**From the Headmaster:**

**After a Thanksgiving and Leavers’ service in the Priory, Speech Day continued with prize-giving in the sports hall. The Headmaster’s address (slightly abridged) follows:**

Pupils of St Bees School, Professor Sir James Underwood and Lady Underwood, Chairman of Governors, parents and friends.

There is no doubt that the greatest feature of St Bees School is not our wonderful location, nor our superb buildings, not the incredibly supportive parents prepared to make great sacrifices to send children here and not even the wonderfully dedicated staff but in fact our pupils. I always have and always will believe that at this very special school we have amazingly talented pupils. Along with all the other facts that I’ve just mentioned they join together to create this most spectacular thing known as the St Bees School community and that is what we come together to celebrate today.

We started this year with quite a bang as we received the examination results in August showing that our Upper Sixth pupils had managed to secure the most outstanding set of results for some significant time at the school. An eye-watering 43% of all A level examinations taken were awarded the top marks of A\* or A. 95% of all examinations taken were awarded between an A\* and a C grade. The result of these magnificent grades was that our leavers were confidently able to take up their places at many of the leading universities in this country and abroad. In fact, the statistic that I am most proud of, is that 95% of our pupils were successful in gaining entry to their first choice of university.

Mark Twain popularised the saying in ‘Chapters from My Autobiography’, "Figures often beguile me," he wrote, "particularly when I have the arranging of them myself; in which case the remark attributed to Disraeli would often apply with justice and force: “There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” Having been involved in the running of schools for several years now, I am incredibly cynical of the whole system of league tables and educational statistics. I feel they represent a very small picture of the achievements of our pupils and take into account no recognition of the pastoral care, extra-curricular opportunities and wider life-skills that schools like ours provide in abundance. The crux of the problem, as I see it, is that schools are such diverse and complex places that it simply isn't possible to reduce the good we do to a set of numbers. And even if the figures suggest one school is doing better than another, they offer no insight as to why.

However, whilst I absolutely stand by this view, when these statistics show you at the top of the league tables not only for Cumbria, but as the leading co-educational boarding school in the North-West, then maybe we can allow ourselves a chance to celebrate!

At GCSE we were again highly successful with a magnificent 100% pass rate and again 43% of our pupils securing grades of A\* or A in their examinations. Later on in our proceedings we will have a chance to celebrate the achievements of three of our pupils, Dani Lewis, Amelia Tyson and James Brookes who were successful in gaining a clean sweep of A\* and A grades, achieving between them 26 A\* and 10 A grades.

All of these outstanding results are a great tribute to the hard work and dedication of our pupils and their teachers and the families who have supported them during their time at St Bees School. Of course what these sorts of statistics don’t show, is the many pupils at the school who achieve equally impressive results by scoring the much coveted C grade in a subject in which they have battled hard for two years. Many of our pupils were successful in gaining significantly higher results than they might have expected according to our baseline models and I am incredibly proud to celebrate all of their achievements.

At least during my tenure as Headmaster, St Bees School will never become an examination factory. Of course we will always strive to enable our pupils to maximise and often exceed their potential and achieve the best results possible but we will do that within an environment where they are still able to take leading roles on the sports field, stage, concert hall, deep in mud on a CCF expedition, out on the fells and in supporting magnificent charitable projects both locally and internationally. As members of the St Bees community, I want our pupils to feel that they have access to a wide range of exciting opportunities both within and beyond the classroom, and to be able to share in the adventure of learning together with other likeminded people, talented and dedicated staff, supportive parents and a vast network of former pupils. This is a powerful combination and one which I believe is the key to success. In the words of John Donne, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

The St Bees journey begins now in our flourishing Prep department. It is a constant source of pleasure to see the youngest children in the school going about their business, using the facilities, comfortable in the surroundings and very much a part of the school community.

Whilst reading up on recent government changes to the work in our early years class, I decided to look for the word ‘fun’. To my delight the search engine reported it had found several hundred references, the only problem was each time I found the word fun is was closely followed by the word ‘ding’!

But here at St Bees, our Prep Department know not only how to work hard but also how to have fun. Here are just a few highlights of the things which they have enjoyed this year:

Learn to play a musical instrument taster day with the Music Department

They have watched the Whitehaven stage of cycling’s Tour of Britain - in the rain!

Had a visit from former Head Boy, Chris Sharman to explain about his career as a vet

Celebrated World Book Day by dressing up as their favourite character - lots of Harry Potter look-alikes!

