A School Built on Ethos

Ideas, assemblies and hard-won wisdom

James Handscombe

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Preface

Oswald Bastable says that he never reads prefaces and that there is not much point in writing things just for people to skip.[1] But there are some things that, whilst not crucial to the story, may be useful to know before you embark on the book. So, trusting that the sort of people who don't read prefaces are also the sort of people who are more interested in the action than in the author's philosophy, I shall attempt to set out here, in this semi-secret chapter, what kind of book this is.

[Pause whilst the author thinks.]

This is more difficult than I had thought, but here goes.

It is a history of a school told through the experiences of its principal using the lens of weekly assemblies to cast light on the ethos and idiom of the community, with the hope that the reader will be encouraged to think about the central role that ethos has in any organisation and, perhaps, absorb some of the author's ideas on the idioms that work well in an educational setting.

If that sounds rather vague then perhaps you will find this a rather vague book – although I hope not, because I feel quite passionate about the school whose story I am telling, and I absolutely believe that our ethos is both amazing in itself and impressive in how it has carried us from small beginnings to significant success.

What I can't do is tell you how to set up and run a successful school, because my thesis is that it is in the idiosyncrasy that a school triumphs, it is in being unusual that a community is created, and it is by thinking strategically about the way in which an organisation differs from the norm that a leader shapes its success. The chapters of this book are therefore to be thought of as stories or parables whose characters are not heroes to be copied, but totems to illustrate an idea and from whose mistakes and triumphs lessons can be learned. I thought about

1 E. Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), ch. 2. Available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/770.

trying to distil each chapter into a few bullet points and give you some 'brass tacks' to go away with, but even here I found myself pulling away from being too prescriptive. Trying to make the ideas precise and universal was like pinning mist to the wall, and so the 'Final Thoughts' sections are more impressionist – brass tacks painted by Monet (in my next book I will channel Dali and have surreal commentaries to terminate each chapter).

I hope, then, that you find the book interesting and inspiring. I hope that there are places where you think, 'What a great idea!' but also that you sometimes think, 'What on earth is he worrying about here?' or 'I'd never have fallen into making that mistake.' I hope that you will find it amusing (and I should warn you that the playful and possibly heavy-handedly literate tone of this preface is one that continues – I enjoy a good literary reference) and thought-provoking. I hope that you will learn something. I hope also that it will make you think about the power of assemblies: that they have a central role in a school, that they are the principal's set piece – the one moment in the ebb and flow of a school when everything is neatly ordered and everyone is, for a few minutes, listening, and that how they are conducted and what is said sets the tone for everything else.

Oswald says that chapters in which nothing happens are boring, so I should move swiftly on to Chapter 1 in which something does, but before I do, I should make an apology to all those who have worked to make Harris Westminster the place it is but I have failed to give enough credit in this book (particularly those from the Harris Federation and Westminster School who were involved before me and handed over a project that had received a great deal of thought and work and whose marks are etched deeply into the school psyche). Thank you.

Chapter 1

Beginning

One of the things that people want to know when they hear about Harris Westminster is how it got started – how do you go from a world in which there is no such thing to one in which 600 students are tucked away behind a bland Westminster façade every day? The idea sprang from an alignment of the interests of the Harris Federation and Westminster School, but the first steps out of discussion and into reality (or, at the very least, into a reality that included me) were taken when a principal was advertised for in the summer of 2013. The process of recruitment was what I would later recognise as very Harris Westminster – one day of pedagogy, processes and ruthless questioning in Crystal Palace followed by a grand interview in a fourteenth century chamber once used by royals to die in (Henry IV) or to become king (Henry V, not coincidentally). That evening was (coincidentally) the Speech Day at my school and so, having been offered the job and finding myself needing to invent an answer to that question of beginning, I sat on the stage in front of a large crowd of parents and students half listening to the guest speaker and half wondering how one could go about creating from scratch the school spirit that had built up over fifty years and now permeated the community that surrounded me.

