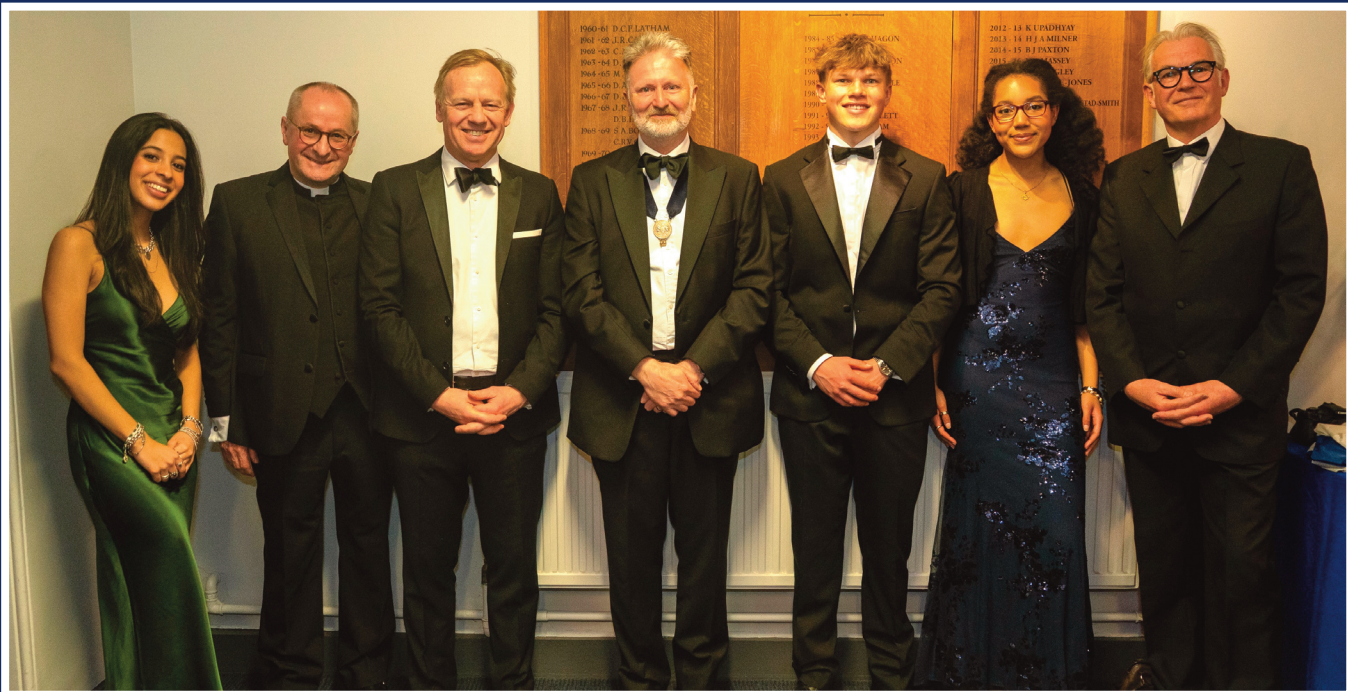


THE CHESTER ASSOCIATION OF OLD KING'S SCHOLARS



ISSUE NO. 89 | MAY 2025

CAOKS Annual Dinner



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AGM
Thurs 12th June
2025



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Introduction and Contents



Head of School Team Piya Saha, Jonni Ashton and Adaora Ekwueme at the CAOKS annual dinner in March



From The Editor Steve Williams

Welcome to the Summer edition of the CAOKS newsletter.

Once again, we have emerged from those dark winter nights and, as I write these words, I'm looking out of my office window at blue skies and April sunshine. It feels good to be out of that period when it is dark when you start work and dark when you finish each day.

It was fantastic to return to school for the 158th Annual Dinner in March. As ever there will be more written about this event elsewhere in the issue but, on a personal level, it was great to catch up with Dickie Wallis, Mark Lenel, David Chan, Andy Jones, Matthew Job and Martin Dodd who were all in my year. I hope we can encourage a few more to come along next year as it really is a brilliant night

As ever we have a number of different and hopefully interesting pieces for you to read in this issue, not least the concluding part of an article by CAOKS committee member A.D Jones (1990) about the time he swam the English channel. We also hear about a Boxing match at school as well. A unique event that I suspect will remain so heading into the future. This is part of what I really enjoy about editing this publication – hearing stories and discussing past events with those who are recalling them and were there at the time.

It will be the CAOKS AGM on Thursday June 12th. Full details can be found elsewhere in this issue, and all are welcome to join us for this meeting and a bit of supper afterwards

Have a wonderful summer and I hope to see you at a CAOKS event in the near future

Steve Williams 05/04/25

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President and Officers' Messages



From the
President

Mark Thorp

It's early April, the sun is shining, and it hasn't rained for several weeks now – a hosepipe ban is surely just around the corner. As the ground firms up, I am rounding the bend and entering the final straight of my stint as President.

Sadly, I had to miss the King's in the Capital event at Lord's Cricket Ground in November last year, but reports are of a great evening which everyone thoroughly enjoyed. The Development Team have set a high bar in terms of venue in recent years but I'm sure that Fortnum & Mason won't disappoint later this year.

Last week was the School's Easter Concert at St Marys Without The Walls Handbridge with first class performances from everyone involved. The same can be said for the School's excellent production of Bonnie and Clyde in January this year. The sporting achievements are too numerous to mention but as a former player, it's great to see the 1st XI on such a good run in the ISFA cup.

The 158th Annual Dinner was held at the School at the end of March. It was a very pleasant evening on a somewhat less formal basis than in previous years. The speeches this year were "in-house", given by Head of School Jonni Ashton and the increasingly demob-happy Steve Downey. Steve's recollections of Reg Read were the highlight of the evening for me. My personal thanks to both Jonni and Steve for their excellent contributions. For the coming year, there is a full calendar with a wide range of events for OKS. Hopefully there is something in there which appeals to you, and you can muster up a few of your contemporaries and attend together – it will be well worth the effort. **MT**

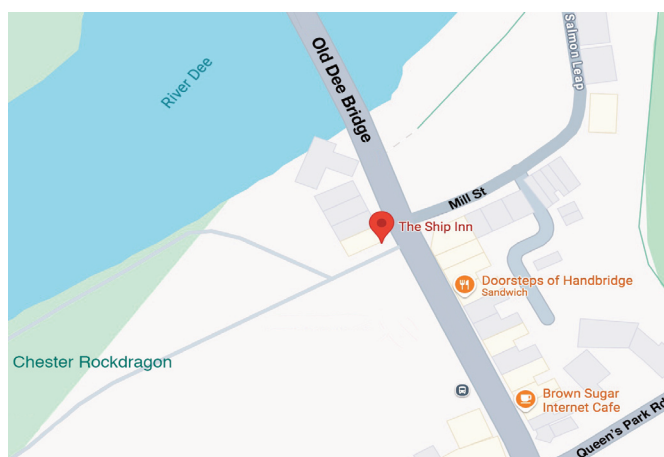


From the
Secretary

Peter Bernie

Following on from last year's AGM at The Architect, this year's meeting is at The Ship in Handbridge. The AGM will start at 19.00 on Thursday 12 June and will be followed by supper. Please see below the agenda for the AGM

[AGM Agenda](#)



If you would like to reserve a place for supper, please tell me by D-Day, Friday 6th June via the following email address

honsec@caoks.co.uk

I also encourage you to join us at one or more of the excellent events listed in the Newsletter. Hoping to see you in 2025

Peter Bernie



Officers' Messages



From the
Dinner
Secretary

Robin Hardi

This March we were delighted to hold the 158th CAOKS annual dinner, moving from the traditional January to the lighter evenings. The dinner was held in the school's Vanburgh Theatre (the old assembly hall to me – and to me too Robin (Ed)) and was well supported by around 60 guests with an excellent menu and a well-stocked bar.

For the first time one of the speakers was a head of school, Jonni Ashton, who spoke confidently and entertainingly on life in the school and introducing Steve Downey, our main speaker who, with retirement imminent, entertained us with tales of his time at Kings.

As ever my thanks to the school development team for provided excellent support in setting up the event, the catering team for provided a superb meal and dinner service and of course to all the speakers.

