



## FRANCIS HOLLAND SCHOOL SLOANE SQUARE

### Headmistress' Speech from Prize-Giving 2019

This year has been something of a watershed for me. I came to Francis Holland in 2012, seven years ago, and the first full generation of junior and senior pupils has passed through the doors. That's a lot of standing in the playground greeting children in the morning and shaking hands at the end of the week. In fact, I estimate that's about 115,000 pupil handshakes. Some of the juniors think I founded the School. One of the infants recently asked me how old I was. 'Ooh, I'm not sure,' I bluffed, to which she answered cheerfully, 'Just look at the back of your knickers. Mine say age 5-6.'

Last week I came across the presentation I gave to the governors in my first term in 2012. A small and happy school, Francis Holland had just 450 pupils compared to the 600 we welcomed this term. Examination results were modest and the co-curriculum consisted of just three clubs. Winning a netball match was rare, and concerts and plays were gentle affairs, the emphasis on participation rather than performance. The minutes from the meeting conclude: *Mrs Elphinstone is nailing her colours to the academic mast (with grit!) and is very optimistic about the future; however it will take around 6 years to make a significant change.* Well, seven years after the event, I behold a transformed School. Academically, the School now stands amongst the top girls' schools in the country. We are regularly regional champions in the major sports, but have added rowing, football and cricket, as well as yoga, Zumba and boot camp to our programme. Our choirs sing in the major churches and cathedrals around Europe, as well as making the final of the BBC Young Choir of the Year. Our student scientists win NASA's international space competition, our actors storm the West End with musicals, whilst our artists are, literally, painting London – go to Eccleston Yards on Saturday and see the ShedFest. We punch far above our weight.

Creativity informs all that we do. In teaching and learning, we think outside the box. There is no end to our pupils' ingenuity. Indeed, when our Year 11 girls were asked to write a creative story containing four elements: religion, royalty, sex and mystery, one girl responded with this concise essay: "'My God,' said the Queen, 'I'm pregnant! I wonder who did it.'"

We have established the 7 Cs of confidence, curiosity, collaboration, communication, creativity, commitment and craftsmanship – and three years ago we heard here Professor Bill Lucas, the author of the book *Educating Ruby* in which these 7 Cs are proposed. Every single teacher, governor was given a copy. We needed everyone on message, everyone on the bus. But more than this, our community is founded on faith, love and service. Our children know who they are, what they believe in, and where they're going.

So you probably have two questions:

1. When are you leaving?
2. What next?

The first question is easily answered. I'm not. At least, not for the foreseeable future, although I don't anticipate being here in 2040 when pupils arrive at school in flying taxis or personal jet packs. Enticements have come my way, I admit, but what can match the joy of leading this amazing school with its fabulous children, outstanding teachers, supportive governors and enthusiastic parents? There can be few heads who have such a happy environment to work in, who find such constant reward and satisfaction. But the more important factor is that my job is not yet done – which brings me to the second question. What next?

You may not all be aware of how the School site has grown. In 1977, the Junior School building was added. 1998 saw the Grosvenor wing with the science labs and art rooms added. In 2000 the Morison library replaced the gym in what is now the Centre for Creative Enterprise, and in 2010 a working men's club became the Carmel Hall, the home for our performing arts. During this past year we have been revelling in the fabulous new spaces funded by you as part of our Building for the Future campaign, including the wonderful Wellbeing Suite, library, roof garden, performing arts studio, and computing and fitness suites which all enhance our children's health and happiness. In September we will open the most significant addition yet – the Old School House on Ebury

Street, which will provide the hub for the next exciting step in the life of Francis Holland. Our current Year 11 pupils will enjoy an unparalleled Sixth Form experience. You will receive an invitation to a viewing tomorrow.

The dramatic transformation of our School has prompted us to review our mission statement – and we have updated our aims to reflect our vision. Here is what you will find on our website:

### **Our Aim is**

To provide an inspiring education in a community which empowers girls to be the leaders, thinkers, inventors, designers, entrepreneurs and game-changers of tomorrow.

### **And this is Our Vision**

We seek to foster

- a love of learning and enquiry
- the curiosity to discover and uncover
- a sense of fun and creativity
- the ability to innovate and collaborate
- skills of research and craftsmanship
- an understanding of diversity and difference
- the desire to serve and support others
- the courage to strive, to fail, to persevere and to succeed.

It sounds easy. But to succeed, our girls need to be able to take risks. To take risks, they must be prepared to fail. To be able to fail, they need to overcome perfectionism. To overcome perfectionism, they need to know they are loved unconditionally. And to know they are loved unconditionally, they must believe there is no one stereotype which is acceptable; they must know that they are loved in all their quirky uniqueness.

