

Speech to Conference 2009

Welcome to Manchester and to the 2009 Independent Schools Association Conference.

I was hoping to welcome you to Durham (where I spent three very happy years as a student) but the hotels are too small, or to York (where I began work 33 years ago and my children were born) but its race week and the hotels were fully booked two years ago! Actually, Manchester will do very well indeed, it is a fine city as I hope you will see and this hotel is truly magnificent.

I would like to welcome our guests and speakers carefully chosen to help celebrate our theme 'Diversity and Excellence'. I know they will challenge, inform and entertain us in equal measure.

A welcome to the staff in Saffron Walden who have worked tirelessly to make conference the success it most certainly will be. Jane, Ruth, Liz and Amanda, my thanks go to you for calls beyond duty. Also to Maggie and Susan Woodward along with the professional development committee, they have constructed the conference programme and made the next three days into an event that will magnificently support the conference theme.

The welcomes continue with one for Neil Roskilly our newly appointed Chief Executive Officer. Neil is with us at conference as an ISA member and will take up his appointment in September. I hope those who do not know Neil will find a moment to say hello. I want to thank Graham Gorton and the appointments committee for the careful and robust process that led to Neil's successful appointment.

What have you been doing today John? These words were often spoken by my mother when I returned home after a day 'playing' during school holidays in the 50's and early 60's. I once made, along with friends, a den in the roots of a fallen tree in a local wood, they had formed an arch. I suppose I was about 10 years old. We had a splendid day filling the gaps against inclement weather and fitting it out to be comfortable with old carpets and the like. We spent most of the summer guarding it against an invisible enemy. We roasted potatoes from a farmer's field over an open fire and hardened spear tips in the same fire afterwards. What was important was the earnest excitement in coming up with the idea and then building it! It was a natural part of a journey through childhood which was stuffed with adventure. And it was terrific fun!

So, you can imagine my wistfulness on reading a recent report that today's children are missing out on some of the great joys of childhood because so many of their waking hours find them glued to playstations, mobile phones or computer games.

Gone, it seems, are those carefree days of exploring your neighbourhood when the only rule was to be home before dark.

Now, many of today's parents live in a shadow of fear, afraid to let their children out of their sight for too long least something terrible should befall them.

I can fully understand these fears. I felt them myself when my own children were small, although perhaps less sharply than parents do now.

When William Wordsworth wrote 150 years ago that 'shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy' I believed he was talking mainly about school?

But today's prison-house is just as likely to be the home, a seductive, comfortable prison for boys and girls whose nimble fingers are adept at working their mobiles and computer games, but have never used them to play conkers.

I grew up in a time when children 'played out', when summer evenings stretched endlessly and happily, when small boys had little gangs and imagined they were Robin Hood. When we were not building a den we could most likely be found constructing a go-kart from old pram wheels and some recycled wood or damming a stream, or putting the chain back on oily bike.

Back to the previously mentioned report. Seven out of ten parents are now afraid to allow their children to play outside unsupervised! In fact some parents don't dare buy their children bicycles for fear of them being run over. And that's a shame!

Now, why am I telling you all of this?

Because I believe much of what we did then was part of a primitive preparation for adult life.

Through those childhood games we discovered some of our strengths and weakness. We practiced the skills we would later find useful and we learned to face success and disappointment in equal measure. When your life is lived through images constructed by a technical genius from Silicon Valley played on a high definition screen I just feel it will be more difficult to experience those important rehearsals for adult life. I think it was quite important to experience the disappointment of a leaking den that I had spent hours trying to make watertight.

How can we replicate these things in today's world?

Well, this is where I believe our schools come in, this is where I believe the diversity and excellence to be found there can help children be well prepared for life.

Now I certainly don't believe children should be exposed to unacceptable risks! We must take the greatest of care of our most prized assets and I commend a sensible approach to risk assessment and to making sure our schools are as safe as they can possibly be, I also urge schools to assess their compliance with the regulatory requirements that form a core part of the inspection process but I hope that none of this will cause our schools to wilt into a boring and ultimately futile educational wilderness that neither challenges or interests our children and is unable to prepare them fully for the world they will grow old in.

When I visited a bookshop with my own children many years ago I marvelled at the range of excellent literature on offer, we enjoyed selecting from shelf after shelf of fantastic wonderment. When I found a set of Arthur Ransome books in a second hand bookshop recently I gleefully purchased the lot and sat up 'till I had finished *Swallows and Amazons*. I was out there on the boat fighting the battles and camping under the stars.

When I take my grandchildren to the same bookshops I find myself picking my way around the 'how to pass Key Stage 1' guides and the 'watch this video of parts of *Macbeth* to learn all you need to know to do well at Key Stage 3'. I am sure someone is now doing a roaring trade selling this stuff cheap on e-bay.

When I think of ISA schools I imagine a whole range of experiences designed to help children learn as well as gain valuable experience in planning along with the resultant success and failure that is so important in their development. Music (we remember the recent London South concert bringing children together to perform in Croydon), Drama (ISA has an annual drama competition), Art (who can forget the fantastic displays of pupil achievement at the Autumn Study Conference each year) and Sport (with a whole range of competitions at levels from the inter school through regional to national). Some of our schools focus in helping children with special needs (and I celebrate that and am proud of the dedicated teachers who help children to achieve when they might otherwise have been cast adrift). And boarding, just over 50 of our schools have an important boarding element with all the benefits to pupils associated with learning to be independent while living with others and so on. I congratulate ISA member, Christopher Greenfield, who will be chairman of the Boarding Schools Association next year.

I commend the cultural diversity to be found in our schools with pupils from many different backgrounds working together in peace and harmony.

Despite my previous disparaging comment about 'geeks from silicon valley' I am a committed fan of ICT and the digital world. I wonder where you imagine we need to be in say 2, 3 or 5 years

time. ISA is in a unique position to play a leading role in education through digital media via Taecanet Springboard and ISANet. Please visit the stand in the exhibition hall to find out more. I firmly believe we should not waste this valuable opportunity to establish a leading position in the independent schools world.

Wherever I look in this excellent association I see a **diverse** range of schools grouped together under the ISA banner providing an **excellent** education for an incredible range of pupils. It really is a wonderful thing.

So when my mother asked, 'what have you been doing today John', I answered 'oh nothing much'. I am sure pupil's answer much the same today when parents ask them what they have been doing in our schools. Rather like it did all those years ago their answer hides the fact that they have been engaged in a range of fantastic educational experiences and we should be proud of all they do and achieve.

I hope you all have an exceptionally enjoyable conference.