

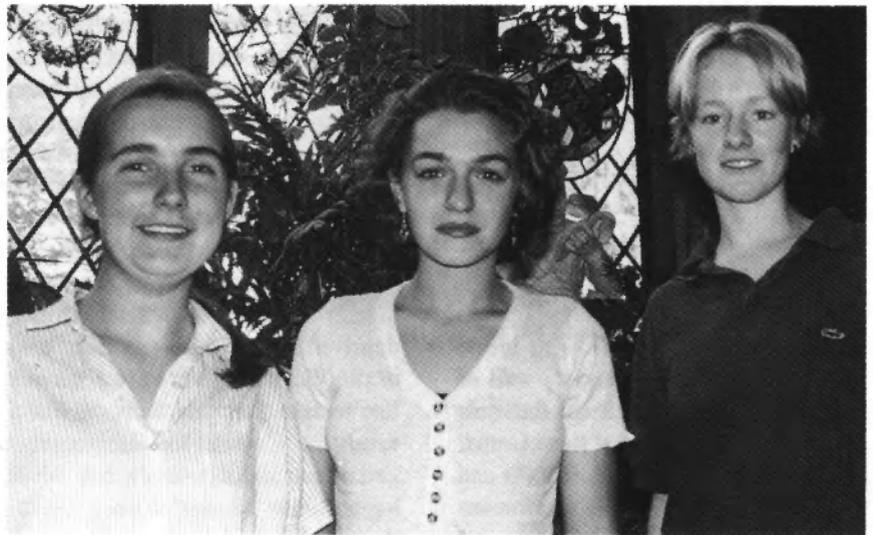
Mrs duCharme's Speech Day Report

Last September seems light years away to me, and possibly to you, but my annual review should, I suppose, start at the beginning, especially since this time round the School was visited briefly on a routine basis last June by an OFSTED inspector and this was followed by a Girls' Schools Association QMA (Quality and Management Audit) for three days in September. Both inspections gave the School an encouraging and positive report, a good way to start an academic year. So we all set to with a will to continue the good work, and here we are in July, still smiling, still beating the National Curriculum and the public examinations into submission, and knowing that this is a process which will have to continue. At a time when pressures on education generally are immense, we feel that we are hardly bloodied, as Mr Major would say, and completely unbowed.

I do not intend, you will be glad to hear, to run right through the year from September to the present, but as usual to talk about the highlights and aim to give you the flavour of the experience. Before I do so, I want to put us as a school into a context, that of England today.

1995 is a special, anniversary year, and I have pondered continually on the kind of world we are bringing up our young people to live in. In the face of materialism, ruthless competition, destructive envy, and lack of trust in institutions or individuals, morale is at a low ebb, and I cannot avoid a *fin de siècle* feeling, which is perhaps not surprising since we ARE coming to the end of this century. We need surely to begin to look towards the new millennium now, and think of new beginnings, change and new hopes, rather than let ourselves get further bogged down in the low-life which is brought to our attention constantly by the media.

This year, 50 years after the end of World War II, has given our nation a welcome and much needed cause for celebrating together, and rejoicing in victory, the victory of good over evil. It was really heartening that so many towns and villages got together and enjoyed concerts and parties, simple celebrations. I decided that as a school we too would do something together on May 8 instead of classes as usual, and that we would go for a country walk. It was not a sponsored walk, just a way to mark the occasion, to see the beautiful countryside round here and be a community together. In the event we set out in



Genevieve Quarrington, Jenny Papas and Barbara Holroyd-Pearce who were selected to join the National Youth Theatre during the summer

glorious sunshine, 438 girls, more than 50 teachers, and over a hundred parents and dogs, and we walked merrily through the fields past the Old Cloth Hall and Dulwich Prep to Sissinghurst Castle. There we were able to picnic on the grass in front of the castle, thanks to Nigel Nicolson, a former Benenden parent, and then we returned to School through the Hemsted Forest, eight miles in all at our own pace. A few days before the walk, Pat Hoare, our Chemistry technician, told me that on the actual VE Day in 1945 she and her school-friends, evacuated to Somerset, had walked round the countryside there and had ended up by swimming in a lake! - So the walk we did seemed to me serendipitous, especially since the weather was fine. We all returned home tired but cheerful, and with only a few blisters to mark the event!

