

Sir William Gladstone, Bt., KG, 1925-2018.

**Contributions from Nigel Wheeler (Olds 1963-1968) and John Trotter (Olds 1964-1969)  
and Robin Reeve (Common Room 1962-1980)**

We pupils of the late 60s knew that Willie was no ordinary Head Master. He carried an air of calmness, dignity and authority about him. We respected him and admired him. We liked him. To us, he handled the major occasions and problems sensitively and with effectiveness, whether it be the centenary celebrations of the chapel, the untimely deaths of two of our number in a single term or the dismissal of seven boys in one of the first newspaper reported school drug scandals, Willie seemed in control.

He was not an obvious disciplinarian but he demanded standards. A new, young, female caterer discovered that if kippers were served at Monday breakfast, only fifty boys would eat them; so fifty were ordered. An observant wag alerted the school to this fact. Four hundred and twenty kippers were demanded; a mini riot broke out; the caterer burst into tears and Willie summoned all to Great School. 'You have shown ungentlemanly behaviour to a lady' he said. 'Next week's Saint's Day is cancelled'.

On the last night of a summer term, a foolish joke of carrying a master's diminutive motorcar up the steps of the Lower Quad with a 'For Sale' notice upon it meant retribution from on high. Those admitting to the crime, all leavers, assembled in The Head Master's study. 'I shall treat this episode as an undergraduates' prank', he said. 'You're all fined £4' and with that familiar twinkle in his eye, 'Now good luck and enjoy your holidays'. The money was deposited straight into The Chapel Funds.

The author of a sketch in a house play in 1969 dared to include 'a word from our sponsor' in the form of a poor but recognisable imitation of one of the Head Master's distinctive aristocratic vowel sounds. It was a measure of the man and our relationship with him that we felt bold enough to do this and that he was good enough to take it in the best of good humour. Willie defined his approach at that time: 'The boys needed scope, including space and time. They needed more freedom to form and express their ideas, in spite of the fact that some of those ideas would be immature and silly, and indeed sometimes outrageous. They too needed to be encouraged to take decisions, and to be responsible for the consequences...'

Willie was to us all a courteous and civilised man who wore his privilege with modesty. Some of those lucky enough to have roles as prefects enjoyed some surprising and enlightening hospitality. Prefects meetings took place in The Old Farmhouse and port was passed amongst us, naturally to the left; dinner was given with beef from Willie's Scottish estate. Style indeed for ones so young!

He had a lifelong interest in wildlife, in the environment and (like his great-grandfather) in forestry. He was also an accomplished water-colourist. More than one successful applicant for a Lancing scholarship can remember being quizzed by him at interview about somewhat obscure bird calls – to the perplexity of the other interviewing masters.

Last October I visited St. George's Chapel, Windsor and found his seat, banner and regalia. I wrote to him to ask why the martlet birds and a blooded head were on the Gladstone crest. I received a long and amusing letter that admitted that he really had no idea! How sad not to see that banner in position for the Royal Wedding.

The fifty years of public service that he spent after Lancing were all represented and movingly summarised by his son, Charlie at his funeral – ten years as Chief Scout, (a guard of honour of Scouts standing outside St Deiniol's church), 15 years as Lord Lieutenant of Flintshire and 29 years as a Knight of the Garter. Charlie said that his father wanted the funeral to be a celebration not just of life but of death – as death should be celebrated when a life has been a full one and not prematurely ended. At 92, his had been a life full of interests and service- and support from an adoring family. From what he has told us, there is no doubt that his time at Lancing, finished almost fifty years ago, remained for him to the end a special and important chapter of his life.

**Nigel Wheeler (Olds 1963-1968) and John Trotter (Olds 1964-1969)**

I first met Willie Gladstone in the autumn of 1961. I was 27 and had been teaching History at KCS Wimbledon for nearly four years. I had applied for the Head of History post at Lancing after Roger Lockyer had decided to take up a permanent appointment at Royal Holloway College.

I think I was Willie's first appointment, although I have not checked the archives, but I knew very little about Lancing. But the great Prime Minister had a place in my heart because I had lived in the nineteenth century for much of my history career at school. So, perhaps, at that interview my curiosity matched that of the Headmaster!

Willie did not overawe – which is not to say that he couldn't. He was immensely welcoming, encouraging and, apparently, although in his first year, completely at ease. He let me talk – probably far too much – but I learned later that is the best way to interview. Looking back the qualities I sensed then were exactly the ones that characterised the man and had been shaped by his family life and naval and Eton experience.

I still have the letters Willie wrote following the interview. As is often the case he had some sorting out to do before making the appointment, but he made it clear that he would like me, and us, to come. The letter of appointment, which came just before Christmas, asked me to reply to Fasque, Laurencekirk, KINCARDINESHIRE, Scotland. As it had been decided that the College would build a new house for us in Hoe Court there would have been no delay in my reply.

What do I remember, and what do I think about Willie's Lancing years? I speak as both admirer and friend, for we were in touch for many of the remaining – many – years of his life. Willie enjoyed people. That was evident if you happened to sit next to him at lunch and, whether at the High Table or not, it was impossible not to notice him enjoying both conversation and the laughter that arose from it. If remoteness and stuffiness were qualities that were thought to belong to the 'Establishment' in the 60's, they had no counterpart at Lancing. Willie's regime was genuinely liberal and humane. If you need proof, try to see his last photo with the Common Room. Taken in the Lower Quad it shows Willie holding a winded pigeon, whose presence was inescapable, but only he had the courage to bring into the scene.

Willie also knew about leading by example. Writing this I suddenly remembered, the enormous effort he put into the Chapel fetes of that period; not just their planning but, equally, front line action on the day. And his Common Room? Well, the Headmaster's party, at the Old Farmhouse, which Willie and Rosamund gave at the end of their last term lingers in my mind as the epitome of hospitality, of summer, and of affectionate regret. But Willie did not leave Lancing. He remained deeply attached to it for the rest of his life.

**Robin Reeve (Common Room 1962-1980)**