

Good afternoon. Andrew Fisher has asked me to kick off the proceedings this afternoon so - welcome back. I hope you feel refreshed and well fed. Andrew didn't say why I'd been selected for this singular honour, but I assume it's because I'm the local version of the Ancient Mariner ... and have always been interested in liberal education. This will be a personal memoir, not a scholarly dissertation.

A.S. Neill was one of the founding fathers of liberal education. I well remember researching him for an extended essay during my PGCE year and tracking down the books he wrote as a young Scottish teacher (or Dominie) just starting out. The first a 'Dominie's log' written around 1915 was followed a year later by 'A Dominie dismissed' - perhaps a sign of things to come -- then several other 'Dominie' volumes which I enjoyed very much - I suppose they were less polished than his later work but they were written with passion and a determination to do something to change an educational approach he saw as fundamentally wrong. I did my teaching practice in 1971 in a curious medium-sized school not very far from here called... Bedales, under the Headship of Tim Slack. This strengthened my interest in the liberal educational approach. After finishing my degree in chemistry and my PGCE I did a further postgraduate year, this time in Theology. This sounds rather earnest but was a delightful experience at a small and memorably eccentric postgraduate Cambridge college called St Edmunds, which had not long moved on from being a seminary and was populated by a range of academics you would struggle to believe in if you met them in the pages of a historical novel. The housekeeping, with regular exceptional feasts reminiscent of Porterhouse Blue, was run by an order of German nuns assisted by a selection of enthusiastic au pairs, arguably misplaced in a semi-monastic setting; we had home brewed ale at supper; my immediate colleagues ranged from a Jewish taxi driver to a clutch of monks, if clutch is the right collective noun, whose approach to life ranged from a saintly and ascetic Indian to a joyously hedonistic American and a retired ex major in the Gurkhas whose wish to have a large trunk of personal effects conveyed to him in Katmandu provided the excuse for a longish but enjoyable summer holiday drive. The year was leavened by extensive research into the nature and properties of claret and the enjoyment to be had prancing around in the Footlights, after which, in something of a daze, I applied for a job here and have stayed ever since. It's been a fascinating journey. I wish I'd kept a diary.

Liberal education isn't a theoretical concept; it has to be lived -- those of us who've been doing it for a while may find time to compare scars with some pride, so I thought a brief journey through my own formative educational experiences combined with a few comments about the history of liberal (or as it used to be called 'progressive' education) might serve as an introduction to the afternoon session. I'm very aware that there are several people here who are much better informed than I am about various aspects of

liberal education so I'm quite prepared to be interrupted with cries of abuse and ridicule, at any point.

I began my education illiberally in a small private kindergarten of a school, doubtless closed decades ago, in Solihull, near Birmingham. I remember very little apart from a lurking sense of doom and the fact that I started French at about the age of 5. It didn't work. When I was 8 we moved to Surrey, which was a great relief, apart from the need for a rapid change of Birmingham accent to BBC approved Received Pronunciation and I entered Esher Church of England primary school. It was a comforting, homely, nurturing little school though with awful grisly meat at lunch, milk warmed from being too close to the radiator served at morning break in very small milk bottles, with straws, and atrocious third-world toilets, up whose malodorous walls small boys aimed to impress each other. I returned from my first day wreathed in smiles and announced to my parents that the day had included 'comic reading hour' an aspect of the curriculum with which I was unfamiliar and which seems to have been dropped since then but which I urge QCA to reconsider. The school really worked for me - and incidentally for Monty Python's Terry Jones who was there a couple of years below me. We were never close - in fact I only found out he was there 45 years later, but he has clearly prospered. The 11 plus held sway and I was the sort of precocious little NHS spectacled nerd it was designed for. I remember two teachers vividly; both maiden ladies of a certain age, Miss Stokes and Miss Fry. Both had impressively hirsute upper lips and an innate grasp of disciplinary techniques which I have struggled for decades to emulate. I remember both with affection and respect and here note a caveat with regard to liberal education. Neither of these redoubtable women sought to be my friend though both had a friendly manner - up to a point. I wouldn't have dreamt of crossing either of them; one critical twitch of their moustache and, to paraphrase PG Wodehouse, I'd be back in my basket, wondering how to repair the damage to our relationship. It's an easy temptation in liberal education to place friendship above respect or professionalism and it's a mistake.

