

ISSUE 67 | SPRING 2024

ASSOCIATES NEWS



ASCL
Association
of School and
College Leaders

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Appliance of science

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CONQUERING THE COSMIC CURVEBALLS

In his final letter from the front line, outgoing General Secretary Geoff Barton recalls facing some stormy days of his tenure in shorts and flip-flops and forecasts brighter days ahead for teachers and leaders

I'm fully in support of Dolly Parton. Why wouldn't I be a fan of someone whose surname is so tantalisingly close to my own?

Plus, in a single afternoon, she reputedly wrote two now-iconic songs: Jolene and I Will Always Love You. That certainly wasn't a bad day's work.

But Dolly P also once said something that has resonated with me ever since: "If you want to see the rainbow, you've got to put up with the rain".

She's dead right.

We are all craving a much-needed dose of optimism, a sense that things are eventually – pleeeeaassse! – going to get better.

Her point is that we'll only appreciate the better days if we can contrast them with the gloomy stuff... the rain, the storms, the far-too-many bleak issues which too many of our members are dealing with at the moment.

'These were extraordinary years'

Post-Covid concern

The truth is that these are tough times for school and college leaders. They always were tough, but rarely tougher than right now.

Across the UK, in all types of institutions, our members have a lot on their plates. There are, of course, the perennial issues of teacher recruitment and retention and the ongoing funding crisis. There's also a much greater post-Covid concern about the behaviour of young people and the fraying support of parents.

And all that's before you get to concerns about the RAAC concrete crisis and its implications for this summer's examinations or the recent measles outbreaks or dwindling school attendance by some of our most vulnerable young people.

So, yes, there's lots of rain around at the moment and, frankly, nothing like enough rainbows.

But that may be about to change.

There's a feeling in the air that we can't go on like this, that the days of expecting our schools and colleges to pick up all of society's pieces must come to an end.

A 21st-century profession

There's a feeling, too, that the curriculum and qualification regime needs urgent review and slimming down. There's a feeling that we need to do something about pay, workload and use of technology that finally makes teaching into a 21st-Century profession.

From various political parties, think-tanks and policy wonks and membership organisations like ours, there are ideas being floated that could start to address some of these issues. There's a hint of a rainbow beyond the hefty showers.

All of that, however, will be on the watch of your new General Secretary.

This is my last Associates News column as I step down from my role in early April.

I then hand the baton – or, possibly, the 'Barton'? – to Pepe d'lasio who comes with a brilliant track record as headteacher, system leader and highly effective past ASCL president.

I'm hoping he has a tenure as General Secretary which is a bit more – how shall I put this? – normal than mine.

After all, while it has definitely been the extraordinarily privileged job that I had thought it would be, it's also been a very different role from the one my predecessors had.

Aftermath of austerity

On my first morning in 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May called a General Election. We responded with a manifesto for educational change, then a campaign for funding and, subsequently, an endless battle to restore decent funding for schools and – especially – colleges. We were fighting the aftermath of the austerity decisions.

Then rumours surfaced in late 2019 of an illness apparently 'like flu but not like flu'. I remember those surreal meetings with ministers when the will-they-won't-they debate about the summer 2020 examinations was such a live issue.

Covid arrived. Schools and colleges closed. We received abuse for being supportive of temporary closures and for saying a few weeks later that educational institutions should re-open.

I would quickly put on a shirt, jacket and tie over my shorts, flip-flops and pyjamas to become the unexpected voice of the educational

'On my first morning in 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May called a General Election'

sector's response to Covid. Teams and Zoom meant there were no excuses not to do these interviews.

The teacher grading debacle came and went, the reinforced concrete crisis and the increasingly-polarised arguments about the rights of gender-questioning children led to a growing sense that schools and colleges were the final community bastions trying to hold a fragmenting society together.

It's been quite a time. And for all the cosmic curveballs and the disappointing fecklessness of so many politicians, I know I'll look back on these extraordinary ASCL years and think to myself that they were just that: extraordinary.

Amazing resilience

We saw leaders taking us through a national crisis and doing so with amazing levels of resilience and courage. We saw them rebuilding the dwindling confidence of their communities and we witnessed them weaving a narrative of optimism and putting their faith in teachers and young people.

And, through all of that, I couldn't be prouder to have been their General Secretary. Thanks to them and thanks to you for your life-enhancing strength and support.

What our members did was precisely what Dolly mandated: they demonstrated that, in order to see the distant rainbow, they'd have to put up with some rain. More than their fair share.

As I sign off, here's wishing you many more rainbows ahead.

Editorial committee report

The Associates Editorial Group met in October 2023, the second of the biannual meetings for the year.

