

## **A brief history of Beechen Cliff School 1896-2020**

The school as we know it today began life in a very different form in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign. The children of Bath were given the opportunity, if fortune smiled on them, to be offered a place in the Bath Secondary School, a provision which was located in the basement of the Guildhall in Bath. This school catered for boys and girls, offering a fairly classical offering of the three 'rs' and a little Greek and Latin, together with modern science. Armed with this education the boys and girls could enter the workplace with a background that allowed them access to a little more choice than their peers, most of whom left school at the end of what we would consider primary education. The Guildhall school must have been popular, as a photograph taken of the pupils, located in Parade Gardens in 1925, suggests that there were possibly one hundred or more children educated by the City Education Committee.

It was clear that the school had outgrown its home and funds were created to provide for a new grammar school on the south side of Bath. The location, a site of exceptional beauty and immortalised by Jane Austen in Northanger Abbey, was in the lea of the beech-lined slope on the southern edge of the city. The foundations were laid in 1930 and, in September 1932, the school opened to 'new and excited scholars' (according to the Bath Chronicle), trooping up the steep slopes of the avenues, 'Jacob's Ladder' and 'Devil's Drop' to start their academic lives as pupils of the City of Bath Boys' School, a grammar school which was to be a mainstay of selective education in the area until 1970.

The war years had an impact on the school, the scars of which can still be seen in the walls and pillars of the main school building. During the infamous Baedeker raids in April 1942 the school received a hit from a German bomber and boys of the fifth and sixth form performed duties as a night watch, waiting to fling any incendiary devices from the school roof. The 1944 Education Act, a visionary document, also paved the way for free secondary education for the children of Bath and the Boys' School saw a limited level of expansion, growing from 400 to 600 boys.

The new grammar school was very popular, many boys competing in the entrance examinations to win a place, remembering that this was not a free provision until the 1944 Education Act changed things for all. It clearly inspired many youngsters to go on to great things, three of its alumni playing rugby for England, the first 'four minute' miler in Sir Roger Bannister, another winning a Nobel Prize for Science, an award winning pop star (Tears for Fears), a Bafta nominated actor in Andrew Lincoln, world famous composer Sir Raymond Leppard and the future Head of MI6. All of those who had been through the school seemed to come back to a

common theme when discussing what made the place special. They all recognised that the academic life of the school, whilst important, was considered only a part of the broad range of opportunities which should make up a boy's education - the general idea being that you keep a boy active and interested and he will be a much happier creature! With this in mind, the school leased an area of Forestry Commission land in Wales to establish an outdoor education and adventurous activities centre. This cottage and land, known to generations of Beechen Cliff schoolboys as Tir-y-Cwm, has been the starting point for a love of adventure in the outdoors. Much improved, although still rustic, it provides for the current cohorts as well as it ever did.

In 1970 Beechen Cliff School emerged ( joining City of Bath Boys' School with Oldfield School for Boys) as a result of the national move away from selective secondary education. Much opposed by the staff and pupils of the old school initially, it soon began to create an identity of its own. Whilst the range of nicknames for staff ( 'Basher Bennett' 'Dancey the Dap' amongst others) began to wane, the reputation of the school for providing a varied and exciting offering for its pupils remained - in many ways it now began to enhance this provision. Boys were offered The Centurion Challenge, Duke of Edinburgh entry, climbing and visits which became the basis for the offer that the school jealously guards to this day. The aim had been to take the best of what was seen as a grammar school offering but to make sure that any boy could thrive, given the right chances to show what he could do.

The school mainstay was often thought of as being related to sport. The fact that the Sporting Honours Board now strains under the weight of gold leaf, bearing testimony to the success nationally of a huge number of former pupils, is an indication of the possible truth of this viewpoint. It is forgotten, however, that the arts and the wider creative aspirations of the boys were also catered for - although a little more 'quietly' in the perception of parents.

In the last few years the school has looked for ways to give even more to its pupils and the access to a Combined Cadet Force, Theatre School and a range of academic competitions nationally have seen the pupils able to leave and be comfortable in their future lives feeling that the broad, enriching experience they received left them feeling second best to no one. The 1955 HMI Report on the City of Bath School pupils described them as 'lively, enthusiastic and very friendly'. We would like to think that that is how they would be seen today. The introduction of girls in 1990 ( to the Sixth Form) added a new dimension to the school and there are now regularly over one hundred girls at any time in the thriving Sixth Form. A boarding 'wing', established in 2014, has given pupils from around the world access to what Beechen Cliff has to offer and it has been an oversubscribed provision since it opened.

The school recently joined a Multi-Academy Trust ( MNSP), a move designed to build its capacity and to share the very best ideas in education - both in and beyond the classroom. With

a large and thriving sixth form ( over 400) and the weight of history behind it the school looks forward to seeing what can be achieved in the next century.

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2020.