

Paper given by Francis William King (1907-1981) at a United Ushers (UU) meeting, c.1967, in which he compared his own experiences as a housemaster at Winchester 1952-1965, with those of his father, Henry Robinson King (1855-1935), who was a housemaster at Sherborne School 1900-1919.

Henry Robinson King

In November 1924, the U.U. (a group of Public School masters who met for the reading of a paper and discussion, eating and drinking, etc.) heard an essay entitled '41 years of it'. The essayist (Henry Robinson King), then aged 69, doubted if a Headmaster were wise to allow a colleague to outstay his welcome. 'Alas', he said, 'we change and grow tired, not so much of boys as of ourselves with boys. During his 41 years at Sherborne, he had noticed great changes (1883-1924). First in religion: flippancy had gone: the war had made men and boys more thoughtful. The effect of that on their social attitude is felt. Boys did not regard the workman as a cad or a blog any longer.

'Secondly,' he said, 'in work: the old standards which were considered sufficient for any subject except the Classics had been replaced by new efficient standards. The 'get on with your work' man no longer existed. Whether the insistence on 'teaching' had benefitted the Classics was an open question. Certainly, too much 'business' and too little leisure was harmful. We should cultivate a wise passivity.

'Thirdly, great changes in medical science and equipment were observable. But why were epidemics so severe?

'Fourthly, the masters themselves had changed completely. Fear was banished from the form-room. If one heard peals of laughter from certain rooms, one might be sure the division was laughing with, and no longer at the presiding deity. But games were tremendously solemn. Visitant and itinerant preachers stirred out emotions. Bach Concertos were listened to with appreciation. Histrionics had become almost a form subject in the teaching of English, vast improvements, but taste was decadent. Sensationalism was the key-note.'

HRK had gone to Sherborne in 1883 and never taught anywhere else. But like many of the best schoolmasters he had tried another profession first: (how few of the best of us are sons of schoolmasters). Born in 1855 in a Westmorland vicarage, HRK went to school at Clifton [in 1869], the choice of this distant school being due to his family's acquaintance with Percival, its Headmaster, who had been a boy at Appleby Grammar School. He left Clifton [in 1875], just after his 20th birthday and went up to Oxford with a scholarship to Exeter. In the middle of his penultimate term when he was 24 and about to take Greats, HRK writes in his diary, "Though I cannot say that divine philosophy is as musical as Apollo's lute (except perhaps for Plato), yet it is far the best part of the Greats work and I hope not to give it up after the ordeal is past. Already I feel much useless remorse at having played the dilettante in reading – of course if I had methodically gone in for searching out the best that has been said and done in the world, I would not have cared for my degree and this is what I would choose to do even now. The worst of such work is that with an irresolute person it must be dilettantism, and has been so with me. It seems to me that Herodotus as got up for Greats involves great labour and is nearly useless – so too Cicero's letters are not worth the toil of mastery. The Republic is sublime – perhaps the Ethics. I don't know enough to say this Thucydides is good, and the logic most valuable; and I have cared for none of these things, but dabbled in pictures, gone enthusiastically many times over the Lake District, read Shakespeare and Matthew Arnold. This is a statement of my career here at the eleventh hour". There follows a statement of work done – "This week 42 hours – average 7 hours. Poor."

HRK left Oxford [in 1879] with a 3rd: "no one much disappointed or concerned with my degree". "I am to be a solicitor" – he was articled to a firm in Kendal. In 1881 he passed his Intermediate Law exams in April, having read that month two books of Homer and six satires of Juvenal; in May 1881 he records that he has by now read all Shakespeare at least three times. In June he went to stay with his younger brother, then a master at Rossall. "Query: should I like to be a master?" The visit was repeated next year; "I went to Rossall for a couple of days to see Calc. We walked to Blackpool by the shore and saw a bad piece, and a good deal of vulgarity for which the place is unrivalled". "The Bank holidayers seem principally to be slumbering in the sunshine. They suggested overwork and vile towns." "My visit to Rossall perhaps a little uninteresting. The masters are hospitable but should not talk so much Rossall shop before strangers."

September 29th, 1882. "I went into Kendal and saw Greenwood. He informed me that I could have a seat in their agent's office in Gray's Inn; also a kind of adumbration of a scheme for my remaining at Windermere all my life and making my fortune there. Will anything come of this? It is, if so, the most notable thing yet contained in this true history."

November 28th: "I passed my final and am a qualified solicitor. I wish I were."

1883 (aet.27). "I am working at Law in Gray's Inn Lane, not very successfully.. I go to courts every day to get inspiration. Gradually came to a momentous decision which affected my whole future ("and which I have never regretted" – he writes in 1904). He went to see the new opera *Iolanthe*, and like it better than *Patience*.