As I sat there, I found myself reaching for words – words that would encapsulate and communicate, words on which I could build, words that would create direction and allow others (hopefully, eventually) to travel with me, words that could lie at the heart of a school ethos, words that would last. Inspired by the speaker, by the prize-winning students (whose names it was my job to read out) and by a very real sense of the enormity of the task, I settled on three words: ambition, perseverance and legacy. This tricolon summed up how I felt that evening and also (starting a tradition of investing words with multiple meanings) encapsulated the qualities I thought would be most valuable in potential students. For me sitting there that evening, ambition was an excuse to dream big, to think about creating the best school in

the country, to stoke the fires of self-confidence that had nudged me towards applying for the role in the first place. Legacy was the sense both that I should build for the future, create structures and traditions that could long outlive me, and that the success of the school would be seen in the mark its students made on the world and not just in their grades. And perseverance was the understanding that I had made some big promises and that keeping them would involve keeping on – I couldn't expect every day to be a celebration of brilliance such as the one I was part of that evening. And then I wanted students who would dream big, set themselves high targets and then, upon meeting them, set higher ones; I wanted students who would go out into the world and make a difference, make it better for others and not just more comfortable for themselves; and I wanted students who would keep going, who would get over setbacks, who would help with the building of the school (metaphorically rather than physically, I hoped – the interview panel had been rather cagey about the location we would be using).

Two things came out of that evening of reflection. The first is the tricolon that still lies at the heart of the school ethos and is proudly displayed on the wall of the entrance corridor: Ambition, Perseverance, Legacy; the second is the idea that Harris Westminster Sixth Form would be a school in which words had power, resounded, were invested with meaning and shared. This is a book about those words, and particularly about the words that were shared with the whole school in assemblies, standing at the front of St Margaret's Church or in the pulpit of Westminster Abbey, before hundreds of expectant faces – words that built and shared and communicated an ethos. In a chapter on beginnings, it is appropriate to begin with an assembly on the Harris Westminster approach to beginning. Not the very first Harris Westminster Assembly – I am afraid that has been lost in the sands of time. Two very early assemblies follow later in this chapter, but right now we begin *in medias res*. One of the things about which I hope to interest my readers is the development of the ethos from those three words to something that has the strength and depth to underpin an entire school. This assembly from three years in is a kind of foreshadowing for that development, a glimpse into the future that I would have loved to have had back in 2013.

You must imagine me stepping up to the pulpit of Westminster Abbey as the bongs of Big Ben fail to fade into the background (the bell having been silenced for repair), without notes (as will become apparent) and with a worried look on my face.

Beginning – 19 April 2017

I have left my notes in my office but it is nine o'clock, too late to go back. I will just begin. The beginning of summer, the beginning of a new term and a wonderful time to speak about beginnings, so I will speak to you about beginnings – or I would, but I don't know where to begin. The sages say to start at the very beginning – it is, apparently, a very good place to start. They go on to explain that when you read you begin with ABC, but they do not, unfortunately, specify how you begin when you deliver an assembly, and so I find myself in the right place, at the right time, needing to start but not knowing where or how.

Maybe I should begin by telling you of the time I explained mechanics and purpose to the principal of Harris Battersea. He listened attentively and then said, 'Yes – excellent. Of course, purpose is just another kind of mechanics.' That is an interesting comment and one that is worth developing, but I know how I plan to end this assembly and I am not sure how to get there from that beginning.

I plan to end by quoting four lines from the poem on the whiteboard in my office and so maybe I should begin with some poetry. Maybe I should update you on my progress towards memorising six poems this year, but I have received criticism from one of your number that my assemblies tend to emphasise literature at the expense of maths and science; of course, I have also received criticism that my Twitter feed fetishises mathematics, so perhaps I can't win. I value all of these areas of learning, but an assembly is fundamentally a wordy creation and it is, therefore, understandable, I hope, that I reach for the geniuses of language in order to felicitate my delivery.

Perhaps, however, and in light of the two poetry-heavy assemblies I have given recently, I should spare you too much this morning and instead begin with the information that on 13 March 1781, William Herschel discovered the planet Uranus – the first planet to be discovered by telescope. But Herschel is buried in Slough of all places and maybe I should reach for one of those memorialised

in this building – Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovel, for example. I suspect I could develop an excellent naval analogy, but too many of you will not have admired his tomb and it is hidden on the south aisle.

