



FARNBOROUGH HILL
WHOLEHEARTEDLY

Prize Giving Speech - November 2021

It is abundantly clear from all that you hear, see and experience, that Farnborough Hill is a thriving place. I am proud of the sense of purpose, sense of joy and sense of curiosity that ebbs through every facet of life on the Hill.

Despite, or perhaps in spite of, COVID-19 we have lived life to the full – we have all shared growing as people, in the face of adversity.

Imogen speaks of events, achievements, experiences, reimaginings, successes and good old-fashioned fun that have taken place this past year.

I think we should consider why it is that we put all this on.

It is quite simply to educate the whole person.

This was our aim in the beginning all those years ago when on a rainy spring day three Sisters established the first school in Farnborough in 1889. It has been our goal ever since through the turmoil of wars, economic decline, changing fashions in terms of; independent schools, Catholic schools, girls' schools and most recently in the testing times of the pandemic. So while the political and social landscape has changed multiple times our aim to educate young women holistically has not. It has stood the test of time. Education in the fullest sense. The word education is derived from Latin educare – meaning to bring or draw out.

This speaks to our belief in the gifts and talents of all, the potential that exists in each one of us. It resonates with all that we do at Farnborough Hill to light fires and approach life wholeheartedly.

Indeed, our approach to education can be seen to Socratic in that it is the kindling of a flame not the filling of a vessel.

Education is a collaborative process – schooling should not just be done to one.

No, rather it is the drawing out of ideas in conversations and engagements rather than learning being poured in.

One is not simply a receptacle for facts and data.

Returning to the imagery of lighting a fire, let us never fall into the trap at Farnborough Hill of teachers dribbling drops of knowledge for pupils to collect as they go about a prosaic experience. Indeed, what we want is for our girls to gather kindling, to learn to light their own fires through playing with flints and matches and to take risks. Hoping and aiming for some of the material collected to burst into flames and to sustain a lifetime.

I often talk with people about our work at Farnborough Hill. Central to it is our preparation of the young girls to become young women and to take their place in society as agents of change. We look to accompany and then fledge our pupils, building them up to become their brave and authentic best selves – independent and compassionate. Evidence of our success? It is all around us.

The young women who join us tonight are the beacons of our realisation. These people are our achievements, in essence our joint triumphs - through the formation of the whole person. And, how is this potential that always existed in each young girl let loose? By coalescing together, the School community and families have cultivated a new generation of Farnborough Hill alumnae. This chrysalis process has taken place through discrete and indeed overlapping experiences, interests and achievements:

Namely intellectual curiosity and also examination results.

And also - co-curricular endeavour.

And also - aesthetic and athletic pursuits.

And also through opportunities to experience more.

In the end these are all simply ways of developing oneself.

All elements hugely important for growth – but an ingredient rather than the end result. It is key to remember that we are engaged in not a tick list of jobs to complete.

All our teachers and staff are helping our young people to prosper in all manner of ways through teaching, instruction, experimentation, practice, application and explanation. Yet ultimately the greatest gift we can give the pupils in the journey of accompaniment is our time and encouragement.

It is only when each one of us feels seen, listened and valued that progress will really be made. When we matter – we can give of our best. We can show vulnerability and effort.

I think this quotation from Haim Ginott, elementary teacher and professor of Psychology, sums up our power, and frankly our duty to care exquisitely. “I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration, I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal... If we trust people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

When I think about all it is we are for, I am forever drawn to the history of our religious foundation and its commitment to forging people to become all then can be.

We talk of the incredible vision of Lafosse, the courage of the first four Sisters that made their vows on 21 November 1817. And, of course, there have been countless more women, giving their all for the glory of God and the education of young women – confident in the value of preparing women for a life greater than within the confines of a house.

In the face of adversity, the RCE pledged itself to this calling and I have often marvelled at the tenacity and vision of these women. When I consider our goal to help our pupils blossom into strong, courageous and compassionate women, the best version of themselves, I think that the model for this is to be found amongst our founders.