HRK got a temporary place at Clifton for a few weeks [in 1883] and then another temporary place at Sherborne, where he was to remain 3 weeks. "I made two good friends on the staff – James Rhoades and [Edward Hawtrey] Donkin who spoke for me to E.M. Young (Headmaster and foundation member of U.U.) who didn't like me at all." By some fortunate accident I stayed on and was finally appointed."

HRK stayed at Sherborne for 41 years [1883-1925]. He liked his form (IVA) and he liked Sherborne. May 9th 1884: "In harness once again, thank goodness! I like Sherborne and I like Wasdale Head – no other spots very much." "In lieu of the old IVA den, I and the form got our promotion into the best classroom of the school. We have ceased "to take places" in form and began to use notebooks and swagger generally." But later that year – "it seems very doubtful whether the old plan of changing places is not the best. The form is kept alive, tho' the fairness of marking is less." June – same year, 1884 – "I get no reading done, alas, or next to none – beside my work."

Sherborne at this time was in anything but a flourishing state. E.M. Young, later to be described by Nowell Smith as "a fine scholar and warm hearted but injudicious HM", involved himself and the school in a major row in which several of the staff were sacked and one of these sued the Headmaster. The suit came on in 1889, and judgement was given for Young; but the school was down to 230 in 1889 and 140 next year. The following year the governors asked Young to resign.

The school recovered slowly under his genial successor, F.B. Westcott, but continued to be short of entrants, particularly entrants of ability. HRK notes with disapproval the appearance of an advertisement for the school in the 'Spectator' in 1899 – "a net increase in the school of 16 boys – not, I hope, because of the advertisement." "The school is in an extraordinary want of ability; IVA seems more and more denuded of it. Yet a school like King's Canterbury professes 14 Scholarships a year. He we get almost none." "The Headmaster combines weakness with obstinacy. He is one of the feeblest men in England where courage and resolution are wanted, and yet all schools short of the highest want him to rule over them." January 1900: "The school has 14 new boys: in fact it goes on neither prospering nor altogether failing."

Having married (aged 43) HRK became a housemaster in 1900 (aged 45) and having taken over in the middle of the Boer War, remained in charge till the end of the First World War, retiring from his house (Abbeylands), though not from his teaching, at the age of 64. This was too late, as he admitted; but marrying at 43 and having a family of five whose education cost between £500-£600, it would have been hard to give up the profits of housemastering. HRK made a regular profit on the house during the first years of the century – about £500 p.a. after all the bills had been paid (including family holidays etc.), but as the family became older and more expensive and food bills soared with the war, the profit dwindled till it became by 1919 a loss.

HRK's House flourished, and he enjoyed it [HRK was housemaster of Abbeylands 1900-1919].

September 19th, 1900: "The boys came back and I became a real housemaster, responsible for 25 boys."

September 23rd, 1900: "The house seems interesting work. I intend to look after the boys more closely than my predecessor, and in work also."

October 13th, 1900: "All runs smoothly in the house except that the gas bill seems enormous."

November 10th, 1900: "The House seems fairly satisfactory, but no new boys heard of. Don't in the least see why boys should be attracted to Sherborne unless their parents are enamoured of the picturesque. Our boys are not very learned, nor religious, nor gentlemanlike (like Radley), nor very moral, nor particularly manly or self-reliant... The staff is declining in quality."

1902 (Spring): HRK began his little edition of Pindar and continued about two hours a day all term.

1902 (Autumn): "Very successful term; private reading bad; Pindar in abeyance."

By 1904: "Pindar actually came out, a handsome book and inexpensive. It ought to be used if there is sense in schoolmasters." [H.R. King (ed.) *Myths from Pindar* (London, George Bell & Sons) published 28 March 1904].

Summer 1904: "The House is in a satisfactory state, which could not be said of the other outhouses in this Lilliputian public school."

July 1904: "All is going well, except the prosperity of the school, and my private reading."

1906: HRK went twice to U.U. meetings and compared Eton and Marlborough with 'Lilliputian' Sherborne – "this place is far from prosperous but whether it deserves to be I am not quite sure. The HM seems paralysed in will; the housemasters are not remarkable although as good as some of those I saw at Eton. We have nothing wherewith to attract the vulgar public." In June, HRK went to Marlborough, "the school very well behaved and better disciplined than ours." But HRK's house continued to flourish: "I must not get careless in prosperity but am always afraid of over doing it. '*Polypragmosune*' in Housemasters is bad."

1907: HRK was increasingly unhappy about the staff and what he would call the Sherborne "image". "The ladies of the staff are ill, absent or non-effectual: new masters mainly not gentlemen."

July 1907: "gentlemen badly wanted on the staff."