Looking ahead, we are seeing ticket sales drop these days for the annual dinner and with costs increasing and the alumni more spread around the country than ever we continue to reflect on how these events best serve the alumni in a changing world. Nevertheless 158 years of alumni gathering is a tradition to be proud of and we hope we will see you next year whatever form the event takes.

Thanks again to all who supported the dinner, and I wish you an enjoyable summer.

Regards
Robin Hardi

Eastgate, Chester

I found this print in a junk shop in Southampton a year or so ago. It's based on an original Water-colour by F. Robson and published by Haigh and Sons Ltd from Southall, Middlesex.



It now hangs in my office/studio at home and reminds of those good times in Chester all those years ago. (Ed)





KING'S IN THE CAPITAL
This years London event is being held at

Fortnum & Mason
Thursday 13th November 2025
6.30PM - 9.30PM

- Complimentary Arrival Drink
- Wine Tasting
- Grazing Boards
- FREE BAR
- Guest Speaker Harry Langley (OKS 2019)

Tickets start from £25.00

FREE BAR ALL EVENING INCLUDED IN TICKET PRICE!



Headmaster's Message



From the
Headmaster

*George
Hartley*

Dear all,

It has been a busy and productive Lent Term at King's in various ways, marked by some outstanding sporting achievements. These all arrived in the space of a remarkable week towards the end of term during which the 1st XI boys hockey team won national plate competition, both our girls and boys Vllls came third in their categories at the Schools Head on the River Thames and the 1st XI boys football team won the ISFA national trophy. I am not sure whether King's has experienced a similar week for sport in its history but needless to say we were incredibly proud, not just for the high level of simultaneous success in three different sports but also given we were competing against much larger schools in all four competitions, most of whom offer various sports scholarships (we offer many means-tested bursaries but no sports scholarships).

We've also enjoyed a busy term in terms of CAOKS events, welcoming back the leavers of 1995/2005/2015 and 2000/2001/2010/2011 (postponed from the pandemic) for two Saturday reunion events and also, another excellent CAOKS dinner in school, at which Steve Downey gave a brilliant speech recounting various anecdotes and tales from his 41 outstanding years of service at King's as an art teacher and in various other roles (including CAOKS President in 2008). Steve was joined at the dinner by Seb Neal, who is also retiring, albeit after a mere 33 years of service mainly as a History teacher at King's. I know that many of you will have benefited from Steve's and

Seb's wisdom, support and guidance over their 74 years of combined service and will wish them well in retirement.

King's has also been given another national award recently in the form of the AGBIS School of the Year 2025. AGBIS, which stands for the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools, represents over 2,000 schools across the country and so it has been a great honour to be singled out in this way for the high levels of governance at the school. Our excellent Board of Governors, ably chaired by Mrs Sandy Verity and including two CAOKS members (Charlotte Gillies and Mike Sayer), as well its clerk (and Bursar) Mrs Hayley Jordan, are rarely in the school limelight though they do carry out a vital role for King's and have played a very significant role in the school's success over the last few years which have included various other recent awards such as last year's NW Independent School of the Year.

Looking ahead to next term, we anticipate a full school inspection in May which we are naturally looking forward to, not least as the outcomes should contribute positively to the new school strategy, which we intend to launch from next September. The main purpose of Strategy 2030 will be to ensure that King's continues to flourish and thrive over the next five years, despite the challenges that we, and the broader independent school sector, now face. If any CAOKS members would like to offer their thoughts and ideas as to this process, I would be delighted to hear from you so please do drop me a note at hm@kingschester.co.uk

George Hartley

hm@kingschester.co.uk

Lucy Simmonds OKS (2013)



My inspiration for writing

I've written diaries and journals since I can remember, and the drive to do so came from a need, a desire, to have a quiet moment to myself; a moment of honesty. In 2015, I moved to Paris for a year abroad as part of my degree in French and German at the University of Southampton. That was when I started writing a blog which initially focused on life in France and on acclimatising to a new country and city. As much as my blog was about culture and travelling in France, it was there to help me understand how I was feeling. To write about loneliness, about the family and friends that you're missing, is part of the adjustment process.

At least, it was for me.

I continued my blog even after I left Paris. My next adventure, after my final year in Southampton, was to move to Germany. Starting in the Roman city of Trier for two years, I worked as an English assistant for the British Council in a local school. Alongside my work in the school, I worked part-time on a vineyard on the Saar river. Writing my blog, like in Paris, helped me navigate my new world.

My next stop was Marburg, the University City of the Brothers Grimm. I did my Master's Degree there in Romance language (French and Italian), all the while continuing writing. Since 2022, I've been living in Stuttgart where I work as a lecturer in English at the Ludwigsburg University of Education.

In the last two years, there has been some radio silence on my blog as I poured my energy into another project: writing my first novel, *Leaving Stra*. At the end of September 2022, I took part in a Writer's Retreat in Venice, led by the fabulous writer, Sophronia Scott and my wonderful Mum, Janet Simmonds. During our week in Italy, Villa Pisani in Stra was one of the spectacular places we visited. As we explored the villa for a couple of hours, I wondered what it would have been like to live there. What would it have been like to grow up there, navigating the villa's corridors and rooms?

We left Venice at the beginning of October, but the idea stayed with me, and I started writing. Two years later, I have published *Leaving Stra*. A lot of love has gone into those pages; a lot of sneaky smiles; some sweat and some tears. For the most part, it's been challenging and fun, and I've enjoyed seeing what would happen to my characters, who they'd meet and where they'd end up.

I hadn't always wanted to write a novel, but I have always loved writing. When I moved to Trier, I opened a word document on my computer and saved it under the title: *Whatever my book will be called*. I filled it with snippets from my diary and blog entries. It's still there, untouched. A part of the process that I may go back to.

My creative writing journey most definitely began at The King's School. I remember *enjoying* what I think was a GCSE English exam where we had to write about a season, or perhaps my memory fails me, and we had to write a short story based on the prompt of a sentence. In any case, it started with a tree, and I remember sitting in the exam hall and beaming with delight. I might not have done very well in that exam, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I remember it did not *feel* like an exam.

What my English teachers did that was so special was that they breathed life into words. And they did that with passion, and perhaps most importantly, with

patience. They demonstrated heaps of it. My first English teacher at King's was John Hargreaves. He shook life into the poetry before us! The first poem I remember us reading was *Digging* by Seamus Heaney:

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.*

We had to write a text on this poem, and in my text, I thought that 'peat' was maybe the author's father or brother. Mr. Hargreaves taught me an important lesson that day: if you don't know a word, look it up! My love of English, that intensity, really took off during A-Levels, and that's thanks to Ann Marie McMahon and Helen Lydon. We were fortunate to have such a small class of nine students. We were given a lot to read, and I adored our lessons. A-Levels were a two-year book-club, and again, what I distinctly remember was our teachers' patience.



In Helen Lydon's class, we had to write an essay on *Frankenstein* and on 'good' and 'evil'. My entire essay focused on how one could interpret the words 'good' and 'evil', hardly referencing *Frankenstein* or his monster. I remember Helen Lydon called me into her office and gently explained why this wasn't *quite* the goal of the task. At King's, I was able to try things out and experiment with language freely, and if I lent the wrong way, I was softly steered back on course. My English teachers brought English to life for me. In the

acknowledgements of my book, I've written a little note to them:

"... to Ann Marie McMahon, Helen Lydon and John Hargreaves – my fearless English teachers at King's who taught me about our language and how to love it."