Enjoyed a talk from the Owl Trust after which they discovered there are Barn Owls behind the Whitelaw building. Real owls in the Prep – just like Hogwarts! Then the highlight of the day as they examined owl poo to see what owls eat!

A magnificent Christmas Nativity Play.

The annual Christmas Crafts Event – glue and glitter, cutting and sticking. Fun for all the family. And Carol singing, too.

A visit to see the Mayor of Whitehaven

A visit to Morgan Sindall's site in Whitehaven. Where they are building new offices for Sellafield. In return they built the prep an outside hutch for Rory, the Prep Rabbit!

Baking activities with Madame Mouette – Mother's Day cupcakes and Father's day pizza-themed cookies

Pancake tossing in the school grounds

Art on the beach, PE on the beach, walks on the beach, ice cream on the beach. Any excuse to go to the beach!

A stunning music recital – where they showed off their instrument skills – piano, clarinet, guitar followed by some wonderful singing.

Sporting activities against other schools in the Copeland Cluster – Football, Hockey, Tri Golf, Cross Country, gymnastics and netball

Planting seeds as part of the Morrison's 'Gardening for Schools' initiative

Then finally earlier this week, the annual two-day adventure training residential visit featuring ghyll scrambling, rock climbing, canoeing and some lovely nature walks.

This year has seen a number of exciting developments on the site. Over the course of last summer we completely renovated the Fox Music School and spent a considerable amount of money equipping it with new resources. We now have state of the art Apple Mac computer studio, running recording and composition software, which enables our pupils to create their own music and to record their pieces.

Following the floods there was a great deal of damage caused to our Home Economics room; but every cloud has a silver lining, and again last summer, we were able to completely refit this facility and create a bright and welcoming place where under the expert guidance of Mrs Evans, our budding Jamie Oliver’s and Mary Berry’s can create their culinary masterpieces.

I reported last year on the developments at Grindal House, and extensive work has been carried out to all four boarding houses over the course of this year to continue to provide our boarders with the best facilities possible. Due to a growing interest in boarding, this summer will see further work undertaken with additional bed spaces being added to Bega House.

Thanks to the artistic eye of Mr Midwood and the support of the Bursar, I’m delighted to say that we have made significant strides in brightening up the school with fresh colourful paintwork all around the site and what a difference it has made.

Outside the buildings we invested heavily in doing some serious work to help with the drainage of the Crease and I’m thrilled to say that for the most part this has been highly successful and combined with the care and attention of our ground staff led by David Lamb, our pitches have been in excellent condition. To complement this, we also decided that it was time to put some much needed effort into preserving our historic pavilion. Built in 1893 there was no doubt that it was showing its age, and through the care and expertise of our maintenance staff, we have been able to transform it back to its former glory. I am looking forward to welcoming Mrs Joan Lees, widow of distinguished former Headmaster, Geoffrey Lees, to officially open this fine facility in his name on Old St Beghians’ Day this September.

Another area of development this year has seen us actively engaging with a whole host of local junior schools organising special days to offer them a taste of life at St Bees School and offering our pupils a chance to show their amazing leadership credentials. The fact that attendance at our Open Days has shot through the roof, shows that there is real interest in the school as a serious choice for local parents. This year we had more people applying for entry into our First Form than we could accept, a position we haven’t been in for many years.

I’m also delighted that we have been engaging much more with the local community getting involved and supporting local events. We are very fortunate to have excellent links with St Bees Priory and I am very grateful to the wardens for all their support in allowing us to use this magnificent building. The Chaplain was keen to appoint a ministry associate this year and it has been a real joy to welcome Mr Ben Shires to the staff, sharing a role between our two organisations and contributing enormously and with real energy to both. It was also a pleasure to be able to share in the service of confirmation earlier this year. One of the major schemes I am most proud of, is our association with Rosehill Theatre. Their Director, Richard Elder, has a great vision for Rosehill and through a creative partnership with the theatre as part of the ‘Rosehill on the Road’ programme we have been able to host two magnificent concerts here at the school and the Priory featuring world famous performers, Paul Lewis on the Piano and the Ellias String Quartet. This summer will also see us collaborating in bringing the National Youth Choir’s training Choir to St Bees for their summer residential featuring concerts from the Choir, Tenor Nicky Spence and the Crioch Quartet.