September 1907: "Two new masters – one experienced scientist with a strong accent [Robert Elliot Steel]." "The staff as a social body is fast reaching its nadir."

But in 1908 Westcott was going. HRK hoped that his friend Costley-White would succeed him but there were rumours that a scientist was to be the man. All these reflections however were concealed in an ancient language "vulgatur fama Album Pretiosum, virum insignem, hic non regnaturum esse sed nescioquem Scientiae Naturalis peritum. Si ita, periit scholar: actum est."

Sherborne's ill-fortune was not over, for the man to whom the governors did appoint came as a sick man and died within a year [Charles Henry Thursfield Wood]. He was succeeded by Nowell Charles Smith, once a fellow of Magdalen, Oxford and then a housemaster at Winchester; and there begins a new chapter. In 1910, HRK writes "The school really flourishing for the first time." He had been there 27 years and was 55 years old.

As the school recovered, HRK found himself less happy in his house, and was full of gloomy prognostications about the state of the world. "Somehow it's difficulty to keep up enthusiasm over 50". "House supper noisy and merry but one was not very proud of the dozen old boys present". "I tire of talk and jokes." Of the state of the nation, he had written in 1907, "Public events are in a sordid condition which seems normal now," and in 1908 there had been a debate on "Decadence" on which HRK comments "I find nearly all boys, old and young, think England on her last legs. IVA have an essay on this topic."

But the gloom was temporary. In November 1909, he describes himself (aged 54) as happy in health and new studies. His house had a new lease of glory; because Nowell Smith was a layman, he decided to read for ordination and was ordained in time to baptise his fifth child in 1910 [Charles Mason King (1910-1987)].

Should we Housemasters of the second Elizabeth age envy those of the Edwardian period? In good times a tidy sum could be made and the bachelor was well off, at any rate in those schools that had a satisfactory waiting list ('a regular gold-mine' was the description of housemastering at Winchester made by a retired housemaster to my bachelor predecessor when he went to Sergeants in 1933).

But they suffered more from incompetent headmasters and from incompetent Governing bodies. The Governors of Sherborne in the first quarter of this century were a collection of Dorset noblemen and gentry who met at Sherborne Castle. It is astonishing that Sherborne ever got a good Headmaster.

Domestic labour was available and comparatively manageable. There were plenty of good, well brought up country girls who started at £9-£10 p.a., slept in a communal bedroom in the attics, and filed into the Housemaster's dining room every morning for family prayers under the eye of the parlour maid (at £18 p.a. and the cook at £20).

And the boys? Children brought up by nannies and on nursery meals were less demanding in the way of domestic comfort and attractive food than the products of the small family unites of today, living with their parents and their parents' friends, in a household where mothers and sisters do the cooking and are willing to study the boy's likes and dislikes.

Were HRK's boys 1900-1919 were difficult or less difficult than mine of 1951-1965? Impossible to say. Two boys in his 19 years share with Alec Waugh (Shirburnian author of *The Loom of Youth*) the comment '*miaros miarotaton*' – stronger language than I would have used of any of my charges. More boys from HRK's house were expelled, but at that time it was normal to expel those convicted of theft or of "immorality">

Three boys left HRK's house between 1900 and 1914 because their parents could not afford to keep them, and four or five 'stoliditatis causa' or 'stultitiae causa' or, in one case, 'left, without education.' Commenting each term on conduct, HRK wrote with steady satisfaction (1909, "v.g. as usual"; 1913, "v.g. probably high watermark") until the latter years of the Great War introduced a less satisfied note – 1916 "the house not particularly slack, but futile." In 1918 "Fair, no scandals". Four boys left under clouds in 1917-1918; and with his characteristic realism and candour HRK comments in June 1918, "in two terms 4/5ths of the leavers left by request."

At the same time he passed his parents in review and reached the following conclusions (I translate from the Latin): "Reviewing the parents of our boys (37 of them), I put thirteen in the first class, fourteen in the second class, and ten in the 5th class – I mean the lowest. When I take this into account, videtur tota puerorum cohors summis virtutibus praestare."

"Immorality" was fortunately diminishing when I became a housemaster in the post-Freudian era and is now an infrequent anxiety. The housemaster's difficulties are much more concerned with what the Germans called 'das Gentleman Idea', the senior boys' reluctance to enforce discipline, or to conform to our idea of tidy and becoming dress, or to our out-moded code of courtesy.

What fascinates me when I contemplate HRK's 19 years as a housemaster is the amount of private reading and private life that he managed to enjoy, although he intended "to look after the boys more carefully than his predecessor." HRK was newly married when he took over his house, but this did not deter him from launching a literary society in the same year and embarking on an edition of selections from Pindar. He also managed conscientiously to keep up a habit of private reading. Classics and English and later (when reading for Ordination) Divinity; and to explore Dorsetshire on bicycle.

