James Sabben-Clare

Born 9.9.1941
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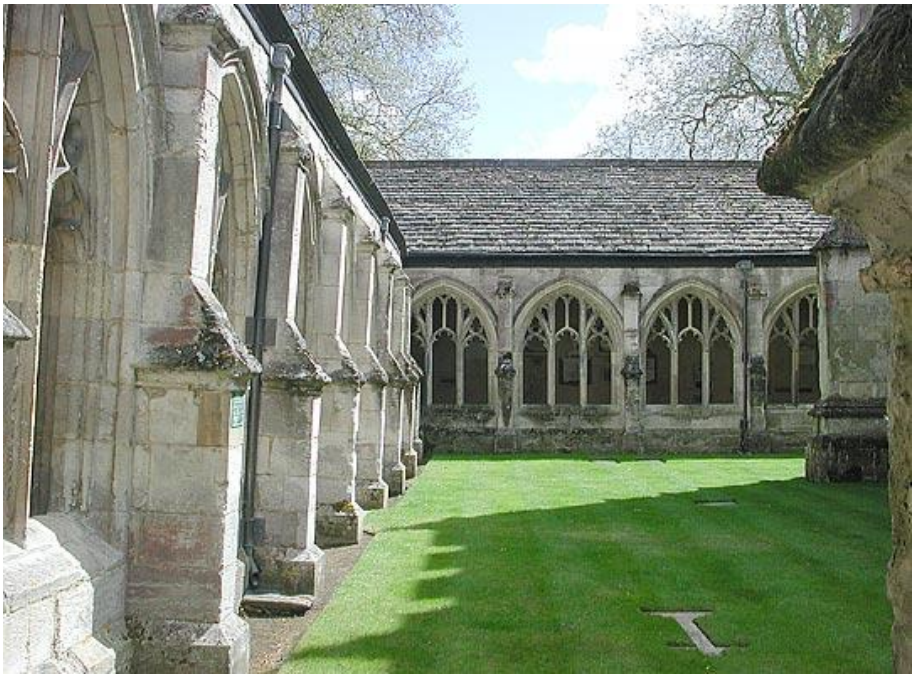
Contents

1. Interview

The following is archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of TES.



The Cloisters at Winchester College.

The chairman of the headmasters' and headmistresses' conference was educated among Winchester's cerebral elite, and returned there as a teacher in 1968. He tells Biddy Passmore why he's never wanted to be anywhere else.

This year's chairman of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference is head of Winchester College, the 14th-century foundation where he has been headmaster since 1985. Winchester is regarded with awe by most other schools - and by the HMC inspectors, whose lyrical report on it came out early last year.

"Academic standards are consistently at the highest level," they wrote, helped by the "intellectual rapport which exists between teachers and pupils". And the pupils' behaviour, true to the school's motto "manners makyth man", was described as "unfailingly civilised".

Mr Sabben-Clare has spent more than half his life in this academic paradise. A boyish and engaging 58, he first arrived as a scholar in his teens. After three years spent studying classics at New College, Oxford (another scholarship, and a double first), four years of teaching at Marlborough and a further year at Oxford (All Souls, naturally), he returned to Winchester in 1968 and has been there ever since.

"Very early in life I was able to put ambition aside," he says happily. "Every time I wanted to move up to the next stage, an opportunity came up at Winchester." So he became head of the classics department in 1969, second master in 1979 and headmaster in 1985.

This week, Mr Sabben-Clare used his chairman's speech to the annual gathering of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference to tackle the subject of exams. Not, he suspected, as likely to hit the headlines as subjects like drugs and family breakdown but "if the head of Winchester doesn't talk about exams, who should?"

Indeed. Year after year, Winchester comes at, or near, the top of the A-level league table, achieving an average score equal to more than three As per pupil. And, year after year, Mr Sabben-Clare says a) that it would be surprising if it didn't, given the intake and the teaching and b) that exam success is incidental to an all-round education. It is an approach that delights all lovers of Real Education and infuriates less favoured schools that cannot afford to take such a lofty approach.

But he is unrepentant. He sees no point in the constant examining that goes on at present, and has said that "pupils at secondary level really do not need rafts and rafts of GCSEs" (Winchester boys do not bother to take them in history and English literature, although they study a lot of both) and has urged his fellow heads to have the courage to allocate more time to non-examined subjects.

