



Claire's Court Schools



NEWSLETTER - LENT 2011

Some Jubilee thoughts

When my parents, David and Josephine Wilding, founded Claire's Court in 1960, they provided Maidenhead with an extraordinary new school - one offering a day education for local children, fitting with family life and budget, yet at the same time offering a boarding facility attractive to families in West London who wanted to see their sons at weekends.

Both my parents read History at King's College London, both became effective teachers of language, my father focussing on Latin and History, my mother on English and Art. From early days in Maidenhead, my mother became increasingly interested in how children acquire language. Whilst developing the school as Principal, teacher, kitchen assistant, landlady and break time biscuit seller, she became a key researcher on child development, and many weekends were spent reading reams of writing to identify when and where children develop the various concepts that underpin becoming literate.

In my final A-Level year, my mother went to the States to study at MIT under Professor Noam Chomsky, to this day one of the great figures in the world of Linguistics. If ever a teacher was inspired by a sabbatical, it was my mother and she returned keen to develop further her ideas for teaching reading and writing. She realised, for example, that the purpose of teaching writing was to enable children to create readable text quickly and effectively, so out went copperplate in favour of italic. Surprisingly, even in the early 1980s there was little in the way of organised post graduate training in the UK for the teaching of special needs, so when the need arose at Ridgeway, she was excited to find a suitably qualified (to Masters level) teacher for special needs. I am delighted that Mrs Goford is still in post at Ridgeway, bringing out the best in the younger learners of 2011.

Claire's Court Schools has developed and thrived on the powerful contribution men and women have made to education, both in our school and further afield. I know just how much I have valued my father's mentorship, particularly through my early years as Head in the 1980s. We need to be clear however, about the educational lead which Claire's Court developed over its competitors in its early years; a school that chose not to select on ability, ensured classes were small enough for all to receive individual attention, and had, amongst others, an inspirational teacher of English who really

knew how and why children learned. Of course Claire's Court has developed out of all recognition, but I still have a clear memory of my mother's ability to teach her socks off, and equally, of when she would do absolutely nothing because it was the child's turn to get some work done!



Art on the Street

This event was so successful (14,000+ extra visitors) last November that the organisers are staging a similar event on Saturday, 7 May, again on

Maidenhead's High Street. Claire's Court is proud to sponsor this second event and we are looking to provide more impact with our musicians and artists participating at times during the day. Make a note in your calendar now!

A Grand Finale

Our Jubilee Programme continues next term with the Jubilee May Ball (14 May – now sold out) and the Jubilee Summer Fete (18 June) building up to the Grand Finale to our Celebrations. This will take place on Saturday, 9 July, at our playing fields opposite Taplow Station. We are aiming for a range of entertainments and catering for all the family – not a repeat of the Summer Fete but offering as broad a range of entertainment and fun. Be sure to put that date on the calendar and watch out for further information. Thanks to the generosity of the Claire's Court and Ridgeway Society and The College PTA, your son or daughter will be bringing home a commemorative Golden Jubilee pin badge - turn your children upside down and shake until it drops out!!!



Mrs Lizbeth Green. CPhys MInstP BSc PGCE

Liz Green retires at the end of this Summer Term after 7 years of distinguished service as Head of the College. Liz joined Claire's Court in 1995 shortly after we had been invited to take over Maidenhead College by its former Trustees. Right from the outset her place was with the senior girls, though she made a significant contribution to Physics education on the

boys' site, and assisted with the Sixth Form in its embryonic stages, becoming its Deputy Head. Throughout her first 9 years, before taking over as Head of College from Mrs Pitts, there was no task too large or small, difficult or challenging to which Mrs Green would not rise. I remember well her saying, "the challenge I have, Mr Wilding, is to fit it all in; after all I do have a son in your school and a husband at home".



