

## Headmaster's Speech Day Statement 2019

Good afternoon. Many congratulations to the Big Band who played so well; congratulations in particular to Alex Pollard who wrote the second of those pieces.

A warm welcome to our Speech Day; thanks to the Stockport Plaza who host us once again. More than 10 000 tonnes of sandstone was removed to make space for this building and the stage area is actually underground, a fact recognised by the pragmatic citizens of Stockport during the bombing raids of the Second World War. I like that: not even the Luftwaffe can stop people having a good night out in Stockport. The Plaza opened in 1932 and featured a Vitalux sun-ray lamp for the affluent patrons sitting in the circle, allowing them to tan whilst viewing a film; as if the Sun doesn't shine in Stockport. The opening of the Plaza was not well-received; the editor of the influential Stockport Advertiser thundered that films were a bad influence on the youth of Stockport. The tendency of the middle aged to criticise the behaviour of young people and to worry about their morals has a long history.

In 1859 the magazine Scientific American complained bitterly that an upstart form of entertainment was exerting a hypnotic and addictive pull on young fragile minds. The subject of their rant? the game of chess; I quote; a pernicious excitement to learn and play chess has spread all over the country, and numerous clubs for practicing this game have been formed in cities and villages.

Chess is a mere amusement of a very inferior character, which robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements, while at the same time it affords no benefit whatever to the body.

60 years on, I don't think that an enthusiasm for chess amongst young people did them much harm and I would be delighted if that was the biggest challenge they faced.

More than 2500 years ago the Greek writer Aristophanes despaired writing:

"Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers."

I have a much more positive view of young people, based on daily observation of the pupils at SGS, than the stereotype of phone fiddling fortnite fiends. I see predominantly hard-working, thoughtful and community minded young people committing their time and energies to develop their talents. The word 'school' derives from a Greek word meaning leisure. Think of attending school as a leisure activity. To an educated Greek at that time leisure did not mean time for twiddling thumbs, on a mobile phone or otherwise, but rather time to be used for learning important insights into oneself and into the meaning of life, to discuss, to explore and to learn, as distinct from employment or developing job-related

skills.

The breadth of opportunity at SGS fulfils this aspect of education, giving pupils space and occasion to develop genuine passions and interests and real character, a sense of purpose and direction and the opportunity to follow their dreams rather than merely being squeezed passively through the production line of public examinations.

We welcome Mr Ben Heason to present our prizes this afternoon and to speak to us; climber extraordinaire, and someone with real experience of following a dream and showing the character strengths needed to see that dream through to the end.

A nation divided, concerns about the influence of European nations and 2 ambitious would be leaders jostling for supreme political power; I refer of course not to 21<sup>st</sup> century preoccupations about Brexit and the Tory party leadership contest but to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the wars of the Roses. Our founder, the Goldsmith Edmund Shaa, lived in and navigated capably through uncertain times when making a wrong decision might cost you your head rather than just your job. We are delighted that the link between Edmund Shaa's school and the Goldsmiths continues to flourish; I am particularly grateful to the Goldsmiths for providing medals to be awarded to the Head Boy and Head Girl today as well as equipment for the Design & Technology Department.

Edmund Shaa believed that education would help the young people of Stockport not only to survive but to thrive and to lead in uncertain times. The problems we face as a world are increasingly problems that we can only tackle together as a community rather than as individuals: economic inequality, environmental degradation, effective governance.

Economic inequality means that, according to Oxfam, 26 individuals now own as much as half the population of the world; a new-born child dies every minute avoidably from a waterborne disease when more than 2000 people are billionaires; 63 million primary age children are still not in school; all children world wide could have high quality primary education for 40 billion dollars each year. That's a huge amount of money – it's the amount of money that the world spends on armaments every week. The increasing pace of technological advance seems destined to further increase these divides; how can we ensure that people are not left behind?

How should we govern ourselves? Democracy seems to have developed a few problems in recent years; whilst it still seems much better than the alternatives saying that it is the best system seems like beating me in a break dancing contest; you'll take the win but it's not a huge achievement. Democracy requires a free flow of truthful information to allow people to argue and to form well-founded views. How will we ensure that this can occur in an age of Fake News and echo chambers with people affirmed in their views and increasingly angered by people who hold different views? Donald Trump to stop school shootings by banning schools is untrue but was shared more than 1 million times last year and believed by around one third of the people who read the story.

We are all aware of the challenges of environmental degradation: plastic waste, habitat destruction and global warming. Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is now at 415 ppm compared to 280ppm before the industrial revolution. The last time CO<sub>2</sub> levels were this high was 3 million years ago; sea levels were 20m higher, the temperature was 4C higher but on a positive the A6 was less congested. How can we preserve the environment whilst still enjoying the benefits of modern life? I am delighted that we will be looking to reduce the environmental impact of SGS next year through the pupil-led Ecoschools scheme.