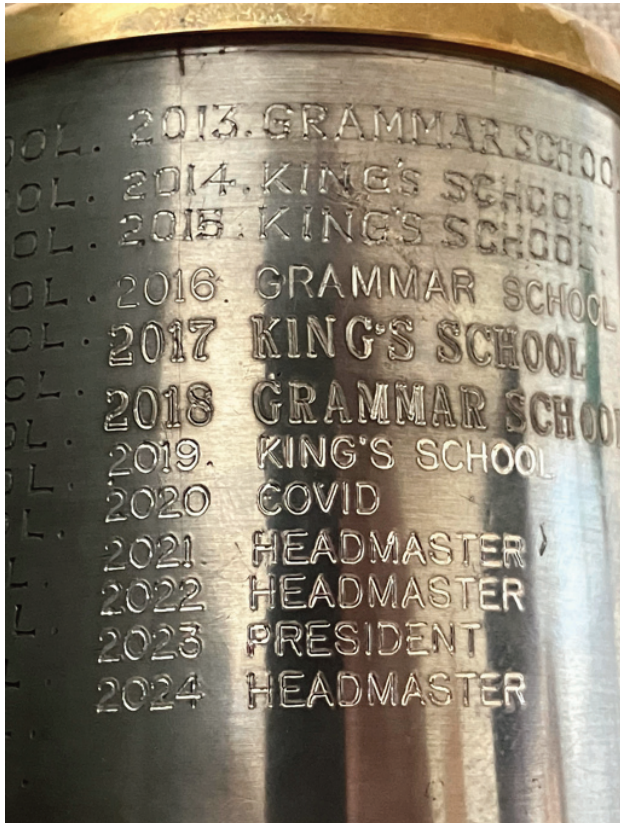
A beautiful thing about writing this book is that it's given me the opportunity to get back in contact with those teachers. Soon after A-Levels, I met up with Helen Lydon. We talked about what we were reading and I gave her a book as a little thank you for her teaching at King's, and I remember her saying: 'I think you're going to write a book one day.' What an effect someone's words can have on you? I told her this now, years later, and that even though I didn't start writing my book with her words in the forefront of my mind, her words found me again, about half-way through the writing process, when I really needed them. For the passion and courage instilled in me by my teachers at King's, I'll be forever thankful.

Leaving Stra:

In 1927, the Italian village of Stra is charged with tension for Maria Zola and her family. Is their home, the renowned Villa Pisani, truly the sanctuary they believe it is? As the encroaching tide of nationalism seeps into their lives and through the walls of their Palladian home, Maria and her three brothers confront the realities behind the imposing oak doors of their father's study. With each passing year, their childhood joy is replaced by the sinister, industrial clouds of Venetian Lagoon Fascism. How will the Zola family navigate their relationships with one another and their place in a changing Italy?

CAOKS Snooker Night

The annual November snooker evening goes from strength to strength. It wasn't possible to hold the event in 2020 due to Covid restrictions and we had only a dozen players in 2021 and 2022 but eighteen signed up for 2023 followed by thirty for 2024, eight from the Grammar School and twenty-two from King's.



President, Mark Thorp, who for the avoidance of doubt is not a convicted felon, asked us to raise the customary glass, firstly to the Old Boys from the Grammar School and the one hundred and fourteen Old King's Scholars who lost their lives in the two World Wars.

To make the event more attractive to sponsors and television, the post-Covid matches have been re-branded President's team versus Headmaster's team. A few might argue that, like the School's founder and his father, we are rewriting history, but the evidence is in the engraving on the John S Douglas Snooker Challenge Trophy.



This year, two diners chose not to play, so it was fourteen a side. As the photo shows, Headmaster George's side proved victorious, by eight frames to six, after which informal doubles continued late into the evening.



We are still looking for a sponsor for the 2025 event, the thirtieth year in which it will have been played, so we invite bids from any companies or members that aren't subject to US, EU or UK sanctions.

Peter Bernie

Often when watching Match of the Day or similar football program and a match comes on involving Fulham playing at their home ground, Craven Cottage, I find myself saying to the nearest person "I played there!". My two sons were the latest victims as we watched our beloved Liverpool FC playing Fulham. Being football-mad themselves they took a keen interest and, as I told them the story of how the King's School 1st X1 football team played in and won the Boodles Independent Schools Football Association (IFSA) cup final there, it struck me that March 2024 would have marked the 30-year anniversary of that glorious night.



There's a saying that it's not about the destination, it's about the journey, and it is certainly certain moments from the journey to the final which stand out most clearly in my mind all these years later. I was fairly new to the 1st XI, having tried my hand at rowing for a few years – a great experience but my true passion was always for football. One day I joined in a kickabout and, when it ended, was surprised to be approached immediately by Mr Mellor and Reggie Reid, telling me I should try out for the 1st X1. Before I knew it I was training alongside well-established superstar players of the school such as Martin McGrath, Phil Brotherhood, Nolan Franklin, Andrew Harradine (captain) and Luke Guest – enough to give anyone a feeling of imposter syndrome - and proudly seeing my name on the 1st X1 team-sheet that Mr Neeves used to put up on the notice board in the main corridor each week.

Thanks to a ‘robust’ challenge from a Queen’s Park player I ended up missing the early part of the season with a broken ankle, however I can recall the excitement and momentum building as the team progressed through the early rounds of the ISFA cup. It started to feel like a real adventure when we were drawn away to Eton in the quarter-finals (by which time I was back playing) – the coach trip down there, playing cards and music blaring out as we trundled along the motorway, then the experience of Eton itself with all its history and grandeur, pupils walking around in top hat and tails.

The match itself was a tight affair with Eton taking the lead before Luke Guest swept an equaliser high into the net from a tight angle. The deadlock remained unbroken even after extra time and so it was on to the dreaded penalty shoot-out. The score was still level after the first five penalties each so it went to sudden death. I was quite a way down the list of penalty-takers and can vividly recall the nerves building as with each penalty scored it moved closer to my own turn – then, when it came, the long and lonely walk from the centre circle to the penalty spot seemed to take an age. Fortunately, a few of us had taken it upon ourselves to practice taking penalties whilst we were killing time before the match and I went with a tactic that had served me well – look one way, shoot the other. It worked as I sent the Eton ‘keeper the wrong way and the ball nestled in the bottom corner, much to my intense relief. I don’t recall who eventually scored the winning penalty but I do remember the entire team running to pile on top of Iain Tatt (AKA Tatty), our goalkeeper, and the joyous feeling of victory and togetherness on the coach journey back to Chester. The victory was extra sweet given the amount of verbal abuse the Eton pupils/supporters had been giving to our players during the match – in particular Gabriel Doris, on account of his angelic first name (which they’d read in the program Eton had produced for the match).

On to the semi-final and our next opponents were to be Brentwood, a team we'd beaten 5-0 on a pre-season tour of southern-based schools. I remember Mr Neeves posted the team sheet with the words "The Big One" – win this and we get to play the final at Craven Cottage! Confidence was high but just a few minutes into the match it became clear that this was a very different Brentwood team from the one we'd white-washed in

pre-season. They had some different players and I remember a young-looking, smaller boy with dark hair absolutely running the show from Brentwood's midfield. Again a program had been produced for the match and, many years later, it was pointed out to me that the name of that small, outstanding player was Frank Lampard. I wonder what became of him... ?

Our own team had been weakened due to some injuries and the suspension of a key defender in Nolan Franklin – he had been sent off in a previous regular school match for shoving an opposing player over who had just hacked me down. All these years later, and as a junior football coach myself, I can appreciate that his suspension for such a key match was an example of the strong principles with which Mr Neeves and Mr Fear ran the team – they didn't want to be without Nolan, but equally they wanted to set an example of not only how we should play but also behave. Nevertheless, I had appreciated Nolan sticking up for me and felt a sense of guilt that he was missing such a crucial match and so I felt an extra responsibility to help get us to the final. I and other lesser players had to step up, and one in particular did just that – the player who came into the team to replace Nolan, known as 'Big Jock'. Very late in the game we were trailing 0-1 in front a large and increasingly despondent support made up of family, friends and Queen's school girls. Our dreams of making the final were literally hanging by a thread with seconds to go when we won a free kick. The ball was sent high into the penalty area and cometh the hour, cometh the man – Big Jock leapt high in the air, flicking the ball off the top of his head and beyond the Brentwood 'keeper into the net. Cue an explosion of celebration mixed with relief. Again the deadlock couldn't be broken after extra time and it was on to penalties again – this time, however, we dispatched Brentwood within the first five penalties and onto the final we went, our opponents the mighty Ardingly College.

The build-up to the final had been full of excitement and anticipation and I can recall that I barely slept the night before. There was a mass exodus from Chester as what seemed like hundreds of supporters made their way down to Craven Cottage on the coaches organised by the school and parents. As mentioned earlier, the final itself went by in a blur for me and, having had one of my best ever games in the semi-final I'm not

convinced I touched the ball more than 10 times in the final. It didn't matter though as the superstar players in the team really stepped up to lead us to victory – Martin McGrath in particular as he scored two goals, one of which came after he'd dribbled past virtually the entire Ardingly team. Phil Brotherhood put a penalty away in his usual elegant style to make it 3-0 before half-time and we were in dreamland. A second-half onslaught by Ardingly was repelled by our absolute rocks at the back in Nolan, our captain Andrew Harradine and Julian D'enrico at left back. Ardingly did



steal a late goal but by then time had run out for them and the ISFA cup and glory belonged to King's.