It is entirely appropriate that at this point in our school's life, at the time when the Sisters have had to leave the School, that we are attentive to our shared history, that we respect, mark and consider the School which we have inherited.

For the very real danger is this – if we do not speak of and share our history, quite simply it will be forgotten.

The spirit and values of the Sisters that went before us can be likened to the earth, perhaps we can stretch the metaphor to compost.

It is their commitment and vision that has allowed us to thrive, germinate, flourish and bear fruit.

Therefore, attentive to the importance of our story I will take the opportunity to keep our earth fertile and nourished through using part of the RCE story at this ceremony each year.

So, I thought that as tonight we have come together to celebrate the life of the School over the last year, it is actually entirely fitting to consider the foundation of the School. Indeed, as you will be aware we have sought to marry together the celebration of our community – namely the Sisters of the RCE and the successes of our current pupils in the ceremonies of today.

Recently whilst I was walking in the grounds, I spent time in the Sisters' graveyard, a place of peace and reflection, and amongst the simple and uniform gravestones and generations of Sisters, one stands unique, in its size and central position:

Mother Roantree

Mulier Fortis - Strong woman

And it is to this formidable woman that we all here assembled, owe so much of that which we hold dear in the guise of Farnborough Hill.

Therefore, I take the opportunity to tell you all something of the story of Syra Roantree – that strong woman of whom we can learn so much.

Sister Roantree arrived in England from France on a cold wet day on 30 April 1889, accompanied by two other Sisters; Murray and Deplanck. Why England? Because political events in France were pointing to the need to have a plan ready should all the religious houses be expelled.

Farnborough was a town with which the Order had connections through Sister Murray. But, Syra Roantree herself had no such connection, indeed she had never even been to England before she was sent by the Mother Superior to help found a school here.

She was in fact an Irishwoman who left her home in her teens to study with the RCE and later take her vows in Normandy. Yet on 30 April 1889 she found herself taking possession of Hillside – and the very next day the first pupil arrived!

It was a humble start – the Sisters slept with curtains and rugs used as bedlinen and broken crockery and a pudding basin for tableware as no possessions had appeared.

Yet by 15 May 1889 – the School had three pupils. Open as it was for day girls 9.00 am to 7.00 pm and boarders obviously all the time. Hillside Convent was in existence.

The School burgeoned under the Sisters – by 1907, 80 boarders attended.

The School expanded its premises and later actually moved the location of its boarding house in Farnborough.

However, for too long the girls and community had been wedged into The Sycamores and a new location for the School was required. The clear way to solve this difficulty was to ask all the girls to pray for a mysterious intervention for Mother Roantree, and on 30 May the prayer was answered.

The great coup was the purchase of Farnborough Hill in 1927 – seven years after the death of its famous resident Empress Eugénie, with whom the Sisters and girls had enjoyed a flourishing and mutually beneficial relationship.

My favourite bit of this story of divine intervention is that, although until the deal was done the girls were not told of the hope of Mother Roantree, ie a beautiful local house and grounds to be found. They were promised a delicious tea at St John's Beaumont once it was met. I think it is at this point the Farnborough Hill obsession with cake began.

But even this was not enough achievement for the redoubtable Mother Roantree. She had vision – she sought to expand the house – to make it fit for a school of some size. It was she that called in Adrian Gilbert Scott and planned with him this Chapel.

The foundation stone of the Chapel was laid by Abbot Cabrol on 21 November 1931, indeed behind this plaque commemorating this are laid coins and medals from that year. A veritable horde to be discovered one day. The following year Bishop Cotter blessed the Chapel, dedicating it to the Sacred Heart. In 1934 the magnificent marble altar was added.

Not content, Mother Roantree continued to make plans for development of the School, an Assembly Hall was now planned with two storeys of rooms above. In spite of the imminent danger of war, the foundation stone of this wing was laid in May 1939. The Hall, with the first floor above, was completed before the Second World War put a stop to building. Again, her work is interrupted by war, Hillside was again taken by the military, pupils and staff were evacuated to Farnborough Hill in totality. All through the war, thanks to this valiant woman the School, though cramped for space continued to function without any diminution of its efficiency.