This term in Prayers we have been talking about symbols, and of course

one of the most important symbols for English people in World War II was Sir Winston Churchill's famous V for victory sign as well as his enormous cigar. I think we at Benenden now need two V words as part of what we are seeking and working for as a school. The first is V for victory.

The most spectacular V for victory this year is one Sheelagh Houlden will talk about, and it did a great deal for the confidence of the whole School. It continues to be part of the philosophy of the School to find the talent in each person which can bring her success, and all of us need a victory now and again to help our morale. These need not be public victories, but for US as individuals they make a real difference. Two girls have been selected to be part of the National Youth Theatre and another for the US equivalent group. Two girls have got GAP year teaching assistantships in India. Two

overcame persistent ill health and managed to turn up to take their A Level exams. I could give you literally hundreds of other examples. These seem small victories and they will not hit the papers, but they are very important in the building of character and of morale in the community. It is often easier to complain and to give up, but Benenden girls do not give up easily or without a struggle.

The second V is for vision. In order for the School to go into the new century with heads high we certainly need a vision of the future. The students have no trouble with this, as they proved by burying a time capsule on the terrace in March which included their designs for and poems about their view of life in the year 2045, when it will be dug up. We adults are perhaps a little more circumspect. We are now thinking and researching all aspects of the School both inside and outside the classroom as well as considering the impact of the new technology in ten years' time so that we can approach the year 2000 and go on to 2005 with the confidence that we have planned ahead in a sensible way.

The Development Committee, convened by the Council and consisting



Lauren Pobjoy with the 2045 time capsule

for the most part of members of the Benenden staff, is doing this research. We know that we intend to build the final section of Founders planned earlier which will house 20 more Sixth Form students, and the other signposts along our path into the future should be clear by the autumn. Of course I have a number of hopes and dreams, but we need to plan as a community so that everyone has an investment in the success of what we undertake. We have over the past ten years spent more than £10 million in upgrading the School's facilities, a process which like painting the Forth Bridge must continue. Our most recent improvement which you may well have noticed, and perhaps used already, has been to rearrange the Victorian cloakroom and the luggage entrance so as to provide easier access and better toilet facilities for everyone, especially the men, who have for years been very deprived, meanwhile retaining some of the Victorian glass brick for everyone to see. I should en route like to thank the Council for their constant and active support of all that we do, support that is vital to us, and for their faith in our ability to do the job. At present we are not planning other new buildings, but concentrating on producing an overall blueprint for the future.

To return to the present, this year has not been a year of staggering surprises or flourishes or of pulling rabbits out of hats. I would call it more a year of consolidation, of polishing our efforts as an artist polishes marble. This is what we were aiming for, since pulling rabbits out of hats can be unpredictable and draining.

One of my long held dreams did begin to come to fruition this year, however. I have long felt that our beautiful park would be a wonderful place for outdoor sculpture - some of you may have seen for instance the sculpture park near Wakefield, but I have never managed to get hold of any. This year some of our art students, guided by sculptor Anthony Hawken, made the K8 and K9 sculpture at the top of the drive from

pieces of car and fridge and a shopping cart, so the sculpture park has begun, and a marble fountain is now being made which will be our second outdoor sculpture at Benenden, and several more have been made by the Fifth Form in the Design Studio, so this dream is coming true.

Another of my deepest interests is in words. In our society they often seem devalued, and I am glad that at Benenden our love of words is nurtured by the Lower School Poetry Competition, now in its third year. I am deeply encouraged both by the quality of the poetry being written by our younger poets, and also by their interest in writing poetry. This love of words - spoken as well as written - has also been demonstrated by our Lower School debating team, who spoke eloquently in the finals of the Allied Schools Public Speaking Competition held recently at Homerton College, Cambridge.

The fact that the arts and humanities are alive and flourishing at Benenden is also shown by our second Arts Festival, which took place in February, when nearly 30 artists from all aspects of the arts - from portrait painting to scriptwriting to silk banner making - came to Benenden and conducted workshops for the Fifth Forms and an afternoon Founders' Recital for the whole School, a day generously funded both by the Founders' Memorial Fund and our bankers, Coutts & Co.

The balance is held between arts and sciences by an ever-increasing number of our students studying the sciences at Advanced Level and going on to further education in medicine, veterinary medicine, engineering and the pure sciences. Added to that, fifteen girls will take the GCSE Design Technology course in September.

