

## OCHJS NEWS BULLETIN NO 29 : JUNE 2006

### PATRONS' DINNER in LONDON

On 4<sup>th</sup> May 2006 the Centre held a Patrons' Dinner at the Draper's Hall in London. The purpose was threefold: to greet existing and prospective supporters; to thank Sir Richard Greenbury for his service as Chairman of the Governors from 1996 to 2004; and to pay tribute to the memory of David Patterson as the Centre's founder president. Participants, numbering some 160, were unanimous in their appreciation of the evening – so much so, that the next such dinner is already provisionally booked for 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2007.

Sir Victor Blank read out a message from Oxford's Vice Chancellor, Dr John Hood. The President, Peter Oppenheimer, spoke *a propos* of the Centre's new constitutional designation as a Recognised Independent Centre of the University. (His remarks, on Oxford's corporate culture, will appear in the Centre's Annual Report for 2005-06). Dan Patterson, David's son and a newly appointed Governor, gave a hilarious introduction to one of the evening's two guest speakers, namely Stephen Fry, who paid tribute to David Patterson's achievements. The other guest speaker was Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC, and we have pleasure in reproducing here a slightly shortened version of his speech:

"One of the many pleasures of being DG is the many interactions I have with the public. In public meetings, phone-ins but above all in e-mails and letters. I don't suppose there are many people in UK who get so many thoughtful and well-expressed letters. Or so many splenetic or downright peculiar ones either.....

Try this heart-felt plea: *Dear Director-General, are there no longer dress regulations at the BBC? Like many others, I am appalled at the tieless habit that has suddenly invaded our screens. How scruffy the open-necked community appear! As another correspondent was kind enough to note: the middle-aged male neck is not a thing of beauty!*

Sometimes though the point is a rather more obscure one. *Dear Sir, There was a time when I would have liked to be King of Britain. Now I have come to realise that Prince Charles is more suitably qualified for the job. I hope you will communicate this fact to all concerned.....*

On the face of it, my world – the world of broadcasting and the BBC – has little in common with Yarnton. Much of broadcasting is about the ephemeral, time-sensitive information and entertainment – whereas the Oxford Centre of course is focused on scholarship of lasting value.

But there are three points of commonality I thought I'd touch on this evening.

The first is the remarkable Patterson family. Everyone here knows about David Patterson, whom I was lucky enough to meet a few times and whose vision and determination led to the foundation of the Yarnton Centre. But David's son, Dan, is a sometime colleague of mine – one of British television's most gifted comedy writers and producers. *Whose Line Is It Anyway* to *Mock The Week*. Those Pattersons turn up in all sorts of interesting places.

The second connection between Yarnton and the BBC is what you could call the spirit of open-minded enquiry.

If you wanted to boil the BBC's mission down to one word, I think that word would be enlightenment. We don't always succeed of course, but what we aim to do more than anything is to provide disinterested, open-minded insight and knowledge with which people can not just inform themselves but enrich and improve their lives. *News*. *Planet Earth*. *Beethoven Experience*. *Bleak House*. The BBC was founded with that ambition. At our best, it is still our goal.

Now I think that same spirit is also deeply present in Yarnton. An age of sharp, sectarian differences and loyalties where inter-faith connections are often troubled and the boundaries between faith and the secular world can be jagged and disputed. It was, I believe, always David's vision that Yarnton should be different – broad in its remit with a focus on secular and demotic literature and culture as well on the highest level of scholarship in the study of ancient texts and culture. Open to inter-faith and cross-disciplinary studies, and encouraging enquiry and dialogue. These qualities are more rare – and more precious today than they have ever been – and they've made Yarnton a kind of beacon.

The third common theme is a culture which focuses on the uncompromising pursuit of excellence. In the case of the BBC, of course we often fall short, but from Day 1, from John Reith's founding vision, excellence matters more than anything. Whether it's the work of Dan – or indeed of Stephen – refining and refining a comedy idea or comedy script (and there's nothing harder in any area of broadcasting), or its one of our camera teams spending week after week literally living in a cave in a remote corner of Pakistan in the hope of one shot of a snow-leopard, I have many thousands of colleagues who put creativity and excellence before everything else.

Again, my sense is that that is the spirit of Yarnton.

The Oxford Hebrew Centre is a very young institution. So is the BBC though it sometimes likes to pretend that it isn't. Earlier this week we opened an exhibition of our history, including the portraits of the people who have led the BBC from John Reith onwards. John's daughter Marista spoke about her father and her first memories of the early days of the BBC.

It's important that institutions understand and celebrate their beginnings and their founding purposes. It's also important that, in the light of those purposes, they lay plans for the future – again, over the past week, we've been talking about that in the BBC.

I believe that David Patterson and the many other people who have contributed to Yarnton's success in its first three or so decades have laid a superb foundation on which to build the future. And I'm sure that everyone here would want to join me in wishing those who have followed them and who are charged with taking Yarnton on to the next stage in its evolution every success in their endeavours. Thank you."

Mark Thompson

Peter Oppenheimer – President  
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