Now when I think back to that night the images that come to me are of playing under the floodlights with the constant noise and encouragement from our huge band of supporters, led by Dave Atkin who had brought a drum along with him, the joy of King's players and supporters at the final whistle, Mr Fear going straight to give his wife a kiss at the final whistle, the cheers as each player took it in turns to hold the trophy aloft, getting soaked with champagne in the celebrations on the long coach journey back home, waking up too late for a shower and still having sticky hair in school the next day when the headmaster, Mr Wickson, called all the players up on stage at assembly to be applauded by the whole school. Many of the team, including myself, were in upper sixth form and about to sit our A-levels before going on to university and our lives beyond, so what a momentous way it was to round off our time at King's.

Ben Whatling (CAOKS 1994)

Boxing at King's and Memories of Norman Hallas

I exchanged a few emails last year with Tony, the catalyst for which was the letter from Norman Hallas that was published in the last issue of the newsletter. This is one of the best parts of being editor of this hallowed publication – when an article generates a conversation that leads to an unexpected piece for the newsletter. I'll hand over to Tony now (Ed).

I was delighted to see the letter from Norman Hallas in the last edition of the King's Alumni Magazine.

I remember Norman teaching History as well as Economics. I was at the '4 leavers reunion last year (I left Kings in 1973, but the event was held over to 2024) and amongst the teachers present was Graham Hutton.

Graham and Norman used to do a double act for the 'A' Level Economics - they took it in turns to teach the 2 streams taking the course. I was reminiscing with Graham about the course and how it gave me my love of Economics, and the discussion turned to Norman. Graham hadn't heard from Norman for some time so was unable to update me on how he was. It was good to see that he is still with us.



My time at King's was fairly uneventful - my only claim to fame was as a promoter for a boxing match held for charity between Mike Parry and Martin Hazell. Tom Clamp refereed the match, and I seem to recall the report in the School Magazine written by the late Ian Thompson included a photo of a number of teachers hanging off the wall climbing frames to get a good view of the proceedings. I think Graham, Norman and Reg Read were in the photo.



Sadly, that was the only event organised by "Tony Bennett Promotions" - my career went in another, less exciting direction, but I think we raised a good amount for charity"

Tony Bennett OKS (1973)



Alumni and School News

Calendar of Events

If you would like to book onto an event, please visit

<http://www.kingschester.co.uk/alumni/alumni-events/> or call Gemma on 01244 689492

CAOKS AGM

Thurs 12th June 2025 - The Ship Inn Handbridge

The AGM begins at 7pm and will be followed by supper. Please contact honsec@caoks.co.uk to book your place for supper.

CAOKS Cricket v School 1st XL

Fri 20th June 2025 - King's School

40 overs per side starting at 1pm. Please contact Dave Atkin (OKS 1994) to secure your place in the team Davidewardatkin@gmail.com or 07979523943. Come along and watch the conclusion of the match from 5.30pm if you don't fancy playing.

Henley Royal Regatta

Fri 4th July 2025 - 3:30pm

We will be pitched on the cricket club grounds where we will be providing drinks during the tea interval for those who wish to catch up with friends.

CAOKS Golf Day

Fri 11th July 2025 - Chester Golf Club

12.30pm Meet with Tees booked from 1.30pm. Two-course dinner after the competition with prize giving and presentation of the prestigious CAOKs Golf trophy. Smart, casual dress for dinner in the restaurant in the club house. £50 per head. Please email William Lamb (OKS 1994) sixhitter@hotmail.com to book your place

CAOKS Golf Day

July 2025 Date and venue TBC.

Please get in touch with Nigel Cunniffe or Rob MacKenzie regarding this one. Alternatively drop me (Ed) a line and I'll forward your message to the guys.

Rowing v School

July 2025 Date TBC.

2024 event was unable to take place due to the river being too high.

Curry and Quiz Night

Thurs 25th September 2025 - King's School 6:30pm

£5 per person to include a delicious curry, General Knowledge Quiz, Prizes for the Winning Team and hosted by Dr Ravi Jayaram. Please note max of 6 per team or join with others when you arrive.

Kings in the Capital

Thurs November 13th 2025 - Fortnum and Mason

This year we are thrilled to present a new format, featuring Harry Langley (OKS 2019) as our guest speaker.

Harry, who is currently the Manager of Jeroboam's Fine Wine Tasting Rooms, will guide us through a wine tasting experience.

In addition to the wine tasting, guests will savour grazing boards that will include the famous F&M scotch eggs.

CAOKS Snooker Evening

November 14th 2025 - The City Club

This event continues to go from strength to strength with 30 attending in 2024. Join us for some snooker, a bite to eat, a few drinks and a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

158th Annual Dinner Report



‘Pastime and Good Company’ The CAOKS Dinner 2025

‘I fly helicopters for the US military.’ It isn’t every day you sit down to dinner to hear that from the glamorous lady on your right. Coming, as she and her husband did, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I’d be inclined to think they won the prize for the persons who had travelled the furthest for a square meal – but the King’s alumni have many surprises up the sleeves of their tuxedos, so I could easily be proved wrong!

A veteran of CAOKS dinners over the past twenty years-or-so, I’ve observed a gradual and pleasing evolution of the event from the elaborate formality of clapping in distinguished guests, splendidly bedecked in full evening dress on high table, to the more relaxed style of recent dinners, with all guests mingling together in fellowship, wearing a mix of evening dress, lounge suits and dresses with an eclectic range of hem lines. Like Mr Hardcastle in Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer*, I have a tendency to ‘love everything that’s old,’ so I thoroughly enjoyed the pomp and circumstance of earlier CAOKS dinners, but I do confess to having enjoyed enormously also the greater informality of recent dinners.

As mentioned above, Pittsburgh might seem a long way from which to travel to Chester for a dinner – but, with acknowledgments to the esteemed emporium of Messrs Marks and Spencer, this wasn’t just any dinner. I joined

King’s in the year 2000, and I think it’s fair to say that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of sketches, written, produced and performed by a typically enterprising group of fifth-year students a few years later, summed up the state of catering at that time: hearty – but not necessarily good for the heart!

Happily, this changed very soon afterwards, and the piquant ham hock and pea terrine, followed by meltingly tender daube de boeuf, with perfectly seasonal rhubarb crumble tart for dessert, was, indeed, a meal to savour – and well worth the air fare from Pittsburgh! The School kitchens have even heard of vegetarians nowadays, too! When I saw that my vegetarian dinner companions were being treated not only to the delicious rhubarb tart but also to goat’s cheese and wild mushroom croquette, followed by butternut, chestnut, sage and blue cheese risotto, I was briefly tempted to defect to their ranks! With all this and a Headmaster who makes it his personal business to choose complementary wines, how can you go wrong? All that selfless tasting was very much appreciated, thank you, George!

In between the main course and dessert, tours of the School were offered and gladly taken up by the assembled cohort of some fifty alumni, who had left King’s at various dates ranging between 1955 and 2020. Those who left before 1960 will not even have known the School on its current site, but even those who left as recently as 2020 observed and admired many developments: no good School stands still.

Together with the inevitable rise in the prominence of digital technology around the School, the enlargement and embellishment of the Sports Hall, the Sixth-Form Centre and the Wickson Library were among the developments which drew the greatest amount of comment from alumni – and so many of those now-eminent doctors, lawyers, vets, teachers, businessmen and their ilk hesitated even now before crossing the threshold of the almighty Staff Common Room! Out of bounds then, and it has the power to intimidate even now! Happily, the student Heads of School took all this comfortably in their stride and coped admirably with the vagaries of their forebears, shepherding us expertly back to the Vanbrugh Theatre in time for a delicious spot of pud!

Speeches came next, and the Head of School drew many plaudits for the confidence and maturity with which he delivered a veritable tour de force on the subject of the School and what King's has meant to him. A hard act to follow, but retiring Head of Art, Steve Downey, who always 'set the table on a roar' after staff



Christmas lunches, rose magnificently to the challenge, as no one doubted he would! This summer will see the retirements both of Old Master artist, set designer and orator Steve Downey and of faculty head, historian extraordinaire and consummate raconteur, Seb Neal, whose fund of cricket anecdotes must be second to none! As Steve remarked, he had been asked to give the speech on behalf of both of them because, had Seb given it, we'd still have been listening to him right now! Mind you, neither gentleman has ever been guilty of boring an audience! Steve's moving words about the value, fun and sheer joy of a teaching career struck a chord not only with those of us who have also worked at what we used to call the chalk face but with his entire audience. Not, as they say, a dry eye in the house.

