The 211th Old Boys’ Dinner Speeches
Saturday 21 November 2015
OLD BOYS’ 211th ANNUAL DINNER
Founded 1781

Senior Steward: Sir Nicholas Hytner
Junior Steward: Faisal Islam
Recorder: Paul Rose

COMMITTEE

Alan Dean Richard Antipas Gareth Poole
Denis Tarr Paul Rose Adam Robson
David Gandy Richard Dennett Marc Ross
Maurice Watkins Neil Jones

The two hundred and eleventh Old Boys’ Dinner was held at the Point, Lancashire County Cricket Ground, on Saturday 21 November 2015. There were 957 Old Boys and guests present.

The Recorder spoke as follows:

Mr Senior Steward, Mr Junior Steward, Mr High Master, Ladies, fellow Old Boys,

Wow! Simon Jones said that standing here would be rather like the Oscars. I don’t have an Oscar but I do have a Hulme - this is the mascot from Billy Hulme’s car and I thought he should be represented here this evening. (laughter)

This is the welcome to the 211th dinner – or at least we think it is the 211th dinner – it most certainly is a celebration of 500 years of The Manchester Grammar School and you are all very welcome. There are about 960 Old Mancs present here tonight which, when you consider that that represents about 10% of the database of alumni, it is a fantastic effort and quite clearly the largest assembly we’ve ever had for the dinner or an Old Boys’ event. (applause)

Now, organising a dinner for 200 people is a large task, but to organise a dinner for 1,000 people is a mammoth task and our thanks must go to Jane, Laura and Julie who have organised everything - stand up ladies. (Loud and sustained applause)

Just a few facts and figures about today’s attendees: we’ve got starters from every year from 1937 and leavers from 2015, apart from 1939, which is a shame. The oldest Old Boy here this evening is Frank Thewlis on table 24 – stand up Frank (applause) - and whilst we have diners from all over the world, Nigel Wallwork who has travelled all the way from Australia gets the prize. There are 92 of us who attended the School in 1965 when we celebrated 450, and I for one didn’t expect to be here 50 years on.

We have 20 former Stewards of the dinner – I’m not going to mention all of them. I’m very pleased to see Martin Stephen here (applause) and Den Dover who is the longest serving Steward – he was Steward in 1989. We have one pair of Stewards, Dr Robert Shields and Guy Robson, who were Stewards together in 2005, and two father and son combinations of Stewards, Clement and Jonathan Goldstone and of course tonight’s Senior Steward, Sir Nicholas Hytner and his father Benet, who was Junior Steward in 1995. Benet, we are all delighted to see you here this evening. (applause)
I don’t need to say very much by way of introduction to our two Stewards this evening. Our Senior Steward, Sir Nicholas Hytner, is arguably the most famous Old Boy (loud mutterings) - don’t argue with me, please! He is one of the country’s most well-known and successful directors of opera, theatre and cinema. Sir Nicholas, you will be, I am sure, pleased to hear that I took my mother-in-law to an early evening showing of Lady in a Van in Altrincham this Sunday and it was very well received by the entire audience including all the carers present. (laughter) I can tell you that there is no truth in the rumour that Louis Rapaport is buying up all the yellow Commer vans in South Manchester!

Our Junior Steward, Faisal Islam, is the political editor for Sky News. He has won numerous awards and has a reputation for being a ferocious interrogator, most famously reducing Alex Salmon to describing him as impersonating Alastair Darling - he may elaborate on that. (laughter)

Before I finish I must remind you that an Old Boy’s Dinner is not just every 500 years but every year.

Chairman of Governors spoke as follows:

Mr Senior Steward, Mr Junior Steward, Mr High Master, ladies, fellow Old Boys.

As both an Old Boy and Chair of Governors, it’s a double pleasure for me to add my welcome to you all at this 211th Old Boys’ Annual Dinner. It’s also an added pleasure for me as a member of the Lancashire Cricket Club board that the dinner is taking place here in the Club’s Point building.

Tonight’s dinner, which may indeed be the largest school reunion ever held in the UK, marks the culmination of the School’s quincentenary celebrations and what a year this has been.

A swift canter through the year records that there have been reunions and events across the world, in London at Lincoln’s Inn, Tel Aviv in the Ben Shemen Forest, Hong Kong, New York, Northern California, Perth and Sydney. We’ve had services at both Exeter and Manchester Cathedrals. In fact there were two services at Manchester on the same day, with the Bishop of Exeter giving a sermon at one and the Bishop of Manchester at the other.

And we’ve marked the 500th anniversary with two very significant commissions. First the new history of the School written by Nigel Watson, recounting the School’s remarkable journey from its foundation to the present day and secondly, a world premiere production at the Bridgewater Hall of Tarik O’Regan’s A Celestial Map of the Sky, performed by the Hallé orchestra and conducted by Sir Mark Elder.