With advancements in technology, it has never been more important for us to ensure that we have the best IT facilities we can provide for our pupils. It is fair to say that we have a large task ahead of us as investment in this area has not really kept pace with change. However, I am delighted that the governors have agreed to a significant investment in IT over the forthcoming years. We have started with completely replacing the server systems in the school. A little like the engine in a car, you can’t see anything from the outside but you certainly notice the difference once you get started. This has been an enormous job and not without its fair share of difficulties. Despite meticulous planning, introducing twenty-first century technology to historic listed buildings was never going to be easy. I am very grateful to the staff, pupils and parents for their patience as we have undertaken this task. We have also managed to start a rolling replacement of computers throughout the site, giving our pupils much faster access to the variety of programs that they use every day. We continue to grapple with the issue of introducing wi-fi to the school and I’m delighted to report that this system is being launched today.

New and improved facilities are hugely important as we seek to develop and we are constantly looking at opportunities to benefit our pupils as funds allow. At the same time, we continue to work assiduously at what I think of as the fundamentals, the essential virtues if you like, of any school with the aspirations to excellence, above all in teaching and learning. Over the last two years we have made significant developments in ensuring that we provide the best possible opportunities both inside and beyond the classroom for our pupils. You will have seen many new initiatives introduced as we seek to address the points raised in our inspection report. New policies and procedures have been implemented and there has been a great deal of change. I must, at this point, pay tribute to the staff for stepping up to the challenge of what has been a remarkable time of change for them. Winston Churchill said, “to improve is to change, to be perfect is to change often”. Well I’m not sure we’re perfect but I am hugely grateful to all my colleagues in embracing swift change as we have sought to take St Bees forward. I am fortunate to be able to work with people who are teachers of children not just of subjects. The art of being a teacher, and believe me it is an art form, risks being lost in a maze of narrowly focussed and misdirected political gimmicks, which Mr Gove tells us will drive up academic standards. I believe passionately that outstanding pastoral care has to be at the very heart of any school community. Mr Gove would have us label our children as learners, data sets or perhaps even mobile profit centres and I really do fear that we risk children losing their identity as individuals in a data-driven swamp.

However, you’ll be pleased to know that Mr Gove does occasionally take time to visit the classroom and it was during a recent visit to a primary school that he popped in to one of the classes. They were in the middle of a discussion related to words and their meanings.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a special day for many who will be leaving St Bees School either today or at the end of this term. Schools are places that never stand still but that doesn’t make the process of saying goodbye to pupils and staff we have known so well any easier.

I’d like to start with our Upper Sixth leavers. For many this is the end of a seven year journey and for others a much briefer two year one through St Bees School, and I know that I can honestly say that we will miss you just as much as I hope you will miss us. We have been truly blessed with a quite remarkable set of pupils in the Upper Sixth this year and they have led the school magnificently. Under the watchful eye and unflappable exterior calm of Thomas George and the encouraging and relentless cheerfulness of Julieanne Thompson, our Upper Sixth have set an extraordinarily high standard. I’m sure that all my colleagues on the staff would agree that it has been a privilege to work with them. It is testament to the mutual respect shared between the staff and pupils at the school that we were all able to enjoy some wonderfully inspirational end of year pranks as the Upper Sixth said farewell in style. I have to say as a Headmaster the last few days with any Upper Sixth are always filled with trepidation, what will they do, who will they upset, how will I ever calm the Bursar down when they……!

Well, 1,000 cups of water were removed from the corridors, 933 balloons from the PE centre, 500 metres of cling film was retrieved from various parts of the School, including the inevitable toilet seats, 38 chairs were removed from the temporary fort that was once the sixth form common room, twenty classroom and toilet name plates were returned to their rightful place in Foundation and eight posters of me as the newly appointed Professor Dumble-Davies were found around the school, as it had been transformed into “Hogwarts up North” complete with our very own dementors hanging out of the sixth form common room windows – causing much bemusement on the faces of a visiting local history group that afternoon; but not perhaps so much confusion as the sight of two goldfish who had to be rescued from the water coolers and one UKIP sign proudly displayed at the main entrance! At the end of the day we were still smiling and much fun was enjoyed by all, not least the Third and Fourth Form pupils who helped members of the SMT to fill the Sixth Form’s cars with the 933 balloons from the PE Centre!