So, maybe I should begin with you. I could start by congratulating you on your house drama, by expressing my delight at being able to be part of that celebration of your thespian talents and by linking that celebration to this term and explaining that the exams are to your studies as the opening night is to weeks of rehearsals, and that therefore, if you have studied correctly, exams, as much as the end of exams, are a celebration. That would make this week's Year 13 mocks a dress rehearsal and I don't want to give the impression that I think of exams as a bit of fun. I know exams are not fun – they are deadly serious – but that doesn't stop them from being a celebration of how clever you are.

I don't know how to begin and now I have wittered away 500 words, so maybe I should take a deep breath, clear my decks and get started.

I love the idea of clearing my decks – a nautical term for the beginning of a combat that resonates pleasingly with the scholarly act of clearing my desk – and so, with a clear desk and cleared decks, I shall leap into a pre-prepared paragraph on the discovery of Neptune: something I know well and feel confident about and which will illuminate my main point once I get to it. After the discovery of Uranus, the new planet was watched carefully by astronomers who discovered that it wobbled in its orbit from what would be expected based on the laws of gravity. From this, two astronomers – John Couch Adams and Urbain Le Verrier – deduced that there must be another planet out there and were able to use mathematics to calculate its location. Simultaneously, or almost so, they pointed at an area of sky and said, 'Look there.' Unfortunately, there the similarities end because as students differ so do scientists, and John Couch Adams was careless in his mechanics, sloppy in his workings and messy in his laying out, whilst Urbain Le Verrier was slightly slower but careful and accurate. Adams pointed first but Le Verrier pointed to where Neptune actually was. The British establishment claimed for many years therefore that they should share the glory, but unfortunately this is not how an exam board would see it and nor, now, does the international community. The glory belongs to Le Verrier alone. They both had excellent purpose in understanding that there was a planet out there, but Le Verrier's mechanics were better.

Le Verrier was excited by this and went on to calculate that Mercury's orbit was also wobbly. He therefore predicted another planet, Vulcan, between the sun and Mercury. Sadly, no matter how carefully they looked (and after his success with Neptune they looked very carefully), nobody could find a planet where he was pointing. This was due to the disappointing fact that there was no planet there. Le Verrier's mechanics were fine again – the orbit was wobbly – but his purpose let him down because he didn't know about general relativity (living, as he did, considerably before Einstein). General relativity explains many things, one of which is the wobbliness of Mercury's orbit.

And so we hook into the question of whether purpose and mechanics are the same thing: can you learn to do all of your studies by rote? Could a computer be programmed to pass A levels? Well, I suspect it could: I suspect that at a basic C-grade level the questions are routine, the explanations required are straightforward and most of the essays needed could be memorised, but I think that to get full marks, to get an A*, you need to properly understand, you need to be able to think around the question, you need to be able to bring something interesting and original to the analysis. There is no excuse, however, for missing out on those C-grade marks in the manner of John Couch Adams: if the examiners are willing to give you marks for memorising quotes or formulae or dates or essay structures or graphs or techniques, then you should just memorise them. If I can memorise the poems that go on my wall, then you can memorise the things you need to know for your exams. And so we return to the poem currently on my whiteboard.

It is called 'Invictus' and was written by William Ernest Henley. The last stanza goes like this:

It matters not how strait the gate,

How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate,

I am the captain of my soul.

Right now you are masters of your fate as well as captains of your souls, but time is sweeping you on and exams are a celebration of how clever you are, whether you like it or not. Every mark you gain is a testament to the hours of work you have put in, and every one you should have gained but don't is a sad reflection on your study habits: first nights tend to show up those who haven't learned their lines. And so we get back to the question of how should one

begin on a task that seems unmanageably large, where the stakes are scarily high and where there is no obvious starting point. I have a neatly enumerated list of tips on how to begin, garnered from my experience, in this assembly on beginnings. Listen up – you all have exams this term.