Historian Michael Wood delivered the Hugh Oldham Quincentenary Lecture and a number of other Old Mancunians returned to the School to give talks and offer careers advice. The Business Class lecture circuit was particularly busy in the MGS Theatre with contributions amongst others from former dragon Theo Paphitis, serial entrepreneur Anthony Preston, ex-Manchester United CEO David Gill and financier Jonathan Samuels. Even the 2015 general election was of significance to MGS, featuring six Old Boys representing six different political parties.

On the sports front, besides football and rugby tournaments, the School’s first XI cricket team beat the MCC at home, whilst an Old Mancunian team was victorious over the Cross Arrows side at Lords in September and this morning with apparent remarkable coincidence, the new Michael Atherton Sports Hall was opened by Michael himself, after the original blew down last year in a freak tornado. (laughter) and it’s good to see Michael here tonight.
On a serious note, one success to report of particular significance to our founder concerns the partnership with the City Council in the New Islington Free School. An open access mixed junior school opened two years ago in Ancoats, the birthplace of Hugh Oldham. And despite being still in temporary accommodation, the School has this year been judged outstanding in all respects in its first OFSTED inspection and that’s a rare result and one that we’re all very pleased about. (applause) I’m sure our founder would consider this a fitting testament to the ethos on which MGS was founded. So as you’ll appreciate, a very eventful year. But back to tonight and it’s now my great pleasure to introduce the High Master, Dr Martin Boulton, the first Old Boy in 500 years to hold that position. Thank you very much. (applause)

The High Master spoke as follows:

Mr Recorder, Mr Senior Steward, Mr Junior Steward, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I don’t think that there are many schools that could assemble a thousand old boys for a dinner. The response to this and all of the other events to celebrate our quincentenary has been quite overwhelming. Of course, much of the success of this year is due to the fantastic group of staff we have working in our development office, who not only organise events such as this but also keep in touch with the MGS community throughout the year. In development circles, MGS is way ahead of other Schools in terms of the size of our network but more importantly the involvement of our alumni with the School. This involvement ranges from offers of work experience to research in our archive, from networking for recent graduates to donations to our bursary fund, and yesterday we saw an army of old boys come into School to teach lessons.

So far this year we have held a dinner in New York, attended by over 70. Ian Thorpe went on from there to the West Coast to host two dinners, one in LA and one in San Francisco. Earlier in the year we had a get-together in Tel Aviv which had over eighty guests with ages ranging from 20 to 80.

Heads at other Schools often ask me why the bonds between the School and its Old Boys are so strong. Well, in order to answer that, I would like to read a short extract from a letter I received recently.

I entered MGS at an unusual time. It was 1946 and WWII had ended. The Butler Act had passed and Dr Eric James was into his second year as High Master. I had benefited from the Butler Act. I was a slum kid in Chorlton-on-Medlock, who had been coached by “Ma” Miller, the Headmistress of St. Chrysostom’s School. My mother and stepfather gave consent, provided my attendance at MGS didn’t entail an expense for them. At the time, the significance of being at MGS wasn’t evident to me. I was eleven years old and just went with the flow. However, following my passing of the School Certificate Exam at fifteen my stepfather decided that I had had enough of “book learning”. It was time for me to get a job. My form-master (Haffy Field of S4L) visited my parents to remind them that when I had entered MGS, they had signed that would keep me in school until the end of the academic year in which I was 16. He further convinced them to give me another year and I would get to a university.

What followed was a journey to the University of Bristol and then Stanford and a stellar career.

There are hundreds of stories like this, of boys whose lives were transformed at MGS. Boys who might not have had the opportunity to go to University had it not been for teachers like Haffy and had it not been for the Butler Act which ensured that funding was available.
MGS was founded to educate the poor boys of Manchester; this is why Hugh Oldham made his initial gift. Entry was on merit alone. In the mid-eighteenth century, fee-payers were admitted, but only when it became clear that this was the only way to ensure that the foundation could continue to educate bright sparks from poor backgrounds.

Funding from the state in the twentieth century ensured greater numbers could access an education that was the envy of the nation. It would be wrong, of course, to think that the school was only about the poor – by then thanks to the mix of fee-payers, foundation scholars and direct grant boys, it had become a meritocracy – ability was what mattered. This mix of boys was and still is one of the School’s great assets. Those whose fees the Bursary Fund pays benefit from the sort of social mobility that politicians talk about but do little to deliver and all our pupils benefit from an environment that covers the whole social spectrum – they all learn to mix with princes and paupers – there can I think be no better preparation for life.

In 1997 state funding ceased. This school was probably the first to predict that the loss of the Assisted Places Scheme would fundamentally change the school. It was also the first to do something about this.

Staff at that time realised that unless action was taken the School’s long-standing ethos that merit mattered above all else would disappear and the school would become just another fee paying school where what counted was how deep a family’s pockets were rather than how bright their children were; and so our first bursary appeal was launched.

What followed was a twenty year journey and in that time we have come a long way thanks to the remarkable generosity of old boys and other benefactors, but we are still quite some way from being needs-blind once more. Every year we turn away boys who in previous generations would have won places at the School.

