

Jonathan Gibson

Professor Jonathan Gibson MB BS MD FRCSEd, FRCOphth (1966-1971) is a Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon for the Heart of England NHS Trust, Birmingham and a Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Aston. He looks back at his time at Merchant Taylors' and his career

I entered Science Division A1 at MTS in 1966 and left the familiar, secure world of Alpha Preparatory School in Harrow. 1966 had been a good one for Alpha, as four of us applying to MTS had managed to gain entrance scholarships. I therefore entered Clive House in the huge, new world of MTS with some trepidation.

Memories of those early days were of battling with the dreaded detachable collars after games – I think 1966 was the year they were phased out - and of going into the largest bath I had ever seen after rugby. I also remember being frightened out of my skin on my second day when a friend and I dared to take a shortcut across the Flagstaff pitch, and ended up being chased and shouted at by the formidable Senior Master “Rags” (R.A.G. Stokes.). It was a misdemeanour I never dared to repeat and throughout my time at MTS I always remained rather wary of “Rags”, even when our paths crossed years later in the sophisticated world of Biology Upper Sixth. Other memorable masters were the legendary Messrs. Steane and Barnes, who although I was on the science side were successful in instilling in me an interest in English and History respectively, and Bruce Ritchie, who amongst his many roles, was also for a time a dynamic Flight Lieutenant in the RAF CCF section.

Having chosen a science path at the age of 13, for no better reason than it looked interesting, I slowly progressed through the science side to eventually reach the pinnacle of Biology Upper Sixth. Other memorable masters I encountered on my journey were A.P.W. (“Fanny”) Hill, who was my form master in Science Division A1 and who was largely responsible for inspiring an early interest in Biology, and W.H. Thorning, the Head of Science, who humoured my decision to give up Physics in the Upper Sixth and was extremely supportive in my application to medical school.

Our school year had been the first at MTS to embark on A level Nuffield Physical Science – which was a new concept which combined Physics and Chemistry, as one subject, taken as an A level a year early, in the Sixth Form. Although this concept was fairly speedily abandoned by MTS, after it became apparent that for most career choices separate Chemistry and Physics A levels were still required in the Upper Sixth, it did have one personal benefit: the practical project that I did on “lens aberrations” led to a lifelong interest in photography and optics, and probably contributed to my later choice of ophthalmology as a career.

Although by no means a star of the sports field, looking back on my time at MTS I seemed to have spent a lot of time cross-country running, playing House rugby and in the summer terms playing squash and tennis, not to mention the joys of “meadow league” cricket. There was also the Field Club, with lunchtimes spent collecting various specimens in the water meadows, which, if nothing else, was a good excuse for a pleasant stroll and chat with friends. The Field Club also allowed me to spend a memorable month in the summer holidays after Lower Sixth, camping in the Gower Peninsula, observing otters and generally listening intently to the banter of the older boys.

I also found the CCF to be great fun, particularly learning to shoot, going on annual camps at RAF stations Binbrook and Cranwell, and having the chance to fly on Field Days. I was a Corporal in the RAF section and, probably because no one else was keen, I was put in charge of drilling the new recruits. I therefore spent many Friday afternoons marching my squad up and down the school drive and saluting all and sundry. It probably cured me of any wish to enter the forces myself, but later on it gave me some insight into the career choices of two of our children, my daughter who is an Army Reservist and our middle son who is an officer in the Royal Navy.

Career

In 1971 I left MTS to enter Bart's Hospital, London, as a medical student. In those days rugby was said to be the dominant theme at medical school interviews, and the apocryphal story was told that one could expect to be thrown a rugby ball by the Dean. If you caught it and passed it back you were in, if you dropped it you would not get an offer and if you caught it and drop kicked the ball back you would get a scholarship. Needless to say, despite this forewarning at the several interviews I attended, rugby was never mentioned!

Medical school was fantastic fun and I rapidly discovered girls, sport, beer and hard work, in that order, and thoroughly enjoyed my time there. In those days the nurse training of the famous London teaching hospitals in many ways resembled finishing schools for the daughters of well-off families. Male medical students were outnumbered about three-fold at Bart's, and we were therefore in great demand for parties, Matron's Ball etc, so it made a very welcome change from my rather monastic existence at MTS.

In 1976, at the tender age of 23, I managed to fool London University into letting me qualify as a doctor and I was let loose on the unsuspecting British public. After pre-registration house jobs in London and Edinburgh, I gravitated towards ophthalmology – probably in part because of my experience at MTS with my optics project, but also partly because the surgical firms that I had worked on generally seemed to have more fun.

Training posts followed in Edinburgh, where as well as learning about ophthalmic surgery I met and married Jennifer, developed a life-long love of Scotland, and in my spare time became club doctor for Heriot's Rugby Club in Edinburgh. This was very enjoyable but could be rather hairy on match days – as my knowledge of sports medicine was rather limited and the club boasted several international players.

Life as a Consultant Ophthalmologist

Further ophthalmic training occurred after moving to Leicester where I was appointed as a Lecturer in the newly opened medical school, before I was appointed as a Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon in Birmingham in 1986.

I have never regretted my choice of ophthalmology as a specialty, because it combines aspects of medical and surgical expertise with the opportunity to make a huge difference to the lives of patients. It has allowed me to work in several different roles over the years, as a NHS consultant for 28 years, carrying out elective and emergency eye surgery, as a partner in a busy private practice and for the last seven years as a university professor, working as a teacher and in clinical research. A typical working week for me now has evolved from when I first started as a consultant, and might include research clinics conducting clinical trials, lecturing and supervising undergraduate and post graduate students, as well as working in a large NHS hospital seeing patients.

Despite the many well-publicised tribulations currently affecting the NHS, I am still convinced that medicine in general is a fantastic career to follow and opens up a huge range of career opportunities world-wide, and I was extremely pleased when our oldest son qualified as a doctor. Although I have not visited the school since leaving, if my experience is typical, MTS provides excellent career preparation for aspiring medical students. If I had to give two pieces of advice, they would be: never be afraid to ask questions, no matter how trivial they might appear and secondly, get stuck in to as many school activities as possible.