

Thanksgiving for the life of Robert Avery

We are all here today to give thanks for the life of a truly remarkable man; Robert Avery, or RA as those with Marlborough connections remember him.

He was a man of many parts and all of us will have different overlapping memories. Perhaps it will be his connections with Marlborough, exceptional drama productions, teaching English or as House-Master of Elmhurst. Perhaps it will be his love of railways - of all sizes, or maybe it could be Rolls Royce motor cars or sport, playing cricket or as a rugby referee. His hospitality at Ladder Hill, the garden there and Sam one of four Dachshund companions with that name. His books, poetry, drawings and paintings; all done in a distinctive and meticulous hand. There are many more memories; I have only scratched the surface!!

Robert was born, the only son of Father Len and mother Doris in 1934 and baptised in this very church. He was brought up in his life-long home "Longside" on Ladder Hill, Wheatley. After initial preparatory education at Headington he went to Magdalen College School in Oxford from 1947 to 1953.

He went up to University at Trinity College Dublin and graduated in English and French. This was followed by studying for a Diploma of Education at Oriel College, Oxford.

Following University he became a school master at Magdalen College School teaching English & French. He remained at MCS from 1958 to 1965. There followed a brief period lecturing at Westminster College in Oxford before his first encounter with M.C. where he became acting Head of English for a year between 1968 & 1969, leaving to take up a post as Head of English at St Edwards School in Oxford. John Dancy the Master at Marlborough lured him back a year later to take up the post of Head of Drama in 1970. He held this post until he left Marlborough in 1990. He was additionally House Master of Elmhurst (A Junior House) from 1981 to 1988.

Whilst I was taught English by RA at Marlborough-indeed he was the Master in my very first lesson there. I am no Thespian and had no part in his epic productions and therefore to give some deeper insight into this most important element of Robert's life. I am going to call on Martin Evans - Marlburian Club Secretary to read a piece by Andrew Reid which eloquently sums up Roberts time as Head of Drama.

Robert Avery (CR 1968-90)
By Andrew Reid (C2/BH 1972-76)

RA: You must be prepared to live theatre; and when I say live theatre, I mean eat theatre, drink theatre, breathe theatre.

[Pause for impact.]

And not just when you are here on this stage: you must be prepared to live theatre from the moment you wake until your first class of the day, then between classes, after classes, before rugby, after rugby, and yes, why not? - during rugby.

[Pause for nervous laughter]

You think I'm joking? RA does not joke about theatre.

[Fix nearest child with a steely glare.]

You. Are you prepared to live theatre in the lunch queue?

This was the fiery opening to a pre-audition recruitment speech I heard RA deliver many times; but the first was for me, as for so many budding thespians, a defining moment in the long, awkward journey from childhood to adulthood. Here was a man unapologetically demanding dedication, commitment and sacrifice from those who had known only indulgence. It was a demand delivered with the certainty of one aware that he offers a prize

infinitely richer than the price. For me, it was a clarion call, unsurpassed by anything Shakespeare put in the mouth of Henry V; heady stuff, calculated to *stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood*. Irrevocably inspired, instantly hooked, I answered with an unconditional yes, and the role of 3rd spear bearer in RA's epic whole school production of King Lear was mine.

Robert Avery arrived in 1968 to a Marlborough approaching its liberal zenith. Led by the legendary Jack Dancy, the College had begun to recognise that the bluff heartiness and diletantism that had characterised public school output for generations was no longer enough. The spirit and enthusiasm embodied in Newbolt's *Vitai Lampada* ("Play up! play up! and play the game!") now had to be grounded in a level of specialism and professionalism that would previously have been regarded as ungentlemanly. It was a time of controversial and frequently startling change: pupils were encouraged to question, to challenge, to recognise that achievement was not constrained within the boundaries of the playing field. The focus was on performing to the limit of one's ability; the medium almost immaterial. And so, appointments to Common Room were made with a view to the newcomers' specialist skills and interests outside the classroom as well as their qualifications within it; girls were admitted; Marlborough developed the first A level in business studies; art was taught to a standard previously unseen in secondary education, and as a serious subject rather than as an amusing hobby; even the ever-strong sports department saw a new scientific approach to training and tactics that gave the lie to the title 'games master'.

