

Friday 3 December 2021

Dear Everyone

**Headlines:**



**Amber Threshold:** we have reached Amber threshold for COVID controls. This is a notice from the London Coronavirus Response Cell which is advisory on limiting some activities. Please look out for notices over the coming week that may be year group specific – no news is good news. In the meantime, we have increased such things as masks wearing, social distancing where practical and cleaning routines.

**Gifts:** Not to be a party pooper, if you are thinking about thanking staff with gifts this Christmas, please bear in mind that as part of our school's regard to the Bribery Act, any gifts above £25 in value have to be declared by the recipient to the Bursar. The PTA manages an equitable system to thank staff, and PTA reps have been in touch to explain how this works.



Never rush a roux. I like to add nutmeg ground with a micro plane at the outset, and cook through, stirring occasionally, taking my time. I like to use butter, vegans might use olive oil, and borrowing from Jamie Oliver's Veg cook book (a gift from a good friend), his vegan lasagne has wild mushrooms as part of the bechamel. The mushrooms dry fried to bring out the nuttiness.

I've no doubt Artificial Intelligence might be programmed to know all this, and to improve the timings, temperatures and volume of ingredients, and even at what point the different components should be added for optimal flavour. Poo to that, I'd say. Knowing something through experience, and making by hand, is far more enjoyable, and rewarding. To experience one's failures is part of the joy of getting it right, or at least getting it good enough to eat. One early morning bath time, *The Today* programme groaning in the background, my ears pricked up at the phrase, 'success teaches you nothing'. Failing is everything.

The game of chess is back in the news. Not headline material, but middle of paper commentary and a bit more of it since *The Queen's Gambit*. I'm a hopeless chess player, although I'm fascinated by its beauty. I can see about 3 moves ahead if I'm lucky. I have colleagues who, whether or not they are chess players, can see much farther than me in this kind of strategic puzzle. Those who engineer the timetable, for example, or can see the calendar of the year in their heads or make heat maps to indicate outcomes of COVID infection over time have a kind of mind that I greatly admire. Having that mix of skill, experience and know-how across the school is vital. I'm good at some things, not at others, and the older I get the more at ease I am with that. I'm surrounded by great people who can do stuff I can't. Trust in them goes a long way.

John Gapper in his commentary about modern chess and the pervasive nature of AI in the game, makes an interesting point, "a rookie with Stockfish [an open-source chess engine] on a smartphone knows a strong next move, even if not understanding why".

Not understanding why can be really debilitating. This next wave of uncertainty around COVID is a challenge we could all well do without. Things are on the move all the time, and it's not possible to be able to inform at the speed of change: so, we have to learn to be at ease with adaptation in the moment. It is easy to be critical of leaders in such circumstances. At the beginning of this week a letter, more or less a cut and paste from a government document, was sent to you all. It is known as the 'warn and inform' notice. It is hugely long, baffling to read and littered with grammatical problems, and a complete lack of definition for certain key ideas in the original.

For example, what is 'a close contact'? Our nurse researched what that meant and made a good job at clarifying the definition as best we could to add to the government's standard text.

As you might imagine, there were plenty of emails flying about among the SLT over last weekend to respond to the government's edicts and to figure out how and what we communicate and when. I am sympathetic to the people in Whitehall who are asked to draft guidance at such high-speed.

Thank you, again, for coming with us in all this.

We are taking a day-by-day approach, with everything under review. Meanwhile, inject some joie de vivre and, as I suggested to everyone in Monday's assembly, think about what we might eat. Pre-Prep children are keen on cake and chocolate ice cream, especially if they are served together.

'Tis the season. Advent has its spiced cookies popular in Germany and the Netherlands, and Hanukkah's festival of lights over these 8 days have wonderful things to tempt the palate, from latke (potato pancakes) and Matzo ball soup, to sufganiyot (jam donuts) and rugelach (sweet pastries). Years ago, in the interim between treading the boards and selling my soul in media land, I worked briefly in retail in Golders Green selling suits. Ours were cheaper wool/nylon mix at £99 than the ones in Cecil Gee next door. *They* had fine Italian wool suits– lovely – but many more shop lifters (therein lies another tale). From one of the fabulous delicatessens close by, the queues for pastries and cream cheese & smoked salmon bagels would wind down the road every Sunday. I've tried to find the place on GoogleMaps, but it seems to have gone, replaced by a chain coffee brand. Any idea what that place was?

I asked staff what their favourite festive food is. One teacher said she could eat her body weight in lebkuchen. I'm on her table!

Before the Christmas turkey arrived, some suggest that this game bird was introduced by Henry VIII, medieval England would eat boar and swan.

Here is Steeleye Span's Boar's Head carol. The sleeve photo is bang on trend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVwr5B6VQZk>

And this plaintive swansong in a recording by the Armenian National Philharmonic Orchestra and Academic Choir from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, sung from the point of view of a swan roasting on a spit.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3\\_y5Leoyrl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3_y5Leoyrl)

What will you eat this weekend?

Best wishes

Simon