Within the HMC, Mr Sabben-Clare is praised for his clear thinking and brisk chairmanship. Perhaps his greatest contribution has been in the field of inspection, where he has been the architect of the new system that will be absorbed next year into the Independent Schools Inspectorate, the private sector equivalent of the Office for Standards in Education.

That work has taken him away from Winchester perhaps one day a week since 1990. This year, as chairman, he has been away more like two days a week, leaving the school in the charge of his "excellent" deputy and the largely autonomous housemasters. But he has never let a term go by without any teaching. ("I teach the beginners' set in Latin," he says. "It's wonderful.")

The fees at Winchester are pound;16,000 a year, putting the school out of reach of all but the rich and the brilliant (there are 70 scholars out of 680 pupils who can, in theory, receive full remission of fees, as well as a few bursaries for state school candidates).

Mr Sabben-Clare's own background makes him regret that access to such excellence should be so restricted. His father, the son of a theatrical man who had abandoned his wife, leaving her penniless, had a completely free education because he won a full scholarship to Winchester. He later became headmaster of two grammar schools, Bishop Wordsworth's in Salisbury and Leeds Grammar, then a direct-grant school.

The only way to open up access to the best academic schools, says Mr Sabben-Clare, is by some form of voucher or assisted-places scheme. But he knows such a scheme would be unthinkable to a Labour government.

Meanwhile, he supports the current partnerships between private and state schools, while remarking that they are only "scratching the surface".

He is due to retire next year, after 14 years as headmaster. Has he never felt hemmed in, frustrated, restless? "No, I've loved it." Every time he walks the dog, he is struck afresh by the beauty of the place. And, while not all the boys are brilliant

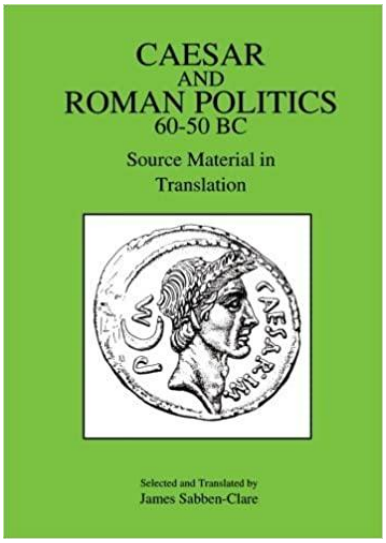
and not all the masters are perfect, he says it is a very favoured community of interesting people.

Asked if he has changed the school during his time as headmaster, he replies that it was the image rather than the reality that needed changing. "People thought it was full of quirky, ill-co-ordinated individuals with large heads," he says.

Now, he feels it conveys the image of a happy and relaxed place (although the current Good Schools Guide still complains of "a continuing tendency towards ivory-towerishness"). And the extra-curricular activities have improved, with musical standards now as high as the academic, and sport returning to its former glory.

It is hard to imagine such a youthful figure retiring, let alone retreating full-time to the barn in Dorset that he and his lawyer wife Geraldine have converted to a house. They may decide to keep some kind of base in Hampshire so that his wife can carry on with her work in the NHS, especially in mental health.

They may spend more time in London, where their two grown-up children work: their son for the merchant bank Schroders, their daughter as a commercial barrister. (They were good at passing exams too.) There will be more time to indulge his love of Italian opera and of walking in the mountains.



But Mr Sabben-Clare is not bursting to write a book. "I have written one or two not tremendously serious works of popularisation," he says (Caesar and Roman Politics, Fables from Aesop, The Culture of Athens), "and they haven't been superseded."

Indeed, it seems there is nothing he is aching to do. "Running an independent school like Winchester offers such a huge range of opportunities that it's rather your own fault if you come out without having done what you really wanted to do." He has enjoyed playing fives, making his own bed and kitchen table in the school's carpentry workshops, walking in the Hampshire hills...

"I'm fortunate in suffering neither from frustration nor ambition," he says. "It's a recipe for a happy life."

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2. Obituary

The following appreciation of James Sabben-Clare was written by his colleague Tommy Cookson. Acknowledgement and thanks to the Winchester College Society, on whose website it was published.