It was good to observe tradition, as toasts were made to the King, to the Glorious Memory of the 114 Old King's Scholars who sacrificed their lives in the two World Wars, to the City and the County of the City of Chester and to our founder King Henry VIII. Thereafter, guests chatted amiably before dispersing gradually with a profound sense of connection and fellowship – to say nothing of a smiling stomach!

None of this just happened, of course, and it would be remiss of me in the extreme not to end by paying the warmest possible tribute to the superb King's catering team, to the incredibly mature student Heads of School, to the highly efficient and unbelievably patient alumni team, to the meticulous CAOKS Dinner Secretary, Robin Hardi, to those who travelled near and far to be there and to all the other unsung heroes who made the CAOKS dinner of 2025 such a delightfully memorable occasion. Without greater numbers there exists the very real possibility that the CAOKS Dinner of 2025 could prove to have been the last of its kind. Should that be the case, we certainly went out on a high note – but it doesn't have to be that way, and the survival or otherwise of such a convivial, life-enhancing event depends on all of us.

Ann Marie McMahon
(English Department, 2000-2018)



“It Lurked Beneath The Surface - Pt 2”

The Swim

Storms had been stopping all swims for 2 weeks, but the weather broke 3 days into my window and the Pilot messaged to say it was a go. At 11pm that evening we boarded the boat only for an electrical fault to delay our departure. We arrived off Samphire Hoe beach an hour late with the tide turned, it mattered as I was on a Spring Tide and needed to get out quickly to clear Dover Harbour. It also meant the last mile could be very treacherous; it wasn't ideal but if you don't take your shot you go to the back of the queue.

In the pitch black I found the shingle beach more by sound than sight. With a lot of arms flailing, I waded up the slope, took a moment to look around, raised my arm to signal the boat about 200m away, and at 00:30 face-planted into the water. As I swam out, I could see ships crossing left to right ahead of me in the Southwest Lane, but the ferries entering and leaving Dover to my left were getting closer and closer. Eventually the harbour started to slide behind me and we'd made it far enough out.

Swimming on autopilot 10 metres off the side of the Pilot boat I let my mind wander. Thoughts of the enormity of the task ahead and of swimmers I knew who hadn't made it flooded in and started thinking of face-saving ways to quit. This was terrible! I was frantically thinking positive thoughts to arrest my mental doom loop when I swam into THAT jellyfish.



My feed plan was to feed at 2 hours of swimming and hourly thereafter and having made it to the first feed I committed myself to swim to the next. Messages from friends in the US were coming in through the night and being written on the whiteboard for me, they were hugely helpful. Feeling the rhythm of my stroke, hearing my breathing, feeling the water flowing, darkness above, darkness below I entered a deeply relaxing, meditative state. Before I knew it, it was time to feed again, and I was enjoying myself.

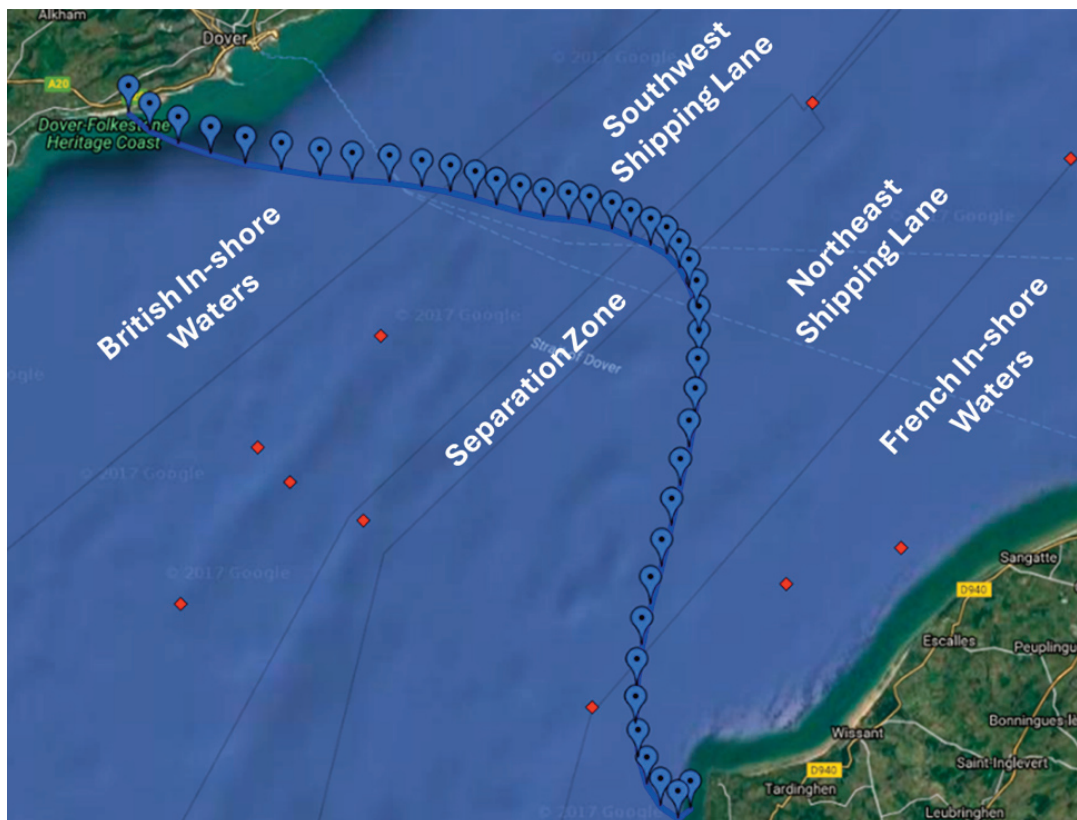


Features

There were no Coastguard requests to tread water and wait for ships that would be unable to safely avoid us, so aside from one or two minor stings the swim through the Southwest Shipping Lane into the Separation Zone was uneventful. The feeds went like clockwork with the bottle lobbed just in front of me, so I didn't waste energy swimming to the side. I'd roll onto my back, chug the feed and grab the treat from the compartment under the bottle, listen to any messages then get going again.

The Separation Zone has large mats of seaweed which often trap jellyfish, I dragged myself over some that looked clear underneath, otherwise I Pac-manned around and reached the Northeast Lane in just over 5 hours, an hour faster than I'd expected.

The average successful crossing time is 14 hours, it depends on the conditions not just the swimmer, all that matters is to get across but when I signed up this challenge my secret hope was under 10 hours. Surgeries had killed that goal and based on comparable swimmers I'd told the Pilot 11 ½ hours. My body was telling me I was at an easy forever pace, the sun was rising, and all felt good, so I decided to try to negative split the Channel and picked up the pace.



With dawn the water transitioned to clear blue, the clarity of it was something most open water swimmers never get to experience as proximity to land means cloudy sediment. It also meant I could now see there were hundreds of bloody jellyfish though most were below me. The Northeast Lane is 6 miles wide at its narrowest, so it feels never ending, fortunately there were no ship encounters, and it was a case of just grinding it out. The UK started to wake up and a different flavour of message came in, meanwhile the tide

turned, and I started to get swept to the Southwest. I could see the white chalk cliffs of Cap Blanc Nez in front of me and I knew that Cap Gris Nez was to my right but hidden by the pilot boat, the extra pace was taking its toll and I asked for paracetamol in the next feed. Unfortunately, I lost most of this, but my crew rescued me by bringing forward my next feed and throwing half a banana at me with ibuprofen poked in it. After 8 ½ hours of swimming a very welcome “FIW !” (French In-shore Waters) appeared on the whiteboard and it was emotional. There were tears in my goggles. Cap Gris Nez was visible to my front right only 3 miles away. I could see the rocks at its base and people standing on the top, but it was sliding to my left and was going to miss it. This was a bad thing for two reasons: 1. The currents to the swimmer’s right of the Cap can reach over 6 knots and form large gyres which trap swimmers or push them back out to sea. Capt. Webb himself was stuck here for 5 hours. And 2. If you land on the beach to the left, there’s a restaurant. If it’s open a waiter comes with a glass of champagne.