So just how far have we come? The MGS Trust holds around £22 million on behalf of the School. With funds that pre-date the appeal, the total pot stands at just short of £26 million.

We are currently funding around 220 places with this money - almost all of these are full fee places. The average bursary covers 92% of the school fee, meaning that virtually all of our bursaries are full-fee bursaries. This compares with a figure of around 40 - 60% for almost all other UK schools. To qualify for a full bursary, a family’s combined income will be less than £26,000. We are still funding boys who would not otherwise have any chance of attending a school like MGS.

So what next? Well, the current appeal is approaching its target – but that cannot be the end. There are two challenges that we still face. The first is that we are still turning away incredibly bright boys who pass our entrance exam with flying colours because we do not have the funds to offer them a place. In the days of the direct grant over half of the boys at the School would have had their fees found.

The second challenge can be summed up with the one word ‘endowment’. The fund we have is not sufficient to be called a true endowment fund. In fact to ensure that each and every place we currently offer will be protected in perpetuity, we will need to raise something in the order of a further £100,000 for each place.

So what we hope to achieve in the coming years is twofold: to move the existing funding to a secure endowment model and then to grow the fund. The sums we need are quite daunting but if we look at this as part of a long term goal it can be achieved. This afternoon, one of our alumni gifted half a million pounds to the bursary fund (applause) – this will have a huge impact and secures five of our
bursary places in perpetuity. Gifts like this allow us to take great strides towards becoming needs-blind. But the small gifts are equally important – the vast number of Old Boys that are supporting the School is overwhelming and leaves me in no doubt that we will reach our goal. The legacy for future generations for MGS boys is quite clear but I think by showing what is possible, other schools will follow. To all of those who have given, or who plan to do so in the future, I want to offer my sincerest thanks. As one of those who benefited from an Assisted Place at the School, I am only too aware of how significant your gifts are.

Before I finish I would like to thank all of those who work so tirelessly to make all of this possible, and particularly Simon and Ian, Laura, Julie and Jane, who are doing so much to realise our dream of becoming a needs-blind school.

Finally, I would like to thank you all, not only for coming tonight, but also for your generous support for current and future generations of MGS boys.

I will now pass over to the Bishop of Manchester, who will say grace. Please be upstanding.

The Bishop of Manchester spoke as follows:

God give us grace to enjoy our food and drink, our companionship and our conversation. Make us wise owls to care for those who follow us, in the tradition that Hugh Oldham set before us. Amen.

The Junior Steward spoke as follows:

Mr High Master, Mr Senior Steward, Mr Recorder, ladies and fellow old boys, this is quite some honour to try to do this occasion justice. I offer particular special thanks to the Recorder for stitching both myself and the Senior Steward up with that rapping comedian guy, who is obviously not an Old Manc - that is just totally unfair. Thanks for that (laughter) but frankly, how to do an occasion like this justice?

1515, five centuries, fifty decades, half a millennium - an institution that predates the telescope, electricity and newspapers, was discovered before the existence of the United Kingdom, the United States and Manchester United (laughter) and the same time Liverpool last won the league. (cheers) Columbus had only barely discovered the Americas a couple of decades previously and (this is your quiz question, that three people in this room know the answer to) only 12 UN countries currently existing pre-date the school - answers later.

Here in this land in 1515 Henry VIII was 23, he was king and at that time a happily married Catholic. (laughter) Maybe I’m winning a little bit against that comedian-rapper bloke! My ancestors were in Bengal fending off the invading Mogul Empire or possibly being part of it! (laughter) That was a century before the visit of the East India Company which started a chain reaction with many consequences including the fact that I’m standing here in front of you right now.

Each of the 900 Old Mancs - you’re not all old, but there are a few over there, (laughter) sorry; could tell an equivalent tall tale about what our forefathers were up to when the school was founded. Flemish weavers had just arrived in Manchester, a couple, well just about a couple of centuries before, setting in train the industry that would lead this city and this country’s transformation, and
an important part of this school’s history, totally intertwined with the history of our great city. Water was being piped from the spring that would become Spring Gardens and Fountain Street - did you know that? Against that backdrop at that moment of history - I’m just setting the scene - the Bishop of Exeter, Hugh Oldham, founded the school with a revenue from some of the mills, with the express aim of having two graduates capable of imparting Latin or Greek, bringing children up in good learning and manners - remember that last bit! - with the art of grammar, the ground and fountain of all other liberal arts and sciences, as said in the foundation deeds. The aim was to get some of the boys, the poor boys of this town and the surrounding areas, to some of the great universities to study law and to study theology. The youth particularly - this is from the foundation deeds - from the County of Lancaster had for a long time been in want of some person who should instruct them in learning and in virtue. I’m glad things have changed! (laughter)

Now praying for the soul of Hugh Oldham was one of those traditions. I’m not hugely into traditions, not at school, not at Cambridge, nor in my job - but praying for the soul of our Founder is in the foundation deeds of this school. It is a prayer for the soul of the Founder that they took as part payment for the land upon which the school was founded, and so whereas we must do this once a year, or a little bit less frequently than that, the first pupils at the school that said, de profundis - I sort of said Latin in a Spanish accent! (laughter) - they would pray for Oldham, his mother, father and all those who aided the school, and all Christian souls - they had to say this prayer every night, so you can count yourselves lucky!