I am a consistent optimist; solutions to all 3 of these problems: inequality, democracy and the environment will be found and they will be found by young people; my generation has worsened instead of solving these problems; SGS produces pupils who are used to making a contribution; recognising that your attitudes and your actions not only affect your own well-being but also that of others; recognising that we can achieve far more together than we ever could alone; recognising that you have ideas and energy that can make a difference. Greta Thunberg has shown just what can be achieved by young people in terms of leading.

She has pushed the topic of climate change up the political agenda and given the lie to the idea that young people can do nothing to shape their futures. Never doubt that you can achieve remarkable things through your enthusiasm, your efforts and your talent and make a huge contribution to the school community and to society at large.

I am indebted to my predecessor Andrew Chicken for ensuring that I have inherited a school in good heart. Last year's A level results were excellent with 80% of all grades at A\*, A or B. At GCSE more than 58% of grades were A\* or A. Our academic success goes well beyond public examinations with many pupils succeeding in national competitions and Olympiads; numerous medals this year in Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics and Biology and real success at Gold level in Mathematics and Chemistry.

Sport of all sorts flourishes at SGS: netball, hockey, tennis, football, rugby, cricket, athletics and swimming and many more from archery to table tennis and from fencing to dance; particular congratulations to the U13 netballers who reached the national final of the independent schools' competition and to the U16 rugby players who won the Cheshire competition. In September we welcome a new Director of Sport to help us provide even more high quality opportunities for pupils to enjoy the health and character benefits of playing sport. Outdoor pursuits continue to be popular with mountain biking, climbing and kayaking all flourishing.

More than 200 pupils are registered for the various Duke of Edinburgh Awards and have enjoyed and sometimes endured expeditions this year alongside learning new skills, being physically active and volunteering.

In Music a dazzling array of concerts has showcased the talent of many pupils; the concert at RNCM last term was a particular highlight with some wonderful solos as well as

impressive ensemble pieces; the recent Music Festival was simply excellent; we wish the musicians well for their tour to the Netherlands next week.

In Drama we have enjoyed fantastic performances of the classical play *Andromache* and the Shakespearean comedy 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' as well as an excellent Dance Show. In September we will welcome a new Head of Drama to allow an expansion of Drama; together with the flourishing Music Department this will allow SGS to become a real hub for performance in this part of the world.

Trips take learning out of the classroom as well as broadening experience with, for example, the First Year residential, the infamous Bushcraft and visits to local places of worship offering contrasting and complementary experiences. Trips beyond the UK this year have included a hockey tour to the Netherlands, a football tour to Barcelona, History trips to the WW1 battlefields and to America, Art trips to Berlin, exchanges to Paris and shortly an adventurous trip to Madagascar.

Enterprise flourishes at SGS with an excellent Enterprise Day for the Second Years as well as the Young Enterprise initiative.

In March, a Model United Nations Conference, hosted at SGS, was an opportunity for some fiery and heartfelt rhetoric. The School Council meetings have been similarly impassioned tackling topics from the lunch arrangements to communications with pupils and many, many more; the eponymous chicken burger has featured several times.

Links with Educaid, which works to promote education in Sierra Leone, and with the Wellspring in Stockport, which helps the homeless, have allowed our pupils to make a contribution to the lives of others. I am also grateful to our prefects and anti-bullying ambassadors who continue to work to promote the friendliness and cohesion of our community.

The Old Stopfordians held a successful dinner earlier this year and the Old Stops are in good heart, led ably by Mr Tim Stretton through the last year and by Mr Graham Earles in the next; we welcome Mr Earles today.

The Stopfordian Parents Association flourishes with a vibrant and busy Christmas Fayre last year and a well-supported quiz in the spring – sadly my team didn't win but I'm not bitter.

Next year we will continue to promote our three core priorities: academic ambition, a full programme of extra-curricular activities and a genuine community that allows pupils to feel cared for and to grow in character.

I am most grateful to the staff who work tirelessly to establish and maintain a vast array of opportunities for the development of excellence, too many to mention individually this evening. I have no prizes for them but perhaps we could offer the staff this round of

applause.

We have a number of staff leaving us this term; Mr Davies has taught Biology this year as well as being a stalwart sports coach; he leaves us to travel and I hope that he will take fond memories of SGS as far as Australia; thank you Mr Davies.

Mr Breffit leaves the RS Department, Vernon House and the Model United Nations scheme to take up a role as Head of RS at the Royal Grammar School Worcester; thank you Mr Breffit for your time, expertise and contribution; we wish you every success in the West Midlands; Mrs Molly Evans leaves the Maths Department after 11 years at SGS having helped a huge number of pupils to progress with their Mathematics; Mrs Evans we wish you a long and happy retirement.

Thank you very much.