselves as successful. After all a 'successful priest' is as ridiculous an oxymoron as 'Woke Eton'. All I can say is that I owe a great spiritual debt of gratitude to our school.

The OE to whom I sometimes think I owe most in my spiritual life was an outstanding cricketer who Captained the XI, and later played for England in the first ever Ashes series of 1882. His name was C.T. Studd (seen here in the middle of this photograph) Somewhere along the line C.T Studd got religion and said he wanted to be ordained. There was great joy in the Church of England at this news and much forecasting that the legendary C.T. would one day be a Bishop.

*"No thanks" said C.T. Studd: "I want to be a Prison Chaplain."*

This disappointed his fans because then and now, Prison Chaplains are well below the salt in the church hierarchy and never achieve preferment. So in clerical circles the question was often asked: 'Why on earth does C.T. Studd want to be a prison chaplain?'

C.T. Studd answered them by writing these delightful lines of doggerel:

*Some wish to live within the sound  
of church or chapel bell.*

*I want to run a rescue shop*

*Within a yard of hell!*

I read these lines when some five years ago I was resisting what might have been a call to ordination.

Suddenly I said to myself:

*"Running a rescue shop in the hell of a prison? I'd really like to try that."*

So, that's what I now do. I love being a Chaplain at HMP Pentonville. On the wings I daily try to help men who are: suicidal; self-harming; disturbed; violent and deeply upset at being separated from their families. Often, it's the outwardly toughest prisoners who are the most homesick and most in need of pastoral support and prayer.

There is rarely a dull moment in a prison chaplain's life. Although I often have to cope with agony on the wings, occasionally you get the ecstasy of good laughs. To give you one now, I will end with this story, which happens to have an Eton punch line.

One of the Chaplain's daily duties is to visit every prisoner in the "Seg" – the Segregation Unit, or Punishment Block. Prisoners sent to the Seg have usually done something serious such as assaulting an officer. But on this particular morning, I came face to face with a Seg prisoner volubly protesting that he had done nothing wrong at all.

He hadn't been charged with anything. He was completely innocent. He was a full on barrack-room lawyer loud-mouth who knew his rights. So, I checked with the S.O (Senior Officer) in charge of the Seg, who said:

*"Well the guy's got a point. We haven't got anything against him except a tip off from the Old Bailey that he's got a mobile concealed about his person."*

So, I went back to this man's cell on the Seg. But, just as I got there, I suddenly heard the unmistakable sound coming from his nether regions.

Ring, ring, ring...

*"Can I hear the sound of a bell?"* I asked.

*"No, you can't!"*

Ring, ring, ring....

*"You can't hear NOTHING!"* he bellowed claspng his backside!

Ring, ring, ring....

Then, in a highly original effort to drown out the ringing sound he demanded *"Will you sing a hymn with me Father?"* And in a scene worthy of the sitcom *Porridge*....he began singing *"Abide with Me"* at full volume!

I was laughing too much to join in but before he had got through the first verse, the ringing tone mercifully stopped!

Then in something of a panic, the man grabbed me by the wrist through the bars of his cell and said in a beseeching tone:

*"Father, you won't let me down. You won't grass me up, will you?"*

And then in rising desperation he said: *"You're the one who went to Eton aren't you? Eton boys don't grass each other up do they?"*

I assured him that he was right. So I walked away.

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Well that's it, guys.

We don't grass

We don't talk rot

We're loyal to our friends

We know how to get along with all sorts and conditions of men.

And as my life shows we were prepared for many things beyond the horizons  
of our imagination by our great school.

Floreat Etona