At 11 I moved to KCS Wimbledon, where Frank Shaw was Headmaster. It was a single sex, day school -- both of these being categories I decided I'd had enough of when looking for a suitable school for teaching practice, then later for a job. KCS in my day was very academic, though the signs are that, now, it is even more so. When I skim through the annual exam results in the letter to Old Boys, the list almost comes complete with a self-deprecating cough and a modest simper as it carefully explains how close to a set of perfect exam results the school has come in the last twelve months. For those of you who have seen Lindsay Anderson's film *If...* KCS was, in my day, identical in almost every respect, stopping short only at the point when the staff are machine gunned. As in the film, we had deeply eccentric members of staff, many of whom were manifestly certifiable and one of whom, like the history teacher superbly played by Graham Crowden regularly rode his bicycle into the classroom. The school prefects and Head Boy had considerable power. As a school prefect taking assembly, my

gentle but authoritative stroll to the front of stage would compel profound silence across all 600 adolescents gathered below me. I sometimes look round the classes of 20 irrepressibly voluble Year 10 chemistry pupils I teach here and wonder what happened. I like to think I've placed myself deliberately in a situation and role where the power I had then is considerably diluted, having experienced briefly, the tantalising but ultimately corrupting taste of authority.

Anyway KCS was the school I joined after the 11 plus results came out. I was interviewed and accepted on the basis of a giggle - never underestimate the power of humour - a giggle that emerged from Frank Shaw as he studied my drawings of the jet powered hover craft invention I'd proudly brought along, heavily influenced by Dan Dare and the Eagle. Art isn't my strong point; in the art world my output would be politely categorised as 'primitive'. Still, the drawings amused him, and perhaps he felt they hinted at an imaginative mind. We can all make mistakes. 7 years free education for a giggle still seems an excellent deal; I enjoyed it a lot. Frank Shaw was running a traditional HMC school - eventually becoming chairman of HMC -- but was regarded in the public school world as a liberal Head. He introduced a reform of the uniform requirements (I remember the agony of starched, separate collars and the red weal they left round your neck); he stopped the practice of prefects caning younger boys. He still occasionally used the cane himself though seemed to have very little interest in maintaining this tradition, in strong contrast to the Head of the junior school whose motivation, with hindsight, I now question. I had enormous respect for Frank Shaw - respect tinged with ... with what? I want to say 'fear' but it isn't quite the right word. He was, I am certain, a kind man as well as being a wise one. I didn't fear him in the bluntest sense of the word but I was certainly fearful of the consequences of getting it wrong, where he was concerned. He taught me Latin in the 4th form - Year 10. We had to prepare a translation for prep and, in the lesson, he would choose someone to read out and explain their attempt - I can still remember his gaze drifting round the form, spectacles in hand as he decided who it would be. It was always a bowel-loosening moment. At the end of the Year the form presented him with a home-made cat o' nine tails, lead-weighted, and nail-studded for extra effect; he was genuinely amused. Frank was a masterful orator; his annual speech at Speech Day a joy. I remember one where he was describing the poor quality of staff at the school immediately post WW2 - all male of course -- and dryly categorised them as 'largely unmarried, in the style of their fathers.'

Perhaps, in liberal education we have lost something by seeking to eliminate fear - perhaps we should try harder to bring in, at least 'fear of the consequences'. After all, if I decide to exceed the speed limit, I accept that there are consequences if I am caught and it's fair to say I fear them, even if I bring them on myself. Perhaps we are wrong to be so sympathetic to excuses, so understanding of personal difficulties. The critics of liberal education do accuse us of being woolly. At FH I've sometimes heard the word

'fluffy'. There has to be a hard edge somewhere and we seek it in personal commitment from staff and pupils alike, but perhaps there's a case for some sort of external hard edge. We shouldn't seek to hide or blur the connection between cause and effect.

Back to Bedales. As I did my teaching practice I was quickly intrigued by it. As some of you will know, the school was started in 1893 before moving to its current location in 1898. It was, we believe, the first liberal, coeducational boarding school; primary schools were often co-educational but secondary were not. In fact education for girls was generally very poor. Abbotsholme was founded a few years before Bedales but was not then co-educational. The general view at the time was, of course, that girls didn't need education as they would marry and their husbands would be the bread winners. I watched a little of a programme on Monday this week on Fiona Bruce's ancestry which mentioned that in the years just after WW1, the official school leaving age for boys was 14, but for girls it was... 11. Education for boys had originally been very church-related; monks instructing upper class boys and for centuries that pattern prevailed. Schooling then gradually became more widely available and some of the educational patterns established are still with us -- the traditional long summer holiday was created to allow all children to help with the harvest. Perhaps we should re-establish this particular connection. Getting to know the food chain at first hand has a lot to be said for it. Some schools, including some here, still operate a system of outdoor work of course.

