

Founders' Day 2017

The English College is celebrating Founders' Day. This College is the fruit of an idea, a challenge, a dare, even a gamble – all well described in Ann Lewis's book, which celebrated our twenty year anniversary three years ago.

The English College is unique. I know no other school quite like it. Let us flatter ourselves to say that it is exceptional.

The students and staff that it has attracted have been exceptional people, the early Headmasters in particular. They rose to the challenge of a new place, a new language, a new culture and new times.

But the outstanding figure who steered this venture to success in those years was Richard Holme.

He may not have been the first to have the idea of an English College in Prague, but he was our first Chairman of Governors. It was he who took the idea when it was still just a utopia, a vision, and he made from it the English College as we know it today.

Lord Holme of Cheltenham - Richard Holme – led this College for over fifteen years. He also led the English Foundation, the UK charity which in legal terms founded the College, until his untimely death, now nearly ten years ago.

He had very clear and well founded ideas about education and great admiration for Prague, this glorious city in the heart of Central Europe. His thinking was both liberal and international.

Liberal education - individual, exploratory, creative, socially engaged and tolerant. Those were his aims. Taking young minds to the limits of learning, teaching them to teach themselves, to explore and discover, to develop as personalities, not just as thinking machines.

And his ideal did not stop with the individual student. The English College was for him at the centre of a number of concentric circles.

First there was the family of the English College. That comprised not just the staff and students, but also their families, their parents and grandparents. And as the College grew, the alumni too. Now they number nearly one thousand five hundred: a mighty army! The College family also embraced an older generation, the alumni of the earlier Prague Grammar School, that had been shut down by the Nazis, and then its temporary successor, which was suppressed the Communists.

Just where and when the College was founded mattered to Richard - specifically in the heart of Central Europe and immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The idea sprang from the changes of 1989. Circumstances change with time, but the origins of the College lie there.

No wonder that he and those around him did all they could to make the College outward looking, liberal, tolerant and international.

Richard knew this country from the Prague Spring of 1968. He knew the road it might have taken, and the cul de sac it was forced back into. He wanted this new foundation, this English College, to reflect the values that young Czechs might have aspired to a generation earlier, had they not been stopped in their tracks. An international perspective that was open to the West was very important for him.

The English College was and is unique in its appeal to students, and not just from the transitory international community that inhabits this city. Even more importantly it attracts many Czech children whose family roots lie here. It strives to give an international dimension to their education in several different ways.

First, it has always taught the International Baccalaureate, a broad-based syllabus that develops lateral thinking in young minds. It exposes them both to the natural sciences, to mathematics and to the arts. The curriculum is wide and flexible. All human knowledge is open to them.

Then the College has always maintained the link with Great Britain. English has become a global lingua franca, but the alumni of the English College have a special affinity with Great Britain – perhaps even with Shakespeare’s English – as well as fluency in what is now a world-wide means of communication.

There are practical and personal expressions of this as well. Just next week we shall welcome a dozen or more sixth formers for work experience in British institutions, charities and companies in London. That serves to strengthen this bi-lateral link and to give students insights into the world of work in a major international capital.

Learning knows no borders, no boundaries, no frontiers. That is a major aspect of the internationalism that Richard wanted students to appreciate.

But these advantages go hand in hand with larger responsibilities. And Richard wanted this sense of responsibility also to feature within the education offered to students here. More is expected of those who are privileged.

Life poses us all with choices, and one of those choices is to put something back into our communities – large or small – that will help other people. The English College is well aware of this moral obligation. Our students contribute to numerous charities - with personal service as well as with money – while they are here at school.

We all hope that this is a lesson they internalise and take with them into their adult lives. In the wider world it is easy to forget that not everyone enjoys what we may take for granted. The good life is not all about earning a fortune. What you do with your talents and with your fortune is even more important.

For Richard, the local community was always important. So was his own country – as witness his political engagement in Great Britain. But the wider world posed - and still poses - even greater challenges to his liberal ideals.

We all know that the world has grown – and continues to grow – ever more interconnected. News and views are now instantaneous, from all round the globe. But intolerant nationalism threatens our liberal values. Reactionary populism makes a mockery of international engagement. It has already undermined some of the international organisations which we had come to accept as permanent fixtures on the world scene. Politically people are finding it hard to adjust to the speed with which the world has shrunk around us.

How would Richard have reacted to this? I think he would have simply underlined what we all know to be psychologically true. We are all part of one another. It is up to us to remain open and tolerant, not to turn inwards and erect barriers that divide us. We solve problems better with one another rather than fighting against one another. It is a core lesson of living together in the school community.

An English poet summed up this dilemma four hundred years ago in memorable lines which many of you here in this audience will recognise: *“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind.”*

Richard would have wanted our students to remember this as they make their way in life. We all have much more that unites us than divides us, and we should cherish and share it.

That is one of the lessons I know our students learn here. It is good to recall it on Founders' Day.

Dr Martyn Bond