- Clear your decks and your desk. You can't work in the middle of a mess and you can't begin with something hanging over you. Do the jobs you have been putting off – throw out the rubbish that you neither know to be useful nor believe to be beautiful – and that is a quote from the third William of the day – William Morris.[1]
- Get rid of distractions. Cancel social engagements, put the Xbox in the attic, change your Snapchat password and forget the new one, tell your friends you will see them in a couple of months. You are the captain of your soul, and the admiral will remind you that a distracted captain crashes the ship.
- Balance mechanics and purpose but know that the quick wins are all mechanics – memorise important things, make as much as you can into a routine you can follow, learn the patterns. This is why, by the way, Year 12s need to be digging as deeply into the purpose of their subjects as they can now: by this time next year it will be too late to get your head round the really hard ideas. Treating purpose like mechanics will get you a C but no further.
- Learn drop-ins. Like the piece on the discovery of Neptune, you can memorise a paragraph or a proof that you can then drop into an answer and gain some marks for a perfectly constructed section because you haven't had to work it out on the day. In fact, you will have guessed that this whole assembly was constructed off site and dropped into place this morning.
- And, finally, just begin. It is easy to put off getting started, to dither, to vacillate, to squander time and to end up being a hostage to fortune, but your ambition is wedged into one of the stones of the abbey. You

1 W. Morris, 'The Beauty of Life' (lecture delivered at the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, 19 February 1880). In *Hopes & Fears for Art: Five Lectures* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919). Available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3773.

know where you want to end up and you can get there if you start from here – you are the master of your fate.

By 2017, the ethos was up and running, the students had joined the school and so it was possible to have an assembly that played a little with the format (I usually read from a prepared script but, sometimes, as on this occasion, I indulge the urge to show off and commit it to memory). It was also possible to play with the jargon of the school: mechanics, purpose and celebration are all words that we have adopted and developed. At its heart, though, this assembly is a development of the thread that started at the Speech Day in 2013: words being used to educate, amuse and intrigue; words being used to model, support learning and enable the students to get better, to develop the skills that would bring them closer to their ambition.

Back to the beginning, though, and what happened next: what do you do when the euphoria of being appointed to your dream job dies down and you find yourself with a three-word ethos and little else to build a school upon? Obviously, my 2017 self would have cleared my desk, but in 2013 I hadn't yet come across this excellent piece of advice, and, anyway, I was still employed in my previous school until 1 January 2014 and in the meantime there were plans to be made and students to recruit on top of my existing job.

I spent the summer pondering the kind of school I wanted to create – a place of learning, a sanctuary from ignorance but also a place that would send its graduates out ready to face and change the world. The idea of changing the world, of developing a generation of young people whose diversity, intelligence and passion would create a shift in the social structures of the nation (which, to this day, sounds overblown as an ambition), was in my thinking throughout those months, and it nearly became the tagline: 'Ambition, perseverance, legacy: changing the world'.

A little reflection showed that this sounded more like voluntary service and less like the academic sixth form I was hoping to create. Our actual unofficial motto came about through an interview I gave for the

Evening Standard in the autumn.[2] This was the first time I had spoken to a newspaper journalist since, I think, I was 16 and in the local press for having a notable collection of GCSEs. Once again, the Harris and Westminster teams had come together to create the opportunity: the Harris communication experts from the mysteriously named 8hwe had set up the interview and it took place in the headmaster's study at Westminster School. By this point I had gone past the point of no return; there was no mileage in being daunted – the entire experience was beyond anything I had done before. My comfort zone was a dot on the distant horizon, and so I smiled broadly and talked enthusiastically about the wonderful institution we were building.

That interview helped me to understand the 'we' in that last phrase: this wasn't just my school, my idea, my impossible commitment, my inevitable crashing downfall when the impossibility was realised; it was a team with contributions and commitments from the Harris Federation and Westminster School (neither of which are in the business of inevitable crashing downfalls). I also saw that I was bringing something to that partnership, that my experience of being an academic high-flyer in a state school, of being a comprehensive kid at Oxford, of being an Oxford graduate teaching in state schools would be important if we were to pull this off.

For a few days after the publication of the article, friends and relatives would tell me that they had seen it. Generally, they were positive about how I had come across but the recurring theme in their comments was, 'You do say "learning is amazing" a lot.' This was news to me – I had certainly never caught myself doing so (although it was, and remains, a thesis with which I agree). I reread the article and, in a short piece with even less quoted text, it did, indeed, turn out that I had repeated that phrase. Either embrace your idiosyncrasies or be forever ashamed of them goes the ancient proverb (or it would if I were in charge of creating ancient proverbs), and so I decided that I would say 'learning is amazing' a lot and let whoever wanted laugh. 'Ambition, perseverance, legacy: learning is amazing' would be the

2 A. Davis, 'State Sixth Forms Aren't Inspiring Pupils, Says New Academy Head', *Evening Standard* (16 October 2013). Available at: https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/state-sixth-forms-aren-t-inspiring-pupils-says-new-academy-head-8883485.html.

ethos and tagline with which I would try to win the hearts (and, more importantly, minds) of London's teenagers.