The Pilot and my crew messaged “IMPORTANT”. “SWIM FASTER”. “NOW!”. I was into anaerobic territory and the water was buffeting me like in-flight air turbulence (caused by the reefs below). The bloody Cap was off to my left and the shore in front of me seemed to be receding despite the effort, the muscles on my back had turned purple and the Observer started worrying I wasn’t going to make it but after 15 exhausting and anxious mins we were out of a gyre, and I could ease off a fraction.

Eventually I saw the Pilot’s crew ready and launch an inflatable boat to escort me the last ½ mile. Time for a sprint finish! What I thought was a wakeboarder shot past from left to right, I was about to get biblical with rage until the next breath revealed it was a buoy and it dawned on me just how fast the current was ripping.

Finally, I could see a boulder below me, then another closer to the surface, then bloody enormous boulders rearing out of the water each the size of a large SUV. Technically you are supposed to clear the water completely for the clock to stop but for safety reasons they’ll accept you just touching the rocks if you finish at a cliff. Because I’m an idiot I went for the full technical and smeared a good amount of my DNA on the rocks. The second attempt was better, and I cleared the water like a weird Sealion for a time of 10 hours 28 mins.





Ten for Now and Then - Martin Cash (OKS 1978)

“Ten from Now and Then” puts the following questions to a different former student each issue. We would love to hear from anyone who would like to take part in this new feature. Whether you left the school 5 years ago or 75 years ago, it doesn’t matter. If you fancy taking part, you can drop me line at the usual address. Editor@caoks.co.uk

1. When did you begin your journey at King's and do you recall your initial impressions?

I started in the Junior School in 1968. I was in Form C, but I can’t recall any initial impressions – it was nearly 60 years ago and I have trouble remembering what I had for lunch these days!

2. What was/were your favourite subject(s)?

I was an avid reader (and still am) so English was always a favourite. I also like to know the “how and why” of things, so Latin, French and Greek were also interesting in helping me appreciate and understand English as a language.

I also liked Geography – and not just because there were opportunities for field trips! But I vividly remember my first family holiday to the Lake District when everything I had learnt about glaciation was suddenly revealed in the scenery all around me. I would say I owe my understanding of the landscapes I have encountered during my travels to what I learnt at King’s.

3. Who was your favourite teacher and why?

The most frequent comment on my reports was “must try harder” so I wouldn’t say I had a “favourite teacher.” But there were two who made an impression on me – for very different reasons.

Tom Clamp. PE teacher. Despite my dislike of, and total incompetence at, any sort of physical activity he was never anything less than encouraging of my feeble efforts.

John Hudson. He was my form teacher in Form A in the Junior school and also taught us French. There was one phrase I just couldn’t understand –

“trompe jusqu’aux os” – so he dragged me to the nearby cloakroom and held my head under the tap for a few seconds. I have remembered ever since that the phrase means “soaked to the skin.” I suspect that such teaching methods may be frowned upon these days...



4. Did you take part in any organised sports at King's?

As mentioned above, I detested most sports, being small, asthmatic and lacking any sort of hand/eye co-ordination. In three years of compulsory football during my time in the Junior School, I scored only one goal when the aforesaid Tom Clamp made me take a penalty kick against the only boy who was smaller and more asthmatic than me. To the surprise of everyone (especially me,) I did actually manage to put the ball in the net.

I enjoyed rowing when I was able to take that up in the Senior school but wasn’t good enough to keep it up. I seem to recall that by the time I reached the Fifth form a few of us who were similarly lacking in sporting ability/inclination were allowed to while away our games periods playing badminton, pretty much unsupervised.

5. Did you take part in any of the musical activities at King's? (Choir/Orchestra etc)

My music teacher was Mr Sutton, who rapidly spotted that I was tone deaf and couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Consequently, anything involving singing was out of the question.

He did try and teach me to play piano but, due to me being left handed, I struggled a lot. In the end, rather than persevere with the tuition, he said words to the effect that I might as well forget it, I'd never be musical or learn an instrument. I have always loved listening to music but those words meant that I never thought I could do anything other than listen.

Thankfully, after learning to play guitar during a "mid-life crisis moment" I ended up playing bass in a band at the age of 60! Although no longer in that band, I still play with a couple of friends on an irregular basis and have also written the lyrics for several original songs that we are planning on performing at some point in the future.

So much for Mr Sutton's opinion!

6. When did you leave King's and where did you attend University?

I left in 1978 but did not go to University as I'd had enough of academia by then. Also, the job situation was pretty dire in those days and I'd been offered a career with Barclays Bank if I passed my A Levels.

I did subsequently take my banking exams though, and became an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Bankers, a qualification that I was always told was degree level. Not that it counts for anything these days...

7. Do you still live in, or have family in the Chester area?

I was fortunate enough to be given a move to Kendal with Barclays Bank, some thirty years ago. It is the best move I ever made and I have remained here ever since, despite my Barclays career ending in 2010. The rest of my family stayed in the Chester area and I do visit now and again, though I find the city a very different place to that I grew up in.

8. Have you kept in contact with any of your former classmates and attended any Alumni or CAOKS events?

I have only attended a few events at the school – living 100 miles away either means a late night drive home or paying for a hotel in Chester. As I said above, the job market was not good when I left school, and was even worse by the time my contemporaries left University, so a lot of my classmates left the Chester area for the sake of their careers. Consequently I lost contact with most of my former classmates.

I think only half a dozen of us attended the 40 year reunion in 2018 and, though I said I'd keep in touch with a couple of them, Covid came along in 2020 before anything could be arranged.



I couldn't really avoid joining CAOKS though as my father R M Cash (OKS 1949) was Hon Sec for many years. I still look forward to each newsletter, though I am always awed by how much more other Alumni have managed in their lives compared to mine!

9. What would you regard as your career highlight to date?

I don't really have any highlights from my career with Barclays Bank. I did end up managing my own branch, but the job was very different by then – more sales than service. I left at age 50, mainly for the sake of my health.

I was then fortunate enough to find a role as a technical trainer, working for a company set up by two ex-Barclays trainers. I spent the next ten years travelling all over the UK (and Ireland, on occasions) firstly helping with the roll out of self scan tills in Asda and Tesco before landing up on a couple of projects with Costa Coffee. Basically, I was paid to

show people how to make coffee to a certain standard and it was a very rewarding role. I received several glowing reviews, but I'm going to say that the highlight for me was being signed off as a Barista. Not as academic as my ACIB, but probably a lot more useful!

As the training I delivered was all face to face, it all came to an abrupt end in March 2020. I was nearly 60 by then so decided to retire early. And I've not regretted that decision since.

10. What would you say were the main benefits of attending a school like King's?

I certainly learnt a lot at King's and, whilst not all of it was relevant to what I did subsequently, the actual process of how I acquired that knowledge was a firm basis for learning what I needed in my career.

I think the main benefit I got from my time at King's was self-confidence. Something I think that wasn't actually taught but was absorbed during the years. We always knew that we were attending one of the best schools in the country and that anything was achievable if you put your mind to it. An attitude that has served me well over the years.



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Many thanks to Martin for his contribution. On a personal note it's great to hear from other musicians who are playing in bands and getting out and playing live. If it's in your blood, it's in your blood haha! (Ed)

New Alumni Website Launch!

Something Exciting is Coming for Our Alumni Community!

After listening to your feedback and imagining the possibilities of a truly connected alumni experience, we're thrilled to announce the upcoming launch of **our brand-new alumni platform** — a digital space where community meets connection, and memories meet momentum. Think *LinkedIn* meets *Instagram* — designed exclusively for our alumni like you.

Whether you're looking to reconnect with classmates, grow your professional network, share life updates, or explore career opportunities, this is the space you've been waiting for.

- What to expect:
- Dynamic profiles for showcasing your journey
 - A vibrant newsfeed of alumni updates and achievements
 - Networking tools tailored to your field and interests
 - Event announcements, job boards, and more!

We can't wait to unveil it!

Keep an eye on your inbox, we will be sending out the official launch invitation soon.

*Let's reconnect. Let's celebrate.
Let's build the future together.*

Ron Gerrard OKS (1947)



Ronald Stanley Gerrard was born in Newton, Chester on 3 September 1930. He passed away on 12 November 2024, aged 94 in a Care Home in Bedfordshire near to his beloved daughter, Sarah.