It was against this backdrop, after a short stint as acting Head of English, that RA entered stage left (it could only be left) in the role of Director of Drama, with a stiff, slightly stooped formality that proclaimed him to be a man about serious business. Not for him the bluff heartiness of the 'good egg' pitching in and corraling the pupils in a rollicking production of Charlie's Aunt or one of those thoughtlessly entertaining Agatha Christie murder mysteries. Tasked with bringing what he termed 'real theatre' to Marlborough, Robert had no time for what he regarded as the safe, puerile productions that had hitherto been the meat and drink of public school theatre. Refusing too to succumb to the easy indulgence of controversial Rocky Horror style spectacles, he chose instead challenging works from contemporary dramatists such as Beckett and Ionesco, interspersing them with healthy doses of the classics in which he found an endless supply of barbed social commentary entirely appropriate to the modern world. Every Avery production was a vehicle for challenge of what he saw as the errors of an old order precariously clinging to the reins of modern society; and it was with glee that he would quote the handwritten note of protest famously despatched to him via internal mail from a senior common room colleague who had abandoned his production of Coriolanus at the interval: "The trouble with you Avery IS that you don't understand that people don't go to the theatre to think."

For me, the lasting value of Robert's contribution as Director of Drama went well beyond his deft demonstrations that theatre, like all art, is entirely capable of providing instruction, education and challenge while simultaneously entertaining. RA imbued his young casts and crews with a quality that would be increasingly expected of us in adult life: professionalism. In demanding that we live theatre, he taught us that the era of the gentleman amateur was over, that success in the modern world required self-discipline, focus, justifiable confidence and truly professional performance. There was no place for a prompter in an Avery production. He treated cast and crew as adult professionals, cajoled the Bursar into providing funds for professional lighting equipment and prevailed upon talented members of Common Room and their spouses to create costumes, props and scenery which would not have disgraced a busy county theatre. The result was so much more than the twenty year run of high end productions for which Marlborough deservedly garnered acclaim: it was the steady output of OMs who had bowed to Robert's direction, had learned to live theatre in

the lunch queue, and had left equipped and prepared to succeed in the world of the professional. To each of them I say: join me in one last cry of Director! Director! and savour the applause as the man who played such a major part in shaping the individuals we became takes his final curtain call.

Thank you Martin.

After leaving Marlborough he returned to life full-time in Wheatley in the family home "Longside" and whilst he found the development and urbanisation of Wheatley at times puzzling he loved "Home". He maintained the large garden single handed, wrote poetry, read widely, painted, built and developed various model railways and of course built the unique "Ladder Hill Railway".

This was the culmination of a passion for railways in general and steam locomotives in particular. I feel that it is again the drama of a steam express that so captivated him. His first love was undoubtedly the GWR and many happy hours were spent watching and photographing the trains. As steam disappeared from the GWR he went further afield, the North, basing himself in Sedburgh to photograph the S&C and trains on Shap and the Southern Region to witness some of the last steam hauled express trains on BR. He then travelled further afield to Northern France where steam lived on.

Model railways became an early fascination and the Bassett Lowke O gauge railway circling the sitting room was started as a boy with his father and was added to, adjusted and modified through-out the rest of his life.

A MC Railway Society visit to Oakhill Manor and a trip on the miniature railway there provided the inspiration for purchase of a 7 ¼ gauge model Britannia and the construction of LHR. At its zenith it ran from the gate to the back lawn, was fully signalled and had a miniature Pullman dining car. There will be a few who travelled on it who will not forget the drama of the ride!

Robert's hospitality was always gentle, warm & distinctive and were perhaps epitomised by the railway days he held in aid of charity. Beautiful summer weather (for they nearly always were) tea on the lawn with home-made Avery fruit cake with the garden looking at its best. Trains running in the background, maybe a number of visiting RR's on the drive and Robert with Sam on a lead or under his arm, all slightly eccentric and quintessentially English!

There remains one significant element of Robert's life that has not been touched on, that of his faith. Robert had a very deep faith that was important to him. He loved the traditional wording of the King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer and the reverence they bestowed on a service. As ill health dogged his last years, I know that his faith and certainties that it brought helped to bring Robert through the highs and lows.

Robert was an exceptional man, he was meticulous and for him attention to detail was all. He inspired everyone who knew him to pursue their dreams and to live their lives to the full - He will be greatly missed.