During my teaching practice, I was young, I had shoulder length hair, I felt reasonably hip (the habit of wearing bright red cords at the time led to the temporary nickname of Captain Scarlett; Daniel Day-Lewis, then in my chemistry group in Block 3 - Year 9 -- may still remember the name though I have to say he seems to have made little use of the chemistry I tried to instil; sad really, if he'd paid more attention to my lessons just think what he could have made of his life). I threw myself into the school and at the end of the year was appointed as one of the two Bedales delegates to the annual co-educational conference at Dartington Hall, the other being the Head, Tim Slack, though looking back I suspect there would have been few if any contenders for my place. Tim had a dire reputation as a driver and the conference was after the end of term. AS Neill was due to attend but alas was unwell - I think it was the first one he had missed in years and I much regret not meeting him. However John Aitkenhead of Kilquarity House was there and others included Maurice Bridgeland, an eminent child psychologist, who had just been appointed to be Head of FH. I met and talked to Maurice at length and liked him very much. He was a Quaker; a thoughtful, kindly man, but, alas, not a natural Headmaster, perhaps especially not for a school which was then going through a troubled time. He told me at the conference that he thought he would either be in place as Head for a long time or a very short one. It proved to be the latter. Maurice moved on after a couple of years as the school visibly deteriorated and teetered on the point of closure. His weakness, I felt, was his profound interest in the problem child, or the child with learning difficulties and this deflected attention away

from the more straightforward children, whose needs were no less, but different. Any school should be able to integrate a percentage of children who for one reason or another, struggle to learn in a conventional manner. Some schools have coped effectively with a large percentage. FH, a 'progressive' school which had been through a period of fragmented management after its incumbent Head collapsed and died on the tennis courts, facing the social unrest and the changed expectations in the adolescent world that flowered at the end of the sixties, and with a clientele that, at one end of the spectrum included some very non-mainstream pupils and even more non-mainstream parents, as well as some distinctly odd staff, simply could not cope. Perhaps it needed, at least for a while, a smaller percentage of difficult children, as well as order and direction and was not ready then for the freedom Maurice wanted to give it. Some of the disturbed children there in my first year must have found the transition to adulthood very challenging. On the other hand some later did remarkably well. One, who arrived mid-term from a unit for adolescents with severe problems run by George Lywood, later attempted to brain me with an empty milk bottle after I had suggested to him that practicing his electric guitar outside my bedroom at 2.00am was wrong time and wrong place. He is now one of the country's most successful antique book dealers though I suspect, for various reasons, he retains no memory of our last conversation.

The Governors advertised for a replacement and produced a shortlist of candidates. As a mouthy new young member of staff I wrote on behalf of a group of colleagues to the Chairman suggesting more staff input. A polite reply included the phrase 'we think the governors have sufficient interviewing expertise'. They were probably right; the Chair of Governors at the time was Sir Martin Furnival-Jones, then Head of MI5. Curiously, at the same time the Chair of Bedales' Governors was Sir Dick Goldsmith White, then Head of MI6. Two determinedly anti-establishment schools, overseen by two quintessentially establishment figures. I've often wondered why. The four shortlisted candidates visited the school to give a talk to staff and students in support of their application. A couple were very uncomfortable with this and it showed. One seemed wholly at ease and really rather cuddly and understanding - Alan Pattinson. He was the unanimous choice of pupils, staff and, as far as we know, Governors.

Alan was an ex-Benedictine monk, who had been in a monastery for quite a few years though never taken his final vows. Over a short time he then lost his faith, left the church, gained a wife and started teaching in a prep school, about which he was later scathing. Eventually he and his wife could stand the prep school ethos no longer and walked out without giving notice, an act that resulted in his being placed on the Gabbitas Thring blacklist, a label that delighted him for years. Gabbitas Thring - what a glorious name for an educational agency, magnificently summed up by Ronald Searle's superb drawing of the two gentlemen who gave it their names. Alan was then appointed Head of English at St John's Leatherhead - where he much enjoyed being the most liberal and forward thinking staff member - before moving to FH where the school's circumstances,

and his position, required him to reign in the growing chaos and become in many ways a rather conventional and illiberal Head, at least for the first few years.