James Sabben-Clare, who died on March 8th aged 75, was one of the most widely gifted schoolmasters of his generation. Outwardly reserved and afflicted in his youth with a stammer so pronounced that his dons hesitated to question him, he shone as classical scholar, author, actor, sportsman, carpenter and cabaret artiste.

His appointment to the headship after several years on the staff was never likely to be easy. But he established himself through quiet intellectual authority, personal integrity and reliability. It was said that he could put more good sense onto a single sheet of A4 than anyone since Tacitus.

He ran the school with a light touch. Although unflappably in control, he recognised the quality, power and independent-mindedness of his staff and allowed them free range. In an age of increasing academic competition, he maintained the school's place near the top of the league tables although – or because – a quarter of the timetable was devoted to Div and so free of exam teaching. His own wide interests maintained the example of educational breadth and culture set by his predecessor, John Thorn.

His cool mind was matched by a warm heart. As an affectionate family man, he always had time for his two children, of whom he was enormously proud. He was also unostentatiously generous both to his staff and to outsiders. The Head of a special school a dozen miles away was astonished one day to receive a knock on his study door and to recognise the headmaster of Winchester, who had dropped in to deliver a cheque for £750.

He was firmly against corporal punishment and was quick to abolish it as Headmaster. In schools sometimes referred to by their opponents as secular monasteries, he recognised the contribution of women, appointed a number of women to the staff and encouraged cooperation in drama and music with St Swithun's.

The son of Ernest Sabben-Clare (Coll, 19-24), himself a distinguished headmaster of Leeds Grammar School, James won the top scholarship to Winchester, where he became Aulae Prae, Captain of College VI and a member of Soccer X1, as well as winning school prizes for Latin and Greek Prose and Greek Verse. After winning a scholarship to New College, he gained a double first in Mods and Greats and was elected a Visiting Fellow of All Souls.

With the world at his feet, he decided to become a schoolmaster, first at Marlborough and then from the age of 27 at Win Coll. He spent the rest of his career here as head of Classics, Second Master and then Headmaster. He wrote a textbook on Caesar's Gallic Wars, a translation of Aesop's Fables (copies of which were printed in-house and presented to The Queen and The Queen Mother) and a History of Winchester College.

In 1999, he became Chairman of the Headmasters' Conference. Previously, when he was a member of its Academic Committee, it had been said that other members, concentrating fully, came to the wrong answer while he, with half his mind elsewhere, came to the right one.

His family included several generations of actors and he had a deep love of the theatre and of music. He enjoyed directing school plays and on one remarkable occasion took over the role of Prospero at short notice on the illness of the boy playing the part.

But his forte was comedy, whether as an ugly sister in the dons' pantomime, as a late-night cabaret artiste at The Southern Cathedrals Festival or (his party piece) doing his dinosaur impression. This involved his leaving the room and re-emerging with slow, deliberate steps, sharp sideways movements of the head, lizard-like eyes and the flickering of an unnerving tongue. He was a superb writer of lyrics for all occasions and in all styles. A party of Americans doing Winchester in half an hour was written up as a barn dance; and Winchester Cathedral's sophisticated Tippett/Tournemire festival programme as a calypso.

Performing in The Southern Cathedrals late-night cabaret in Pilgrims' School Hall, he gently targeted the cathedral clergy. In an Olympic Year, he invented the Ecclesiastical Games in which the Bishop was entered for the Feeding of the Five Thousand 'and he's going in the Ten Thousand as well'. During the year of strikes in 1979, he imagined a National Clergymen's strike: 'It is our aim to bring this government to its knees.'

A Governor of several schools while he was a headmaster, he continued after leaving Winchester notably at Oundle School and The British School of Paris. But his major contribution was to join the steering committee of four which set up The Prince's Teaching Institute. This organisation grew out of the Prince of Wales's desire to provide the best education for pupils of all backgrounds across the country by inspiring their teachers with a love of their subject. Summer schools attended by Simon Schama, Tom Stoppard and other speakers led to an expansion of the programme, which has now involved and enthused 5000 teachers and head teachers and through them half a million children. He became passionately absorbed in this project and was closely associated with it for 15 years. When he was forced to give it up, Prince Charles saw him privately to express his gratitude.

He contributed generously to local activities, finding the time to chair the governing body of his local primary school at Corfe Castle, to be on the committee of the Dorset Historic Churches Trust and to teach Greek to a local girl who has now completed a degree course in Classics.

