

Speech Day 2019

Thank you, Chair of Governors, a very warm welcome to Christopher Wright and your family; Mayor; distinguished guests; parents, governors, staff, friends, alumni – lovely to see lots of last year's Upper Sixth here today! – and especially to our pupils.

This is a prize-giving, so let's celebrate the most prestigious of them all. Sir Peter Ratcliffe, Director of the Francis Crick Institute in Oxford: born in Morecambe, came to LRGS 1965 to 1972, studied in your classrooms, sat where you're sitting, worked hard at school, went on to Cambridge, and last month received the Nobel Prize for Medicine for his fundamental work on cells' response to oxygen. It is the most astonishing achievement.

And he has written this to us: "Quite a surreal two weeks. So many good wishes from so many old friends – quite a few from the Grammar School who I've not seen for nearly 50 years. But interestingly the school was important in this. It taught simplicity (to look for simple solutions to complex problems). Those are the ones that are most frequently correct. And I'm inclined to think the success of the UK owes much to its secondary schools. Keep up the good work."

My message to the school: don't think of Peter Ratcliffe as our only Nobel Prize winner, but only as our first. No pressure!

It has been quite a year. Three other highlights.

Firstly, I need to tell you: "This is a school that creates extraordinarily positive experiences." Those aren't my words – that was the verdict of the Ofsted boarding inspectors who came before half term. And they painted the most glowing picture of our very special boarding community: from which an outstanding ethos of pastoral care emanates across the wider school. I loved the quote from one pupil who said: "This place would fall apart without the matrons." And another boarder who said: "We asked the governor for a basketball hoop and we got it." Thank you, governors! Boarding staff are proud to be part of that extraordinary team. Well done.

Secondly, this afternoon we officially re-open Old School House. In the 1850s it was home to 110 boarders with only one bathroom. And – so they say – a ghost. Those old dorms are now superb History rooms, study spaces and our new top floor café. On time and on budget – most from successful capital bids, some from generous donors. Thank you.

Thirdly, of course, fabulous to welcome 34 Sixth Form girls this term from 16 schools. Some of them are here this morning. To them and to the school – well done. It is the start of a rich new chapter for LRGS.

And we are in the business of opening doors. Outreach and access are the centre of our grammar school mission.

And that is why – as well as outreach work with InspirUS, and financial assistance of the Lune Scholarship and Opportunities Fund – governors are consulting on an admissions proposal that starts to tilt the playing field in the direction of pupils on pupil premium or free school meals. Specifically we want to lower the 11+ pass mark for those pupils to reflect the impact of adversity.

So that pupils from all backgrounds will apply and thrive at LRGS: to provide the opportunity for all pupils to do things they could never imagine: "from any street to anywhere."

Well done to the class of 2019: A-level results were outstanding, with almost a quarter of all grades at A* and well over half graded A* or A. Last year's Upper Sixth have gone to study everything from Astronautics to Artificial Intelligence; Marketing to Musical Theatre; from Bristol to Durham; Swansea to Sheffield.

Twelve followed Sir Peter into Medicine; twelve went to Oxford and Cambridge, including Tom Burrows with an organ scholarship; two to Glasgow School of Art; David Wyatt to the Guildhall School of Music; others with apprenticeships to Ernst and Young or the BBC.

GCSE results were up as well. More than forty students achieved seven or more grades 8 and 9, including eight with 10 or 11 GCSEs at grade 8 and above – the old straight A*s – many of them here this morning. I say this to pupils in Year 11 and below: Most people got mostly 7s, 8s and 9s. Make that your goal!

But the real point is the cultural capital, and the intellectual curiosity and confidence and get-up-and-give-it-a-go:

Oscar Ross gained the highest mark in the country in Business and Management. There were Gold Awards in Biology, Chemistry and Physics Olympiads, with Ethan Kidd and Callum Bell selected for International Olympiads, and Saul Manasse selected for the Oxford masterclass. Golds too in the Cambridge Chemistry Challenge, and success in the Lancaster University and Salter's Challenge.

Students won 19 Gold Awards in the Senior Maths Challenge, and even more at younger ages. Paul Gellerson achieved a Distinction in the Maths Olympiad, and Ben Fearnhead in the Intermediate Olympiad. Teams tasted success in the UKMT Team Maths Challenge and the Lancaster University Maths Feast.