Within a short time of his arrival a large batch of pupils were told to seek education elsewhere. Before he arrived in September, a smaller but still significant group of staff were asked not to return. Admittedly they included staff members who had driven a school party to Morocco - an understandably suspect destination then - and returned 11 days overdue, having at no point sent any communication warning of a delay. Even in those laid-back times when Health and Safety were less connected, at least in the mind of teenage males, than Health and Efficiency, this caused some comment. When it came to selecting staff to sack, I suspect I only just missed the cut. Alan once described me to a colleague as 'a potentially good young member of staff, permanently damaged by the previous regime'. Alan was a maverick and a very interesting man. Always a skilled orator, he was able to persuade prospective parents that all was well, when others might have judged that the school still had some way to go and he was able to persuade any audience that he had thought long and hard over any educational theories he was discussing when I later noticed on several occasions, he was neatly précising the last book he'd read. I remain convinced that for us, he was definitely the man for the job. Having established his authority, he took risks, attracted interesting prospective parents and their children (a quirky and thoughtful answer to the question 'is there a God?' was deemed entirely sufficient as an entrance exam) and pushed up the academic standard to the point where he was invited to join HMC.

He continued to appear cuddly - the beard and the build suggested this -- but he could be over-bearing at times, even genuinely frightening to some children (and, at times, some staff). Like all of us he was human and therefore imperfect and perhaps I'm being unreasonable in suggesting he should have been otherwise but then the standards required of a Headmaster are very high.

So what of the liberal education ethos in his time? Well it worked, for many, perhaps even most. The inter-personal chemistry between staff and pupils was constantly interesting, the mix of personalities was wide-ranging and there was a good deal of genuine affection and tolerance across the board. Academically there were bright areas and less bright ones; though these were not always the same every year. Doubtless you could say the same for most schools. Did FH grow and re-establish itself as a worthwhile school in that time? Was it true to its founders - and is it now? Is the concept of liberal education one that has a value these days, or one that only had a value in the past when most schools were so much more formal and there was more to react against. Is that last statement in fact contentious - is there just as much to react against these days? We have listened to ideas this morning that suggest the debate needs to continue.

Now a few words about the sort of places most schools were, when the progressive movement started and what the founders of this movement hoped to achieve. Let's go back to Bedales. When JH Baddeley started the school, serious secondary education was very formal. Staff were fearsome, students fearful. Bullying was institutionalised. Occasionally in the past there had been riots at some schools; pupil deaths were not unknown. Corporal punishment, the hitting pupils with canes, was widespread in schools long after it had been dropped elsewhere. Here is a brief excerpt from Hansard, July 1882.

COLONEL MAKINS asked the Secretary of State for War, Whether, having regard to the fact that flogging in the Army has been abolished, Militia subalterns and members of Volunteer corps, who may be students at Eton -- and other public schools -- can be subjected to the personal castigation which forms a part of the primitive discipline of these institutions; and, whether he has reason to apprehend any conflict of authority on this point between the Commander-in-Chief and the head masters or governing bodies of such schools? The hon. and gallant Member explained that the phrase "primitive discipline" was a misprint for "punitive discipline," adding that the adjectives were not contradictory.

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MR. CHILDERS replied I suppose the hon. and gallant Gentleman has in view the famous case of Dr. Keate, who boasted that he had flogged the highest officers in the Army.

Dr Keate had been a notorious Head of Eton and a serial flogger, who once publicly flogged 80 boys in one day and later regretted he had not flogged them harder. In one riot, his room was trashed and desk destroyed. Schools at the end of the 19th century set out to prepare young Englishmen for running the British Empire and a degree of hardship - even brutality -- in training was regarded as essential. JH Baddeley was one of the first to suggest that treating children with kindness and understanding might be a more effective form of education. Mind you, he would have seemed something of an oddity these days - when he and his wife went walking locally, she was required to remain a few respectful yards behind him at all times. Views similar to Baddeley's began to flourish in the first decade of the twentieth century and the progressive movement grew rapidly after the end of the first world war. As I mentioned AS Neill published his first book in 1915 or 16 (depending whether you believe Wikipedia or Amazon), and founded Summerhill in 1921. Beatrice Ensor founded St Christopher's Letchworth in 1917 and later FH in 1925 along with Isabel King. For a while, Beatrice Ensor and AS Neill jointly edited the magazine of the New Era Fellowship founded in 1921 - and still going today though I'm not sure 'going strong' would be a fair description. Dartington Hall was founded in 1926 by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst. The two founders of FH were Theosophists and there was a connection with Indian philosophy and spirituality

here, which was also reflected in the association between Dartington and Rabindranath Tagore (pr. Tag ore) and the interest shown in and by Jiddu Krishnamurti. I've mentioned only a few of the schools that formed the progressive movement. There are those here today who can tell you much more than the bare bones I've just sketched out. Ask them.

