

# Philip Headon PHF

## A Memorable and Successful Head Teacher

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What makes for a good or memorable teacher or head teacher? There must be numerous answers to such a question but many of us will remember from our school days one teacher who remains in the memory favourably long after the school education experience has passed. Teachers occupy a privileged position in our lives for they are the conduit through which learning passes from one generation to another and how they approach such responsibility not only informs, but influences, the next generation and the leaders of tomorrow. One quote states "a good teacher is like a candle – it consumes itself and lights the way for others". How that comes about is determined by many factors including a passion for the career of teaching, not just as a job but for the pupils and their futures. An infectious enthusiasm, vision, accessibility, humour, competence in delivery of subjects and supportiveness are other attributes. Everyone tends to remember teachers for one reason or another but especially those who leave a lasting favourable impression whose influence has spread beyond the confines of the school building or playground into the wider world. Head teachers have a broader challenge and perspective because they need to be supportive of the teachers in the school and to have the ability to give them space to perform their craft in their individual manner - in short give inspired leadership. Another constituency also requires their



*Phil Headon sporting his PHF badge*

attention and that lies in communication skills with parents.

One teacher locally who has made a lasting impression on his Primary School pupils is Philip Bowen Headon, former Headteacher at Whitfield Primary School and Aspen Unit, now approaching his ninetieth birthday at the turn of the year. News of Phil (the name by which he is known on a familiar basis) being an Honorary Member of the Rotary Club of Dover was met with numerous affectionate posts on Facebook from some of his former pupils. Living in River and still in his own home Phil is reliant on carers calling to help him and some of these have proved to be former pupils of his – a good persuasive argument for being kind to pupils on their way up as they may well turn out to be one's carers later in life!

Phil was born on 14th January 1930 in Brynmenyn, Bridgend, South Wales, one of seven children of his parents, with five sisters and a twin brother William (Bill) Headon who died a couple of years ago from cancer. Phil's youngest sister survives and lives in Wales. After elementary school in Brynmenyn he attended the County Grammar School in Bridgend leaving at 17. He was captain of the school cricket team and later sang in a college choir. He was called up to National Service on 1st April 1948 (April Fool's Day he remembers) serving until 31st December 1949 in the

army, REME. For the first six weeks he was stationed at Honiton, Devon, where he remembers an emphasis on P.E., marching and exercises, with 20 people on the Basic Training Course, before being posted to the University of Southampton. Phil was a rugby player for his unit playing as a scrum half. Having been given 14 days embarkation leave Phil then left Southampton in 1949 on the troopship *Dilwara* bound for the Far East. He recalls that the Bay of Biscay was very rough and he spent quite a few days remaining on deck! The voyage took him to the Aegean Sea where everyone was required to wear life jackets because of the risk of mines in the area. The troopship then reached Port Said and the Suez Canal before crossing the Indian Ocean to Colombo in what is now Sri Lanka but was then Ceylon. After calling in at Singapore Phil finally made it to Hong Kong where he was to be based for 6 months before being posted back to UK, again by boat.

Phil has lovely recollections of a delightful Chinese lady in Hong Kong who undertook sewing for troops and before he left, handed to him a hand knitted navy-blue pullover which he kept for many years. While in Hong Kong Phil had many experiences, two of which stand out in his mind. The first related to the discovery of an unexploded bomb with which he had no experience to deal so he contacted a Major who, it seems, was very excited by the prospect of dealing with it! As Phil turned to walk away, for reasons of safety, the Major required him to stay and help by passing him the tools of the trade in his efforts to defuse the bomb! Phil found this a frightening experience, not knowing if it was booby trapped. It proved to be a Japanese naval shell from the war and after he dealt with it Phil remembers the Major was very excited and pleased with himself! The second experience proved to be one historic event for the Royal Navy as Phil was privileged to be present to witness HMS

*Amethyst* limping into harbour after the Yangtze Incident which had seen the frigate escape from her berth on the Yangtze River under fire from Communist guns. The frigate was given a tremendous welcome on arrival with its surviving crew members.

Back in UK Phil lived with his parents and was promised a place at a Teacher Training School but received a letter postponing it by a year. Phil challenged this decision and September 1950 saw him head off to St Paul's Teacher Training College in Cheltenham. Between January and September 1950, he worked for British Railways dealing with wages and time keeping and indulged his passion for sport by playing cricket. Phil remembers that at the dances between those attending St Paul's and those attending St Mary's in Cheltenham all the men would line up one side of the dance floor and ladies on the other! One lady caught his eye and he made a polite request to dance to which she said "yes". Phil was aware of a familiar sound and said "you have a Welsh accent" and inquired where the lady came from. She said a small village he would not have heard of – Pontycymer, Bridgend – but he did know as it was his patch! This lady was Margaret Williams who was attending St Mary's and was one year ahead. It was the beginning of a lifelong partnership as Phil and Margaret were married in Bridgend in 1952 and their marriage lasted until her death in 2009.

Phil remembers while at St Paul's a meal of eggs, peas and chips cost 2s/6d! His teacher training proved to be a two year very intensive course with lectures every day and evenings. His group was the first that had no exams as progress was by assessment. Phil took up his first teaching post in primary education in Bromley where he was responsible for music and boys' games and he stayed at this school for 8 years. He was then appointed a Deputy Headteacher in St Albans where he remained for 3 years before

taking up a Headship at Crockenhill Primary School near Swanley. He was in post for 4 years and lived in a schoolhouse. His next move was to Whitfield Primary School as Headteacher at Easter 1967 a post he held for twenty-two and a half years until his retirement at Christmas 1989. His secretary at Whitfield was Sue Garlinge, a former pupil of Dover Grammar School for Girls and described by Phil as "ultra-efficient". Sadly, she died suddenly in 2019 after a few years of retirement.