Having researched this history after being surprisingly appointed Junior Steward, I must confess the odd pang of guilt. I can’t claim, High Master, to have attended every Founders’ Day - for some I may well have taken a day off having told my mum and dad it was compulsory, but told the school as a devout Muslim I couldn’t go to the cathedral. (laughter) This is actually true - so I haven’t quite, and to be honest quite realised, how fundamental the praying for the Founder’s soul was to the very existence of the institution that served us all so well. So I hope Hugh Oldham can forgive me for the three, four, possibly six Founders’ Days that I skived! (laughter) Perhaps this address will rectify this deficit.

To be honest, and someone tells me that that this may feature in some other very famous Old Mancunian’s autobiography, I didn’t much like the school in the early years. There is good reason for this: I was squeezed in a year early by delightfully encouraging – this is what I’d say if this gets published - father and mother, pushy parents, no stereotype there. In fact who are more pushy, Asian parents or Jewish parents? (laughter) Imagine some combination of the two! (laughter) Sorry.

Right, pushy parents - how glad I was that they did make me sit the entrance exam aged nine years old! A special interview with Ian Thorpe, which he has probably forgotten, was required to check I was sufficiently mature. I didn’t expect to get in but I did and suddenly we have to face a choice, be normal, comfortable, hang out with my own friends, my own age, or be pushed and be deeply uncomfortable. And so dad said, you’ll be fine! (laughter) It did kill my burgeoning Lancashire kids cricket career stone dead. I was quite good but then when you get moved into a different year you slightly lose control over your hands and you’re not quite as coordinated. It was all going to happen for me but - that’s my excuse anyway - chucked in at the deep end with 200 boys, one to two years older than me, with broken voices and bum fluff on their upper lips with my non-broken voice and
my chubby cheeks, it was a tough ask. Having said that, having achieved that in Roger Alderson’s form J, answering an off-script Jon Snow or off-the-cuff Kay Burley on the sensitive issues of bank runs or diplomatic crises is water off a duck’s back I have to say. (laughter) So many different pathways for us all, so many different journeys.

I’m only really here because the legend of the school - this is absolutely extraordinary, I wrote this sentence, obviously, ages ago, not this morning, but just hear me out - I’m only here because the legend of this school had been passed down to my father by his older brother in Kent. My dad had been an Indian accountant trainee. He arrived in Manchester in 1961 and brought my mum over here after their marriage. During the 1970s, dad fought off post-Mosleyite skinheads in parks in Manchester and mum occasionally had dogs set on her, but helped into work by a Manchester-based, Jewish accountant, seeing a thread of commonality in his outside experience, my father, an Indian Muslim, Mr Islam, set up here and prospered with his family of seven, mum and dad and five kids, in our great city in Didsbury. Now here is the amazing thing - at the beginning of this dinner, that accountant came up to me and said hello. I had no idea that Mr Yaffe was from MGS - that guy, Mr Yaffe, is the guy who gave my dad a job and told him about MGS. (applause) My dad always tells that story when there are difficult moments in the media – something we should remember. (applause)

My older brother, Farhad, made it from Beaver Road Juniors in Didsbury to MGS in 1982 populating the dark corners of the stairwells with now-defunct photographic chemicals with his best friend Barney Harford, now one of Britain’s most successful internet entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. I had the sibling experience that some of you may well have had; the ups, the expectations, the ability to game the system, the knowledge that the most important exams are in the lower sixth not the upper sixth. But the downs involving your own flesh and blood shunning you and disowning you in the corridors as a liability to their street cred and the requirement to wear ill-fitting hand-me-downs of course that then became quite cool in ‘baggy Manchester’ so that works.

Roger Alderson as I said was my first form tutor in the 1J class of 87 and he got me going in maths followed by Mrs Staufenberg (related by marriage to the German officer who tried to assassinate Adolf Hitler) teaching us meditation including the Alexander technique which I still use to this day. The fresh smells of the cows at the Owl’s Nest will never leave me, nor the terror of one of the many made-up horror stories of Friday the 13th style designed to get us to go to sleep. I wasn’t much of an overachiever, learning Russian as the Cold War ended was not the greatest of geopolitical choices. German would have been a more visionary choice but it’s come in handy in various jobs I’ve done and Geoff Chandler was an unforgettable form master. (cheers)

