



From the Interim Head: Prize-Giving 2023

In the life of The Pilgrims' School, this has simultaneously managed to be both an *extraordinary*, and a thoroughly *ordinary* year.

Let's start with the *extraordinary*:

The year started with an *Interim* Head in post – for any school that can in itself be a bit unsettling, but in the first week we unexpectedly also had to deal with the death of our beloved Queen; I can't say that responding to such a major national event was what I was expecting in my first week, but I was deeply proud of the reaction of our whole school community.

Of course, later in the year also saw the Coronation of King Charles III, and again there was an opportunity to feel proud. Proud of our community yes, and also proud of our national traditions which proved to be both meaningful and remarkable.

In fact, throughout this year the extraordinary has seemed to be all around us: crikey, we had a winter World Cup and three, yes THREE, Prime Ministers.

Finally, probably the most significant *extraordinary* thing for Pilgrims' was the Inspection in the Spring. I am deeply proud of how the school came through that and thrilled with the result, and we are all indebted not only to the staff, but also to all the pupils for how they showed themselves, and their school, off to the Inspectors. Well done!

And yet, for all that has been *extraordinary*, when people ask me what I am most proud of this year, it is that we have felt a sense of the *ordinary* return to Pilgrims'. After the challenges of COVID, and then the sudden departure of Dr Essex, this year it has felt like normal life has been restored. There have been no abandoned plans or fixtures lost to COVID. Community events like the Summer Fete, and the Senior Play have run as they always have done.

So, despite the heavy sprinkling of the *extraordinary*, this has also been a very *ordinary* Pilgrims' year. For that, I am both pleased and thankful.

Running alongside all this, it would be fair to say that this has been an extraordinary year for me personally too. If you will allow me a moment of self-indulgence, I would like to share some of my highlights, in the hopes that it will help you understand what a privilege being the Head of *this* school this year has been for me:

I start with the Carol Service and what I would consider to be my highlight memory; I recall standing with the Dean and others in the South Transept before the service started, waiting to begin the procession, and feeling a powerful sense of stillness in that space whilst still knowing that the cathedral was brimming full in the Nave. Those of us standing there waiting, heard the strains of Once in Royal David's City float through the air to us, signalling the start of what is a very special service for our whole community. It is a special memory and one I will always treasure.

Now to my competitive moment of the year: Beating Twyford with the 1st XI football team on the way to winning the Rory McDonagh Trophy ranks high, but it is perhaps pipped by the staff team winning the PPA Quiz (I'll take that, in my year as Head!)

Christmas Choir time was special, particularly as I found myself attending events that were new to me - the Turkey Feast for example - and discovering things about Pilgrims' that I did not know, despite having been here for more than a decade: who knew that the Waterloo Cup is the most fiercely contested Cup in the school? If you want an explanation of this, you will have to ask a Chorister, and perhaps they will choose to explain.

One of the things I have really enjoyed doing, that I didn't really expect to, has been writing my weekly Pilgrims' Way article. I don't know how many of you read these, and I can imagine that some have rolled their eyes at my missives (why does it always have to be sport or Netflix, says Mrs Duncan regularly); I must apologise to anyone who has been offended by my words, or if I have hit the wrong notes! However, I have enjoyed being forced every week to sit back and reflect, and to have the opportunity to think about what I value, or what I have enjoyed from the past week. And here's a piece of advice to all of you, boys; force yourself to take the time to reflect on what matters to you. You may be surprised by what you discover.

And that brings me on to some thank yous:

To the staff. I salute your dedication and commitment; this year would not have been possible without you. We are all indebted to you, and I can say no more.

To the Senior Leadership Team. For digging deep, and giving this school your all, when I'm sure at times you probably wanted to throttle me!

To the Governors. I thank you for the trust you showed in me and the privilege you have given me by allowing me to lead the school for this year.

To the boys. For ever being an inspiration, and a reason to go the extra mile.

To the parents. For being such a great support to me and to the whole staff team, and for being so kind.