In the room were Chair Pauline Thomas, Peter Crowe, ASCL and administrator Jane Williams with Pat Sales and Editor Julie Nightingale joining via Teams.

Julie updated the group on articles planned for future issues and said there had been an excellent response to the request for recollections of the association to mark ASCL's 150th anniversary. She encouraged further contributions, ideas or inspiration to include as part of the celebrations for 2024.



Other editorial ideas discussed included another piece highlighting the valuable work of the ASCL Benevolent Fund (see p15) and coverage of October's Associates reunion which took place in Bristol (see p13).

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 15 May 2024 at 10am.

Podcast round-up

Geoff Barton shines a light on the sterling work carried out in the FE sector by chatting to Jerry White, Principal and Chief Executive Officer of City College Norwich, Paston College and Easton College in one of the latest ASCL Leadership podcasts.

Jerry explains Easton College is a former school of agriculture which now prides itself on a commitment to inclusion and the tailoring of curricula to the needs of learners.

"Our wonderful facilities are used as a classroom to expand the students' horizons," says Jerry who adds traditional courses such as veterinary nursing, animal management, forestry and horticulture have recently expanded into the areas of sport and public services such as construction.

"Across the college, half of our 16-to-18-year-olds have special needs or a disability and they found school challenging. We have young people who didn't know what they were good at as school probably identified their weaknesses, rather than their strengths.

"The Step Into Construction programme, for example, is the first time they've been able to explore practical skills such as bricklaying,

painting and decorating, helping them to identify a route that will give them the confidence and self-esteem for a career."

In the Leaders Are Readers podcast, Geoff chats with Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, about his new book, written with Emily Briant: Equity in Education: Levelling the playing field of learning - a practical guide for teachers.

Lee explains his dislike of his own job title.

"I critique it because social mobility has become associated with a narrow version of success, the American dream version. Some politicians use that to circumvent inequality.

"We talk about dignity not deficit, enabling children to do better than their parents' generation and performing valued jobs in their communities," says Lee, who greatly enjoyed working as a binman in a previous professional life.

"It's lovely when primary kids ask me about life on the bins all the time. We have to get away from the deficit mindset."

Listen to all of the discussions at www.ascl.org.uk/News/Podcasts.



Cast your vote for Associates Committee

Three seats on the Associates Committee are coming up for election as members come to the end of their three-year terms.

Serving committee members are eligible for re-election if they have served less than three consecutive terms. ASCL will deal with the elections by a single transferable vote.

The nine-strong committee represents ASCL associate members and meets three times a year.

Nominations (note that you can nominate yourself) should be accompanied by a brief statement, maximum 90 words and typed, if possible.

To make a nomination, use the form below or go to www.ascl.org.uk/associates-committee

Nomination form: Associate Committee - term September 2024-August 2027

Name of nominee: _____ Your name: _____

Address: _____ Postcode: _____

Email: _____ Former school/college: _____

Any national or branch offices, responsibilities held: _____

Please return completed nomination forms by **Friday 15 April 2024** for the attention of Corporate Administration, ASCL 2nd Floor, Peat House, 1 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP or email to corporateadmin@ascl.org.uk

'Diversity challenges across the system'

Margaret Mulholland, ASCL inclusion specialist, has responded to a report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), exploring barriers and solutions to achieving a more ethnically diverse teaching workforce.

She said: "A diverse workforce enriches pupils, schools and colleges, and wider society and we support NFER's call to make sure schools are supported in improving ethnic diversity among teachers and leaders. We're committed to making school and college leadership more diverse and have set up equalities networks to help members in these groups to support and empower each other and raise the issues affecting them.

"However, this report starkly demonstrates that there are problems throughout the pipeline from training onwards and all of us with a stake in education, including the government, need to redouble our efforts."

Pensions update

The annual pension indexation is available to view on the Teachers' Pensions website (www.teacherspensions.co.uk/).

The increase to be applied to pensions in payment will be 6.7% for 2024. It takes effect from 8 April 2024.

POLICY THROUGH THE AGES



Poverty, inequality, the place of the arts . . . some of the challenges when ASCL began in the 19th Century are still with us today, notes Director of Policy Julie McCulloch

"Every year," the Association's President told conference delegates, "figures show the appalling lack of staff in many schools." One school, she went on, had been without a senior mathematics teacher for seven years. Another hadn't been able to recruit a physics teacher for the last four years; another had been without a chemistry teacher for two years. Shortages of maths and science teachers were now generally accepted, but there were other subjects in which the position had rapidly deteriorated – notably English, geography and modern languages.

Schools were suffering from a constant turnover of staff. One school had only four staff who had been there for more than one year. What was needed, she told the hall, was "a coordinated campaign of recruitment".