It is a common misconception among parents that learning takes place primarily in the classroom. Certainly the evidence from Benenden this year shows that the classroom is only one of many places in which it occurs. Our students and Seniors are

to be found in the four corners of the earth in the most unlikely places in their quest for learning. In the course of the past year they could have been found at the Kent Police Constabulary, in the neurosurgery department of a London hospital observing operations on the brain, at various London newspapers, publishers, City firms, auction houses, and law offices and at the BBC Philharmonic in Manchester, all for work experience, and in a freight shipping company on Take Our Daughters to Work Day. Another on GAP year helped build a suspension bridge across the Segama River in Eastern Malaysia on Operation Raleigh. You will find a Benenden student or Senior under almost every stone; last summer in China, at Easter in the Sinai desert along with some of their parents and in California, and this summer on a leadership course in Zimbabwe working out in the bush, as well as on our regular trips to Malaga, La Rochelle, Salzburg and Nettlecombe. Meanwhile, nearer home others can be found presenting their mobile phone company to judges from Mercury Communications, taking part in the Circus Workshop or our Tonbridge exchange and playing concerts at Rye and Smallhythe Parish Churches. I believe that it is this multiplicity of experiences which gives them, along with their many hours in the classroom, studio and lab and library, the skills to be able to cope with almost anything that they come up against - the fact that they study in a beautiful place gives the calmness needed to balance out the thrills and spills. I think it is important to note *en passant* our belief at Benenden that everyone should get as much education as she can, because given the surprises life usually throws at us all these days, both men and women need to be prepared for almost anything; also, given the longer life expectation nowadays, it is vital to have some training so that not only before raising a family, but also after they have grown up, and sometimes concurrently, a woman has enough skills to be able to have a fulfilling life as well as earning a livelihood.

Well, that I hope gives you a flavour of the year. Now for the farewells and the thankyous. As usual, we have to say goodbye not only to our Six Two leavers but also to some of my colleagues, which is always hard and even harder when they have been bulwarks of our community.

Mrs Shirley Brinkhurst has indeed been a bulwark, for sixteen years in all. She first worked at Benenden under Miss Clarke, left to live in Canada and then returned to teach history and geography in 1981. She has been Housemistress of Echngham since 1984. You can find Mrs Brinkhurst at the heart of every School drama or dance production, producing amazing costumes out of almost nothing, and sometimes you will find her wearing them too! I shall never forget her in her disguise as the art critic, Sophie Velazquez-Hiem, when she came to open one of our art exhibits and even her colleagues did not recognize her! To everything she does Shirley Brinkhurst adds zip and zest, and she will be sorely missed. However, she will not be far away, in Rye, for she is the only person I know who actually lives in a tower, though not an ivory one! Thank you, Shirley, for everything you have done for us all over the years.

Equally sorely missed will be Mrs Mary Strong, mother of two Benenden Seniors, Kate and Pippa, and teacher of PE for 25 years but whose association with the School began 31 years ago. Whether on the lacrosse field, the squash court or the tennis court, Mrs Strong has been a tower of strength and steady encouragement to the girls and to us all, and she has added much to the life of the School by her deep commitment and by her great interest



After the Speeches

in the girls as people as well as players. Her home has been a home from home for many girls, not just her own, and it will be very strange not to see her every day - though I must admit I have made her promise to keep on with our weekly tennis game. I have extracted the same promise from Mrs Julia Reynolds, her colleague in the PE department, who leaves after sixteen years of loyal service and who will also be much missed.

One of my most modest and most valuable colleagues is Mrs Hannah Addyman, who is a friend to many Seniors as well as to the girls. She has had several roles in the School over the past sixteen and a half years, beginning in the Accounts Department, becoming the Bursar's secretary and Clerk to the Seniors in 1979, and then moving to become Associate Registrar six years ago. As such, Mrs Addyman has been production editor of the School Magazine, the Seniors' Magazine and the newsletters, and has made herself utterly invaluable to us. Now she wants to devote more time to her family and to other pursuits, so she is leaving the School but will continue her work with the School Magazine.

I salute her, and I thank her for her dedication, support and initiative.