Back to FH and the school I've known for ...quite a while. Having, presumably, overcome Alan's suspicion that I might be damaged goods, I settled in for the long haul and became a Housemaster for the next 26 years, deriving considerable enjoyment from watching the young grow up and musing on the best way to establish the right conditions to bring this about. You never know, at the time, whether you're doing it right of course - a bit like parenting - and really we should be judged over the long term but for some reason the governors are never keen to include in the prospectus a comment along the lines of 'give us your children for a few years; you'll know whether you've made the right choice in 3 or perhaps 4 decades'. Not quite up to the Jesuits' pithy summary but you get the idea. I think for many of them we did get it right because they come back, year after year, with spouses and children, some with quite a few more bulges and, in some cases rather less hair but obviously keen to revisit a place for which they have considerable affection.

What should liberal education strive for? I've worked with children for far too long to think of them as perfect little angels who should always be treated as such. Some of them are odious little toe rags - or at least go through phases of behaving that way -- but they all have within them the potential for wisdom and a capability for joy. Schools need to be acutely aware of this, day in, day out. Newspaper interviews with the eminent or fashionable often include a comment on a particular incident at school, or a particular conversation with a teacher which proved, in retrospect, to have been formative. The possibility that this might crop up at any moment and require, in response, all of the crumbs of wisdom we've managed to scrape together is what should keep us, as teachers, constantly on our toes. The long term effects of an apparently trivial conversation were brought home to me a few years ago when an ex-pupil dropped by and chatted about his hobby of round the world motor cycling. He was absolutely clear that the wish to do this had started when I lent him, at the age of 14, a book called Jupiter's Travels by Ted Simon, about long-distance motor cycling. Having completed his degree in engineering he started to spend 6 months a year solo motorbiking in far off parts and, on his most recent desert crossing, had broken down, a long way from help. Close to death he set fire to the tyres as a last resort and the black smoke attracted a group of camel riding nomads who nursed him back to health with camel milk. Had he died then, alone in the desert, I might never have known but if he had, it would have been directly connected to my comment to a young teenager, fifteen years previously, that 'I think you might enjoy reading this'. Other comments of widely different kinds, might prove to be equally important. Every conversation with any pupil contains that inherent possibility and, in that sense, every conversation is special. Perhaps the essence of liberal education is to

respect every contact with pupils, to give complete attention to what is being said and provide a balanced and thoughtful response. In case that begins to sound a bit too po-faced or oracular we shouldn't forget the simple joy of fun. Injecting a bit of humour is always worth a try; back off quickly if it fails but playing with language and getting a responsive giggle is a great conversation enabler. Expect to get some humour back and expect that it might not always hit the mark. However, if it's funnier than your attempt, have the grace to enjoy it - genuinely and visibly -- and not feel trumped.

As a final round up I thought I'd browse a few of comments from the mission statements or introductions to the school that we publish on our various websites. Apologies for only quoting a few.

The FH one includes: The ideas of Isabel King and Beatrice Ensor - our Founders defined as 'faith in human nature and the spiritual powers latent in every child'.

Leighton Park quotes the Quaker ethos

Quakers are people who believe there is that of God in everyone. They recognise no barriers of colour, class, or gender. They regard honesty and integrity, simplicity, equality and peace as central to the manner in which they conduct their lives

Bedales remembers J H Badley's wish to educate the whole person - 'head, hand and heart'.

King Alfred School

Its objective was to "help train up its scholars in the way of the good life, to help to fit them for effective work in the world, for effective sympathy and for **effective joy**." (a telling phrase). (John Russell, Head 1901-20).

The Sands

At Sands, no-one has more power than anyone else, the teachers and students are equal, and there is no headteacher.

St Paul's takes a different tack; not just a Headmaster, a High one.

We rest on three pillars of strength - scholarship and academic achievement, extra-curricular involvement and pastoral care.

But I think the one that struck me most was the one on the Dartington site, associated with Aller Park, a longer quotation from John Locke (1632 - 1704), worth quoting in full:

If the mind be curbed and humbled too much in children, if their spirits be abased and broken by too strict an hand over them, they lose all their vigour and industry...

dejected minds, timorous and tame, and low spirits are hardly ever to be raised, and very seldom attain anything...

he that has found a way how to keep up a child's spirit, easy, active, free and yet, at the same time, to restrain him from many things he has a mind to...and to drive him to things that are uneasy to him... he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions has in my opinion, got the true secret of education.

John Locke (1632-1704)