'Juvenile delinquency'

And the government, unfortunately, wasn't helping. A recent report had included the view of one correspondent that schools were "breeding grounds for all juvenile delinquency". "If such notions are widespread," warned the President, "it is no wonder many people shrink from the thought of teaching as a career."

Sounds familiar? With a few linguistic tweaks, this could easily have been an extract from an ASCL President's speech this year. In fact, it comes from a speech by Miss Glenday, President of one of ASCL's predecessor organisations, the Association of Headmistresses, in 1960.

I'm not sure whether to be heartened or depressed by the fact that the problems we face today have been around for so long. What is rather wonderful, though, is to see the role that ASCL has played on behalf of our members, in influencing policy and holding policymakers to account throughout our 150-year history.

The Association of Headmistresses was established in 1874, at a time when some radical thinking about secondary education in England was taking place.

Dorothea Beale and Frances Buss (pictured above), the indomitable founders of the Association, gave evidence at a number of parliamentary commissions – something almost unheard of for women at the time. One commissioner was apparently delighted by this, remarking that "We were all so much struck by their perfect womanliness. Why, there were tears in Miss Buss' eyes!"

'Perfect women'

The commissioners were soon to discover that these 'perfect women' held some expert, powerful and sometimes differing views about education, and particularly girls' education.

Asked whether she believed "there is . . . a distinction between the mental powers of the two classes as to require any wide distinction between the good education given to a girl and that to a boy?", Miss Buss responded tartly that, "I am sure girls can learn anything they are taught in an interesting manner, and for which they have a motive to work."

By the late 19th Century, members of the Association of Headmistresses had started to take up positions as members of commissions, not just as witnesses. Sophie Bryant, who would later become President of the Association, was appointed as one of three female members of the Royal Commission on Secondary Education, which produced its final report in 1895. The commissioners highlighted some "considerable strides" which had been made over the previous 30 years but were concerned that "many . . . schools remained insecure, with some suffering fluctuating pupil numbers and others

in a state of decline. This was mainly . . . due to poverty, but other factors included geographical position, the inefficiency of some headmasters, and growing competition from higher grade schools." Ongoing social stratification in education meant that "Jude was still likely to remain obscure".

Fluctuating pupil numbers, the impact of poverty, concerns about competition between schools, the place of the arts, the importance of teacher training, and discussions about local versus central direction. That really does sound familiar!

New political era

Back in the 21st century, our engagement with policymakers over the last few months has touched on many of those same themes and on encouraging all parties to adopt the proposals in our manifesto (www.ascl.org.uk/manifesto)

If the polls are to be believed, 2024 will mark the beginning of a new political era. But, as this delve into the past reminds us, discussions about how best to educate the next generation are perennial.

With many thanks to Rich Atterton for his help in sourcing these stories of ASCL's influence over the decades.

A longer version of this article appears in the Spring Term 1 2024 issue of Leader magazine. Go to www.leadermagazine.co.uk

For more on ASCL's history see Spring and Summer 2023 editions of Associates News and look out for more in Summer 2024, www.ascl.org.uk/Associates