He owed much to his wife, Mary, whose intelligence, sense of fun and generous hospitality made a huge contribution to Win Coll life. Their whirlwind courtship in the summer of 1969 included a now legendary marathon drive to Scotland to attend the wedding of a friend. Normally so orderly and logical, he forgot the keys to his parents' house in Leeds where they were due to spend the night and decided to drive on to Edinburgh. On arrival at 5am, attempting to put the car into reverse to park it,

he managed to pull the gear lever clean out of its socket. They made the wedding with a minute to spare and became engaged two weeks later.

Our deep sympathy goes to Mary, who looked after him so devotedly during his long illness, and to Rebecca (G, 86-88) and Matthew (I, 85-90).

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3. Memorial Service Address

Tommy Cookson also gave the following address as the memorial service for James Sabben-Clare. Acknowledgement and thanks to the Winchester College Society, on whose website it was published.

The last time I spoke publicly about James was on a school speech day. As a governor of the school, he himself was in the audience. I told him I was going to mention him in my speech. He replied "Oh good. Wake me up when you get there!" It was a joke—almost. But James' critical faculties were so sharp and his boredom threshold on such occasions so low that he was quite likely to nod off if his attention wasn't fully engaged.

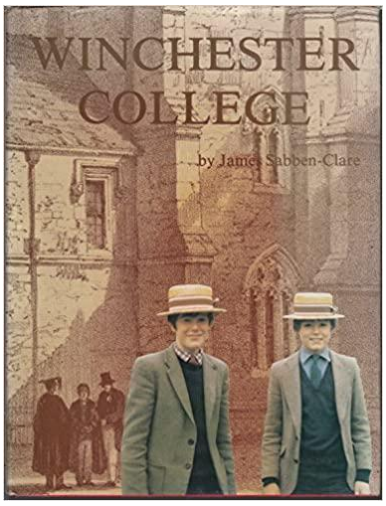
And if there is any consolation at all for his not being with us today it is that this address isn't being exposed to his formidable analytical powers. It is inevitable, when recalling James over a close friendship of 60 years, to speak about the power of his mind, and to remember the alertness of those eyes, the glint of sheer intelligence in those glasses, the ability to make careful distinctions and to think objectively even on the most emotional occasions. I complained to James that the initial diagnosis of his brain tumour seemed to have been conveyed to him pretty coldly. "No." said James in his careful, measured way, "Dispassionately".

"Dispassionate"-- a word that aptly describes James himself, but without its overtones of emotional coldness. He was objective but consistently humane: a devoted husband to Mary and father to Becca and Matt, a caring and perceptive teacher and housemaster. One of his pupils speaks of his finely-tuned sense of fairness. Another of a report James wrote that was funny, affectionate and so extraordinarily accurate that 30 years later his wife stuck it up on their fridge door. Allied to James' critical powers was the range and depth of his knowledge, over and above that of his own subject, the Classics. Top scholar at Winchester, scholar at New College, Oxford where he gained a double first in Mods and Greats, elected a Visiting Fellow of All Souls, he was a natural choice to become Head of Classics here. But it is the range of his interests beyond the classics which is so impressive: he was something of an expert on literature, on sport and on politics, to name just three.

I remember his asking me on my return from America to talk to his form about the American presidential elections of 1968. He sat at the back marking his books, only lifting his head occasionally to correct me on my facts. He was also something of an expert on opera and we were frequent visitors to Glyndebourne. I remember especially going to a production of Verdi's Macbeth where Lady Macbeth was sung by a magnificently-proportioned soprano. "Well", I said to James in the interval, "she didn't hang back". "No", said James, "she hung forward".

To read his History of Winchester College published at the time of the sixth centenary celebrations is to be impressed both by the range of his knowledge and by the lightness with which it is worn. 150 years of curricular changes, the achievements of Wykehamists over two centuries and the professions they have followed; an exhaustive list of Wykehamists in fiction (though curiously missing out Sir Humphrey Appleby in Yes Minister)—it's all there. Nor does he allow his

loyalty to the School get in the way of his judgements: writing about the school song, Domum, he says: “The first thing to be said about it is that the poetry is pretty awful”.