My sporting highlight was the return of Mike Atherton to take an indoor cricket class which he may think is forgotten, wherever he is. Mike Atherton FEC. Future England captain and I’m told it had another meaning too and fellow guests will be proud to know that the E stood for educated. Perhaps the F and the C would elicit less Old Manc pride but for the fact that it illustrates a certain wonder for the intellectual prowess of the boys produced from our school. In any event I think I managed to impress him. I was anxious to make up that lost year of my cricketing career. I was fielding at silly mid-on, nice and close in. Robert Last stroked the ball to me. Is he here? Robert Last stroked the ball to me pretty hard….ok smashed the ball to me and in one move I gather the ball and launched it like a rocket propelled grenade back towards the wicket. My aim wasn’t so good. It hit
him straight in the left eye - we all gathered round - he was out for about three minutes. He opened his eye a few minutes later and there was no pupil visible. Mike looks concerned, my chance with Athers was dashed and thankfully Robert’s eye rectified itself a couple of minutes later. (laughter)

At home things were tight. Automation replaced my father's job with a computer. He had to pay our fees. He decided to buy a sub-post office on the other side of Fallowfield in the shadow of Maine Road. It was very tough. He worked 363 days out of 365 essentially for myself and my sisters’ education. He thought Post Office meant a cross between friendly bank manager and Postman Pat. Alas, it was the benefit distribution point and pension distribution point for this rather tough part of Manchester - serious social educational failure and social breakdown, drug addiction, criminality everywhere. He was the man who had to refuse to pay out money that the DSS had stopped, or point out that giro cheques were forged or out of date. It was real Manchester; it was less than a mile away from our school the other side of Platt Fields Park from Manchester High. I had to help out at the Post Office in the mornings and then come to school. At one point I distinctly remember surprising the Receiver by paying a month’s-worth of school fees in 1 pound coins. All of which is not to make excuses, we lived in Didsbury, we were very middle-of-the-road. But it shows the amazing social mobility of Manchester to think of where people were going at Manchester Grammar, to think of what was so close. In fact the bus, the 45, the 157, even the 41 - I had a choice - I lived in Didsbury but to think of all the posh guys going to Hale, Bowdon, Bramhall. And I was the poor kid who had to get off in Didsbury, and when I got off in Didsbury all the kids from Parrs Wood would say who is that posh guy from Manchester Grammar? (laughter) It was like that scene from that Ronnie Barker and John Cleese sketch - it was Britain's class system on the greater Manchester bus system before it was privatised. So, not making excuses, but I wasn’t one of the chosen ones. I managed to contrive to be one of 130 in my year not to be made a prefect so I never got to play on that pool table; in fact; I've never been in that room, ever. Can I go in now? Thank you. I didn't really care, honestly. I had to fight a little bit to get into the special after-school Oxbridge classes as well Dr Mac’s special classes. No complaints again - quite some education, chasing smack addicts stealing chocolate one morning, the legendary MGS philosophy classes on Kant and Rousseau the next. No doubt the school cultivated a strong social conscience in most if not of all of its boys. Mr Orrell's Community Action took us to Salford’s Crescent to deliver Christmas presents - some of the most deprived corners of Europe. Totally terrifying - they've now been demolished but the problems haven’t gone away. The same problems identified by Hugh Oldham, even mentioned by Engels and here in the surroundings of the school. In Sixth Form, I will always be grateful for a new chemistry teacher and form master, Mr Tanveer Ahmed - Tony for short. (cheers) He was quite a laugh and when I got caught doing biology coursework in the back of his chemistry lesson, and vice versa by Dr Mac, I was in severe trouble. Dealt with in a different way, my life could have ended up quite differently but he wasn’t a disciplinarian. He called my parents; he reasoned with me said I was letting people down. A very odd thing happened. It all just clicked into place in a year and a half, late in the day, in the lower sixth with my cramming partner Ian Whitaker, who is now the UK's youngest ever professor of plastic surgery, which is terrifying. My marks turned around and grades improved enough to study medicine at Cambridge, but I chose to do economics instead.

This is not a sob story - there is a point: education is not a formula - it is about bespoke interventions at the right time, cultivating and nurturing the rare geniuses that pass through other schools - that’s probably quite easy, imparting character, truly helping children from all backgrounds to fulfil their
potential, teaching them to take rare life chances and to know when the chances are coming their way, that is the true test. It was also quite some time to be a young Mancunian. While, dear guests and fellow Mancunians, you think you’re here to celebrate five hundred years of the Manchester Grammar School, it’s also the 25th anniversary of the Madchester Grammar. We were truly blessed: we had the pleasure of queuing for an hour in pouring globules of Manchester rain to get into the Hacienda. When the door staff spotted us, we trudged across the road to the Boardwalk, where we were refused entry - more often than not it was Discothèque Royale in reality but we never told anyone else that. I was a teenager during the Stone Roses legendary Spike Island gig, recently made into film, not that I went, but I did know someone that did. (laughter) This generation of Mancunians didn't quite realise what the likes of Anthony H Wilson, Ian Brown, and Bez had bequeathed with the music and the start of the regeneration which began with the Olympic bids. I was oblivious until freshers’ week that our flat vowels, our accents made us very popular. I actually felt very sorry for people from the Home Counties. Etonians would say to me I wish I was from Manchester. To me it was the perfect sweet spot, the inner confidence, the Manny Grammar swagger, that stopped well short of public school arrogance. It wasn't a superiority complex, and it definitely wasn't an inferiority complex.

