

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE BURY GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

3 April 2017

Much of the widespread interest in events surrounding Black Thursday at Bury Grammar School has focused on what happened to provoke the Headmaster into absenting himself from School on March 9th - who set this up, who exactly was involved in the key precursor events, what was said, when, and to whom to trigger the crisis, and why did no sensible and sensitive persons intervene to prevent what by any measure is shaping up as a major loss, both for the Headmaster himself and for the reputation of Bury Grammar?

But there is another question that all the constituent groups making up the Bury Grammar Schools community, in Britain and around the world, ought to be asking.

In the words of a parent with children now at School, "What's the plan?"

That is a very good and important question. It's several questions, depending on which of the Bury Grammar Schools and their present or prospective students one has in mind.

To make it feasible to begin to do some thinking about the future, and in the light of the already announced intention to merge the Sixth Forms, let's *arguendo* pose a more specific question.

Is it now the BGS Governors' intention gradually to merge the two senior schools so that Bury Grammar, sooner or later, becomes a co-educational institution, managed by a Principal together with subordinate Heads in the two senior schools, and the Junior School and the Kindergarten?

The question has no clear answer. And the process of thinking through what might be a sensible answer to it after Black Thursday is clouded by uncertainty surrounding the terms of the Headmaster's separation and the further question of whether those terms might eventually have to be settled by litigation. The impact on the future of the Schools in using litigation to resolve those uncertainties could be huge, no matter who prevails.

But let's review.

In January, this year, when the appointment of a Principal for the Bury Grammar Schools was announced, along with an announcement about the planned merger of the Sixth Forms, there was a third leg to the stool. The Headmaster was going to lead a comprehensive Curriculum Review.

It occurred to me at the time, and it occurred to others with whom I am in contact, that this could be the prelude to the merger of the two senior schools; the beginnings of a plan to start a process of gradual amalgamation that would lead to BGS becoming co-educational.

To be clear about where I stand, I favor moving in this direction.

I argued in an essay I published on the Remembering Roger Kay website in the Spring of 2013 that a careful look at amalgamation of the senior schools was long overdue at Bury. See http://www.rememberingrogerkay.com/uploads/2/0/1/6/20161677/remembering_roger_kay.pdf

Indeed, I wrote a long letter to the Headmaster earlier this year urging him to think of his Curriculum Review assignment not just as a consolation prize for losing out on the Principal job but also as an opportunity to shape the future of both Schools, for the long term.

The way I assess the prospect of amalgamation is very different, however, than the way people see it in Bury, and indeed in other parts of Lancashire. People like me, as well as others who have by now perhaps spent too much time in North America and the Antipodes, are inclined to view co-education with equanimity.

But in Bury, as someone privy to the deliberations of the Governors told me, a week or so ago, announcing an intention, now, to amalgamate the senior schools, even gradually, would most likely lead to “riots in the streets.” Hyperbole, perhaps. It is unquestionably the case, however, that amalgamation would and should be a slow process and the ground would have to be carefully prepared.

But the Governors are not prepared, certainly not at the moment, to move in the direction of co-education, or even to be dragged along that road by someone who has thought more about it than they have. Indeed, as part and parcel of the announcement in January of the Sixth Form merger the Governors unequivocally reaffirmed their commitment to single-sex senior schools, and solemnly promised that BGSB and BGSG would continue to function as conjoint but independent entities well into the future.

So, if the question is amalgamation, the Governors haven't done their homework - a problem that the Curriculum Review could have started to fix. Moreover, and this explains why the January promise about independent senior school management was made, amalgamation carries grave near-term risks. If parents and pupils and the community at large, including more than a few Old Clavians, respond negatively to amalgamation, enrollments will decline, fee income will decrease, and endowments such as they are, whether for buildings or bursaries, will diminish.

