

John Thorn

Born 1925.

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1. Introduction



Leaving St. Paul's School during the Second World War, John Thorn joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, in which he served as a Sub-Lieutenant from 1943 to 1946. On returning to civilian life, he took up a place at Corpus Christi, graduating in 1949, and was then an assistant schoolmaster at Clifton from 1949 until being appointed headmaster of Repton in 1961. From 1968 until 1985 he was headmaster of Winchester College. In 1981, he was Chairman of the Headmasters' Conference.

After his retirement from Winchester, where he has continued to live, Thorn was an educational consultant and also a writer, as well as serving on a number of public and charitable bodies.

He was a director of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, from 1971 to 1976; a Trustee of the British Museum from 1980 to 1985, and of the Winchester Cathedral Trust, from 1986 to 1989; Vice-Chairman of the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust from 1989 to 1992, then its Chairman until 1996; for some years he served on the Executive Committee of the Cancer Research Campaign. He was Chairman of Governors of Abingdon School from 1991 to 1994 and was also a Governor of Oakham School and of Stowe School during the 1980s.

2. Pauline Profile

The following was archived in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Old Paulines website.

In his last year at Cambridge, John Thorn was considering academic research but changed his mind when Desmond Lee, the Head of Clifton College who had been his senior tutor at Corpus, “summoned him to teaching.” Before World War II, John lived in Chiswick (two doors down from the Madge family) and attended Colet Court. His first term at St Paul’s coincided with the evacuation to Crowthorne and he never set foot as a pupil in Waterhouse’s buildings in West Kensington.

Walter Oakeshott (right) was High Master, who John describes as a “very great High Master. He was not a good organiser or administrator but he had the likes of Alan Cook to do that”. Oakeshott left St Paul’s in 1946 to take on the headship at Winchester. John’s memories of Crowthorne (where the boys were billeted) and Easthampstead Park (where they were taught) were of a time of few rules but very good behaviour. “Everyone just behaved because there was a war on”.



They bicycled the three miles from Crowthorne for lessons. He describes Crowthorne as “an ugly village with housing for Broadmoor workers. Its only redeeming feature was a cinema”. In the 8th form, he switched from Classics to History and was taught by Mr Eynon Smith who “was dominating and rather frightening but was the greatest teaching influence on me without being a good teacher. We were lucky to be at school then because there was no obvious syllabus and Eynon Smith would unexpectedly teach us about the history of medicine or lurch into political theory”. Eynon Smith was killed in an air raid in 1944 while staying at the house of the sister of Colet Court’s Headmaster. Another master he remembers is George Rude who was openly a communist (not unusual in the Common Room during the 1930s and World War II) but could not keep order.

There was little organised sport during the war. John describes himself as “adequate” at boxing. This did not suit the master in charge, Bo Langham, who was “an incredibly successful fanatic”. He remembers two school friends well, Ian Collin (1939-43) and Keith Hamylton Jones (1937-42). Ian was Captain of School when John was a prefect, reprimanding John for not policing cycling assiduously enough. Ian spent three years in the RAF before reading History at Corpus with John and beating him at squash twice a week. The “delightfully mad” Keith joined the Welsh Guards on leaving school and, after being a POW, entered the FCO. John remembers that a posting to Warsaw ended abruptly after Keith tore down a poster of Stalin.

Joining the Navy was a strange choice as John could not swim and suffered terribly from seasickness. After initial training, he saw active service on HMS Eskimo in

the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans before arriving in Durban for a refit a few days after the Hiroshima bomb was dropped. On her return to England, Eskimo was scrapped and John was posted to HMS Zambesi. His final posting was in command of HMS Tumult. This did not end well with Tumult torn from her buoy in a gale and thrown on a mud bank when he was enjoying a weekend's leave in London. After the Navy, he took up his place at Cambridge leaving in 1949 with a first-class degree and "a very patchy knowledge of the Middle Ages". While on leave from the Navy and at Corpus, he continued to attend the St Paul's Christian Union becoming a House Party officer while at Cambridge.



HMS Tumult, was a T Class Destroyer, built during the Second World War.