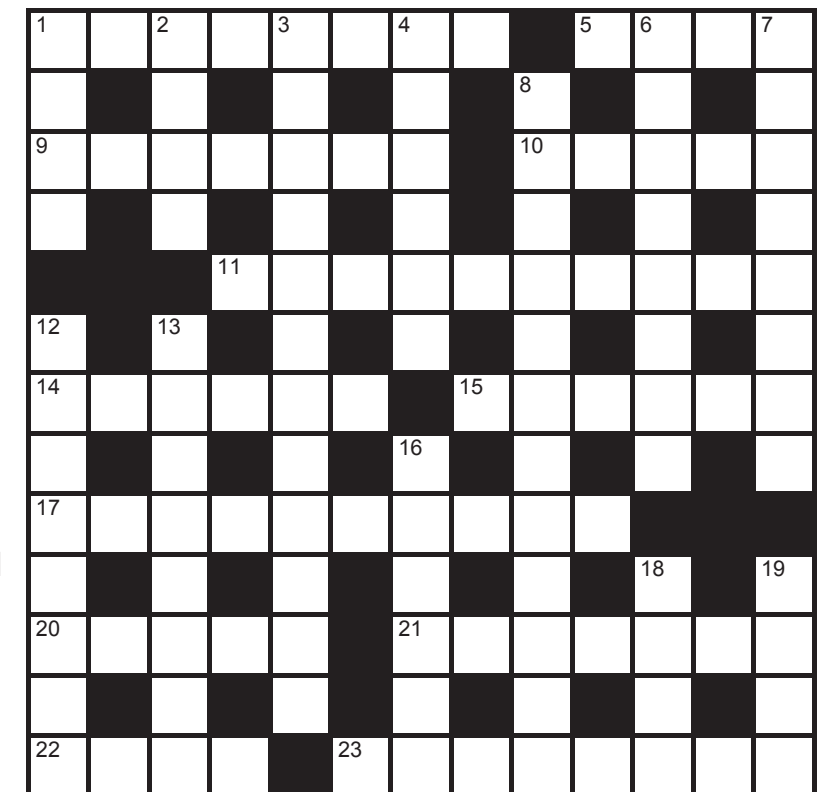
TEATIME CROSSWORD

Across

- 1 Act as a substitute (8)
- 5 Sprockets (4)
- 9 Small fish (7)
- 10 Total, complete (5)
- 11 Brief strong increase in electrical current supplied (5,5)
- 14 Public speaker (6)
- 15 Savoury appetiser (6)
- 17 Duplicate pieces to replace lost or damaged pieces of a machine (5,5)
- 20 Flexible twig of a willow (5)
- 21 Bluster (7)
- 22 Expressed in words (4)
- 23 Filleted (8)

Down

- 1 Flat round object (4)
- 2 Fringe benefit (4)
- 3 Mathematics of triangles (12)
- 4 Oozed, percolated (6)
- 6 Sudden occurrence of something unwelcome (8)
- 7 Wizard (8)
- 8 Demonstrate or verify by evidence (12)
- 12 Spicy pasta steamed with a meat and vegetable stew (8)
- 13 Niccolò ____ (1782–1840), Italian violinist and composer (8)
- 16 Woody tropical grass (6)
- 18 Live-action film about a piglet (4)
- 19 Domesticated bovine animals (4)



Puzzle supplied by Puzzle Press Ltd
(www.puzzlepress.co.uk)

THE JOYS OF SPRING

Combine your countryside strolls with culture over the coming months with a visit to some of this country's great public outdoor art displays

If you go down to the woods today – or, for that matter, a stately home and garden or university town high street – you're sure to see some surprising art.

There are scores of sculpture parks, art trails and woodland walks featuring thought-provoking pieces to enjoy as you take a breath of fresh air.

One of the best places for a walk on the artistic side is the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (<https://ysp.org.uk>), a 500-acre parkland at Bretton Hall, just off the

M1 near Wakefield, which celebrates the history of the county as the birthplace of pioneering sculptors.

There are works by Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Damien Hirst along with site-specific pieces by Elisabeth Frink, Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash and,



Contemporary sculpture at Jupiter Artland. Credit: Photo by Allan Pollok Morris/Jupiter Artland

perhaps most impressive of all, the enormous Promenade by Anthony Caro, known for his 'sculptecture'.

This monumental sculpture was originally inspired by Gustave Courbet's tree paintings and was originally conceived for the Tuileries Gardens in Paris.

One of the more unusual pieces is Gold Lamé by Tony Heaton, a mounted Invacar, the very basic three-wheeled vehicles that were once given by the NHS to people with disabilities who could not use public transport.

Individual artists

Individual artists with their own sculpture parks and gardens around the country include Hepworth's museum at Tate St Ives in Cornwall (www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-st-ives/barbara-hepworth-museum-and-sculpture-

garden) which features more than 30 of her works, placed to be in harmony with the landscape by the artist herself.

The Hannah Bennett Sculpture Garden in Derbyshire (www.hannahbennett.co.uk/sculpture-garden/) features works from many artists which are all for sale. The garden is also handy for a visit to nearby Eyam, the village that quarantined itself against the plague in the 17th Century.

The Henry Moore Studio & Gardens in Hertfordshire (<https://henry-moore.org/studios-and-gardens/>) feature his iconic pieces spread over 70 acres of grounds, which includes a new visitor centre.

A new name this year is the sculpture garden in the grounds at Compton Verney in Warwickshire (www.comptonverney.org.uk/sculpture). The celebrated Capability Brown landscape and Robert Adam house already



Jupiter Artland's dramatic landscape. Credit: Photo by Allan Pollok Morris/Jupiter Artland

feature six different collections of art and the new garden will include sculptures from around the world as the venue encourages visitors to consider art and landscapes together.

Artists represented include Sarah Lucas, Louise Bourgeois – best known for her monumental spider sculptures that feature in galleries and landscapes worldwide – and Turner Prize-nominated British artist Helen Chadwick.

Jupiter Artland (www.jupiterartland.org/visit-jupiter-artland/) is a contemporary sculpture park and art gallery in the 100-acre grounds of Bonnington House, a 19th-century country house around ten miles west of Edinburgh.