It was a new rebirth for our city and a renaissance that gave me my break in journalism. I won a scholarship to The Guardian and the Manchester Evening News and then on to the Observer as an economics correspondent. I think I stayed fairly loyal to Manchester and economics in the decade covering the boom and bust before I jumped ship to become political correspondent at Sky News.

It has been quite a year with Scotland’s near breakaway, popping on the PM’s plane as he vows to win a majority, not seen in the polls, but achieved by winning seats off the Lib Dems in the southwest. I really believed him at the time. (laughter) Pointing out when Miliband was complaining about NHS privatisation and the award of the Salford Royal Hospital, that it is in fact a Labour signed PFI with tens of millions yet pay. In terms of the surreal, Nigel Farage explaining why there was a picture of Mahatma Gandhi in his office, (laughter) Jeremy Corbyn becoming agitated after I asked him the very controversial question for an opposition leader - do you want to be the Prime Minister? (laughter) David Cameron dining with a nominal communist in Vietnam and then joking about how an actual communist was about to become the opposition leader. That was his view, I should stress for any journalists in the room.

1990s Manchester prepares you well for such upheavals, I would say. In 1515, Manchester was not even represented in Parliament and was only briefly so for a decade during the Commonwealth. Not until the 19th century was the city represented properly and frankly the playing fields of Rusholme haven’t been that successful in bringing up politicians. Businessmen - yes, journalists from Sixsmith, to Crick, to James H Reeve and Tim Samuels - perhaps overly so. The politicians, no, and the few that there are seem to want to win seats off each other such as in Manchester Withington - Old Mancunian political cannibalism. Perhaps we like to think about politics in this city rather than to do it. Perhaps the one-party city state at the town hall is a reflection of this. Just last month it all seemed to crystallise about one place, the Town Hall, with the arrival of President Xi of China in Manchester. He must have been pleasantly surprised that 96 seats out of 96 seats were held by one party. (laughter) This was the first state visit of a world leader to our city in nearly a century since Woodrow Wilson in the aftermath of World War I. The Chancellor had declared the UK is China’s closest ally in the West, the leader of the opposition had worn white tie, hundreds of pro-Xi students
were littering propaganda in our own version of Red Square, Albert Square. The world’s second most powerful leader said the phrase ‘northern powerhouse’ in Mandarin. Sergio Aguero had taken a selfie with David Cameron and the hitherto unheralded Man City Chinese footballer Sun Jihai was miraculously inducted into the Hall of Fame of English Football as one of England’s best ever footballers. Guys, President Xi of China then quoted Disraeli: “What Manchester does today the whole world does tomorrow”. Everything I just said is true - he was in this town because George Osborne wanted to show off the investment opportunities in the so-called northern powerhouse. The city is about to gain unprecedented powers over spending, perhaps eventually taxation and even education, so perhaps this is our chance. Elsewhere in 1515 it was the era of the city states. We are never going to seize the reins of power from the white tie flatulence of the public schools, from the dribbling sanctimonious hypocrisy of people who obtain elite education for their children by forcing up house prices or faking being religious, if we don’t organise. We will protect practical non-ideological Manchester school practicality and meritocracy without that sort of arrangement. Perhaps Mancunian independence in the guise of the northern powerhouse is the perfect vehicle for this and this dinner is just the sort of place where it can start. So I won’t dwell on the bygone eras of past glories - we are not Liverpool Football Club. But I would now like to raise a toast to the pious memory of Hugh Oldham.

The Senior Steward spoke as follows:

Mr Junior Steward, Mr Recorder, Mr High Master, Fellow Old Boys.

Mr Recorder, I have to start by saying how ridiculous it seems to be referred to as the most famous Old Boy, Sir Nicholas Hytner. Sir Nicholas is a result of the way that gongs are thrown about like confetti, particularly to theatre people for no good reason. And people that know me here know me as Nick or even, humiliatingly, Nicky Hytner (laughter). So, Sir Nicholas will not wash, but it does give me the opportunity to tell you how the great actor, Sir Michael Gambon, dealt with becoming Sir Michael Gambon.

Michael Gambon for the under 30s is Dumbledore (laughter) and he is a notorious story teller. Sir Michael told me that he found himself with Robert De Niro and Al Pacino, with whom he was making a movie, and they were giving him a very hard time about accepting the Knighthood and becoming a relic of the British Empire. He said ‘I’m going to reveal to you now, something well known in England, but not widely known elsewhere which is that on being knighted, each knight is given an ancient card, according to ancient feudal law, and on production of this card each knight can take to bed any English maiden of his choosing.’ (laughter) Well, Pacino and De Niro knew Michael of old and told him to take a running jump and they continued with dinner. Then sometime later, Michael went outside for a smoke and found himself in conversation with a very elegant, young, English lady, I think a very distinguished literary agent, and she told him that she was one of his greatest admirers. And he said, ‘Would you do me a very great favour?’ (laughter) and he went back to dinner with Pacino and De Niro and after a few minutes his new friend introduced herself to Michael as if for the first time – ‘Sir Michael, I’m your greatest fan’ – and he said, ‘Just one moment, I have in my wallet my knighthood card, and I have yet to use it this year, would you be so kind?’ She said, ‘Sir Michael, it would be an honour and I’m staying just around the corner and there is no time like
the present.’ And so off they went and had a convivial drink together...and to this day De Niro and Pacino are trying to work out how to get themselves knighted. (applause)

Anyway, as Nick Hytner, you do me great honour to ask me to speak on such a significant evening.

