

Remembering excellence - eventually
David Crystal

Dylan Thomas once said: 'The memories of childhood have no order and no end'. He might have added that they can also be extremely disorientating - at least, when you try to make fresh physical contact with them.

It happened like this. When I left St Mary's in 1959, and started at London University, I had expected to be still visiting the Crosby area regularly. But my family also moved south, soon afterwards, and when I next had a particular reason to visit Crosby I was 30 years older. The St Mary's Old Boys had asked me to give a talk at their annual dinner, and as my car journey from Holyhead to Liverpool hadn't taken as long as expected, I found myself leaving the Mersey Tunnel with an hour in hand.

I decided I would visit the school, to see if it was still there, and drive round through Waterloo, which is where I used to live. All went well until I arrived at the junction with Moor Lane where, in my memory, there was a simple right turn, which I knew would take me in the direction of the school. I anticipated no problem. I had walked that route a thousand times. And I knew when I should prepare to make my turn for the school, too - just past the Regent Cinema, on the right.

But arriving at Moor Lane, in the dark, was to enter an alien world of new roads and new traffic lights and new buildings and new road signs. It seemed impossible to turn in the direction I wanted. I took the exit with fewest buses and lorries (a survival tactic which works very well in Wales) and tried to keep an eye on the stars in order to move in a generally southwards direction. But it was cloudy, and the roads are not straight, round there. They curve, interminably, and you quickly lose all sense of direction.

I was too proud to stop and ask the way. Why should I? This is where I lived for years! I knew where I was. How could I look myself in the face again if I had to ask the way to my old school? Still, it would have been helpful if I could recognise just one of the roads along which I was driving. There was no sign of the school. There was no sign of anything. I looked at my watch. My suburban voyage was steadily eating into my spare hour - and I had still to find my way back to the Old Boys address. I began to panic. Any familiar landmark would do. Anything. My imagination started to run riot. Maybe the school doesn't exist. Maybe nothing exists.

At last, a notice-board. Perhaps it would give me a clue. A church name, perhaps, which I might recognise. I stopped the car, wound the window down, and peered out. The letters formed themselves in the gloom. The notice board told me I had reached St Mary's playing fields. There was a God.

It proved remarkably easy to find my way back to the Old Boys meeting place from there (can't think why, as I don't remember ever being particularly keen on sports in those days), and the rest of the evening went splendidly (as far as I can remember - this was the Old Boys, don't forget). But I never did find the school.

Fast forward now to 1996, and Speech Day. No problem finding the Philharmonic Hall, at least. And then the relief to find that some things don't change. I don't mean just the layout of the occasion - the tiered ranks of uniformed students, the gowned staff, the to-and-fro of instrumentalists trying to be in the right place at the right time, the melee of parents, relatives, sisters, brothers, Brothers, and special guests - I mean the atmosphere, the sense of occasion, the sense of commitment to an educational goal - in a word, the 'quality' of the occasion.

People said some very kind things about me, while I was there, and two of my encyclopedias were brought along and displayed when I was being introduced. I was delighted that the school was proud of those books, and it seemed to me very appropriate that, if anything of mine should be mentioned at all, it should be works of this kind. For encyclopedias, by their nature, require a very special kind of commitment - a self-discipline, an ability to organise, a respect for knowledge of all kinds, and a world-view of learning that is at the same time humble and critical. Above all, there is a concern to maintain quality, to seek out the best, to aim for perfection. You know you can never achieve it, in encyclopedia writing - after all, every edition of a general encyclopedia is inevitably a little out-of-date as soon as it

is published. The world has moved on. The satisfaction is in striving to present information which is as up-to-date and as accurate and as accessible as one can make it.

There is, in short, a respect for truth and a commitment to excellence. And I know that the foundations of this respect and commitment in my case came from my time at St Mary's. Everything I heard and saw at Speech Day this year, from the concert to the speeches to the prize-giving, suggested that the school has in no way lost sight of that priority. And insofar as I had a message to pass on to the new generation of students it was to do everything possible to preserve it.

I was invited to a buffet at the school afterwards, and I drove behind the head to ensure I did not get lost again. As I write this, the new memory traces of that visit have already begun to replace the old ones. I certainly shall not use the Regent Cinema as a psychological landmark any more.