In his autobiography 'Road to Winchester', John wrote, "I valued the friendship, the idealism, the vision of what human relationships could be which my visits to the House Parties gave me". John felt "ill-prepared for teaching" when he arrived at Clifton but appears to have mastered it quite quickly. He was soon head of history and, after marrying Veronica, took on a dayboy house which "I was to run fumblingly and uncertainly". He liked Bristol particularly its wine merchants.

In 1960, John received a letter inviting him to lunch with the then Lord Montgomery ((1902-06), School Governor 1948-68)) who was interested in him as the next High Master. "The job rightly went to Tom Howarth, one of Monty's staff officers and then Second Master at Winchester; the hot favourite all along. And Tom was to do a wonderful job at St Paul's." John attained his first headship in 1961 and stayed seven years at Repton School (still in the shadow of former Headmaster and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher) rather regretting taking the job. "I wasn't good at it and didn't like it. It was too gamesy. The staff room was sport dominated and it was very difficult to start up the intellectual life."

In 1967, he learnt that his summoner to teaching, Desmond Lee (right), was to retire as Headmaster of Winchester College. Veronica was no lover of the Derbyshire countryside and encouraged John to apply. To his delight he discovered that Tom Howarth had not



applied as he was on “a wave-crest and perhaps thinking that Winchester was unlikely to be as exciting as the academic forcing-house, now sited on the south bank of the Thames”. To his surprise at the age of 43, he was appointed. But “at Winchester, problems were not slow in coming... Drugs arrived at Winchester about a year before I did”. One of the two friends John had on his arrival was Tony Wood (1937-42) with whom John had been billeted in Crowthorne. With the help of Tony, he set to and, during his time at Winchester with the sale of the The Malory Manuscript of Le Morte D’Arthur (discovered by Walter Oakeshott in the 1930s), Winchester introduced a bursary scheme and made its entrance examination more maintained school friendly.



A detail from the Malory Manuscript of Le Morte D’Arthur.

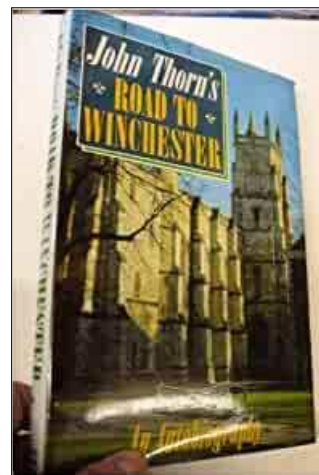
After retiring from Winchester, John had “my most enjoyable time as a teacher” preparing very able boys and girls at Portsmouth Grammar School for their Oxbridge entrance examinations. He thought co-education worked well and is delighted to hear that girls are set to enter the Eighth Form at St Paul’s. “How can you be promoting diversity if you only educate half the population?” Repton is now fully co-ed. “This was easy enough, given the space there; you just build a couple of new boarding houses”.

At Winchester, “there was never any pressure for taking girls and it would have been a significant architectural challenge”. Until a few months ago, John and his late wife, Veronica lived in Winchester when he acted for a time and “not very effectively” as a director of the Royal Opera House and as a trustee of the British Museum. He now lives in the Sunrise Home in Winchester. He would welcome any Pauline visitors. The conversation will not be dull.

3. The Road to Winchester

John Thorn published in 1989 his autobiography, The Road to Winchester. The following review of the book by physical educationist Malcolm Tozer was archived in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the academia.edu website.

Two new brooms arrived at Winchester College in the autumn term of 1968, each determined to make sweeping changes in the physical education programme of this most prestigious public school. One was John Thorn, a surprise appointment for this plum headmastership; the other was Geoff Dyson, out to break new ground as 'Director of Physical Education'.



The Road to Winchester is Thorn's autobiography - he retired as headmaster in 1985 - but in part it is a memorial to an enthusiastic tilt at the windmills of athleticism. The Winchester windmills, however, proved resilient, making the physical education innovations a spectacular and glorious failure, so it is Thorn's recollection of these events that provide the greatest interest to the physical educationist and the sports historian.