As our leavers move on from here this afternoon I’d just like to ask you to keep in mind that your life must never be reduced to what is on your CV, or what job you have, or how much money you earn. Please don’t ever forget that the many opportunities that your parents, teachers and friends have laboured – and often sacrificed – to give you are nobody’s God given right. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges you will face in this fast-paced world is not falling into the trap of taking things for granted. As you set out on your journey, I’d urge you to keep the words of the Irish writer, James Joyce, in mind. He referred to life’s ‘epiphanies’, those magical moments when you recognise just how rich and meaningful even the most unlikely experience can be. Whatever the results of the summer are, I am convinced that each and every one of you has a magnificent future ahead and I can assure you that all of us at St Bees School will be here for you.

Of course it is not just members of our Upper Sixth that are leaving; sadly this time of the year also sees us inevitably saying farewell to a number of members of staff. I am faced with the momentous task of wishing two Welsh giants of the St Bees Common Room all the best as they hang up their rugby boots and CCF uniform and head for life at a slightly slower pace.

Huw Lewis joined St Bees School in 1989 from a large London comprehensive and there can be no doubting the influence he has had on literally thousands of young St Beghians. It is a little known fact that Huw was a former premier rugby player for Blackheath, competed as an international hurdler and indeed ran in the first London Marathon back in 1981. I suppose given that this was 33 years ago we can forgive him for the fact that he now chooses to cycle the incredibly long distance of 200 yards from the PE centre to the Common Room!

During his time at the school, Huw was the Housemaster of School House and took the role incredibly seriously taking care, at one point, of no less than 92 boys from eleven different countries. He took it as a personal mission to introduce many of them to the mysterious game of rugby for the first time; his wife Chris remembers fondly many a young man from a far flung corner of the globe returning to the House cold and covered in mud thus affirming in their mind the fact that the Brits were indeed a crazy bunch. He has led many sports’ tours across continents from South Africa to Sri Lanka, Paris to Pontypridd and when not leading the tours he was often busy running the ever popular ski trips.

Huw took the then School House pantomime to new heights re-writing the scripts in order to find every opportunity to mention sheep. One thing that all his former charges remember is his early morning greeting of ‘Morning Boys! Glorious Day!!’ This cheerful early morning call didn’t always sit well with adolescent youths on a cold dark Cumbrian morning, but it is what they had inscribed on a commemorative plate when he stepped down from duties on House.

Huw was responsible, along with Hugh Turpin, for starting the tradition of Fringe Week at the school and giving us a time of wonderful music echoing around the corridors. £10 each”.

One of his favourite phrases will continue to live on at the school, displayed proudly on the sports notice board for all to see – ‘Modesty in Victory, Dignity in Defeat’. In many respects, it is the values enshrined in these words that sum up Huw. His legacy to St Bees will be in having given to countless pupils a deep love for sport regardless of ability.

Moving on to fellow Welshman Jeff Evans, here is another long serving member of common room. Jeff joined St Bees six years after Huw from Mill Hill School in London. Many of you will know that Mill Hill and St Bees have historic links going back to a time when Mill Hill were evacuated here during the Second World War. Indeed they had their field-centre close to here in the village of Dent, and it was on trips to the Western Lakes that Jeff fell in love with the area, writing in his letter of application to the then Headmaster that he felt he wasn’t really a ‘metropolitan type’. Prior to being at Mill Hill, Jeff had been Head of English at Radley College and Canford School. Writing in his reference for Jeff, the former warden of Radley commented, ‘I believe Mr Evans to be a very good all round schoolmaster whose wide range of talents would fit him well for the post of Head of Department at such a distinguished school as St Bees.’ Well as they say, the rest was history and Jeff has certainly lived up to and exceeded the sentiments expressed in his reference.

It would be true to say that Jeff has certain traditions and perhaps even some may say peculiarities and he is certainly a creature of habit, believing strongly that whatever the clock may say, it is never the afternoon until a gentleman has had his luncheon. Renowned for not holding back on his thoughts, Jeff is someone who calls a spade a spade or perhaps even a shovel! Jeff has worked closely with many colleagues in helping to present drama of an extremely high standard and this was evidenced earlier this year in producing a captivating performance of Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors. He is also not afraid to tread the boards himself and who could forget his performance last summer as the Priest in the Art of Coarse Acting?