In 1515, the Pope appointed Thomas Wolsey Cardinal, Henry VIII appointed him Lord Chancellor, and MGS opened its doors. But I’m not sure that 1515 was so long ago. My Dad, who is here at my table, started at MGS nearly 80 years ago, and he swears he remembers seeing Cardinal Wolsey on one of his progresses through the North. It’s as good as 50 years since I walked up the drive on Old Hall Lane for the first time, and it seems like yesterday. Back then, 50 years seemed like yesterday to all the Old Mancunians as old as I am now. 1515 is only ten yesterdays ago.

And 2015 will be here ten days after tomorrow. But at the mid-point of our first millennium, I wonder how well placed I am to look back to the future. My experience of the school was partial, ruthless in its devotion to theatre and music. Opting for what was optimistically called cross country running whenever compulsory sport was on the agenda, I was part of a cabal of lazy slobs who took turns to buy up the tuck shop so that we could dodge behind the bushes, pig out on Mars bars, smear ourselves with mud, and return to the run as it circled back towards the school, panting ostentatiously.

You probably remember how insufferable the Dramatic Society crowd were. What weird emotional need we were satisfying by dressing up and showing off to each other was a mystery to us then, though I’ve since spent half a life-time exploring it, with some of the best actors in the world. I’ve been very lucky, but I wouldn’t put myself in a time capsule as representative of our school and its multiplicity of interests.

Because this school is part of the luck we’ve had. It may have opened your eyes to the excitements of science, the lure of the academy, the joys of sport, the seductive chasm of history. For me, it was literature, theatre and music. I simply wouldn’t be having the life I’m having without Brian Phythian, the Head of English during the 60s and early 70s. He ran the Dramatic Society with inspirational verve, and his English Department seemed to be bursting at the seams with talent and energy. And I’m thrilled that my first English master, Geoff Fox, is here tonight.

But nothing was more thrilling to me than the school play, the heart-pumping excitement of seeing your name posted on the cast list on the Dram Soc notice board, the sizzle of rehearsals, the week of performances.

Our dressing room was the old Masters’ Common Room, which is now – triumphantly – one of the Drama studios. But back in the late 60s, the actors hovered outside it at the end of the school day, a great waft of tobacco from a determined regiment of pipe smokers billowing out every time the door opened. And when we were finally let in, we’d sit round the fire, sticking on false beards or strapping ourselves into overstuffed bras, loftily passing judgment on the director. Each director had his fierce partisans. I was – obviously – a Phythian man. Steven Pimlott, three years my senior and genially disdainful of me, was for Brian Derbyshire. Later on, Steven became not just a friend, but a mentor, and his desperately early death in 2007 robbed the British theatre of one of its most original and best loved directors.

When the Masters’ Common Room moved, the Dram Soc dressing room was shunted over to the Prefects’ Common Room, which seemed like a tragic downgrade. And it coincided with a growing, and intolerable, confidence that I could direct some of this stuff better myself. This conceit reached its appalling climax in the last play I acted in at MGS – The Servant of Two Masters by the eighteenth
century Italian farceur, Carlo Goldoni. I played the servant of the title, one of the great comic roles in the repertoire. Its terrific director was David Wylde, who I’m delighted has come from South Africa to be here tonight. More accurately, David was its co-director, because shortly before rehearsals began, it was announced that he would share his directorial responsibilities with the High Master.

Peter Mason was a distinguished educator, but with the best will in the world, comedy was not his area of expertise. David Wylde fizzed with good ideas. The High Master was dauntingly well informed about Venetian *Commedia dell’Arte*. His research was no doubt fascinating, but it went on for hours and it wasn’t funny. He wasn’t a funny man. (laughter)

So I took David Wylde aside at the end of a rehearsal one day, and told him the cast had lost confidence in the High Master and it would be better for all concerned if somebody told him to put a sock in it. I don’t know if David remembers this, but it’s stuck with me: I’m the boy who tried to fire the High Master. (laughter)

The last laugh, though, is with Peter Mason. Nearly forty years later, looking for a comedy to fill the house at the National Theatre during a rather dour summer season, I remembered *The Servant of Two Masters*. I had it rewritten by Richard Bean, a very funny playwright, and my part was played by James Corden, a very funny actor, in a play now called *One Man, Two Guvnors*. And as James raked in the laughs, the penny dropped: he was hilarious, I wasn’t. If an actor isn’t up to it, he often starts by blaming the director.