Robert Martin was a finalist in the Bebras Computational Challenge at Oxford; Thomas Holden gained our first Duke of York Award for Digital Enterprise. Ben Giles, Juan Aravinth and Monty Cleminson won the MFL Spelling Bee; Monty got to the national semi-finals in German, and along with Abhinav Sharma also won the Save the Children competition "Words not Weapons." Henry Jackson won the Triumph Design awards, with Rowan Myall winner of the innovation award. In the Senior Schools Quiz Challenge, Fred Calvert, Daniel Lusardi, James Weir and Raphael Fox were third in the national finals.

LRGS loves reading: and this year we have loved our first Bookworm Badges, and our reading challenges including the Costa Challenge, Carnegie Shadowing, the Booker short list – one of that shortlist published by another former pupil – and the Young Quills.

But the aim of the school is more than academic. It is about making a positive impact – local and global – by creating the leaders of tomorrow.

Our school enjoys the most extraordinary culture of Sixth Form leadership. That is what the Praesis ut Prosis Award exists to promote – and to remind us in that motto that we have a particular quality of leadership in mind: that says: lead in order to serve; that says – if service is beneath you, then leadership's beyond you; that doesn't place the leader at the apex of the pyramid but turns it upside-down and says: this is where leadership begins: supporting those we work with; bearing one another's burdens.

Last year's senior prefect team did that brilliantly: Josh, Ethan, Cain, Jack.

And you see it everywhere: prefects, mentors, Inspirus volunteers, form captains, organisers of next week's Sixth Form conference at Cumbria University; students involved with Parallel Histories, our inspiring educational charity; our European Erasmus projects; Green Day and Parliament Week; Sixth Form Awards funded by the Old Lancastrians, which students used to go as far as Uganda and Barcelona; the Archive team – and you must go and see the archive display upstairs in the Banqueting Suite over tea and coffee after the end of our formal time together with a display from the Royal Visits in 1951 and 1969.

And behind those pupils, we are privileged to have such supportive parents: thank you for your support for the Annual Fund without which our extra-curricular programme would not run, huge thanks to the Friends Committee, to parents who support our school from the Memo Café to Cricket teas and ROCAP and Burns Night and a thousand other ways. Thank you.

And so to sport: Cricketers won the Royal Grammar Schools festival in baking weather in Worcester – the first state school to retain that trophy. Rohan Parekh and Tom Anderton trained as net practice bowlers for the England, Indian and Pakistan World Cup cricket teams; Charlie Parkinson also played for the Lancashire Academy; 38 pupils played District or County Cricket. When the First XI match played Sedbergh, The Cricketer magazine named it match of the week. The scale as well as the quality is truly impressive.

Rugby teams toured South Africa but the highlight for those of us who stayed at home was victory in the Lancashire Cup against Manchester Grammar – 47:5 in the mud and the mist – and good luck to this year's First XV who beat Stonyhurst this week to progress to the Final again. U13s were also county champions, and U16s were joint winners of the Lancashire Plate. U12s won Sevens competitions at Manchester Grammar and Audenshaw; seniors won at Stonyhurst and QES. Patrick Bishop played for the North of England; ten players represented Lancashire, five for the Sale Sharks or Newcastle Falcons Academies. And five matches on this afternoon!

Rowers competed as far afield as Eton Dorney and the Head of the Thames, with our J14 quad in the top 15 crews in the country. As with netball and rugby, it has been excellent to see girls' rowing begin this term as well.

First XI footballers were finalists in the Lancashire U19 cup and went on tour to Spain, while three pupils played in the Lancaster team that won the County Cup, captained by Theo Butterworth.

Well done to 279 runners who completed the Supper Run! Matthew Knowles can't collect the Cross-country Prize this morning because he is representing Great Britain in the World Mountain-Running Championships – his team won Gold yesterday in Argentina.

Finlay Johnson also won Gold for Team GB in the World Orienteering Championships in Estonia.

Athletics successes included Tom Garner, County champion at 100m; Jack Newton represented the North West in the English Schools Combined Events Athletics finals; Filip Stuchlik was Victor Ludorum, and also played rugby for the Czech Republic.

It is excellent to see Swimming thrive this year, and Owain Heathcote-Jones was County and North West champion at 100m freestyle.

Four pupils were selected for north-west Handball, and Frazer Pollock played for England Future; Finlay Meek for England Hockey's Sporting Excellence programme; John Bardsley was second in the British Schools Circuit Cycling; Abdul Faisal played squash for the Lancashire squad; Will McGhie qualified for the Junior European Golf Finals in Spain; Toby Ellis won the national Table Tennis championships; Rob Cotton was UK Young Rally Driver of the year. And maybe not quite sport, but Lewis Mason was second in the European Pokémon Championships.

But success is what we build together, as well as what we win.