There are works by famous names such as Antony Gormley – Firmament, an enormous polygon constructed from 1019 steel balls held in the space by 1770 steel tubes – Marc Quinn



Life-size oxen of the OxTrail (above and left)

➤ (Love Bomb, a 12-metre-high orchid) and Anish Kapoor (Suck, a seemingly endless curved metal chute surrounded by a 17-foot-high square cage) as well as a seasonal programme of exhibitions and events.

The Forest of Dean Sculpture Trail in Gloucestershire (www.forestofdean-sculpture.org.uk/visit/) features 18 sculptures. One of the most eye-catching is Kevin Atherton's Cathedral, a large stained-glass window – 15 feet high by 10 feet across – sited at the end of a tree-lined aisle facing east.

Public sculpture

And you don't have to get out of town to enjoy public sculpture. Many of our more thoughtful towns and cities have recently staged their own trails featuring differently-treated versions of favourite local characters, Nottingham's Robin Hood and the Lincoln Imp, for example.

This year, two university heavyweights join the fray.

The Cambridge Standing Tall trail will feature more than 40 magnificently-decorated giraffes on the streets in support of the Break charity (March to June)

And the OxTrail will feature herds of life-sized oxen among the dreaming spires of Oxford in the summer

Once the trail is over, they will be auctioned off to raise funds for the Sobell House Hospice.

As always, check with the venues about their opening times and special events before making a trip and don't forget that many of them also have more traditional indoor gallery spaces, too.



The grounds at Compton Verney. Credit: Compton Verney



Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Credit: YSP

SHIPSHAPE AND BRISTOL FASHION

Having defied the rail strike, 13 hardy souls gathered in the welcome autumn sun on the Bristol waterfront for the ASCL Associates 2023 Reunion. The group was led by Patricia Sales and retired teacher Susan Parslow was the guide for a tour of the city which Diana Stainbank recounts here

Our journey of discovery of this fascinating city began at the statue of John Cabot on the quayside. During the morning we learnt about the history of trade in the city. Because of its position at the confluence of the rivers Frome and Avon, it has been a trading port since its inception before the Middle Ages.

It has public houses in abundance which have tended to the needs of sailors throughout the ages.

Cabot came to England during the reign of Henry VII who gave him

leave to set sail westwards to look for an alternative passage to the East Indies. The Merchant Venturers of the city helped fund the voyage.

He landed in Canada at what is now Newfoundland in 1497 with a crew of 19 men in the wooden vessel *The Matthew*, a replica of which sits in the harbour.

Colonisation and trade with the Americas began alongside the trading already taking place with Asia and Africa. As a result, the first American Consulate in Britain was opened in Queens Square, Bristol in 1792.

In time, merchants from Bristol – together with those in Liverpool, London, Glasgow and other ports in Europe – became involved in the slave trade. In 1787, Thomas Clarkson moved from Ipswich to Bristol. A friend of William Wilberforce, he was concerned about both the conditions of the sailors and the slaves on board the ships.

He befriended the landlord of the Seven Stars pub who allowed him to use a private room to interview sailors about conditions on board and in the slave markets.

The evidence collected was sent to Wilberforce to help with the fight to abolish slavery at a time when Wilberforce's fight for abolition was flagging.

The very important role of Clarkson was somewhat lost to history until recently when the Bristol Radical History group gathered evidence and published it.

We will all remember the 2020 riots in Bristol that ended in the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston from its plinth and its subsequent dragging into the river.

Citizens had been agitating to have the statue removed during the 1990s but action was finally taken when the Black Lives Matter movement emerged. Since then, some slave traders' names have been removed from schools, roads ➤



► and buildings and the history of the slave trade is being more overtly acknowledged in museums and displays in Bristol and across the country.

A visit to Bristol cannot be complete without mention of its engineering history. Feats such as the half-mile diversion of the River Frome and the making of a floating dock are legend in the town.

We saw the beauty of Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge over the Avon Gorge on our afternoon Tootbus ride around some of the seven hills on which Bristol is built.

The suspension bridge stands on brick supports at both ends. This, we learned, was a world first but not for Isambard Kingdom Brunel; it was the brainchild of Sarah Gibbs, the wife of one of his colleagues.

Lovingly restored

We also saw Brunel's SS Great Britain in the harbour. Launched in 1843 it was called "the greatest experiment since



The ship was used on voyages around the world until it was deemed unsafe

and towed to the Falkland Islands in 1936 and left to rot. It has been lovingly restored and stands proud in Bristol Harbour.

Although we didn't see any graffiti by celebrated street artist and son of Bristol Banksy, we did see some fine street art by locals and we dined in a hotel in College Green.

