

John Collins

Although there are many people who touch our lives there are few who really make a difference. If we leave aside our parents, then for many of us it has been our teachers who we remember as having made the greatest meaningful difference to our early and impressionable years. There is perhaps some truth in the saying that “nobody forgets a good teacher” and for me that is certainly the case.

John Collins only taught me maths for my 1st year at BGS but was nevertheless a huge influence on my life and continued to be so when 12 years later I returned to the School to teach in the Maths Department. He commanded enormous respect from all of his pupils and made the boundaries of acceptable behaviour very clear and straightforward which with hindsight was exactly what was needed in the early days of a new school developing its reputation and standing within the community. John’s high-profile presence and energy were a feature of my time as a pupil at BGS and together with his role as Head of the Maths Department he perhaps more than anyone helped to create a school which was a good place to learn and where teachers felt supported and comfortable enabling them in turn to give of their best. John also managed the first team football for most of my time at the school and the surprising success that we had as a small mixed three-form entry school was down to the fact that we would all play our hearts out for the manager who, while appreciating skilful play, always expected 100% effort and commitment. Happy days for so many of us and many wonderful memories!

If John’s influence and contribution to the development of BGS was not altogether apparent to me as a boy, it certainly became so on my return as a member of staff in 1968. I am not ashamed to say that I modelled my teaching style on that of John and his brother Peter and they both gave me excellent guidance as a young member of staff without ever trying to interfere with what I did in the classroom. Having their trust was another important step in my professional life and I thank them for it. I was also able to observe John at first hand as a teaching colleague and enjoy his company and see a more light-hearted side of the man for whom I had such respect. I was also able to see how the pace and energy which he gave to his role as ‘Senior Master’ took its toll on his health and wellbeing with the job meaning everything to him. Standards were always high with John because he knew no other way.

My last professional memories of John were many years later when he returned to the maths Department at BGS. It seemed incredibly strange to be his Head of Department for a short while but being the gentleman he was he never made life difficult for me and I was delighted to be teaching with him again.

As soon as I returned to teach at the school, I came to regard John as a friend as well as a colleague and in the latter years of his life I felt particularly close to him even though I did not see him that often. When he visited us in Suffolk a couple of years ago, he insisted on coming on his own, changing trains three or four times before I picked him up at Ipswich

Station. I would have happily given him a lift from Beckenham, but it was typical of John to travel independently even if it wasn't easy for him.

This is a brief summary of some of my thoughts about John Collins. There are many former students and staff at BGS who have reason to be grateful for his life, each with their own story to tell. It is perhaps something of a paradox that a teacher who could be so tough on those whom he taught when they fell short of his standards of work and behaviour should in turn generate so much genuine affection when former students looked back on their school days.

Rest in peace, John. You are someone we will never forget.

Don Wellman