What Liz has given to the Claires Court community is her iron will 'to be the best', not to compromise when 'good is not yet good enough', to value each child and adult for the real positives they bring to school each day, to hold individuals accountable for their actions and responsible for their own improvement. She has done that with insight, humour, professional skill

and personal charm. Above all she has brought us a great balance, forcing us all, leaders and followers, to think the big picture, to be corporate and to keep in step. In the meantime, her son Chris has grown up and her husband Bob has stepped down from his intensive career at Mars. Now it is right for Mrs Green to have some 'me time'; her new challenge from September will be "to fit it all in!"

Parents and teachers have already welcomed her successor, Paul Bevis, to the College. Mr Bevis brings with him great experience in primary, secondary and sixth form education from his previous posts as a head teacher and education consultant, and he will become a familiar face as the Summer Term progresses.



Other staff developments

Richard Milner Smith (Assistant Head of College, Head of Year 12, Geography and Games) has been appointed to a Deputy Headship at Moyles Court School for September 2011, a similar school to us in Hampshire. Justin Spanswick,

Assistant Head at Claires Court, is moving to Ridgeway to extend his expertise into the junior years and join the teaching of Year 6 there. Chris Ellis will move the other way, from Ridgeway into the Claires Court Science and Games Departments to extend his expertise into the secondary years. News of other movements, appointments, promotions and departures will follow next term.

Parental Questionnaire

It's Easter – time for me to report on the annual Parental Questionnaire. We received returns from just over 50% of our family groups, fairly equally spread across the gender and age groups. At every level, there is very strong approval of what we do within the School, and I take such feedback as a great compliment. Equally, there are tough demands made by you, our customers, and sometimes we fall short. The approach of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is to apply the 10% rule – if more than 10% of replies make particular reference to a core issue, then that aspect is examined further during inspection time.

With a 3 year cycle in place, we are due an ISI inspection soon so I am pleased to report that we don't have any 10% issues! Some families have asked for feedback on an individual issue and that will happen in the next month. The top 5 concerns of the moment are:

1. Homework - for some, way too much, for others not enough, a comment found regularly in each year's feedback.
2. Discipline - some pupils seem to get away with too much, and teachers need to be firmer, whilst in other responses some teachers seem too tough and unwilling to go with the flow.
3. Comparative assessment against peers – some want speedier information on their child's development while others are delighted their children have time to develop at their own pace and their fears of undue pressure were misplaced.
4. Activities – requests for even more variety and diversity run by more specialist staff seems to be at odds with a wish for early busses and less stuff organised at school, so that children can go home for more family time and engage locally with specialisms.
5. Uniform and appearance is obviously a bugbear on all sites; holes in tights and trousers get bigger the older the student, and 'big hair' is clearly back!

We make every effort to ensure that communication between school and home is as effective and comprehensive as possible. There is now so much to tell you that occasionally important provision is missed. We will continue to work hard in this area (see below) to avoid such lapses but sometimes I scratch my head. One parent wrote that it was a pity that a school of our size does not have an internal assessment facility to identify pupils needs, yet that is exactly what we have on all

three sites, run by experienced and knowledgeable SENCOs. Another wrote about the critical lack of a parents' evening for Year 9 to discuss options for GCSE prior to decisions being made, yet we run such evenings on a regular basis every year for boys and girls.



Some issues of communication are about timing; “If only we knew earlier, then we could have provided more support” is a thread through the years, as is “Once the school learned of our concern, you acted promptly and effectively.” I need to set such observations against a tide of comment across the board that rates our pastoral care as exceptional. I am pleased that there is only one comment about teachers’ slow response time to email. The reality is that teachers can’t access email readily when they are teaching, and so there will be times when the best part of a day can go by without response. By way of example, I read everything sent to me, but with over 100 pertinent emails a day, there will be times I have to let those that provide just commentary, wash through. It is also nice to read your praise of the efficiency of the various School Offices – please use these as direct contact points to ensure that any concerns reach their intended destination.

Our digital footprint; from Website to Parent Portal

As one of the channels which provide effective communication and news on school life, I hope you like our new website (www.clairescourt.com). But the website is not the only way we can provide information to you on-line.