I am a great fan of the ASCL reunions. It enables us to meet up with old friends and make new ones. The city tours

are always interesting and leave me wanting to find out more.

Why not give it a try next year?



the creation" and was the first ship to use a screw propeller, the first to be built of iron and was the biggest ship in the world for the first ten years of its life.



Pauline Thomas explains how the ASCL Benevolent Fund has come to the aid of members

Most ASCL members will have been fortunate enough not to make use of the ASCL Benevolent Fund but some have had cause to call on it at a time of crisis. There is a small group of committee members and trustees, all trained, who administer grants from the fund to members at critical times in their lives.

Many applicants are retired and suddenly have unfortunate events in their lives at a time when income is not adequate to cover a large cost such as installing equipment in their homes due to a disability resulting from illness or accident.

Others suddenly lose their jobs in unfortunate circumstances while some have sudden events where they need short-term help. Each case is different and considered in detail by the panel very quickly as most applicants need help urgently.

One member contacts the applicant immediately the application is received to understand the situation and discuss the sort of help required.

The chair then considers the funding required and the entire group is contacted for their opinions before the grant is offered to the member.

This grant is then paid very quickly by the HQ team and the case followed, in some cases over a few years.

During that time, the recipients receive other gifts such as flowers and hampers at Christmas and Easter, where appropriate.

One of the applicants I dealt with has agreed to let us share their case anonymously to illustrate how the fund had helped.

Unable to work

They were unable to work due to the side effects of radical hormone therapy, which would then be followed by 21 consecutive days of intensive radiotherapy at a hospital a three-hour drive from home, at a time when they were not fit to drive.

We had an initial phone conversation and it was clear that the very large cost of this in itself would require a grant; at the same time they were paying for mediation with their estranged partner, following a permanent separation in which the partner remained in the house, still with a mortgage.

They were in danger of not being able to pay the rent and facing eviction as they were not yet eligible for state

pension, only the teaching pension. Happily, the entire panel agreed to a grant and they were then able to remain in the house and often stay overnight in the hospital hotel during the treatment, which was successful.

They particularly appreciated the hampers sent at Christmas and Easter.

A new life

We have kept in touch throughout and I have followed them through subsequent hip replacement and cancer tests; there were some bad times but mainly a steady improvement in circumstances and they started a new life.

They have said that things would have been much more difficult without the grant and even wrote a poem celebrating their 62nd birthday – I can't imagine that would have happened without us being able to help.

Keeping up the work we do is really important. If anyone feels they could help, one way is to mention ASCL Benevolent Fund in your will. For more details go to www.ascl.org.uk/BenevolentFund



A FORMULA FOR FULFILMENT



Wendy Sharp looks back on her career as a chemistry teacher when the appliance of science ranged from the Kinetic Theory of Matter to blowing up excess sodium in the school car park

I came from a poor background but I passed the 11+ and followed my elder brother to grammar school. The senior mistress ran a second-hand uniform shop so, mercifully, I didn't look any different from the other pupils – almost all of whom hailed from a rather more well-to-do part of town.

My passion was chemistry, thanks to my inspirational teacher, Mrs Brailsford. She never stopped smiling; we did the most amazing practical work and watched her do some incredible demonstrations. I wanted to be like her.

'Too anthropomorphic'

I remember as clear as yesterday the essay I wrote on the Kinetic Theory of Matter. I had hoped to earn 10/10 but she could only award a 9/10 as my work was 'too anthropomorphic'.

That tendency to be anthropomorphic, however, was to prove helpful to many of my pupils in years to come. I firmly believed that, in order to stand a chance of understanding many scientific principles and laws, one needed a very good imagination.

One has to understand the 'micro' in order to make sense of the 'macro'.

It was thanks to Mrs B that my parents allowed me to go to the recently-created University of York. Its founders were from Cambridge and the pattern of the whole structure, including colleges, was an agreeable homage to the Cambridge system.

We even enjoyed their shorter terms and, although I left as a graduate in chemistry, my degree is a B.Arts, not a B.Science.

I didn't quite make a First, but my upper second class degree was a good foundation for my dream job and I duly completed my PGCE at York.

One of my three teaching practice schools was at the Nunnery in York (now a museum).

The nuns served us with milky coffee every breaktime and a wonderful two-course hot lunch every day. On the down-side for scientists, there were no technicians so all preparation of equipment and chemicals was down to me... as was the washing up afterwards.

The next teaching practice was at the Joseph Rowntree School; it was January 1976 and there was a lot of snow on the ground.

The head of chemistry took his children sledging on my first weekend there and had the misfortune to hit a tree at the bottom of the hill, suffering two detached retinas. These

'I believed that, in order to stand a chance of understanding science, one needed a good imagination'

were stitched back but he had to lie totally still in hospital for six weeks.

