

Heads of School speech, Commem 2019

Hector: Good afternoon. The abbey's chime
reminds us grimly that it's time
to hear the Heads of School recite
some verse it took an age to write.

Tom: It's true. We sat up all last night.
Let's hope we got the rhyme and also the rhythm right.
All night the bells kept us on deadline
And then gave us a kind of headline
About how times and people change
To feel familiar but strange.

H: We realised with a sudden tremble
we had what poems need – a symbol. (Clash)

T: Oh yes – that joke. Thanks. Moving on.
Let's contemplate the five years gone
Since we arrived at Sherborne School
so loyal to its every rule
that we became prefects, and then
two of its most distinguished men.

H: Yes, time did fly. Some things flew faster,
Like, we're now on our third headmaster.
In that time, government's matched them:
We've nearly seen our third PM.
Although Sherborne has never had
PMs, we did have Johnson's dad.

T: It's just a shame PSHE
Back then wasn't compulsory.
But here, at senior management's table
our leaders have been strong and stable
with our own stable genius
Doc Lockett looking out for us.

H: He looks so closely he can see

where even prefects shouldn't be.

T: He looks ahead – anticipates
looming examination dates.

So, boys, avoid last-minute hurry.

The proper time to start to worry
is long ago. You should begin
once you've been told that you got in.

H: When we arrived, five years ago,
it's like we didn't really know
there was a school called Sherborne Girls.

But, like a glitter ball, time whirls
to bring our two schools ever nearer
so "He" and "She" grow ever dearer
- and not just in the school fees sense.

T: No. Someone said, "Tear down that fence."

The process is quite like our own
throughout the five years that have flown.

We started in the Third form, where
socials had boys here, and girls there,
like there's a pen for her and him
on either side of some dark gym.

H: Then Fourth form; some boys leave those zones
and even put down mobile 'phones.

T: By Fifth form, there's the big reveal:
it turns out that these girls are real.

H: Sixth-formers hope to be less rude:
they share, first, pizza; later, food.

T: There's been another transformation
during our five-year generation.

H: We thought we'd joined a school for rugger,
but then we realised, "Oh bother."

T: The scales fall from our eyes: we see

a musical academy.

H: But, to be fair, it's just the same.

Music's become a major game.

The subtle shifts in status mean

the choir is the new First XV.

T: And seconds, thirds, and fourths and fifths –

the minor falls, the major lifts –

a rugby team that's singing Hallelujah.

H: Tom, stop. This poem's going wrong.

Why's it a Leonard Cohen song?

T: Oops. Anyway, the choir's become

like many teams rolled into one.

They sing for 40 minutes, then

we pray, then do the same again,

and that's why Abbey's such a hoot.

H: No, that's Rev Campbell. And his suit.

His rainbow wardrobe far exceeds

Joseph's, with psychedelic tweeds.

T: Our actual rugby gods, God bless 'em,

still want a sponsor that can dress 'em.

H: Apart from that, though, nothing shocks 'em

except for that run-in with Bloxham.

T: They may have had one superstar

but we were better dressed by far.

H: I thought you said we came up short?

T: Not the team, Hector – the support.

Sherborne completely raised the tone –

we were a sea of herringbone.

Some haters thought that we'd mixed up

the match with the Cheltenham Gold Cup.

H: Another sport's changed in our time.

Athletes now seem to reach their prime

later in life. Cross country then
used to be more for boys than men.

T: Now at the castle, who's first in?

H: Sheffield, Jamieson, le Poidevin
and "Mr" Berry. Why?

T: Perhaps
they're mostly military chaps.

It's like the starter yelled, "Advance!"

H: Come on, sirs – give us boys a chance.

T: One day, please let the victor's wreath land
on *our* heads when we've jogged round heathland.

H: So things are different by a mile:
music got strength, and sport got style.

Not everything is a surprise.

Some things old boys will recognise.

T: Yes. Shirts are now tucked into trousers.

H: No – I was thinking of nine houses.

Back in the day, only the best got
the privilege of a place in Westcott.

Le Carré, Turing, just for starters
and also Brian from *The Archers*.

T: Isn't Brian a frightful cad?

H: Yes, but the actor's not so bad.

Westcott's recruiting its new crew.

So chaps – the boarding house needs you.

T: That institution's been renewed.

There's one more: when we eat our food.

H: Hard work and play at Sherborne School
comes as an instinct, but needs fuel.

T: We all have drive, so let's give credit
to all the catering staff, who've fed it.

H: They've worked wonders for you today.

Let's thank them in the usual way.

T: The issue's been, should supper fall
before, after, or during Hall?

H: I gather there was great debate,
with some staunchly supporting eight,

T: Some advocates of five, and three,

H: though that would make it early tea.

T: All furrowed brows and wrung their hands till
the senior team came to a standstill.

H: Perhaps it took our archivist
to spot what everyone had missed,
or else some salutary blast
blew to the present from the past.

T: Are there some old boys with us here?

You'll like the answer. It was clear.

The problem had the perfect fix:

we don't we just have tea at six?

(*H:* Except the Sixth form, who eat fast,
so they can wait until half past.)

It's one of our most ancient fixtures.

Vivat Eduardus Tea-at-Sixtus.

T: We love change, but this story shows
le plus ça change, le plus c'est la même chose.

H: You just did food, and French, and quotes!

T: I put it in for Mr Oates.

"The more things change, the more they stay,"

H: And that is why we're proud to say
that Sherborne's been so loyally served
by those who've kept standards preserved.

T: A generation and a half
is how long one man's been on staff.

H: I did the maths – 45 years.

So Mr Morgan, many cheers
for all the care you've given us.

T: He really wouldn't want a fuss,
but many folk came to depend
upon this kind of critical friend.

H: A one-off; but the same is true
of Doc Tremewan (or Tree-mew
as someone with a way with words
dubbed him when Harper did *The Birds*);

T: and Mr Clayton, shrewd and calm,
with a distinctly Northern charm,
quite like a football manager,
but he's deserved to be called "Sir".

H: Others who leave us are more recent,
but showed us how we could be decent:

Miss Connelly, who knows so much
but wears it with the lightest touch;

T: and Mr Duncan, a one-man news-
paper with facts and lots of views;

H: Miss Thomas, who has put on plays
in bold, experimental ways,

T: and finally, we'd all be dimmer
without that beacon, Mr Rimmer.

H: The sanest, most restrained of tutors
who thought so hard about our futures
perhaps because, with adolescents
who want to think about their presents?

T: But don't forget – we're leaving too.

H: The Upper Sixth is saying adieu,
and all but one man will be gone.

T: Yes – Charlie Millar's staying on.

He's played three years in the First XI

but never reached that football heaven
of Colours.

H: Someone put a stop
to those after some Backs-style strop
and to atone for such a crime
he's going into extra time.

T: People can change. So can the world.
It feels as though we're being hurled
into a planet that's perplexed
about just what will happen next.

H: But, as our sports team coaches say
(at most assemblies, anyway)
"The future's bright."

T: Let's hope they're right –
and yet, what if it isn't quite?

H: Then let's reflect upon the past,
cherish the things that ought to last,
and when things oughtn't, let's be bold
when attitudes and deeds look old.

T: We're grateful that the school's done that –
given our backs a hearty pat
But told us when we've been a prat,
Dealt with it, then left it at that.

H: That's why we're so grateful to you
Who have so patiently sat through
Our poem.

T: And so, goodbye from
My good friend Hector.

H: My friend Tom.