This coming term we will launch a ‘parent portal’ with the aim of further improving communication to parents of children in Reception and above. Currently the portal is a “work-in-progress” so initially, it will be restricted to families of pupils in Years 7 to 11 (personal log-in information for these families is included in this mailing) and will allow reports, timetables and attendance records to be viewed. It will also include direct letters to year groups on school matters (e.g. parent evenings, subject choices) plus the more detailed feedback reports produced from time to time (such as the Parental Questionnaire). What we offer will change as new modules are developed. For instance, we will shortly add individual GCSE and A level examination timetables for Year 10 pupils and above who are engaged in public examinations. We expect the service to be extended to Prep and Pre-Prep pupils during the Summer Term, and we will let you know about new facilities when they become available.

The website is a secure site, and is hosted away from Claires Court. It only holds the information described above; there are no other personal details available. Each parent name and password is individually generated, and you can change your password, if you wish, to one which you find easier to remember.

School developments

In these difficult financial times, managing our resources prudently has been vital though we have continued to improve all 3 sites physically. We plan further improvements at Claires Court, Ridgeway and the College this coming summer by remodelling internal space to provide better facilities. We also plan to replace the swimming pool at Ridgeway next year with an enclosed facility similar to that at College. We are due to take occupancy of new playing fields at Taplow next April (2012) and that involves some infrastructure work. Such developments are not the only plans we have, and I expect our educational provision to take further significant steps over the next year too.





Arts Award centre

I am delighted to announce that we have become a registered Arts Award Centre allowing us to offer secondary pupils the opportunity to gain an Arts Award that is a national qualification and accredited framework for youngsters to develop as artists and arts leaders.

The Arts Award mission is to support young people who want to deepen their engagement with the arts, build creative and leadership skills, and to achieve a national qualification while challenging them to share their talents and find out what inspires them.

As well as building confidence, it helps young people to enjoy cultural activities, and prepares them for further education or employment. The Arts Award is open to all abilities and there is no time limit for completing the award, available at three levels, Bronze, Silver and Gold. Silver equates to a short course GCSE grade A*-C and Gold to a short course AS worth 35 UCAS points.

Central to our development as an Arts Award Centre has been the appointment of Frances Ackland-Snow, a professional fine artist, recently published and having exhibited internationally. Frances is employed as the Artist in Residence at Claires Court Schools, specialising in sculpture, drawing, printmaking and abstract expressionism and is to be found working on all 3 sites in some capacity or other! Frances will be leading an exciting and unique programme of master classes and arts and crafts activities at Holiday Club over Easter and through the summer that will support the delivery of the Arts Award.

And finally...

Our pupils make a significant contribution to the broader community in which we live, and we celebrate these as best we can through bulletin and website announcements. Teams winning national titles (Under 14 ISA Netball champions 2011) and individual performances (Ellie Rayer, UK U15 Pentathlon champion 2011) are extraordinary achievements in their own right.



I was very proud to learn of the successes of our sailors in the most recent round of University level race sailing a fortnight ago or so. Whilst it's great that Sam Clark (Helm) and Sammy Isaacs-Johnson (crew) helped us win our first medals at this level, it was Sammy's willingness to serve as stand-in crew for the University of Southampton's Ladies squad the next day that amused me even more!



Congratulations also to those who took part in World Maths Day on 1 March. Among the 1,298,834 students who took part worldwide was Ridgeway pupil Oliver Ross whose name now proudly occupies 97th position in the Hall of Fame for those aged 8-10 years!

The selfless efforts which so many of our children have put in to our recent Charity week are still being realised financially. (Please do divvy up any outstanding sponsoring!) The total will be split amongst our 3for3 charities: Kids in Sport, Thames Valley Adventure Playground and the Alexander Devine Children's Hospice Service. In the meantime, I can only praise everyone for making such an effective contribution to these causes.

Have a good Easter break – I know I will!

James Wilding