Fortunately for the cause of physical education in the public schools, similar experiments were more successful elsewhere (though others were even more disastrous), and collective and concerted action enabled Thorn, but not Dyson, to see eventual victory at Winchester. Thorn's appointment to Winchester was not the only surprise, for many wondered at Dyson's translation. For some 20 years he had been the supremo of British athletics: senior national coach, mentor to the likes of Bannister and Chataway, and the inspiration that produced the golden athletic performances at the Tokyo and Mexico City Olympiads.

Now, at the height of his fame, Dyson fell out with the Amateur Athletic Association, turned his back on athletics (refusing even to coach the boys at Winchester) and sought a new stage for the final act of his long and distinguished career. Years of taking athletics to public schools, where its status was well below that of cricket and its activities were usually restricted to a few weeks at the end of a freezing spring term, convinced Dyson that physical education in the public schools was antiquated, and that he could put it right.

Acting on the assumption that Winchester was probably the most antiquated of all the schools, and that if he conquered there the war was probably won, Dyson set out to persuade its headmaster, Desmond Lee, of the missionary importance of his work. He succeeded. Geoff Hodges, the ex-naval captain who ran physical training at Winchester (and who contributed much to the development of circuit training) was about to retire; Lee saw to it that Dyson would be provided with the first of the sports centres soon to be common at most of the public schools; and in September 1968 Dyson arrived to begin his missionary work.

Thorn's road to Winchester was very different, but he brought a similar missionary zeal. As a day-boy at his prep school and a war-time evacuee from St Paul's School to Wellington College in Berkshire, Thorn escaped the excesses of a traditional public-school upbringing. No fagging, no beatings, no compulsory games; the Paulines were Bohemian scholars who would mock the Wellington hearties.

Though Thorn was to spend all his working life in boarding schools, he never lost the belief that such schools could be rigid and cruel, and that day-school boys gained a better all-round education. After National Service in the Navy and study at Cambridge - and almost no athletic activity on the way - Thorn was appointed to the staff at Clifton College, where the headmaster was Desmond Lee, soon to move to Winchester. Thorn and his contemporaries were to be Lee's new wave - challenging the brutality of cloistered life, scoffing at the games-worship, bringing in a buzz of ideas, delighting in music and the arts - and they enjoyed taunting the old guard in the common room over their belief that the compulsory playing and watching of games significantly improved character.

Lee had marked out Thorn for higher office, for soon he was off to Repton as its young headmaster - a case out of the frying pan and into the fire. If games were important at Clifton, they were worshipped at Repton. At Clifton the games masters were intellectuals and games players; at Repton they were just games players. Most public schools of the period had such men - more often than not cricketer-classicists relegated to teaching the junior forms - but Repton had more than its share, and they included the three most senior housemasters.

Thorn soon learnt that he was in the school of C.B.Fry and Harold Abrahams, Harry Altham and the sons of Len Hutton, yet this crusader for a new liberal education stuck to his task. He won some notable victories - caning was to go, music and art were encouraged - but a dearth of expected victories on the games field brought a conservative reaction, and soon Thorn was scanning the job vacancies.

Lee's retirement from Winchester was thus timely, and Thorn got the job ahead of the favourites, Dancy of Marlborough and Howarth of St Paul's. Those unlikely allies, Thorn and Dyson, came their separate roads to the same challenge. Winchester may not have been as hearty as Repton, and it was certainly never philistine, but there were many to protect its precious traditions and to cock a snook at pretentious innovation - and most, boys and masters, had the intellectual wit and the pugnacity of character to make a good fight of it.

Thorn (wisely?) left Dyson to do the running. Much innovative work in physical education had succeeded at Mill Hill, Bryanston, Gordonstoun and elsewhere in the 1930s, but the dispersal and disruption caused by the war had halted its expansion. Gerald Murray then moved from Mill Hill to Marlborough, and in the 1950s he pioneered new trends, including circuit training and remedial gymnastics. By the time of Dyson's appointment at Winchester PE was beginning to gain over PT in the public schools, team games were becoming more than combat for the few and occupation for the many, and a broad range of sports and games was being adopted to satisfy the needs of more boys.

For a man of quiet patience and gentle reasoning, with some reverence for the traditions of the school and a belief that there must have been some good in the games programme, Winchester was ripe for change: but Dyson was not such a man. He made no attempt to understand the community, he scoffed at Winchester football, and he turned his back on the cricket.