This has been the liberating, empowering factor in our transformation and growth. We don't select girls simply for their brains, for their likely academic achievement – as this evening testifies. We don't value them only for their examination results and university destinations. Our mission statement goes on to declare that we value love, humility, compassion, courage, resilience, patience, hope and thankfulness. Make no mistake. It is this heart, this passion, this belief, which makes FHS unique.

But our children face a challenging future. And it's not just Brexit. Nor is it simply AI and the march of the machines, though both these will require ingenuity, flexibility, courage and determination. There are two major challenges. The first entails the battle for our children's souls. Social media is destroying their confidence and their self-worth. Anxiety and depression are driving ever-increasing numbers to feel their life is not worth living. I told the girls in our first assembly that I did something very scary, very distressing and very brave on their behalf over the holiday – I watched Love Island. I was utterly appalled. The moral emptiness, the emotional fragility, the intellectual poverty were shocking. In dozens of programmes like this, and on Instagram and Pinterest, our children are being told that an artificial, enhanced physical perfection is the pinnacle of achievement, and that happiness is to be found merely in 'coupling' – in other words, a simple physical pairing off - not in loving, equal relationships. In so many other ways, a moral relativism has replaced traditional values and eroded children's confidence in their very identity. Here in our School, we try to give girls the strength to resist the baying of the crowd, the aggression and intimidation of politically-motivated lobbies who try to silence the voices of those who disagree with them, and brainwash young people into thinking that violence and coercion form the only path to change, or that surgery is the key to fulfilment.

But it is the second challenge which I want to finish with. I fear we, the parents, have squandered much of the inheritance we were entrusted with. Careless, greedy and selfish, my generation has robbed our children of a confident and secure future. Our oceans are dying, our forests are burning, the ice cap is melting, wars ravage nations, and the poor starve. We pass to our children a stuttering torch. We can only watch and pray that they have the courage, the ingenuity and the wisdom to made good the damage and bring hope to a desperate world.

And I believe our girls can do this. We have been teaching them to be enterprising and bold. From the Junior School to the Sixth Form, our pupils are learning how solve problems creatively. They learn to take ideas from concept through to the reality of the marketplace. Cordelia, for example, has designed and made a DogPod – a pavement dog spa, where your pooch can enjoy air-conditioning, mood lighting and classical music while you shop. Her dog Lottie now has 12,000 followers on Instagram. Lucrezia vlogs to 17,000 followers on Youtube with her life tips and revision skills. Millie has persuaded the factory which makes our uniform to send her the offcuts so that she can make and sell hair scrunchies – and use some of her profit for our Tanzania link school. Mvumi. We are partnering Zena El Farra of Masterpeace in Ecclestone Yards to offer art classes to local children and provide uniforms to girls in India so that they can have an education.

But more than simply learning ‘business’, the girls are applying these principles to giving back. Their aim is social enterprise, not just making money. We are encouraging them to see the needs around them – in our community and far beyond – and to believe that they can not only MAKE a difference but BE the difference. Many schools pay lip service to enterprise with their entrepreneurship week tagged on at the end of the summer term, and their occasional speakers, but here responsible stewardship of our planet and resources is central to our curriculum, central to our ethos, and central to our way of life.

The future is uncertain. Who knows what this country will look like after October 31<sup>st</sup>? Who knows what jobs there may or may not be when your daughter leaves school in, perhaps, seven years’ time? Who knows whether she will even consider university or whether she will go straight into an apprenticeship or internship? The gig economy is already here. Millennials move from one start-up to another, from one idea to the next, and often run more than one business idea simultaneously. Fortune favours the brave. What an opportunity for courageous, curious and creative young women to lead others, to bring compassion and help to the most needy – to change the world.

The only thing which holds them back is fear. But you won’t find a more feisty bunch of girls than those of FHS. I know that Greta Thunberg tells us we should all be afraid about what is happening to our planet, but fear paralyses. Hope galvanises. It is thought, focus and determination we need. It is courage which empowers – like that of the breast-cancer survivor who swam the Channel four times non-stop and just kept repeating, ‘I can make it through this night. I can make it through this night.’

For all the past seven years, we have worked at ways to enable the girls to take risks, push themselves out of their comfort zone, and bounce back from defeat. We have taught them always to believe there can be a better way, that despair is never the answer, and that hope brings strength. Often I tell them to choose light over darkness. We can’t take away the threats and the struggle from their lives – we know that pain and difficulty are part of the human lot and we can’t protect them forever – but we can patiently and carefully lay the foundations so that ultimately they are able to stand alone and be resilient in the face of setbacks, making a brighter future for themselves and for others.

I will leave you with the words of one of America’s great presidents (you can have a guess at who!):

*“Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man or woman stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and, crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”* JF Kennedy

I believe our girls can do this. I believe they can be the change. The world is waiting.

Lucy Elphinstone  
Headmistress