Never happier than when out with the CCF, Jeff has worn his uniform proudly since 1976 when he was first commissioned whilst at Canford School. Sharing a love for the phrase, ‘You stupid boy’, Lt Col Evans would sometimes be referred to as St Bees own version of Captain Mainwaring. Jeff has been our Contingent Commander here since 2004 and has given countless numbers of cadets many wonderful opportunities. He was responsible for helping to introduce the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award into the CCF, and as we know, this is now a jewel in the school’s crown. In 2006 he was awarded the Platinum Award for Volunteers and this was followed by the Lord Lieutenant’s Certificate in 2008. He has trained and guided many staff through the intricacies of the CCF and led countless camps at various locations across the country. Unsurprisingly, Jeff’s leadership of the contingent was highly regarded during our most recent inspection by Air Commodore Quigley. Whilst he leaves the CCF in the incredibly capable hands of Linda Johnston as Contingent Commander, there is no doubt that we will certainly miss his presence on the parade ground and in the classroom.

I would like to record my thanks to both Huw and Jeff for such long and distinguished service to the school and would ask you to join me in wishing them well.

One of the most difficult parts of being a Headmaster is when you learn that good staff have decided to move on. However, we can’t keep good people here for ever and in the case of the next four members of staff, I know that they have given a great deal to St Bees School and we wish them every success in their new positions.

Mike and Sonya Williams have been at here since 1998, and together with their children Joshua, Amy and Hannah are extremely well known members of the school community. Mike started here in 1998 as House Parent of the International Centre moving to become Director of the International Centre in September 2000 ably assisted by Sonya in helping to look after the expanding number of international pupils at the school. Mike and Sonya have been responsible between them for looking after countless pupils, with very much an open house policy when running the International Centre. I’m told that Mike was renowned for his cake and chocolate radar and was able to use his special senses to pick up the rustle of an opening box of Quality Street or the fragrance of a lemon drizzle cake from at least a mile away! Meanwhile, in those early days, Sonya took on the incredible task of organising and booking all the flights for our international students.

In 2006 Sonya and Mike were appointed as joint Houseparents of Abbots and Bega houses when they moved to Lonsdale Terrace to look after our youngest boarders. Following the restructuring of the house system two years ago I was delighted to appoint Sonya to be Housemistress of Bega House where she has developed an incredibly strong sense of house identity for all her girls and has also taken on the not inconsiderable task of turning Bega into an all-age house. Her care and dedication for the girls in her care is magnificent and I know that pupils and staff alike will miss her calm and wise counsel. At the same time as taking over the running of Bega House, Sonya also took on the role of leading PSHE at the school. A considerable task and a role that she has developed and expanded enormously over the last two years, helping to give our pupils a chance to explore complex issues and debate them with their peers. Reading her reports, there is no doubt that Sonya fully understands her pupils and works tirelessly to help and support them. Sonya and Mike have been firm supporters of the Chapel and Priory programme and I know that their strong faith has been a great example and inspiration to many pupils. We wish the Williams family well as they move to Abu Dhabi this summer to pursue new opportunities of teaching and learning in this fast developing country.

Saul Taylor leaves us to make a move with his wife to the bright lights of London. Saul joined St Bees School in 2008 to teach mathematics, having graduated and completed his teacher training at the University of Leeds. On reading through the notes on his file, it would appear that his interview was a great success, with the words, “there is no contest, do everything possible to get him”, written by Dr Winzor in his memo to the Headmaster.

What is without question with Saul, is his keen interest in the pupils in his care. He has been a magnificent tutor and boarding house tutor and I know that the men of School House will miss him greatly for his dry sense of humour and wise advice. He has helped and supported countless pupils to get to grips with the wonders of mathematics and I know was particularly proud last year to record a 100% pass rate with his GCSE set.

Swithun Sewill leaves us at the end of this year to move with his family to Abbotsholme School where he will take up the post of Head of their Prep School. Swithun joined St Bees in 2009, moving from Castle Court School in Dorset where he had been Head of their Junior Department. He joined a small but perfectly formed Prep Department at St Bees School and very much made it his own, growing and nurturing the talents of the pupils in his care. Swithun has been responsible for many plays in the junior department, but I wonder how many of you are aware that as well as being a wonderful teacher, our very own Mr Sewill is in fact an actor! Back in his days as a pupil at Milton Abbey School, the BBC were in need of a set for the renowned series ‘To Serve Them All My Days’. In the young Mr Sewill they found their perfect film extra, firstly performing as a hand bell ringer and then demonstrating his prowess in the cricket nets. Here were skills that would certainly come in handy as he took on a career in teaching.

Swithun has taken the Prep Department to new heights and leaves it in wonderful shape. We wish him, his wife Claire and their two children Rosie and Georgina well as they move to Staffordshire.

