

OA DAY: SATURDAY 2 MAY 2026
ADDRESS BY DAVID HACKING
'ALDRO 80 YEARS AGO'

I arrived as a new boy at Aldro in January 1946 – 80 years plus four months ago. I was seven years old.

It is a long time ago, but it seems to me, as it probably seems to others, here present, of my generation at Aldro, as if it was just 'yesterday'. I was allocated a bed in the junior dormitory MacFarlane Dormitory. I visited today MacFarlane Dormitory and while it was a new bed it was located in exactly the same position as it was in January 1946!

It was all quite 'scary' for me. It was the first time I'd ever slept away from home. Here I was sleeping in the same room as seven or eight other boys whom I did not know at all. There was, however, one comfort. We were allowed to bring from home our own rug or blanket to place on the bed. This was a big comfort for me.

The greatest comfort, however, was provided by the headmaster's wife, Audrey Hill who was a very kind, warm, motherly person. The Headmaster F.E. Hill, always known as Crispin Hill because he was born on St Crispin's Day – a name that he gave to his eldest son Crispin - who was later to become Headmaster of Aldro for 32 years.

FEH (as he was known) was rather shy but also kindly. I don't remember him ever using the cane.

After being at the school for about a year, I suddenly discovered another connection with the school. The two younger brothers of my grandmother – great uncles to me –

had been at Aldro at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. So my connection with the school goes back a 130 years!

Aldro was then in Eastbourne and the more wealthy industrialists in the north of England sent their sons to a range of prep schools situated in the healthy environment of the south coast of England.

On visiting Lancashire in the 1940s I remember so well the smog and filthy atmosphere. Everything became sooty. If you went down a coal mine, as I did, you would be blowing coal dust into your handkerchief for a good few days afterwards.

My grandmother had four brothers – three of whom were tragically killed in World War I. Two were killed in the Gallipoli campaign and within two weeks of one another. The youngest brother who was “Uncle Geoffrey” to me was at Aldro with his older brother Maurice. Maurice was not sent to Gallipoli like his three other brothers, because he was finishing his degree at Christ College in Cambridge. It was therefore my great uncle Geoffrey who was with his two elder brothers in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign from February 1915 to January 1916 and, as a very young Officer, had to bury his two elder brothers, both in the month of May 1915, in graves in the Gallipoli peninsular. Maurice sadly was killed in France in 1918 shortly before the end of hostilities. His name is on the Memorial Plaque at the entrance to Chapel. Both Maurice and Geoffrey, almost uniquely, were awarded the Military Cross, the highest award for gallantry short of the Victoria Cross. Something I am sure which was treated as a great honour among Old Aldronians. I am wearing the Gallipoli Association in remembrance.

After World War I “Uncle Geoffrey”, as I continued to call him, ran the family collieries in Lancashire until the Labour Government in 1947 nationalised the whole coal industry. He then later became Chairman of the North West Coal Board in the nationalised industry. He was also made Deputy Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff of Lancashire. It was a great thrill when he visited me at Aldro.

I saw him shortly before he died. He had serious blood circulation problems, and both legs had been amputated. He was in very poor shape but for the first time, as I remembered, he spoke of his awful experiences right in WW1. A cruel contrast to the eight-year-old boy arriving at Aldro, I'm sure, very nervously, in 1900.

To return to Aldro from 130 years ago to Aldro 80 years ago, Aldro now was located here in the substantial country house of Shackleford Place. As a country house, accommodating 40 or so young schoolboys, there were no real washing facilities, especially needed after games. There were just two small bathrooms on the first and second floors. It was a day or two before the mud on our knees was eventually washed off!

Somewhat brilliantly, Mr and Mrs Hill were able to find an assortment of locations for the classrooms. They ingeniously created in the Brew House, accommodation for Forms V and IV. Then the Classics form was placed in the Cider Press and there was another classroom in Russel Hall down the end of the long passage leading to the gate accessing Shackleford Village.

In the house itself the study of Sir Edgar Horne was made into a classroom and his billiard room became the school assembly room bearing on the wall above the fireplace a wooden carving citing Rudyard Kipling: *'If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same... you will be a man my son.'*

It took 17 vans from Eastbourne containing all the classroom desks and chairs, dormitory beds and all the other luggage of the school to be conveyed from Eastbourne to Shackleford. It all happened rather dramatically in the summer of 1940. The Nazi German army, after Dunkirk, rapidly conquered the whole of northern Europe and the guns of war could actually be heard at Aldro School in Eastbourne. By July 1940 there was a strong expectation of a German invasion through the south of England. In anticipation of this, the Government issued a decree for all the schools on the south

coast to be immediately vacated. By August Mr and Mrs Hill were in the hunt for alternative accommodation in safer areas of England. They specifically sought a new home for Aldro in Surrey and neighbouring counties.

There was another wartime Decree giving power for the Requisition of large properties to be used by army personnel and schools and other necessities of wartime. I have already mentioned the name of Sir Edgar Horne who had been Member of Parliament for Guilford and was Chairman of the big insurance company: Prudential Assurance. In Shackleford Place he had a very large home and, his wife having recently died, he had moved out of the main house into a nearby cottage. On meeting Mr and Mrs Hill and hearing of their needs to find a place for their school, he was simply delighted that a school was to occupy his home rather than an army barracks whom he felt would not care well for his property.