Mrs Shirley Roche of the Drama Department has also been a longtime member of staff, coming to Benenden in 1980. She has instilled confidence into her students by her dedicated teaching and encouragement, and hundreds of them have achieved certificates and medals for acting and speaking, very often with distinction. She has also been the advisor of the Junior Dram competition, and helped the Six One directors to put their show on the road and to achieve more than they could ever have hoped for, and she is an integral member of the Drama Department when the School puts on a production. In addition, Mrs Roche and her husband Patrick, who is still working at Benenden, are expert ballroom dancers, and we shall see Mrs Roche here regularly as they will offer dancing tuition to the girls.

We are also sad to say goodbye to Miss Jo Lewis, who is going off to join the Drama Department at Queen Anne's School after six years at Benenden. She has been a very important person on the teaching and technical side, and at the same time she has been a much loved Assistant Housemistress of Guldeford. We wish her all the best for this new phase in her career and thank her for her many contributions.

Our Director of Music, Mr Stephen Threlfall, as well as his wife, pianist Kathleen Uren, have decided to return to Manchester where Mr Threlfall has been appointed Director of Music at Chetham's, one of England's premier music schools. His four years in post have seen the Hemsted Forest Youth Orchestra and indeed our music generally go from strength to strength, and our loss will certainly be Chetham's gain. We hope he will revisit now and again in his capacity as cellist or conductor and we wish them both well. We also wish Mr Paul Smith, Head of Academic Music, good luck, as he leaves to concentrate more on his chief love, the instrumental side of

music, at Alleyn's School.

Several other colleagues are also bound for pastures new. Mrs Dinah Clayton of the Food Technology Department and Assistant Housemistress of Norris, has been a loyal and very committed colleague for seven years, and her husband David has been a real asset this year as Assistant Librarian, and we hope they will find their new position on the house staff of the Royal Hospital School in Ipswich fulfilling and fun. They will all be missed.

Mrs Jane Pallot, Mr Dave McDougall, Miss Isabelle Moran and Miss Maren Tolksdorf of the Modern Languages Department are also embarking on other ventures, and we thank them and wish them all the very best. Indeed, we thank and salute all our colleagues who are leaving; they can be replaced in their jobs but as people they cannot be replaced in our affections.

Last year I talked about an aircraft, and the heroism of Captain Jean Maridor, who saved our School building from destruction in 1944. And you may know that a plaque in his memory was dedicated at Benenden Church by his former fiancée last September in the presence of a number of his former Free French comrades and members of his family from Le Havre, all of whom came over for the ceremony and attended a lunch in their honour here at School afterwards. All of us walked together to the site of the crash. You may not have heard that a week after the ceremony, a piece of the doodlebug that destroyed his aircraft was recovered from our woods. We have now named the room next to the Registry on the ground floor of the main building after him, and in due course will put in it more memorabilia.

This year I want to talk about another aircraft, but this time a metaphorical one. We are not an old school, indeed our history, which is now being formally written, begins only in 1923, so like any plane it has taken us time to climb to cruising speed. It

is quite easy and quite impressive to whoosh upwards to 30,000 feet or so. What is not so easy is to cruise safely along, and to go even higher. Maintaining a cruising speed is not so obviously spectacular, and means constant attention to the dials, and a need to look carefully at the map to find the way to the next airport, and then the next. We cannot stand still, and in flying - small planes at least - it is never just a question of holding the joystick; there is work to be done to keep the aircraft in trim.

We have all been working hard to keep our aircraft cruising well and my colleagues have as usual been essential to the flight. In many ways, however, no-one has been more pivotal this year than our leavers, the Six Twos to whom we say au revoir today. They have been a terrific group from the outset, and the Upper Sixth, who have done a wonderful job, especially the Head and Captain of School, Sheelagh Houlden and Ginia Simkins. I have watched them with interest and admiration ever since they were quite small and I would like to express my thanks to them and to wish them all the very best in the future. I would also like to thank their parents, who have been a particularly friendly, hardworking and loyal group whom it has been a pleasure to know.

Sheelagh has family in Kenya, so I want to remind you of what Joseph Thomson, explorer of Masailand last century wrote. I quoted it to you last Speech Day, but this year I repeat it because I feel it has actually come true and is more relevant than ever. You will forgive me for changing the personal pronoun. *She who goes gently goes safely. And she who goes safely goes far.* And I am sure our leavers will.

I wish everyone a good summer and the leavers, both students and colleagues, Godspeed.

Gillian duCharme
July 1995