Meanwhile, Margaret's teaching career had begun in New Cross and she lived in digs in Camberwell but after Phil's move to Whitfield she joined the staff of St Mary's Primary School where the headteacher was Denis Stubbs, MBE before moving to River Primary School for 20+ years in charge of the infant department.

Margaret and Phil had two sons – David married to Ruth and currently living at Littlebourne and Nick who lives in River. David had a career in Company Pensions and with Ruth has two children while Nick was a member of The Clash and attained pinnacles of success with that group.

Phil was very happy at Whitfield School. He remembers the transition from Imperial to metric measurements and the very hot year that was the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. Whitfield Primary School had 8 classes of 40 pupils and during Phil's headship the roll rose to 400 or so requiring 4 mobile classrooms, mainly caused by Whitfield village expansion. Governors were at that time called managers and Phil found them very supportive.

A major development came in 1976 when the Aspen Unit opened. In 1975 Brian Powell, County Education Officer, approached Phil with the proposal for the unit. Wisely, Phil consulted his staff and had

to consider and address concerns of parents about the admission of special needs students to Whitfield Primary School. A County representative in charge of Special Needs, both physical and mental, visited the school and gave a video presentation and after reassurances were provided, Phil agreed to the project proceeding. Phil had to deal with a few parents who questioned the implications. Prefab buildings were erected on site and the catchment area for Special Needs pupils included Deal, Sandwich, Folkestone and Dover. The Aspen Unit had a day Head with two carers and 6 - 7 pupils located some 25 yards or so from the Primary School. Phil took responsibility as overall Head of both elements of the school. Aspen Unit pupils came to the mainstream school for stories, music and assembly but did not stay a whole day. Phil saw the project through from conception, foundation and development over twelve or so years. It was a remarkable achievement. In 2019 the Mayfield Road school in Whitfield has 376 pupils in the mainstream with another 112 with complex needs. Kent County Council has recognised the need for primary school places in the Whitfield area and is proceeding with plans that will see Whitfield Aspen Primary School expand onto a second site, as a satellite, in 2020. With the continuing expansion of Whitfield, on top of existing capacity issues, demand is likely to increase for places at the Primary School.

Phil was regarded with much affection and respect while at Whitfield School where he was succeeded by David Waller who came from Capel School and whose wife, Liz, was Head of Temple Ewell Primary School before moving to St Mary's Primary School in the town. Phil's Deputy Head, Andrew Lamb, succeeded David Waller as Head of the Whitfield Primary School while Nick Andrews oversaw the Aspen side of the school.

Margaret meanwhile had enjoyed a long period as a teacher at River Primary School where she was the leading teacher in the infants' department, where she taught the Reception class. In the words of a former colleague "she was an extremely accomplished teacher" who exercised perfect control over her charges and could quell the most excitable and mischievous child with a 'look'. She was calm and had a strong sense of humour. She expected high standards of her pupils in work and behaviour and was loved and respected by all the pupils throughout the school. Every year, directed by Margaret, the Reception infants put on a Nativity play and a more ambitious production was performed by the older infants. Both occasions would be organised with military precision with areas of the hall labelled so parents assembled obediently in the correct sections to receive their instructions. Many of the parents were ex-pupils and had been taught by Margaret in their time and regarded her with great respect and as a result of her industry the productions were well-performed; all the speakers and singers were word perfect and clearly audible and costumes looked quite professional.

Phil and Margaret enjoyed 20 years of retirement before she died in 2009. She shared her birthday, 10th June, with the Duke of Edinburgh. Since coming to Dover Phil has fully engaged with the community being involved with many organisations and clubs, often in a leadership capacity. He was very supportive of Dover Choral Society and Margaret's involvement with it, a committee member of L'Arche Community, a member and Social Secretary of RCP Yacht Club, Vice President of Dover Rugby Club, a member, then Chairman, then Life Member, of Probus, a member of Cancer Research Committee along with Dr Keith Thomas and he has been an ardent follower of cricket and rugby and played cricket for Cosmos.

An important area of his life has been his membership of the Rotary Club of Dover which he joined in July 1972. He was Secretary for a few years and its President in 1979/1980, which coincided with the 75th anniversary year of Rotary International. For his outstanding work for the club and the community in 2005 he was made a Paul Harris Fellow, the highest honour a club can give other than Honorary Membership which was given subsequently to Phil; and with Terry Sutton, MBE he remains an Honorary Member much respected, loved and admired.

Sadly, illness in the form of Parkinson's Disease has had a serious impact on physical aspects of Phil's life necessitating carers looking after him at various times during the day at his home which overlooks River Recreation Ground. Nevertheless, he is stoic in his attitude to his limitations and his mental capacity is undiminished making him a most enjoyable social companion who retains a passion for cricket and rugby on the television.

He was once given a sound piece of advice which he has reflected on during his life and which he has found to be invaluable. He was advised always to assess a situation, reflect and ask questions. So, on several occasions at school having seen something he thought to be wrong, possibly by a staff member, he would return to his office and ask himself if it was important and what action needed to be taken. If it was important and action was necessary, it needed to be immediate but if whatever had caused him concern, after reflection, did not merit action he would let matters lie. Phil is one of life's scarce good people, passionate, visionary, competent, supportive, humorous and sincere, a person who has lit the way for others over several generations and rightly deserves an accolade as a memorable teacher and Headteacher.