It would be easy to see James just as a powerful academic—to view him as reserved, intellectually daunting and magisterial. My earliest memory of him, however, is of a rather small boy with a bad stammer who played a terrier-like game of Winchester football; then, a bit later and a bit larger, as a member of the first X1 soccer—and later still as an all-round sportsman who played squash and fives--and played to win.

As well as being good at sport he was good with his hands—a keen carpenter, a drystone wall-er, a more than competent cook. When he was a member of our bachelor dining club in our early days on the staff, we all looked forward to James’ cooking night as a relief from the meals produced by the rest of us, such as burnt frozen chops. Other beneficiaries of his dexterity were those who couldn’t tie a bow tie for formal dinners. A phone call to James would bring him running down the street with that loping stride to tie it for you.

Perhaps his greatest love was his acting. He loved comedy—the more ridiculous the better. When the Dons first decided to put on a Christmas pantomime in 1971 there was a long debate about whether to have a pantomime cow. Next came the difficult question of who should play the cow and (when it was decided to ask The Bursar) what the cow should be called. James said it should be called Huddersfield and proceeded to recite ecstatically lines from a pantomime in Leeds he’d remembered as a child. “There was a cow in Huddersfield/That stood in a field and would not yield/The reason why she would not yield/She did not like her udders feeled”.

He was a brilliant writer of lyrics. With a sure sense of rhythm, he was a master of many styles, Stanley Holloway being a favourite. He once performed at a leaving party for a husband and wife: the husband had proposed to her in a letter from Africa where he was a missionary near Lake Albert. James’ version of this rather romantic story went:

It were down by the shores of Lake Albert
A lake I need hardly tell you
Named after young Albert Ramsbottom
As were eaten by lion at zoo”

As his cabaret partner on many occasions at the Southern Cathedrals’ Festival Fringe, I saw him on some nail-biting occasions: he would produce with complete

lack of concern and no apology (he was never addicted to apologies) the brilliant but complicated lyrics of three songs 24 hours before we were due on stage. Fortunately we were such a good team that we always forgot the words at the same time-- which made the audience think it was deliberate. In 1969 when we first started, he devised a sketch on the moon landing, an achievement at the time so

astonishing that he had Mission Control in Houston say “And there is God, almost exactly where we expected to find him”. We finished in 1984 with our adaptation of Frank Sinatra’s I did it my way. This explained why our performances over 15 years could have been so much better and ended with the rousing finale: “ If we messed up on this and that/ And half our jokes were falling flat/ It’s all/ It’s all because/ we did it his way”’.

Sadly, all this came to an end when James became Headmaster in 1985. It wasn’t easy being promoted from inside; and the money that had been spent on the refurbishment of boarding houses left little for spending on other projects like, for instance, the introduction of coeducation, a possibility he had more than once entertained. He therefore had to maintain and develop the School in quieter ways and in his own quiet style, by negotiation and not by diktat, by his intellectual grasp and by winning the respect of staff, pupils, parents and governors.

In his time Winchester, a boys’ boarding school, shared top spot in the league tables with girls’ day schools although (or because) 20% of curricular time was devoted to unexamined subjects and extracurricular time to endless plays, concerts and so on.

The school inspection report of 1997 somehow found its way into The Times Educational Supplement which described it as “As near perfect as you are likely to get, short of the Age of Miracles”. It inspired their cartoonist, Nick Newman, to draw a picture of a visitor to the College looking at a school noticeboard which said “Please do not walk on the grass - or on the water”. James bought the original and kept it in his loo.

James’ contribution was not simply academic, or even more widely cultural, though of course it was both these—recognition of which brought about his election to the Chairmanship of The Headmasters’ Conference. But the letters that Mary received after James’ death showed something more: his many acts of quiet kindness to individuals in need of support both within and outside the College. And it was the combination of his and Mary’s hospitality in Witham Close that reinforced a sense of wellbeing in the School as a whole. The two of them made a powerful combination and it was fitting that, in the clinic at Southampton, while they were waiting for the X-Rays that were to decide James’ fate, James told Mary that marrying her was the best decision of his life.

James could have succeeded in any walk of life. He chose to become a schoolmaster to the great benefit of hundreds of pupils. Life at Winchester, with all its challenge, interest, variety and beauty was, of course, full of attractions. But it was touching to hear that his wonderfully caring consultant at Southampton, Omar al Salihi, said it had been a privilege to treat someone who had spent his life less for personal gain than in the service of the next generation.