In 1945 Mother Roantree had the courage to acquire another beautiful property, Yateley Hall, to accommodate the junior boarding school. In 1951 she opened White Friars as a preparatory day school.

Syra Roantree, from this brief sketch, can be seen to be an energetic, dynamic and courageous woman who gave her whole life to ensuring great vision of our Founder Louis Lafosse became a reality in England.

She had a great capacity for friendship with individuals from all walks of life including the Empress Eugénie and the monks at Farnborough Abbey. Indeed, just this week Fr Abbot Cuthbert of St Michael's Abbey blessed the Sisters' graves. He spoke of her formidable spirit and told stories of how she terrified the monks – a woman of energy, character and humour.

Past pupils loved her and in 1928 she set up the Old Girls' Association.

From early in 1920 she first experienced the trial which she bore with heroic fortitude and uncomplaining until her death – a partial loss of sight which robbed her of the power to read and made her dependent in a number of ways on the eyes of others.

However, as much as possible she continued to play a part in the life of the School. Her room in her final years was in a small room to the right of me where when the window was open, she could continue to hear Mass said.

On 21 August 1952 aged 90, she died peacefully surrounded by the Community of Sisters.

Can we not all find elements of Syra Roantree that we aim to keep alive and flourishing in the life blood of Farnborough Hill?

Vision, dynamism, stoicism, love?

I think also that it is poignant to remember too that the original Prize Giving celebrations of the School took place under the leadership of this great woman. And the guest of honour in these early days was certainly no less imposing. Indeed, it was Her Imperial Majesty – the Empress Eugénie that awarded personal gifts as prizes and the girls were crowned with a wreath of white flowers. Eugénie, a woman also ahead of her time. Appreciating the value of education for women, a friend to suffragettes and an intellectual of some note.

It is this little gemstone of our shared history that has inspired us to, going forward, have displays of white flowers on Community Feast Day – as a reminder of the past glories.

Our school is forged by the work of all those that went before us.

But we never stop moving, always ambitious in our aim to offer the girls the widest opportunities, the most inspirational experiences. The warmest of communities.

Much has changed, even more will do so. We need always to be visionary in our goals.

Farnborough Hill is a school of great juxtapositions. The grandest of houses – actually a palace, where one receives the warmest of welcomes.

A school of modest and compassionate people where ambition abounds and great achievements are realised.

An environment of academic and co-curricular rigour where fun and joy permeates all.

A Catholic school that welcomes all.

A school rich in history and legacy yet forward driving and energetic.

Our ethos, the river that runs through all that we do and a place that prepares our young people wholeheartedly for the future.

I like the idea of the Sisters work being like the earth that sustains us. For me, it is a powerful metaphor for all that the guardians of Lafosse's vision aimed to be; real, physical, tangible, ground and simple.

I am called to mind the words of John O'Donohue in his poem 'In Praise of the Earth' – for me this speaks of the calling our antecedents had for the young people in their care.

“Let us bless

The imagination of the Earth,

That knew early the patience

To harness the mind of time

Waited for the seas to warm,
Ready to welcome the emergence
Of things dreaming of voyaging
Among the stillness of land.

The kindness of the Earth
That we may awaken,
To live to the full
The dream of the Earth
Who chose us to emerge
And incarnate its hidden night
In mind, spirit and light”

Patience
Kindness
Awakening
Imagination

And so tonight I ask you to think of the woman who pledged their lives to something much greater than themselves to the Glory of God. They gave everything for the work to educating young women.

The bounty of their life work is all around us tonight and in the hearts of past generations.

L E Bowman found the words to capture the vocation all the staff of Farnborough Hill are committed to:

“Have you ever seen dust dancing in sunbeams?

How it glitters like flecks of gold?

Maybe that is the true alchemy.

Not changing what something is, but seeing it in a new light.”

Let us hold fast to the qualities espoused by those that are proud to call themselves a member of the Farnborough Hill community, fortitude, tenacity, compassion and love and let us ever see our work here an alchemists, bringing out the gold that lives inside everyone.