Although the Bury Grammar Schools are far from penniless, their periodic reports to the Charity Commissioners make it clear that they have neither large financial reserves nor returns of any great consequence from invested legacy and endowment income. If enrollments decline and fee income diminishes, the prospect of trouble quickly looms.

In this sense, asking whether the Governors have a long-term objective, and whether their plan is to merge the senior schools, is asking the wrong question.

The Governors' standard time horizon for thinking about the future is twelve months. They have lived from year to year ever since independence was declared in 1976, with only occasional forays, almost always into the local community, to raise limited amounts of money over a short span for special purpose improvement projects.

They have never thought of the Bury Grammar Schools, which are by the way superb, as institutions with global reach and ambitions; schools that could call for support from across the country and across the world on a regular basis, to give children an even brighter future in a rapidly changing economy. And this even though they have hundreds of loyal, successful Old Clavians scattered across the globe who know that a Bury education transformed their lives and their fortunes.

Witness the statements made on video in Sydney, last May, at the Schools' first ever Australian reunion. The formation of the Henry Dunster Society was a step towards reframing the idea of Schools development, but much to my regret the Governors have had neither the courage nor the imagination to exploit it fully.

Perhaps a better question, then, is whether the Governors are going to be forced to grapple with amalgamation by the Headmaster's sudden and unexpected but not unprovoked departure.

That, I think, is a distinct possibility. The Headmaster is "out of school," on "leave of absence." The story the boys have been told is that he's "on a course." But he has not resigned. He has not been formally dismissed for cause. How could that be, when he is demonstrably the most successful and widely admired Head of BGSB since Bury became an independent school? The terms of his separation remain, then, to be agreed. He is taking good legal advice from multiple sources.

Old Clavians well-versed and experienced in English employment law advise me that his claim for what would in effect be damages is strong, and that means, of course, that the settlement, when it comes, could be generous. Bury cannot afford a generous settlement. If it must make one, the search will be on for major economies. And merging the senior schools could yield significant savings.

The other important but uncertain factor at work, here, is reputational damage. And that could cut the other way. To put it bluntly, how comfortable will Bury parents be sending their children to a school with Governors who have contrived, wittingly or unwittingly, the humiliation of their own headmaster?

Bury parents are beginning to ask themselves that question and should they decide that, say, Bolton School looks like a better option for their kids, then even if someone comes up with a plan for amalgamation, *and* the Governors approve it, *and* it can be implemented quickly, the long-term future of the Schools is not assured. It takes years,

even decades, to build the good reputation of a school but almost no time at all to destroy it. The opportunity to make amalgamation seem viable and attractive at BGS may, thus, effectively and perhaps ironically have been squandered by the mistake the Governors made in instituting a Principal scheme on the cheap, by simply pitting two good heads against each other and by failing to anticipate and monitor and control the mischief that would inevitably ensue.

The financial and reputational factors I have outlined are intertwined. If, for example, there is no agreement in the short-term on a separation agreement for the Headmaster and the clock starts ticking on a lengthy legal process, the reputational damage the Governors have already caused will be compounded.

There is some sentiment, especially among parents and recent School leavers, for the Governors to eat humble pie over their errors of judgment in creating their Principal scheme, and for the Headmaster then to be reinstated. I hope that happens. I think it should happen.

A more realistic assessment may be that the future of the Schools is now largely in the hands of the new Principal/Headmistress. She has a working majority on the recently reconstituted governing body. She has found a compliant Acting Headmaster to run the Boys' School, at least for a time, in the form of the Headmaster's previous deputy, who she advanced to be Head of Staff of both Schools, over the Headmaster's objections. Other issues were involved in the deterioration in working relationships among the principals at Bury that occurred between January and March, this year. We will not rehearse them, here.

Let's just say that Founders' Day is coming up. There will be reunions and dinners and many memories rekindled about what a great School with a great future BGS is and could be. It would be a great occasion for the Governors to let us all know whether they have a plan and what it is.

Geoffrey.

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Henry Dunster, 1609-1659
In Memoriam