I was privileged to work in several schools in my career but have chosen to share snippets from just one. The reason for this is manifold.

First, just as we enthusiastic young chemistry teachers were about to embark on our careers, the trophy was snatched from before our eyes when the Department for Education invented a National Curriculum.

As a chemist, it was a disaster because more than a third of chemistry – the most exciting third I might add – was wiped out.

This cost the government, perhaps, the first signs of failure in recruitment because several of my peers then left teaching and took better-paid jobs in the chemical industry.

Timetable nightmare

Furthermore, since the government demanded all pupils should study 'double science', every secondary school's timetabler had a nightmare in trying to fit physics, chemistry and biology into a slot in the timetable worth only two GCSEs.

When I reached the lofty heights of curriculum deputy some years later, this was to become my headache too.

The 'answer', if one dare to call it that, was that all physicists, chemists and biologists had to be able to teach all three

science subjects. Frankly, such an assumption was insulting to us.

Soon after this, the government had another bright idea called Ofsted and for we chemists, there was an additional problem – COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health) had been invented.

Every lesson, every chemical, had to be checked against the new COSHH rules. We also had to second guess all the things that could possibly go wrong with every experiment we or the pupils did – and say how we would mitigate any disaster,

For my sins, I once accepted a generous offer of free equipment and chemicals from a local hospital. The equipment included a lot of 'quick fit' apparatus which was used in the synthesis of many substances in Nuffield Science chemistry A level.

However, there was a catch as the 'bundle' included chemicals which were of use to us – just not in the quantity supplied. Unperturbed, we duly stored them safely in accordance with COSHH.

Our head technician had done his homework and once the dreaded Ofsted had been announced, he duly called us into the prep room to inform us that we were seriously overstocked with certain items – chiefly the monstrous stuff from the hospital.

One of my two colleagues had done a couple of years in the chemical industry before joining the degree course at York. We generously offered to come into school one weekend and dispose of this excess safely while there were no pupils or other staff present.

Silicon tetrachloride is dodgy stuff. It hydrolyses to produce hydrochloric acid and we had a lot of it.

Fume cupboard

We did our best, my colleague using the fume cupboard in his lab and me in mine. We left the taps running ALL day. Sadly, this did not entirely prevent some harm to the wildlife that existed in the dykes around the school. Thankfully, however, they recovered quickly.

'Silicon tetrachloride is dodgy stuff and we had a lot of it'

Sodium is a wonderfully exciting alkali metal. Any student that hasn't seen a lump of sodium put into water is seriously deprived. It is, in my view, an essential part of every human being's education.

Since sodium bursts into flames in water, it is safer to dispose of it by putting very small pieces into alcohol. The trouble was we would have needed multiple gallons of alcohol to dispose of all the sodium we possessed.

My colleague and I, with our usual whitecoats on and our not-often-used full face masks, decided a more radical approach was needed.

We brought a plastic dustbin into the car park and attached the longest rubber tube we could find to a tap in the biology laboratory and out through a window into the bin.

We filled it. With water. Not alcohol. Didn't have enough.

Unlike school supplies of sodium, this sodium from the hospital was wrapped in airtight, water-tight, foil like a Swiss Roll.

Shower of sodium

Once the first was dropped in the dustbin, we ran away but the shower of molten sodium was rapid and extensive. The Swiss Roll entered the dustbin and rocketed upwards. We spent a good deal of time covering every inch of the car park, pouring water onto the molten sodium and watching the firework show.

It was a long weekend and one we have never forgotten.

Ofsted came and Ofsted went. We were all 'wrung out' by the end of it. The school (on three sites – a nightmare in itself), got through it and, as chemists, we passed muster.

I stayed in touch with my chemistry teacher for the rest of my life. The

highlight of my career was during my first headship when our lovely comprehensive gained 'Specialist School Status'.

We had a special evening to celebrate. By this time I had lost both my parents so I invited Mrs B instead. She came and I struggled not to burst into tears. I told her that I hoped she could stay for the whole evening as I had booked something very special.

Mindful that not everyone would consider the 'something special' to be appropriate use of school funds, I insisted on paying for it from my own personal money.

As the evening drew to a close, I invited everyone to stand with me on the ridge before the playing fields. One of our parents happened to be qualified in executing public fireworks displays.

Stirring tunes

As the tears streamed down my face and I hugged my staff and students – which I'm not sure is even allowed anymore – the town was given a most magnificent firework display as our school orchestra belted out some highly appropriate, stirring tunes.

Those were the days and they were, more importantly, the days of young people who would now belong to a school with better funding, better prospects.