He shouted a lot, yet the boys did not jump. The new broom was resisted, and then rejected. Dyson provided T-shirts with '100' on the front for those who ran 100 miles in the course of a term - the boys made their own, with 'mm' inscribed after the '100'; and soon his sports centre notices were defaced with the addition of a little 'o' between the initials GD. The hint was taken and Dyson (right) soon relinquished his position, retiring to lecture, write and travel. When he died, Winchester Cathedral was full for his funeral service; but few from the College attended.



Yet, as Thorn relates, it should not have been so. Dyson's views on physical education and the games masters' concern for school sport need not have clashed; but Dyson pushed too hard, inducing a reaction that was equally extreme. Coexistence was impossible at Winchester; happily it worked well elsewhere. Dyson's ideas were indeed sound, and many of his innovations are commonplace today in the independent schools - mainly through the impact he had on the new generation of physical education masters who visited him at Winchester or who came under his spell at the inaugural Independent Schools Physical Education Conference, staged by Brian Ashley at Marlborough in 1970.

Some of his ideas would still cause controversy today: his ideal department would contain a British graduate, an American graduate and a Naval PTI; and boys would have to pass objective physical tests at the end of each school year to secure their form promotion. But the main lesson to be learnt from the Dyson years at Winchester is how not to bring about change.

His short-term legacy was a white elephant of a sports centre and a community that had rejected the message of physical education in its rebellion against the missionary. Thorn, however, had more patience - or had learnt the lesson - and most that Dyson sought to achieve came to fruition under the charge of others. Their fervour was no less, but they applied it with greater tact. And those T-shirts are now worn with pride: the wearers call it the 'Dyson 100', though they have little idea who Dyson was.

Repton

John Thorn's time at Repton is described in the following which is extracted from a review by Malcolm Tozer of Hugh Brogan's book 'A School in England: the History of Repton' published in 2020.

The chapters for the next half-century guide the reader through the militarisation of the Edwardian years; the industrial challenge to Latin, Greek and a ‘gentlemanly education’; more great cricketers; the innovation of prefects and their privilege to beat miscreants; school inspections and a ‘devastating’ report – ‘the standard was exceedingly low’; and Lionel Ford’s admission that ‘we cannot yet call ourselves a clever school’.

Two future Archbishops of Canterbury – William Temple and Geoffrey Fisher – led Repton from 1910 to 1932. The first was a four-year fresh breeze who ‘disliked inflicting punishment’ and saw cricket as ‘organised loafing’; the latter, appointed at 27, steered the school through the horrors of the Great War and led it to an era of stability and high pupil rolls in the 1930s. Fisher modernised the curriculum, encouraged Victor Gollanz and the teaching of Civics, provoked rebellion from Roald Dahl and other schoolboy critics, and encouraged more sport (Harold Abrahams, Olympic 100m champion in 1924, and Bunny Austin, ranked second in world tennis in the 1930s).

On his departure, Repton ‘sank back into the ruck’ and followed the cult of athletics. Stagnation set in, numbers plummeted, boarding houses were closed, masters were sacked and salaries cut. In 1941 Repton was judged as one of 13 public schools with ‘a doubtful future’. It fell to Lynam Thomas – ‘venerable, benign and formidable’ – to revive the corpse, to move the school from the Victorian era to the Elizabethan, and to recapture the earlier buoyancy.

Luck brought him a calm Conservative sea, a fair wind, industrialists’ support for science, a strong staff and a thriving prep school. Numbers reached 491 on his retirement. But the state’s grammar-school threat was growing and Repton’s ‘comprehensive’ intake was losing in the race for university places and professional careers.

A new broom was needed. John Thorn received the brief to raise scholarship and broaden cultural opportunities – the sporty old guard of housemasters responded oafishly. Brain predictably beat brawn. A wave of new teachers was appointed; academic standards rose; Oxbridge places were won (five awards and 12 places in 1967); art, music and drama were valued; beatings and fagging went; and domestic comforts reached studies and dormitories. Thorn’s seven years of hard labour were rewarded with the prize of Winchester’s headship.