The end of term also sees us say farewell to our graduate gap assistant, Mr Fuller. As well as being an outstanding Assistant Housemaster on Grindal House, Mr Fuller has been fully involved in the games department, leading Hockey and Cricket amongst many other sports. He has supported our First and Second Form pupils as they have taken part in our adventure training programme and has also been a great help in providing support in a whole range of areas within the school. Nothing is ever too much trouble for Tom and I know that we will miss him a great deal. I have to say it came as no surprise to hear that he had been successful at gaining a place on the highly competitive teacher training course based at Durham University and we wish him every success as he trains to become a teacher.

At the start of this year we were joined by a number of new staff and I know that they have certainly made a dramatic impact on the school. Miss Taylor joined us from Sackville School in Kent where she had been Deputy Head. As the member of staff responsible for the academic life of the school, Miss Taylor has been working incredibly hard with myself and other members of the SMT to introduce new policies and procedures to further strengthen the teaching and learning opportunities available to our pupils. Away from the pressures of Deputy Headship, Miss Taylor has also introduced the game of lacrosse to St Bees School and taken on the challenges of looking after her new lifelong friend Billy the Labrador. Dr Brookes also joined us in the newly created post of Head of Sixth Form. With over a third of the St Bees community being members of the Sixth Form, the governors agreed to appoint a dedicated member of staff to look after their needs. Dr Brookes has been busy reforming many aspects of the Sixth Form this year and working tirelessly with our Upper Sixth to help ensure that they do everything possible to get entry into the best universities. I’m delighted to say that all her hard work has paid off as we have seen our pupils being successful in gaining more university offers than ever this year. Dr Brookes has also been working hard to introduce the highly regarded Extended Project Qualification for members of our Upper Sixth next year. This award is keenly sought after by universities and will equip members of our Sixth Form with extremely desirable academic skills of research and analysis as they go about formulating a project of their choice.

Dr Philip Callow and Miss Monica Murphy have started their teaching careers with us this year in the Chemistry and Mathematics Departments respectively. I’m delighted to say that following a demanding course for newly qualified teachers they look set to pass with flying colours. Miss Murphy has also been involved as Assistant Housemistress of Bega House where she will be joined in September by Ms Lauren Gray who is taking over as Housemistress.

Mr McNee took over the reins of running Grindal House, and other than having now to prepare our international boarders to understand both English and Scottish, I think everyone would agree that Stuart has done a magnificent job of leading Grindal. He has been ably supported in this role by his wife Janet and as many of you will know, recently she has been diagnosed with cancer and I’m sure you will all join with me in continuing to wish her all the very best for a speedy recovery. It is testament to Stuart’s great strength of character that he has managed to cope with a demanding set of circumstances with utter professionalism, never compromising on care for his family or the broader family of Grindal House.

When we bade farewell to Mr Turpin and Mr Mellor last year we knew they would be big shoes to fill but I am delighted to say that both the Music and the English Department are in incredibly safe hands with Mr and Mrs Corrigan. Newly married last summer, Mr and Mrs Corrigan have made dramatic changes to their relevant departments, and I know that all the pupils who come into contact with them are thoroughly enjoying their lessons. Mrs Corrigan has done a wonderful job both in the classroom and on the stage and we are looking forward to an exciting Shakespeare play next term following on from the highly successful Junior Play ‘Journey to the Centre of the Earth’.

As the new Director of Music, Rob was joined by a familiar St Bees face in the form of Mrs Margie Simper as Director of Vocal and Choral Studies. Together they have set about transforming music at the school and taking it to even greater heights. You’ve heard reference to the many musical achievements this year and we thought it would be good to allow one of our A level musicians, Francesca Merlo to share one of her Diploma pieces with you today.

Keeping with the Latin theme for a moment, Mrs Warne returned to us in September, but not this time as former Head of School but as Head of Classics. Mrs Warne along with her children Molly and Daisy joined the St Bees community and have brought a great deal to the school. As well as being an excellent Head of Department, I’m very grateful to Mrs Warne for her support in building links with some of the slightly younger members of the Old St Beghians.

Earlier this year I was delighted to promote Miss Cheers to be Head of the International Department where she has been busy developing exciting new courses for our international pupils. Following her promotion we were able to secure the services of Mr Keep, who also joins the International Department, as well as continuing to do an excellent job of coaching rugby at the school. Finally we welcomed Mr Burton also to the department where he has been providing one to one lessons for our pupils as well as assisting with boarding duties. I’m pleased to say that Mr Burton has agreed to return next year as Assistant Housemaster of Grindal House.

