

Priory Boys' Reunion, 2011

Dear Friends,

I have been stimulated by this wonderful occasion to contribute a few words. However, I conclude that these would be better written than spoken, for there is clearly no time for all of us to speak.

First, a brief, but heartfelt, "thank you" to Peter Hampson, and Howard Elcock; and indeed to you all.

Second, a few words on "**The Offside Rule**" before I metaphorically '*sit down*'.

I learnt the offside rule as a 9 year old in New Zealand, and in the context of hockey. (Some of you may remember that I was living in New Zealand before I entered the Priory in December 1954; New Zealand, all sunshine, swimming, and sailing; then 6 weeks on an ocean liner with captain and officers in whites, then Shropshire and the Priory.)

My talk of hockey may surprise you as we played rugby at the Boys' Priory; and I doubt any of you will remember me as a sportsman, though I crouched with you all behind the hedge on Longden Road, in the misty drizzle of many a wintry afternoon, grappling with the problem, solved so acrobatically by Mr Bean, of putting shorts on before taking trousers off; with the extra spice of girly giggles from behind the hedge at the out-of-bounds end of the Girls Priory playing field across the road. However, I ran up and down the rugby pitch with the rest of you. And I ran the 5-mile-run, though some monitors may have wondered, when they compared my spotless shorts with the mud-spattered clothing of others; indeed I was briefly in the County Senior team.

The **Offside Rule**, as I learnt it, meant that you could not address the ball if you were closer to the enemy goal than his last three players. This was changed in 1972 to 2 players, restricted to the 25 yard zone in 1987, and abolished completely in 1998! The offside rule seemed to make very good sense to me, and to fit in with the other **Rules of the Game** as I learnt them back in 1954, like "no turning on the ball", "no hitting or even touching the opposing players", and "no hitting the ball too hard, as by raising the stick above the shoulder". One should do nothing, I concluded, that might result in hurting or humiliating the opposition, and that almost extended to winning.

So you would be right — I was no sportsman; I was not very competitive. I have always been reluctant to stretch myself out to be measured, in case the result did not fit my dreams. I was reasonably fit, though. I cycled in to school most summer months, and over to Ray Holliday's house on one occasion, where I learnt how to trap sparrow hawks. Did you (Ray) ever get to visit my home at Dorrington in return hospitality? (Funny how shy I was, for I was intensely appreciative of friendship.) A few sixth formers once come out to Dorrington Grove for a Lunar Society meeting where a man told us about "Radioactivity". But I suspect that Mary Peckett is the only one who can remember visiting Dorrington Grove; and she came not as my friend but as friend of a friend of a brother (my older brother Robert, who, now a retired professor of epidemiology at Cardiff, sends Peter Hampson his apologies and thanks for extending the invitation to him; but Robert is off somewhere; skiing, or sailing offshore, or chairing a meeting.) Oddly, I do not remember Mary and Dave

Roberts' visit, and may not have been there; perhaps I was up a tree somewhere with a couple of books.

Yes, I had lots of brothers; some of you may remember Peter, my immediately younger brother. I know Paul Carson does. I think Howard Elcock took Peter dingy sailing on more than one occasion, though once again I don't know where I was at the time. Peter West, you may have heard, drowned in a sailing accident when he was 20. Robert also had a sailing accident, many years later (1988). Sailing down the Irish Channel in a 32 footer with 4 on board, at 8 o'clock one fine August morning the keel snapped off. They were many hours in the water and very glad to be spotted by the Stranraer ferry on its way back from Ireland. It was more than 10 years before he bought another offshore boat.

If I drive through Dorrington now, my mind invariable returns to the summer I courted Elizabeth Nicholls, who lived at Dorrington Old Hall, and whose mother kept 20 poodles. Memories, sweet and painful. One summer evening Elizabeth just "happened" to be strolling in the orchard with the 20 dogs; I just "happened" to stroll the mile that separated Dorrington Grove from the village. As I approached up the field the dogs started yapping. After a few minutes of helpless miming I gave up the futile task and beat a humiliating retreat. If anyone here is in touch with Elizabeth or knows where she is, I would be very grateful to be able to greet her and say a belated "thank you".

The last time I played soccer I broke more than the offside rule. Visualize me in my late twenties and on my third post-doctoral research assignment, still single; working in a uniquely wonderful situation, a private laboratory in a Georgian mansion in deepest rural Cornwall, owned by a wealthy and brilliant scientist, on a project that won him the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1978. I was 12th man for an out-of-season friendly between the tennis club and Ranco Engineering. At 5 minutes to kick-off our captain counted his men and said I would be needed, so I trotted off to my car to put on my kit, such as it was — some scarcely used rowing shorts, a Fred Perry sweat shirt and white pumps. They had started already when I trotted onto the pitch and asked our captain my position. He waved vaguely to the right-side mid-field. I enjoyed myself, running up and down, passing the ball to colleagues when it came my way, and by half time when our supporters came trotting on with wedges of orange we were well ahead of Ranco. But they told us in theatrical whispers that, as they cut up the oranges, it became undeniably clear that we were fielding 12 men. I was embarrassed, but thought it would be too conspicuous if I walked off the field, so, in the second half I played in a more neutral manner, failing to get possession if possible, and, when unavoidable, passing ambiguously to no-one in particular. Gratifyingly, the scores levelled up somewhat, and I felt I had done the right thing — at least by my rules.

Those were good times. I came out of my shell, played fiddle for the Morris dancers, chaired the folk club, brewed dustbins-full of beer, met and married my wife. The next few years were good too; a teaching post at Cambridge, a college fellowship and then family. Heather turned up in 1976, and is now an architect with two baby girls. Her two brothers are both engineers of sorts, one in Gothenburg working for VolvoTec, one in MIT on the brink of getting married. From '76 till 2002 I was a lecturer at Newcastle University. So, I spent my life in the twilight world of

academia, for which I have mixed respect and contempt; the academic (I conclude) carries what he thinks of as "reality" in his head, which is nothing more "real" than a wispy dream; but what a dream! The universe forms but a small part of that immense picture!

I have no contempt for the Priory, however. I feel very privileged, and seldom miss the opportunity to declare that I had the best possible education (for me); I found no door closed. Gifted teaching that stays with me throughout life, whether it be Peckett's "Pseudolus Noster", Priestly's "Orpheus and Eurydice", Doc Loehry's "Construe, construe!", or Tam Heginbottom's "Law of Mass Action" seesaw, and advice on explosions. I met a few Priorians when I was a student; fewer in subsequent years. I occasionally met Howard Elcock in Newcastle, occasionally bumped into Peter Roach or Peter Hampson in unexpected places. I missed the big reunion in 2004 as I was working abroad, but caught up to some extent once I got back.

I look back on the fifties with unexpected touches of nostalgia. I think I am truly a child of the fifties; we did not compete back then, we co-operated. There was space for all, and we needed each other. Did the **Offside Rule** really require 3 opposing players between you and the goal? How brilliantly fair! How un-sneaky!

Ian West, March 2011