I am so glad to be speaking to you in the School Chapel. This was the first major building in Shackleford Place that Mr and Mrs Hill created. They used a barn placed alongside the stable yard and created this lovely chapel. They managed to get from the Aldro chapel in Eastbourne the stained-glass windows behind the altar. I think by then Mr and Mrs Hill were viewing Shackleford Place as the permanent home for Aldro School. Prior to the creation of this School Chapel, we had to make, every Sunday, crocodile styled walks to St Mary's Church in Shackleford, which seemed quite a long walk, or to go rather further, again in a crocodile formation to Peper Harow Church. I was present in 1949 when the Chapel was consecrated by the Bishop of Guildford.

From 1946 to 1951, when I left Aldro, the nation was going through very challenging times. There was, for example, strict rationing for all food and clothing. This placed a particular challenge on Mrs Hill, in charge of catering, in providing our food. At breakfast powdered eggs had to be used which was then served as a kind of wet junket. Tomato paste was placed on toast which we rather unkindly described as 'red lead'. We were also provided with cake on top of apple stew which we called, again unkindly, 'stodge'. We were all nourished... well sort of ...

As for the teaching, I don't think any Master had teaching qualifications but most of them were quite good at teaching. My form, Form V, was presided over by Miss Macmillan who was very strict and scary. The much more gentle Miss Harries presided over Form IV which was below Form V in the Brew House.

I remember Mr Scott who was quite elderly and had a drink and certainly a falling problem. He would turn up at class quite regularly with bruises and cuts on his face.

Then there was H.B ('Cheesy') Craft who had earlier been a Master at Aldro in Eastbourne and returned about halfway through my time here. He had a wonderful store of photographs of Aldro in earlier years, loved teaching Latin and generously, in the holidays, took us to shows in London. Then there was Major Whittaker, a retired army officer living in Shackleford, who was very good in getting the School Squads properly marching in military style. I remember so well him breaking the news of the commencement of the Korean war. Also to be remembered was Mr Tressler, who biked all the way from Charterhouse, to teach Classics.

I should also mention F.J.Earle as he was known. He was a Master at Aldro, before I arrived, from 1941 and left in 1949 to go to a London prep school. He fancied himself in ornithology. One Toswill decided he would try out Mr. Earle in this and hid behind a bush when Mr Earle was taking a class into the Wood, west of the school, which was then in the school's ownership. Toswill armed himself with a water style whistle which made a wobbling sound not dissimilar to a bird chirping. Hiding behind this bush, Toswill blew his water pistol. "Ah" said Mr Earle "that is an unusual bird song. It must be identified". It was thereafter called by us as the "Early Bird."

There was also on the teaching staff, Christopher Burton who, I think, was related to the Hill family. He was rather excitable and liked to show off his memory skills. He did this by dressing up in Arab clothing with a turban on his head and sat in front of

us breathing smoke from his nostrils. Strange all this was, he actually performed very well in remembering the list of words given to him. When he was not teaching, or blowing smoke out of his nostrils, he headed up the Photography Section of the School where, in an appropriate dark room, we were able to develop, in trays containing the right chemicals, the photographs which we had taken.

Then that was the Honourable Henry Maude, who I think was at Aldro filling in time before going to Oxford or Cambridge University. He took over the Book Binding Section of the School. In fact, we were blessed with a lot of activities for our 'free time'. Ping-pong was played competitively and chess was much played in our free time. The excitement was a local former Army Colonel, who was very good at chess, taking on, at the same time, five of us on the separate chess boards.

Above all there was DSW (Dennis White) who, in his spare time, was taking a degree at London University. He was a brilliant teacher and a brilliant 'producer' of school plays. There are plaques of remembrance for both H.B. Craft and D.S. White on the walls of chapel. At least I can see the plaque for H.B. Craft but not at present, the plaque for DSW!

Of the school plays I remember particularly the performance of 'Midsummer Night's Dream' in the summer of 1950 and 'Twelfth Night' in the summer of 1951. I had the role of Titania (with a large black wig) falling in love with an ass after some potion had been allegedly put into my eyes. In 'Twelfth Night' I had the role of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, the foil to Sir Toby Belch, very well played by Greig Barr who alas, living in France, is far from well. Both plays were performed outside in what is now the car park adjacent to, as now, the dining room.

In those days this was the former croquet lawn of Sir Edgar Horne. There was a large apple tree in the middle of the lawn and at each end a tall yew hedge before which were raised grass banks. It was exactly the same at each end of the lawn and provided a stage – well sort of – for the then school plays. The admiring parents sat on chairs with the

apple tree behind them facing one or the other of these two stages. Indelibly in my memory was the young Hugh Stephenson playing Puck in 'Midsummer Night's Dream'. Sadly now he is very immobile living in Brighton and unable to join us today. Skilfully Dennis White, as the talented producer of the play, got Hugh at the end of Midsummer Night's Dream, to walk close to the seated parents to speak the finale:

*“If we shadows have offended,
Think but this and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here,
While these visions did appear,
* * * *
We will make amends ere long:
Else the Puck a liar call:
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.”*

DDH 7.5.26