The start of the year also gave me the opportunity to welcome back a person whom I am now privileged not to call a colleague, but a true friend. Convincing Dr Winzor not to go into complete retirement was easy and we enjoyed a fantastic time seeing him back around the campus. Sadly the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer has meant that just for the time being Tony has a few other things to think about and I am delighted that he has been able to schedule his treatment to be with us today. I think I can confidently speak for all of us when we say, keep fighting it Tony and get well very soon.

The success of the St Bees community is as much about the non-teaching staff as it is about the outstanding teachers whom we see every day. There is a host of support staff at St Bees School and I’d just like to take a moment to thank them for all that they do. The whole team is led by our Bursar, Mr Nigel Halfpenny, without whom it is true to say I could not do my job. Nigel works tirelessly hard to help me in moving the school forward and I am incredibly grateful to him and all of his staff for their support. I’d also like to thank the other members of the SMT. Finally, it is no secret that without the help of my magnificent PA this school would come to a grinding halt. Emma puts up with so much from both me and from you and yet she does this with good humour and incredible efficiency and in so doing makes all our lives so much easier.

In addition to our staff though, there is a vast army of volunteers who work tirelessly to support the work of the school. By far the biggest group is of course our former pupils, the Old St Beghians. Once again this year I have been hugely privileged to find myself meeting large numbers of former pupils both at home and abroad. Indeed last summer I decided to escape the pressures of being Headmaster and went sailing around the Scottish Isles. Whilst there I visited the most remote pub in the British Isles, the Old Forge in Inverie. Only accessible by sea or several days walk. I thought here was a place I could truly escape. Walking into the pub there was a small collection of people gathered around the bar and inevitably the conversation turned to where I’d come from, “Oh, a small village in Cumbria,” I replied. Fascinating, said the man next to me, I went to school in Cumbria, in a place called – St Bees! There began an evening of stories about his happy times spent at St Bees and, as with virtually all the former pupils I meet, they talk in extremely warm terms about their happy memories and this strong feeling of community. It was a real privilege at the start of the year to be able to welcome back former pupil, now England Rugby Coach, Stuart Lancaster to the school to coach our 1st XV and to talk at our Black Tie Dinner. For those of you who were lucky enough to get tickets, I’m sure you’ll agree it was an evening to remember. Stuart spoke incredibly passionately about his time here and went on to explain that many of the strategies and tactics that he has employed in changing the fortunes of English rugby around were learnt whilst he was a boy here at St Bees. Rather wonderfully the evening helped us to raise over £15,000 for three charities, The Calvert Trust, Cash for Kids and the St Bees Lifeboat. The donation to the Calvert Trust was put forward by the Froggat family. Thomas is a regular user of this charity’s facilities at the Keswick centre and is a highly valued former pupil. My thanks to all those who helped to make this memorable event so successful, without doubt it was a shining example of the St Bees community in action. As well as the many OSB dinners throughout the year, it has been wonderful to welcome members of the St Beghian Society to a large number of events both here and around the country. It was a truly humbling experience to be able to see so many former pupils supporting our current pupils during Gaudeamus’ performance in St Paul’s Cathedral earlier in the year. Looking down from the organ loft at a packed cathedral just showed what support we are fortunate to enjoy from the Society. I would like to thank its President, Anthony Wills, for all his support as he steps down at the end of this year and to say how much I’m looking forward to working with his successor, Mr Dacre Watson. I must also give particular thanks to the Society’s Secretary and Treasurer, Mr David Lord, who has continued to be a great source of wisdom and support when dealing with the sensitivities of communicating changes at the school to our former pupils.

Equally as supportive are our hard working and dedicated Family Association. Under the unstinting leadership of Julie Thompson, this dedicated group of parents does so much for the school behind the scenes, helping to serve refreshments at every event, decorating tables for all sorts of functions and transforming the school at Christmas as well as being the driving force behind the Black Tie Dinner. I must also thank Julie Cox for all her help with this event where, even though she was stepping down from the position of chair, she was determined to see this mammoth project through to such a successful conclusion. Could I just urge as many of you as can to get involved with this group; they have a number of social events to which all parents are welcome, and I can say from first-hand experience that they are some of best events you’ll find anywhere in Cumbria. So please, if you haven’t done so already, come along to their meetings and see what you’re missing.