He was a pupil at the Kings School between 1940-1947 and was awarded the School Certificate. In October 1947 he started work at the Midland Bank (now HSBC) in Eastgate Street, Chester. It was here that he met his late wife, Margaret who was on the staff at the Chester branch. He worked in Chester for 12 years then after a number of managerial appointments for Midland Bank arrived in Kendal, Cumbria in 1972, where he became Area Manager.

Ron and Margaret lived in South Cumbria for 46 years. But his heart was always in Chester and over the years regularly attended many CAOKS dinners and social events. He was very proud of his old school and enjoyed meeting up with old school friends.

Ron was also a loyal Freeman of the city of Chester and a member of the Bricklayers Company. He wholeheartedly supported the Chester Freeman and Guilds and in 1973 was made President. His Grandfather Alderman Stanley Gerrard was a past President of the Guilds as well as Mayor of the city of Chester in 1931.

Throughout a long and happy life Ron spent nearly every summer in Abersoch, North Wales. He loved dinghy sailing and racing and was a keen yachtsman with a special interest in nautical knots. He also sailed on lake Windermere close to his home and was a member of the Royal Windermere Yacht Club.

He devoted much of his time to his community in South Cumbria supporting local causes and his church St Peter's at Heversham where he is buried. He was much loved and respected by all who knew him, a true gentleman in every sense of the word. He is survived by his children, Sarah and Ashley and two grandchildren, Gemma and Charles.

David Roberts OKS (1963)



It is with deep sorrow that we announce the passing of David Roberts (OKS 1963), a cherished former rowing coach here at King's.

David was a student at King's from 1955 to 1963, where he shone as a star oarsman in the early 1960s. He was inspired by Arnold Cooke and David Latham, both of whom rowed for Great Britain, and he had the honour of rowing alongside them in the 1st VIII when he was just 15 years old.

In his final year at King's, he secured a place at St. Catherine's, Cambridge to study English, becoming both the Captain of Boats and Head Boy during his tenure. He thoroughly enjoyed his university experience.

After completing his studies, David went to Phillips Exeter Academy in the United States to coach and teach, where he relished the experience of driving an E-type Jaguar and racing it along country roads against a fellow rowing blue and college friend who had an Aston Martin DB6!

The next chapter of his life took him to New York, where he resided in Greenwich Village while working at American Express headquarters. He later advanced his career at Time Warner, ultimately returning to London on their behalf in the early 2000s.

Throughout his years in New York, David remained devoted to The King's School Rowing Club, serving as the regular Henley coach for King's crews, returning each year for a two-week coaching session.

David was instrumental in organising the first trans-Atlantic visits of KSRC to the Head of the Charles in Boston. He secured sponsorship, accommodation, and

rowing facilities, and this event has since become a highlight in the King's Rowing calendar, all initiated by David's vision.



After retiring a few years post his return to London, he initially moved to Henley and then to Chester, where he quickly became a valued member of the coaching team at KSRC, taking special responsibility for the 2nd VIII.

David was immensely popular among the crews he coached; stories abound of his humour, his ability to inspire, and the joy of rowing under his guidance. He dedicated his time and enthusiasm over the years, and it was not just about his exceptional coaching. He fostered a love for a challenging sport, instilling self-belief in boys and girls of all abilities to reach their potential. Even if they didn't excel, they all had a great time and left with treasured memories and stories that would last a lifetime.

Dave was a beloved figure in the rowing community, having devoted over 50 years to the club. He will always be remembered for the significant impact he had on the lives of King's rowers over the decades which inspired generations, and how he selflessly dedicated his time to help students reach their full potential, all while fostering a love for the sport.

He will be greatly missed by his family, crewmates, and the many rowers fortunate enough to have known him. The whole King's community extends heartfelt condolences to all who mourn him.

John P. Birchall OKS (1958)



King's School alumnus (1950-58) John Birchall died on 5th July 2023 aged 84 years. All of us who knew him in various capacities have had time to reflect on the life of an extraordinary person. In addition, John has left us with something special. Over the years he built up a written record of his life history and recorded this on his remarkable website - . It chronicles his life from his schooldays right up to his passing in 2023.

He was wonderful company, a joy to be with. He had the quality of being greatly interested in the people he met. He treated everyone with respect, and he had a genuine belief that all people have something interesting to offer. John in return was wonderfully interesting to be with. He built up a treasure trove of experience and knowledge through his appetite for learning, discussing, and observing. He lit up the lives of family, friends, and colleagues. It transpires from looking at his website that literally hundreds of us enjoyed this privilege.

Because he recorded in detail his journey through life, it means that we can re-live our part in that journey and that we can learn many new things about John even though he is no longer with us. Furthermore, this opus can be accessed by others of all ages and stages. John has left us a rare chronicle of one person's journey over eight

momentous decades. The website is both an historical record and a wealth of interesting stories, observations, and links to a treasure trove of facts and opinions.

John's wishes were clear - he wanted there to be "No fuss" at the time of his passing. His family, of course, respected this wish but also recognised that they together with friends, colleagues and acquaintances would like to remember him in their own personal way. Consequently, an online Book of Remembrance has been set up by his family. To date 50 contributors have submitted their own personal recollections to this book that will be published online in due course. The result will be an unusually comprehensive written record of a life lived over 84 years of great change. It refreshes our treasured memories, is a source of thoughtful wisdom and provides material of immense value for students of modern history.

John was born in 1938 and almost immediately his parents were faced with the horrors of World War II. He started his King's School education in 1950/51 and continued to 1957/58. Today's students on the Wrexham Road will hardly recognise how the school was then. The Main School was in the building adjoining the Cathedral opposite the Town Hall, subsequently used by Barclays Bank, its entrance was via Abbey Square, the school playground being the area currently the Bank car park.

Other school activities were spread across the city. Science labs, art room and dinner facilities were a few hundred yards away in the Bluecoat building in Northgate Street. The school gymnasium was further quarter of mile away off Parkgate Road. The school playing fields were a bus ride away outside the city down Lache Lane. The sporting picture was completed by rowing on the River Dee. Despite these fragmented facilities the King's School had a record of enthusiastic sporting activity.

Academically the post-war years were certainly "interesting". The school attracted teachers of high

academic quality but, because of war time influences, teaching quality varied. This laid the ground for John's journey of lifetime learning. At school, gaps had to be filled by self-motivated sourcing to supplement what was taught by teachers. John often stated that he learned much from his peers who would always be prepared to help fill in the gaps. This ethos of kind, friendly, helpful interaction between fellow pupils was a feature of King's School life in those days and hopefully the same ethos maintains to this day.

Outside school the 1950s were a time of austerity; fuel and food shortages, food and clothes rationing up to 1954 and limited choice of food, sweets and consumer goods thereafter. Uniquely our generation lived through this period knowing no better. Close friendships were forged, and we made most of our own entertainment. John retained friendships he made at school for the rest of his life and his participation in sports, especially cricket became of lasting importance. Times may have been quite hard, but we escaped the dangers of armed conflict and just missed National Service. We were lucky to have received a good education, often supported by sacrifices made by our parents for our benefit.

John ended his school years in good shape, thanks in equal measure to the school and his own efforts. His positive attitude carried on for the rest of his life and his unspoken motto could well have been "if it is to be it is up to me". Off he went to Glasgow University to study Chemical Engineering. This coincided with the transition from 1950s austerity to the dramatically different "Swinging 60s", the era of young people with modest disposable income for the first time. Jobs were easy to find, university grants plus vacation jobs for the lucky few and prices still relatively low. Pint of beer less than 2/0d (10p), an Elvis record 3/6d (18p), bag of chips 6d (2 1/2p), shops full of trendy clothes, disposable income of £3 (300p) went a long way.

As undergraduates we had a great time, dispersed to the four corners of the UK and back to Cheshire

in the vacations. John was able to pursue his great sporting pastime, CRICKET, so important during his 1st XI Captain schooldays and carried on with newly formed OKS team, Chester Crossbatters and subsequently at a higher level with Chester Boughton Hall in the Merseyside Competition. The full extent of John's cricket activities is comprehensively covered by him in . Be prepared, he has written volumes on this topic alone and his peer group and future generations will recognise many names.

The fun of the early 1960s led to momentous events in the mid-1960s. John met and married Carole who was to be his partner for the rest of his life. It was quickly apparent that this union was going to be something special. They were so at ease with each and each other's friends. They tackled life with gusto, supporting and respecting each other. Their children Jonathan, and Sally were much loved, and the family unit thrived happily leading to the arrival of grandchildren.