It was my proudest moment. And I shared it with my teacher.

A dear colleague embroidered the saying "To teach is to touch a life for ever" for me when I left that school. I lent it to my chemistry teacher, Mrs B, as she lay on her deathbed, dying of a brain tumour that robbed her of speech.

Over those traumatic weeks, I assured her that her days were remembered with love and affection by many. It rested by her side where she could see it.

Her gravestone graciously acknowledges her teaching career... and her love of fireworks!

LEARNING CURVE

Derek Peale set up a leadership consultancy after completing two decades of headship, aiming to inspire others to help their teams thrive. Last year, the firm was named the Thames Chamber of Commerce's 'Most Promising New Business'

What inspired you to start the business?

It may sound trite, but 'to make a difference, differently' by sharing and applying 20 years' of headship learning and 35 in teaching to other corporate and community settings. To inspire other leaders to help their staff and young people to be the very best that they can be

Who do you work with?

There is an educational focus but I also work with some corporates and charities on their leadership, staff development and governance and a number of education tech companies, alongside school partners, to develop the quality of digital learning. I write bespoke learning resources and CPD programmes for a number of education charities and community

interest companies (CICs). I currently support the development and delivery of the Holidays are Fun (HAF) programme to 77,000 disadvantaged young people in Birmingham.

What benefits do you derive from it personally as well as professionally?

Working in this 'values-led' portfolio is a personal and professional joy! I get to work on – or specifically develop – programmes that I personally value, because I know they will have a positive impact for clients (ultimately, in most cases, young people) alongside people whose values I equally share.

Would you recommend self-employment of this kind to other leaders as a second career?

Unreservedly, yes. You get to 'do' all the creative, strategic aspects of the role

you loved as a headteacher without, being frank, any of the operational grief! You obviously remain accountable for the quality of your performance and impact – otherwise, clients wouldn't retain you – but you are empowered by being released from the trammels of day-to-day bureaucracy and pressures which can emasculate creativity.



CROSSWORD

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BURNING DESIRE

In need of a headline act to light up school events, Tony Richardson stepped up to the (hot) plate to realise a long-held ambition (Don't try this at home!)

In an attempt to persuade a reluctant Parents Society to re-present their very lacklustre Christmas fair as a Victorian Street Market, I listed the attractions we could include – pupils dressed as urchins, acting as acrobats or buskers and so on.

Getting carried away, I included a fire-eater in the list, only to be challenged, of course, with the question "Where are we going to get one of those?"

Not wishing my proposal to be lost in arcane discussion of that very specific question, I said that I would do it and urged them to carry on discussing the rest of the arrangements.

Now I have to reveal that I had always hankered after having a go at fire-eating and fire-breathing; it seemed to be one of those activities that depend to a considerable extent on presentation, the ability to hold an audience and a degree of showmanship.

Not entirely unlike headship, then.

I sought out a previous colleague who I knew had at one time performed in this role and he agreed to instruct me in the art.

It really isn't that difficult – though inherently potentially dangerous and not to be embarked on

lightly. There are essentially three things you can do with fire.

- You can split flammable vapour across a flame, thus producing a spectacular flame several feet in length.
- You can put a burning torch in your mouth and, if you are good, you can extinguish it.
- And you can draw a burning torch across the surface of your skin, giving the appearance of being impervious to heat.

The publicity for the Christmas fair included reference to a mystery fire-eater but it very quickly became common knowledge who that was.

The attendance at the fair outnumbered anything that had ever been seen before and the performance led to an appearance on our local TV news, where I did an ad hoc show, narrowly avoiding setting the stage curtains alight.

I only performed a handful of times and only within school events but I felt that I had learned some valuable lessons that were applicable not just to fire-eating:

1 Know who your friends are.

On the way to the first performance, my wife asked who I was going ask to hold

the fire blanket ready in case I set myself alight. Her view was that it would be unwise to trust a member of staff with that role – they might not put you out! She thought a sixth-former a better bet.

2 Appreciate the often unsung contribution of the supporting act

I had the good fortune to have the support of a drummer who was really good at building up tension, excitement and anticipation and allowing me to have an act. Without the drummer, there was no act, just a bloke mucking about. We all have people who back us, support us, build us up and so on and we should understand their value.

3 The laws of physics are immutable – heat rises!

Passing a burning torch close to the skin above a horizontal arm looks good and doesn't hurt. Trying the same thing underneath the arm is extremely painful and seriously to be avoided. Eating fire – putting a burning torch into your mouth requires your head to be tipped back and horizontal and the flame to be vertical!

4 Be careful what you promise - even in the heat of the moment

Perhaps best heeded by politicians!

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