
An Old Shirburnian remembers

Stanley Johnson looks back on days of rugger and a little light studying



Stanley Johnson at Ravenswood prep school, c. 1952, working towards his scholarship to Sherbourne

I went to Sherborne in January 1954. The first view I had of my housemaster was at the TC inspection parade held on the first day of every term. TC stood for *tinea cruris* or 'crotch-worm', an infection which boys were thought to be prone to during the holidays. Col H.F.W. 'Hughie' Holmes moved down the line of boys, inspecting for tell-tale pustules, as they cupped their hands over their private parts.

When he reached me, he straightened up. 'Ah, you must be Johnson!' he barked. 'Welcome to Lyon House!'

I was lucky enough to win a £150 scholarship to Sherborne. £150 was a great deal of money in those days. It represented half the annual fee. My grandfather, who subsidised my education, instead of reducing his own contribution, sportingly agreed to let me have the money. In theory, this could have financed any number

of visits to the tuck shop for me and half the school. In practice, my father, an Exmoor farmer struggling to make ends meet, suggested I might like to invest in some more cows for the farm. 'They'll always be your cows, old boy,' he assured me.

At the end of my second term, when I was 13, I took five O-levels: Latin, Greek, maths, French and English. At the end of my ninth term, when I was 15, I took my A-levels in Greek and Latin. The headmaster, R.W. Powell, thought we should get the tiresome business of Oxbridge entrance out of the way, so he sent me off to be interviewed at

Lincoln College, Oxford. My grandfather had been to Lincoln so it seemed like a good idea.

At the interview, the Rector of Lincoln, Walter Oakeshott, asked me what my grandfather had read during his time at Oxford. I said I didn't think he had read much but that he had rowed a lot. 'He was in the Lincoln VIII when they made four bumps in three days. My grandfather's Lincoln College oar still hangs on the landing outside my bedroom on the farm where we store the wool before the lorry comes to collect it.'

Lincoln offered me a place — to read Greats, of course — but they were eventually trumped by Exeter, another Turl college, who awarded me a scholarship.

But back to Sherborne. Did it matter that, from an academic point of view, I had absolutely nothing to do during my last two years at Sherborne? I took a few more A-levels (ancient history, divinity and English), but I could hardly be accused of swotting. The real reason I stayed on at school — let's face it — was to play rugby.

If you stay at school as long as I did for no good reason except to play games, the powers that be have to find something to do with you. I have described my first encounter with my housemaster, Hughie Holmes. As time went on, I came to know him well. Housemasters, in those days at least, were tremendously important. They were, literally, *in loco parentis*. Even if my parents had had time to visit, they would not have felt the overwhelming need to do so which parents nowadays seem to feel. Nor did we head for home at the drop of a pencil. In those days at Sherborne, there were no such things as excats or half-term, though I do remember my father arriving one Commem (speech day) in our open jeep with my mother perched beside him on a bale of straw, the passenger front seat having been recently removed to make room for a pregnant sow.

Did it matter that, from an academic point of view, I did absolutely nothing during my final two years at the school?

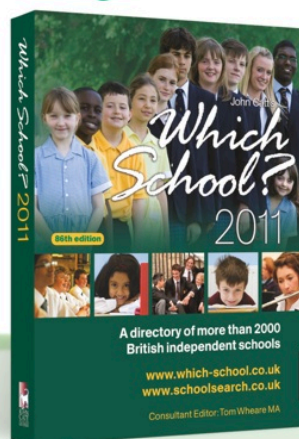
In my last term at Sherborne, Hughie Holmes — for reasons best known to himself — appointed me head of house and Bob Powell made me head of school at the same time. As I look back, I try to remember if I did anything useful in either of those capacities. The only thing I can think of is that as head of house I discouraged the other house prefects from beating the junior boys. It was not that I had anything against beating per se; I just thought it shouldn't be overdone. As far as my time as head of school is concerned, I seem to remember that I reorganised the collection in Sunday-morning chapel to avoid a nasty clinking of coins after the organist had run out of steam.

I would like to think that it was due to my intervention that doors were finally put on the loos in Lyon House and in the School Quad, but in reality it would not be until the sixties that Sherborne went in for social engineering on this kind of scale.

Do I look back at my nearly five years at Sherborne with joy and gladness? You bet I do. I have recently taken on the presidency of the Old Shirburnian Society. Happily, this is a non-elective office. Charles Collingwood, my predecessor — he plays Brian Aldridge in the Archers — asked me last spring if I would like to do the job which, as the current president, was in his gift. Thank you, Charles. I owe you one.

Stanley Johnson's memoir Stanley, I Presume is published in paperback by Fourth Estate

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