James Corden’s first part at the National was in Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*, which was the nearest I’ve ever got to putting MGS on stage, or on screen. It was set in a Sheffield grammar school in the early 80s, though Alan was often remembering his own time at Leeds Modern in the 50s and I was remembering mine here in the 70s. And its central debate – about the purpose of education – was recognisably 21st century, and so was the sophistication of its students.

But the spirit of those boys, their irreverence, their backchat, their smarts – I like to think those were all ours. And we were a small part of the play’s genesis. I once told Alan about singing in the MGS choir as a boy treble – even on a couple of occasions with the Hallé under Barbirolli. In the same conversation we talked about Ella Fitzgerald, for some reason, and her recording of *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered*. In one of those mysterious leaps that playwrights make, he imagined a boy treble singing the song to another boy; though Posner, the loquacious gay kid who sings it in the play, is 18, so the idea had evolved by the time it reached the stage.

But it was Posner who was responsible for stopping the show every night. In a glum exchange with the young history master he said:

*I’m a Jew.*
*I’m small.*
*I’m homosexual.*
*And I live in Sheffield.*
*I’m fucked.* (laughter)

You would be astonished by how many middle-aged men have told me that they were Posner, and none of them lived in Sheffield. A lot of them lived here. (laughter)

Alan Bennett, of course, has always written with particular sympathy about people who feel generally fucked, which I suspect is most of us at some time or another. And maybe one of the great
gifts MGS has given us is the confidence, and the grit, to get to the other side. But if I look back at the 70s and recognise in us the cockiness of the History Boys, I don’t necessarily recognise their comfort in their own skins. We were, I think, quite tightly wound. So it’s been a massive pleasure to get to know the school again over the last 10 years. I’ve been bowled over by how wide the curiosity and broad the horizons are of the boys I’ve met, and above all how at ease they are with themselves and with the world they’re part of. And though I look back with affection across the decades, I look at the current generation, and my heart lifts.

I came to the school to get involved with the appeal to rebuild the theatre, and as I hadn’t been back for a while, I was offered a tour. My guide was an articulate, engaging sixth former, whom we’ll call Alex.

“They thought I’d be the right one to show you round,” said Alex, “because I’d remind you of who you were, when you were here.”

“You’re a theatre fanatic, then?” I said.

“Yes. And I play in the orchestra,” he said.

“And you’re doing English and History A-Levels?”

“Yes, that’s right,” he said.

“Well, that’s who I was,” I said.

“Yes,” said Alex, “and of course I’m gay. So we have a lot in common.” (laughter)

Time passes; the decades fly by, and in the blink of an eye things get better. In 1974, I’d have no more dared say what Alex said to me than I would have volunteered for extra-curricular cross-country running. And I know Alex was an exceptional young man, but still – we’ve come a long way from Hugh Oldham.

At the end of The History Boys, the students sit at the front of the stage, and their senior history teacher Mrs Lintott tells the audience what becomes of them. It’s a melancholy scene, as the joy of the play comes from eight young guys who have their lives in front of them, the world theirs for the taking. Now, in Mrs Lintott’s words, they’re “pillars of a community that no longer has much use for pillars.”

Some of you here aren’t much older than the History Boys, and there’s a whole lot more to look forward to than to look back on. But many of us are lined up at the end of the play, wondering what or who we are, and how much of what we learned, will echo down the centuries.

Darwin, maybe. It is not the strongest of the species that survive, or the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.

The way we played. Six to win against Stockport Grammar, the last man in, and dark clouds scudding over the Toast Rack.

Tiny cellists, dwarfed by the instruments on their backs, hurrying after school to rehearse Beethoven.
The mist suddenly clearing from the summit of Great Gable, as Borrowdale campers gaze down at Wasdale, stretched out at their feet like a dream of Paradise.

Our shared history. The causes of the English Civil War. The consequences of the French Revolution.

Excited boys on their first school trip abroad, at the Gare du Nord, enveloped by the unmistakable aroma of Paris, the very oxygen of civilization.

Shakespeare. “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!”

What do we see, as we look, like the History Boys, over the dark backward and abysm of time? What they see is Hector, the charismatic, flawed teacher they loved. His ghost haunts them as the lights fade. I think he’s talking to us too:

*Pass the parcel.*
*That’s sometimes all you can do.*
*Take it, feel it and pass it on.*
*Not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere, one day.*
*Pass it on, boys.*
*That’s the game I wanted you to learn.*
*Pass it on.*

The toast is: Prosperity to the School.

(The audience is moved – then applause)

**The High Master** spoke as follows:

I only have one final duty to perform this evening and that is to thank everyone who made this evening happen and our Development Office. Please put your hands together. We also thank all the staff of The Point. Serving dinner to 1000 MGS boys is not trivial. I would also like to thank you all for coming. When we set out to plan this evening we were expecting probably about 500 and the fact that we in the end filled The Point says something about the sort of school we are. So thank you all for coming - the bar will remain open since until 12 so do enjoy the rest of the evening.