

Nicholas Hagger, second address on 1 July

30 years of the Hagers: 30 years ago

It's not widely known how my wife and I came to arrive at Oaklands 30 years ago, and exactly what we had to do to renew the school during our first months.

In the mid-1970s we were living in Wandsworth, where I was Senior Teacher and Head of English at a large school. In 1977 we came back to Loughton for the christening of our second son, Anthony, at High Beach church. There was a gathering afterwards at my mother's house and Elizabeth Lord was invited as a family friend. We stood on the lawn under the pear-tree holding cups of tea, and she asked what we were doing. I said we had been exploring taking over a school in Streatham where Ann, who had been teaching at Blackheath and was then teaching at Holland Park, would be Headmistress. She said: "Blackheath? I came to Loughton from Blackheath. You mustn't go to Streatham, you must have Oaklands." We had been head-hunted. For various reasons another five years slipped by but in 1982, when she was nearly 82, Elizabeth Lord decided that she *had* to make an arrangement that would guarantee the future of Oaklands, and we took over at the beginning of the summer holidays in 1982, almost exactly 30 years ago.

We moved from Wandsworth and lived over the road from the school. There was a lot of modernising to be done in a short time. Ann and I made a start by personally decorating ten rooms in ten long days – two coats on walls and ceilings in each room – with great help from some members of the Parents Association at the time, especially Richard and Margaret Snowsill. Matthew remembers the painting that went on in the basement, which consisted of a storeroom and coal cellars and which we had to clear and convert. We had to rewire the whole school because the wiring hadn't been changed since long before 1944 (possibly since the First World War) and was deemed dangerous. Miss Lord couldn't understand why this was necessary as the lights had worked perfectly well for all those years. We installed central heating, renewed the plumbing and upgraded the kitchen.

Ann began updating and modernising the curriculum. This was a continuous process while she was Headmistress *and* teaching the fourth form (Year 6). I carried on teaching in Wandsworth. I was off to work at 6 a.m. to begin a heavy day helping to run 140 staff, organising coverage for absentee teachers and organising exams and the timetable as well as teaching O and A level. When I returned at 6.30 p.m. I had marking and preparation to do, but I also had Oaklands' paperwork such as issuing contracts to all the Oaklands staff and revising and modernising the pay structure, which had grown up higgledy-piggledy over the years. I calculated and paid the staff salaries, dealt with all invoices and at the weekends I mowed the fields. One evening I held a meeting about the parking in Albion Hill for all residents, parents, local councillors and police and secured an agreement that unofficially everyone would drive one-way down the hill to approach the school at peak times – a principle we still try to adhere to.

In 1983 we built what is now Oak House where the Art Room had stood. We moved the Art Room and tacked it on to the side of the Garden Room. We had to move the steps you walked down to reach this marquee, which at that time led down to what is now Oak House.

The husband of a then member of staff, Bill Sergeant, his son-in-law Syd and I moved each step (a great slab) with only a pick-axe, a garden fork and a few pipes we borrowed from the building site to act as rollers. We prised and levered and rolled and dropped into place, improvising a technique that can't have changed since the building of Stonehenge. Around this time I personally redecorated the assembly hall, again with help from parents, especially Martin Wickham and Richard Snowsill. Those days started our 'can-do' philosophy.

We moved into our new house, what is now Oak House, in February 1984. In those pre-computer days I manually prepared our bank spreadsheets and entered every invoice payment in account books. My paperwork was done on my electric typewriter and it was down to me to balance the books. And I was still mower of the fields, starting on the outside and approaching the centre in ever-decreasing circles, and in the early days I was also the school keeper who opened the school every morning and locked up at night. When the cleaners didn't turn up (which was often) Ann, Matthew and Anthony went round emptying the waste-paper baskets and cleaning the loos.

We had in-house catering staff for lunches, and every Friday evening since we took over Ann, along with sometimes me and sometimes Matthew, had shopped at Makro in Charlton and two or three other places for more than 200 lunches for the 5 days of the next week, i.e. more than 1,000 meals. We all carried the large tins and frozen food down the cellar steps to the basement shelves, fridges and freezers. The worst Friday job was humping two huge sacks of potatoes I picked up from Creeds into the boot of my car, which made the whole back part of the car sag (not to mention my back), and then humping them down the cellar steps. Many people are now doing full-time (and therefore much better) what I was then doing part-time in my evenings and weekends until I gave up working in Wandsworth in 1985 – a measure of how far the school has come in 30 years.

All this personal energy and loving care we put into Oaklands recreated and continued the family atmosphere. In 1986 we finished building an extension for the Transitions, and by the end of the 1980s, the waiting list was so long that we founded Coopersale Hall from it. Then we were able to have a company do the catering at both schools and we didn't have to shop for food ourselves. We were asked if we could save Normanhurst in 1996, at 2 p.m. on a Monday when it was set to go into administration three days later, and my wife took a step back from being Headmistress to act as a consultant to *all* our schools. At this point I want to pay tribute to Mrs. Ann Hagger for her work as Headmistress of Oaklands and fourth-form (Year 6) teacher for 14 years and all she did behind the scenes to help turn Oaklands into the school it is now. (Clap.) Our son Matthew joined us as Managing Principal and started shadowing me in 2001, and has been instrumental in steering through all the recent developments that have given us many "outstandings" in our latest inspection reports. I want to pay tribute to all his hard work in helping to take Oaklands to a new level – and incidentally he has been instrumental in arranging and organising this magnificent event today. (Clap.)

During the last 30 years inspections have become more and more rigorous, and we have had to keep standards constantly rising, but I hope you'll agree from all you see and hear today that Oaklands has retained its strong family atmosphere and links with Nature, and

provides an equally secure environment for a new generation of children. Our excellent staff are as dedicated and forward-looking as Oaklands staff were in those early war years and they deserve our appreciation. (Clap.) Last year I was visited by a boy who left before me, in 1946, and is now living in America. A few of you may remember him: Gordon Roberts. He wrote and said he hadn't been back to Oaklands since 1946, and asked if he could have a quick look round while visiting this country. I showed him round last year and we sat on a bench near the Garden Room. He said in wonder, "Parts of it haven't changed at all and are just as I remember them. It still has the feel of a happy family school." It's been said that the Queen hasn't changed during the last 60 years. I hope that Gordon's right and that something similar has happened here during the 68 years since 1944 – that while modernising we have retained our original ethos and founding principles (-ples and also -pals).

We are now celebrating our 75th anniversary and we are buoyantly looking towards the future, and I am confident that many of you – or your children or grandchildren – will be present at the celebration of Oaklands' centenary – or 100th anniversary – and will find that today's spirit is still continuing in the different circumstances that will undoubtedly be prevalent then.

Thank you very much.