Numbers are at their highest levels for years in the CCF, now with girls in all three sections: sailing, flying, shooting – and Ewan Powell, Oliver Wilson and Amos Daw were all recognised on the Cadet Leadership Course.

Also outdoors, The Duke of Edinburgh Award is thriving, with ten Gold, ten Silver and no fewer than 66 Bronze Awards this year; outside school five pupils gained their Chief Scout Gold Awards.

Some of the most stunning moments and strongest memories of the year as ever are from the Arts. Thank you to Paul Froggatt and the band! Last year's CD – "Take 11" – showcased some sensational talent.

Along with Big Band, the soundtrack to the school has come from numerous solos and ensembles through the year: the String Group, Choir, Chamber Choir, Joint Vocal Group, Rock School, Jazz Orchestra, Arthur Chan playing Beethoven. The Music of Stage and Screen event with the Girls' Grammar School was outstanding: many people were deeply moved by Ben Roch's violin solo from Schindler's List, played in this very hall.

We loved Twelfth Night at the Duke's; and well done to the ten students who gained Silver or Gold Awards in LAMDA; and to all those who gained Speech and Drama Awards as well.

Now we're a creative school – we're also school with a conscience, and a city on a hill cannot be hidden.

Pupils raised our largest ever total for charity this year – over £24,000 – £3600 from 9T alone – but inspired of course by Reece Holt who died in January, who should be sitting with Year 9 today.

I first met Reece in 2016, not long after his brain tumour diagnosis. Reece was the most positive of pupils, and the bravest. I want to thank his friends and classmates today. "I can't believe I'm writing this now," one of them wrote in our book of memories, "and not in 80 years' time." Thank you – he loved school; you did him proud. The school did. Well done to Harry Steele and Will Bowker who walked the length of Hadrian's Wall to raise money for Team Reece.

Lenten Charities also included St John's Hospice, Cancer Research, the Children's Liver Disease Foundation, Friends of Chernobyl's Children, and our long term commitment to Money for Madagascar – specifically to their Bevalala Boys' Centre for destitute children.

Great schools don't happen by accident. They need great teachers, and LRGS has some of the very best.

This year we have welcomed Emily Brook to Design and Technology, Katie Farrell to Geography, Ryan Fisher in Chemistry, Alice Fyson to English, Pascale Hardman to French and Robin Walkden to Maths; Jenna Doswell and Sam Owen in sport.

But we have also said farewells. To David Rouse and Elizabeth Hodgkinson with thanks for their work in Design and Technology; to Dr Chris Ellwood, for his contributions to Physics and outdoor education since 2005; to Stuart Gorse who in his 26 years at LRGS among other things became our one and only YouTube star. If you haven't seen his viral film then look it up: Avec Mes Amis to the tune of Gangnam Style!

And farewell of course to Ian Whitehouse: Head of Cricket, Geographer, Ashton Housemaster, Head of Boarding, Pastoral Deputy, a rock that many people turned to – pupils and staff. This was the reference that brought him to the school:

From the School of Education, University of Leeds, March 1982.

Confidential. [Oh well]

Dear Mr Joyce, [the then Headmaster]

Mr Whitehouse is well above average. His strengths are many: a strong voice; an amiable disposition; patience with troublesome characters [he certainly needed that over the years]; excellent rapport with his classes. Mr Whitehouse is a very likeable young man. His interest in out-of-school activities has been warmly appreciated. [I presume they mean – he was and is obsessed with cricket.] We commend him highly to your attention.

We are glad they did. And I commend them all to your attention! Please will you join me in thanking all the teachers and support staff of Lancaster Royal Grammar School for their work this year?

As I end, I want to mark the loss of Professor Tony Guénault, whose funeral was yesterday and who was a governor for over 30 years with great wisdom; and also Michela Masci, wonderful secretary of the Friends when I first started, who very sadly died this week.

It is a highly distinctive thing that we are trying to achieve at LRGS: to take children from any street to anywhere; with a vision for education that values the broadest academic curriculum; and also believes that it is in the co-curricular life of the school, outside the classroom, that children will learn how to win or lose, and learn how to work with people both like and unlike themselves; so that they will be equipped to serve and to lead – from LRGS today to every continent tomorrow.

Pupils: I don't know if you believe this or not, but you will achieve the most extraordinary things. There isn't another hall somewhere else in England filled with more talent and potential than this one.

It will always be our job to take children from Lancaster and Morecambe and send them out into the world to win Nobel Prizes. Don't let us down!

To our pupils and to all our guests today: Thank you for being part of this fabulous school.

CJP 16th November 2019