My final thanks of the day go to the governing body. Professor Woods has already paid tribute to the work done by Bill Lowther as Chairman. I’d just like to add my own personal thanks to Bill for all his support when I took over the role of Headmaster. While not having been a pupil here himself, Bill sent his own children through the school and I can promise you that his dedication, loyalty and commitment to St Bees is absolutely 100%. This year has seen a few changes to the board of governors and I’d like also to record my thanks to Mr Bill Roberts, who has stepped down from the board this year following a move to Finland. We have also been pleased to welcome Mrs Claire Hensman as the new Lord Lieutenant of Cumbria and the Reverend Canon Beth Smith as the Bishop of Carlisle’s nominee. I am very grateful for all the work undertaken by the governing body and to Professor Woods in particular for taking on the role of Chairman. As Governors, they are all volunteers and yet are legally responsible for all aspects of the school.

I referred last year to the difficult circumstances facing independent schools in the North of England. The recently publish Independent Schools Council census makes sobering reading. It reports a continuing decline in the number of pupils in independent education in the north and in particular in the north-west.

I am therefore delighted to be able to say that we at St Bees are continuing to buck this trend with a much improved roll this year and the forecast of an even greater number of pupils joining us next year. This has taken a great deal of hard work from a large number of people and has seen me travelling around the UK and abroad a great deal; but I’m delighted to say the hard work is paying off, even if it has involved me being subjected to finely grilled fillet of snake, chicken gizzard soup, freshly boiled turtle, and my personal favourite, deep fried spicy frog! I’ve also had the dubious honour of travelling with some interesting local airlines, my personal favourite being one in Nigeria where I was greeted with the wonderful announcement, “Thank you for flying with us today; we hope you enjoyed giving us your business as much as we enjoyed taking you for a ride!”

Next year we will welcome pupils to the school from over twenty different countries, and it is this diversity of international pupils that I think brings a truly unique dimension to the St Bees community. Cumbria is not exactly renowned as a multicultural area, and yet as the world gets ever smaller, I would argue that our young people need to become global citizens more so than ever before, and in having the skills to know about and to understand and appreciate different cultures they will be at the leading edge when it comes to securing jobs in the future. I am constantly delighted to see pupils from all over the world working together here at St Bees. Last summer, a large number of local pupils had the opportunity to go and visit all sorts of different countries and experience life in completely different environments living with their friends’ families. In a week’s time, Thomas George and four of his friends will hit the neon-filled skyline of Hong Kong for three weeks! What amazing opportunities.

Through my own travels there is one final point that I have come to realise very powerfully that I’d like to share with you before I sit down. We are truly fortunate to live in a democracy where equal opportunity for all is at the centre of our society. That doesn’t mean that our society is without its imperfections. Poverty and deprivation sadly still plague us, but education is available, indeed compulsory, for all. For those who use it wisely, it is a passport to fulfilment and prosperity.

In many countries across the world, education is a right only according to principle. Some of the following statistics are deliberately designed to shock you, but they are very real, I can assure you:

121 million children across the globe have no access to education – this is roughly the entire population of Russia.

Half of all children in the world lives every day in poverty.

8 billion US dollars is spent on cosmetics in the USA every year – it would cost 6 billion dollars to provide basic education for the world.

Just to underline this point, we spend 105 billion dollars a year on alcohol just in Europe.

It was Nelson Mandela who said, “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world”.

Could I ask all pupils from the First Form to the Upper Sixth to stand up please.

Look around you, ladies and gentlemen, for these young people represent the number of young girls snatched by Boko Haram on the night of 14 - 15 April 2014. Last week I found myself discussing this case with the British High Commissioner in Nigeria. He explained that these girls were in an examination hall taking the equivalent of their GCSE physics examinations when, in a well-planned raid, they were abducted from the government secondary school in the town of [Chibok](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chibok" \o "Chibok) in [Borno State](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borno_State" \o "Borno State), Nigeria. They were 276 of a group of only approximately 1,200 young girls who were being educated to this level in the north of Nigeria – a truly shocking event and one which sadly looks likely to end with few of these girls ever being returned to their families.

The great British poet, G K Chesterton once described education as “the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.” A soul is a fragile, ethereal, but ultimately powerful thing. Education really does have the power to change the world – your own and that of the wider world around you. Whatever you do, please make the most of it.