Where was the time saved? Reports, I think, were less elaborate. HRK, having left for Scotland or Westmorland the day after term, would polish off what he called 'parents letters' in the first day or two of his holiday. Half term reports were unknown, and parental visits during term were exceptional. Houses were smaller (35 instead of 45, my average in 1951-65) and all the apparatus of University Entrance was not dreamed of.

Teaching commitments of housemasters were at least as considerable as now, but time was saved on teaching. HRK was a form master; practically IVA saw only HRK and HRK saw only IVA. He taught them history and English and Divinity as well as Classics, but I don't think the History or English or Divinity caused him much sitting up late at night. Even when the system of "taking places" was abandoned and "notebooks" were introduced in IVA, I fancy that time was saved on correction; and being more independent of fashion than the reader, HRK was not one to read books about books. He read the English, Latin and Greek classics, his own chosen favourites among them; he read these over and over again, but though he founded and for about 25 years ran, a literary society, he did not buy or read much criticism and had no temptation to read any book because it was 'important'.

Polypragmosyne! "Polypragmosyne in a housemaster is bad" wrote HRK in 1906. "I must not get careless in prosperity but am always afraid of over doing it; Polypragmosyne in a housemaster is bad." What would have surprised him had he seen me at my job fifty years later? What is he warning himself against with the spectre of this Greek word? Is it against 'inquisitiveness', against trying to know more about the boys than is good for them? Or is it against 'meddling', not leaving the prefects to run the house?

It was surely the second danger, that of not letting well alone, of not preserving a sort of adult detachment – which HRK was much more successful in maintaining than I. A few years ago at Winchester we were made unwitting participants in one of these massive statistical enquiries which was to provide our critics and reformers with the "facts" about independent schools. My colleagues and I were invited to fill in forms stating, among other things, the hours we worked. At the staff meeting where the affair was launched, one of us asked whether we should put in the number of hours that we spent "watching", on the grounds that this was an essential part of our duties. This was received with some derision; but I have been a little disillusioned, during my time at Winchester, by discovering how few of my colleagues who 'watch' no games or other ploys before they become housemasters, can resist the duty or pleasure of watching them when they have become housemasters. Having ceased to be a housemaster, I find it curiously and delightfully easy to watch no more. Games are just far more interesting when you know the players. I suppose even horse-races may be interesting if you know the horses.

In HRK's day (to return to the early days of the 20th century) there were few ploys to "watch". There was plenty of competitive football and cricket, and athletic sports – but no competitive music (I think), nor competitive art or pottery; nor, I am sure, that dreariest of spectacles, the recruit competition. HRK was a fervent watcher in his first twelve years as a housemaster, a reluctant one in his last seven. The 15-year term for house tenure is right.

Things move fast in the 2nd half of the 20th century, and the world of 1951 when I became a housemaster seems already remote. There was national service, prefects still ruled, boys from East London were entertained, there was food rationing, cold baths were compulsory, we did a bit of corporal punishment (the boys did – and without blenching), Winston was alive, sexual intercourse was not described in serious literature, boys were happy to stay at school till their five years were up, I tried to exert a watchful eye for 'unsuitable reading', 'homosexuality' was not a word in everyday use and made no appearance on the main page of the *Times* or *Telegraph*. In 1961, Lady Chatterley had won her case, the domestic battle over long hair and Edwardian clothes was joined, trousers grew provocatively narrow and I fought a rear-guard action over chukka boots and elastic-sided shoes. My predecessor felt that he had left just in time. Cold baths were out; Christian names were in. We had house dances once or twice a year; there were no scandals. Literature became franker and franker, and I became astonished at my own frankness. Provincial Universities were beginning to be recognised by the Winchester parent.

I handed over in 1965, to a historian who has no Greek and enough Latin for the short grace only; more over he was never at a boarding school. By this time, classical specialists were a rarity, science specialists declining in numbers (in physics, at any rate, and chemistry). Prefects ran the house by kindness, and outside the house discipline was left to a few old-fashioned masters. My successor can stand longer hair and more garish haberdashery than I; the fifteen-year tenure is right. But even he has occasionally said to me that I handed over just in time.

It's a rough time for independent school and the centenaries of Winchester houses are being celebrated more from a sense of duty than in a spirit of proud thanksgiving. The sentiments expressed at Winchester's Quingentenary in 1892 are voices from a world undreamed of by our present pupils, and who would like to guess where we shall stand, or whither tending in 1992 (only 24 years hence)?

But the great thing is that we move with the times, and as long as we are, in the important things, independent, and as long as there are enough good men going into teaching, we can be a jump ahead of public opinion.

Francis King [c.1967]