And to the PPA. For creating such amazing events, again, and again, and again. Anna Kennedy steps down this summer as Chair of the PPA. She has done an extra-long stint, two and a half years, and has done some of the hardest yards it is possible to do. At a time when the school really needed its PPA, Anna has worked tirelessly, and the school, and I personally, will always be indebted to you.

To round up my thank yous, I would like to firstly thank Mrs Duncan. She has not only put up with an often tired and grumpy Mr Duncan at home, but has since January opted to put up with me at work too. It has not always been easy for her. Imagine her embarrassment when, in a staff meeting recently, I memorably managed to mix up the words 'shirt' and 'tie', when talking about gentlemen removing items of clothing when it is hot.....

Secondly I would like to thank Mrs Pacey. Those who really know and understand the workings of our school know how important she is, and for me it is simple: I would not have survived this year without you. Thank you, Karen.

I now turn to saying goodbye to some departing staff.

Hilary Richardson. Although yours has been only a short association with Pilgrims', I know that the connection is strong, and that you love the place. I am indebted to you for having bailed us out on not one but two occasions now. For that, and your old fashioned good sense, I will always be grateful.

Isi Payne. I feel pretty confident saying that Isi has helped pretty much every individual in this room at one time or another. In fact, I thought I might do a little maths calculation. If everyone in this

room asked Isi five questions a year (I know many of us have asked many, many more!), she would deal with approximately 2,500 questions a year. Over nearly 6 years, that is a whopping 15,000 questions. And remember, that is assuming just five each! Isi, you have been the smiling and professional face of Pilgrims' for nearly 6 years and prior to that, a supportive and encouraging parent, and we appreciate all that you have done for the school and wish you well for the future.

Debbie Ross – Debbie joined us in September 2019 from Hurstpierpoint School. You came into a difficult situation after some turbulence in the department and with your wise head and steady hand you quickly did a marvellous job stabilising the ship. Not long after joining, she of course had to lead a Pre-Prep in a lockdown, not an easy job it must be said. Having been Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead, Debbie also took over the full DSL role for year at a difficult time, and we are indebted to you for that. Debbie, you have done a fine job, and I know there are many boys and parents here today who have benefitted from your kindness and care. We wish you well in your retirement.

Now before I finish, I want to turn my attention to the Year 8 boys, which is only right, as they are the special ones today. This year's Year 8 have been a great bunch. I feel great kinship with them, not only because they are my Year 8, but also because they have sometimes been underestimated. But boy have they delivered! Their results have been outstanding. As you know, I like a good statistic: take their awards for example: 14 out of 35 boys, that's 40% - comparable with any Pilgrims' year group and equal to last year's. Add in the awards that could have been won but weren't (because of changes in destination senior schools) and the total would have been 17 from 35, nearly 50%, and that makes them one of the most successful Pilgrims' year groups of all time. But of course, it is not all about awards. Those are, if you like, the icing on the cake. More importantly than that, they are a year group that has really gelled; as with most years, they have seen some bumpy times, but you have come through as a year group so strongly, and I am proud of you. I enjoyed so much seeing you at Mount Kelly together; you have really made the most of your Leavers' Programme, and watching you at the tutor group football yesterday was a pleasure. I am deeply proud to have been your Headmaster this year; it has been a privilege for me, and I only hope that you will look back on the academic year 2022/23 with as much pride as I do now.

I have had many people thank me for steadying the ship this year, and I do appreciate the sentiment. But you must all know, that it wasn't just me. When thinking about this last night, a famous Winston Churchill quote popped into my head. After the war, Winston said: *"It was the nation and the race dwelling all round the globe that had the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar."* That sums up how I feel right now.

And so that is me done! I hand the keys to Tim Butcher. I do this with some regret but have to say that I do it with a lot of relief too. Crucially, I also do it with a great deal of confidence. I look forward to supporting Tim next year and beyond; Pilgrims' is an *extraordinary* school and we have a lot to look forward to.