Enjoyment of sport by all members of the family created a bond: John and Jonathan's cricket, Carole's hockey, Sally's international level rowing. John and Carole had their own individual interests as well, notably John's Jazz saxophone playing and Carole's expert Bridge playing.

Round about that time, John had joined Unilever, a decision that led to a successful career over a period of thirty years. He was very impressed with the history of the business. The founding Lever brothers had the inspired idea of supplying soap of good quality at affordable prices to a mass market. This was a brilliant idea at the time as it was just becoming apparent that the resulting cleanliness was a massive contribution to public health. Lever Brothers did the job better than its competitors as well as demonstrating enlightened attitudes to the welfare of its employees.

It was an example of capitalism at its very best, something that John appreciated. Profits were used wisely and ethically to build the great multinational that we know today. John progressed through the

technical ranks, eventually to important achievements in factory building and management in the UK, Nigeria and Malawi, culminating in the building of a state-of-the art facility back in the UK. Details are described in detail on his website.

After nigh on 30 years with Unilever, John felt moved to retire. This was not retirement as we would know it. It started with a 1st class degree in Economics from the Open University, delving into the intricacies of Evolutionary Economics. In parallel he undertook in-depth study of the history of Dixieland Jazz.

He devotes a fascinating section of his website to his relationship between cricket, beer and a wide and varied social life. The number of lifelong friendships collected along the way is truly mind-boggling. His memories are intertwined with interesting facts on the history of beer-drinking. He refers regularly to his revered “convivial pint”, identifying beer as a means of fostering friendship and fellowship.

He did this most successfully with his treasured pint being a benevolent friend. He never allowed alcohol to become the dangerous enemy that some of us allowed it to become. John’s example is a model for enjoying this friend while staying away from the dark side of alcohol consumption.

Open University and Economics opened the rich world that is evolution, economics and philosophy. Throughout his retirement John read voraciously on these subjects, summarising the work of the greats like Charles Darwin, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Richard Dawkins et al. John had plenty of observations and questions of his own to add. It all adds up to a learned introduction to this complex but fascinating world that he enjoyed so much. Some of his website carries material that is of a depth that you would expect from someone with a First Class Honours Degree but there is plenty of interest for those of us who appreciate learning a little extra about the world around us.

For today’s King’s School sixth-formers there is a valuable peek at what interest the study of economics and philosophy can hold.

John’s command of engineering, soap making, industrial management, cricket and other sports, family life, economics, evolutionary science, philosophy, and the rest was phenomenal. His achievements were staggering but that was not all - he found the time to write it all down. But wait, there’s more.

Dixieland jazz captured his interest early in life and so he proceeded to understand its origins and importance in developing enjoyment for millions. He explains the significance of great exponents like Louis Armstrong and his contemporaries. He provides guidelines on how potential exponents can set about learning to aspire to being jazz musicians. He practised what he preaches by becoming a competent jazz saxophonist himself and gained great enjoyment by playing with a group of musician friends for decades into his early eighties. This group, The Smithy Lane Stompers, were serious about their ‘Toons’. They accumulated a songbook of 220 jazz classics. The spirit was willing right up to the end, with the flesh only taking its toll near the end.

His family and his many, many friends miss him terribly of course. We treasure our joyous memories and are grateful that he recorded these memories in his prodigious website. He has left us a chronicle of 84 years of his life history plus his own extra contribution of relevant facts, observations, fun and related history. It’s a treasure trove that makes the reader feel that John is in the room with us, joining in the fun.

What a joy and privilege for so many of us to have had John Birchall in our lives.

Written by John Faulkner (OKS 1961)

Michael Charles Fox **20th March 1930 – 8th May 2025**

It is with deep sorrow that we announce the passing of Michael Charles Fox, a beloved former King's teacher and Rowing Club coach. Mike, who was married to his wife Hilary for 67 years (also a former King's teacher), passed away on 8th May 2025, leaving behind a legacy of love, resilience, and dedication.

Professionally, Mike's passion for both languages and rowing defined his career. In September 1964, Mike joined The King's School Chester as the Head of Modern Languages and Master of Rowing. His legacy in rowing, particularly at King's, is nothing short of legendary. When Mike took over the rowing club, it was in a difficult place. However, through his leadership, vision, and dedication, the club saw a dramatic transformation. Under his guidance, the team won numerous accolades, including the prestigious Visitors Cup at Henley in 1993, a testament to his passion and commitment to the sport.

Mike's unwavering drive and enthusiasm raised the standard of rowing at King's to a level where they competed alongside some of the most well-resourced institutions in the country. His coaching saw students succeed at the National Schools' Regatta, the Home Countries International, and even contribute to the British rowing teams at both junior and senior levels. His tenure at the rowing club from 1964 to 1994 left a lasting mark on the school and the sport itself.

In addition to his work in rowing, Mike was also a remarkable language teacher. His passion for modern languages was contagious, and he encouraged his students to pursue their studies at the highest level, with many going on to secure



places at Oxford and Cambridge. His impact as an educator was profound, and he will be remembered fondly by the many students he inspired over the years. Whether it was through his remarkable teaching career or his passion for rowing, Mike always strived to set an example for those around him.

Mike's life journey spanned continents and cultures, taking him from Liverpool and Derby to Chester, Paris, and ultimately Amsterdam. His unwavering devotion to Hilary, their six children, thirteen grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren was the foundation of his life.

As a teacher, mentor, and friend, Mike will be remembered with great affection by those who had the privilege of working with him. His legacy lives on in the many lives he shaped and the countless memories he leaves behind.

The Final Word

And so, we arrive at the final stop on our journey through another edition of the CAOKS newsletter. As ever it's been a pleasure to put it together for you the readers. I hope you've enjoyed the latest collections of tales and memories from down the years.

It was another splendid evening at CAOKS Annual Dinner back in March. 158 years and counting – quite remarkable, as a certain sports commentator used to say. On a personal level it's always good to catch up with my fellow committee members in person. Most of the meetings we have during the year require me to attend remotely due to being down on the South Coast, whereas the other guys are all relatively local to Chester.

If you've not given the Annual Dinner a try, it really is an enjoyable evening and one of the highlights of the CAOKS calendar. I never thought these things would be for me either to be fair, but sometimes you can be pleasantly surprised when you just give something a whirl and see what happens. I look forward to seeing some new faces at the 159th event in 2026.

Don't forget that I'm always looking for contributions to the newsletter. Memories of school trips, sporting events, musical events, favourite teachers – all these things are welcome. Maybe you've reconnected with an old school pal or teacher in recent times for example – all these things make for an interesting read. events, musical events, favourite teachers – all these things are welcome. Maybe you've reconnected with an old school pal or teacher in recent times for example – all these things make for an interesting read.

If you fancy taking part in the "Ten for Now and Then" column, just send me your answers to the regular 10 questions along with a couple of photos to go alongside. For this and any other submissions please contact me via

As I'm writing these words the April sunshine is beaming in through the window. At this time of year my thoughts begin to turn to the cricket season. I've been a keen cricket fan since 1979 and I think it was probably my favourite thing at school, either that or music haha! A little less cricket and a bit more study and revision may well have paid better dividends back in the day. I look forward to the annual pilgrimage to the Cheltenham Cricket Festival in July which is held at Cheltenham

College. I've been going now for over 25 years – a tradition which started with me and my parents going along but now, as they are not able to travel nowadays, my partner Anna comes along with me.

A word on the retiring Mr S Downey. Steve joined the school when we were in Shells and he was our form tutor in Shell D. I didn't take art classes myself, so I didn't have a lot to do with Steve other than him giving up Saturday's to take us to sport fixtures or referee said fixtures at school. It was great to see him at the Annual Dinner recently and he shared some funny stories from back in the day. Cheers Steve!

In other news, fellow Class of 1990 reprobate Matthew Walley has opened his second pub in Chester – check out all the details about the Chester Station Tap Room and the other Spitting Feathers Brewery ventures below

<https://spittingfeathers.co.uk>

I hope you all have a wonderful summer whatever you have planned. Enjoy every moment and make the most of any and every opportunity that presents itself. You never know where they might lead

I'll see you all again in the run up to Christmas with the Winter edition of the newsletter and maybe at a CAOKS event or two during the year. In the meantime, be good, be safe and take it easy.

All the best

Steve "Taff" Williams (Editor)





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