Shortly after the *Evening Standard* interview we held our launch event for some of those teenagers, and again the partnership had pulled out the stops to impress (looking back, this may have been to impress me as much as the prospective students). The event was at the House of Lords in one of their reception rooms. Students from 11–16 schools and Harris academies had been invited, and lined up to speak were the headmaster of Westminster, Boris Johnson (then mayor of London) and the principal designate of Harris Westminster Sixth Form (me). We were all herded into this amazing venue, stunned by the architecture, charmed by the history and symbolism, intimidated by the airport-style security and then stood about nervously making conversation. I did my best to give the impression of a nerveless and consummate party-goer for whom this kind of affair was second nature – and, to put the students at ease, to find out something about them, to commit their names to memory (Thomas, Chloe, Laura and Daniella are still lodged there years later). My success (or otherwise) in this goal is unrecorded.

Then the time for speeches could be delayed no longer – we had been waiting for Boris to kick us off but he had been caught up in something more pressing than our launch. Stephen Spurr, the head of Westminster, started with the importance of academic qualifications and his commitment to the partnership, and then it was me (I was meant to be the last of the three speakers; it turned out that I was to be last of two). I talked about the environment Harris Westminster would provide, the culture, the opportunities, and then I said, 'But the best thing about this school is not the amazing subject specialists who will teach you, not the library of books you can get lost in, not the lectures, guest speakers, visitors and trips …' *Bang!* The door behind me was flung open and slammed into the oak-panelled wall. 'Oh, oh, I'm sorry, am I late?' bellowed the tousle-haired celebrity. I cleared my throat, '… not the support of the mayor of London. No, the best thing about this school is you: amazing young people coming together from all over the city to learn together, here at the centre of things.'

The amazing location of the school, in central Westminster, is an important component of the provision. We are hugely fortunate to

be located where we are (in a building that was kept top secret for many months: when our first cohort of students came to take their entrance exams and we walked them over to Methodist Central Hall so I could talk to them – the first opportunity I had to do so with the whole group together – all I could say was that it was within a stone's throw of where they sat, and then ask them not to throw stones at it). This is a privilege that we take advantage of – and I think that any school which doesn't take advantage of all their advantages is missing a trick – and one for which I am grateful to the team who worked on the project (and to the Department for Education for finally signing off on the cost of the central London building – the £45 million price tag appears to be the going rate for real estate on Tothill Street, but it made the front pages of the newspapers).

The amazing location and the opportunities that it offered was also an idea that was picked up by Nic Amy in one of our earliest assemblies.

Stop and Wonder – 17 September 2014

An assembly by Nic Amy

It is nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning. In this Remembrance term, I want you to think back over the last few weeks and to remember. It is nine o'clock on *this* Wednesday morning. Exactly one week ago today we were sitting on coaches, just outside the abbey, ready to embark on a remarkable journey to Cambridge. Exactly two weeks ago today we were all arriving at Steel House for the very first day of your brand new school. Exactly four weeks ago was the eve of GCSE results. The day before you opened that envelope or travelled into your old school for one final time to unfold the results of your hard work over the last two years.

What do you remember of those last four weeks? You have moved from uncertainty about your futures to the normality and routine of sixth-form life in four short weeks. It has passed so incredibly quickly. So will the next four and then it will be half-term and you will be almost a quarter of your way through Year 12. *Tempus fugit*. Time flies. What will you remember of that first half-term? How do you make sure that this Remembrance term is a term to remember? How do you capture the key moments? How will this fleeting

Schooling is more than gaining qualifications, learning is more than exams, and academic success comes more readily to those who have grasped these ideas.

Harris Westminster Sixth Form has had enormous success in providing an academic education for students of all socio-economic backgrounds. This success is grounded in the development of a scholarly ethos that guides students and staff into successful habits – driven by a clear vision for the community and communicated through everything that the school says and does.

In *A School Built on Ethos*, founding principal James Handscombe takes readers through the school's development and illustrates its journey by sharing a selection of the assemblies that have underpinned and elucidated its ethos.

In doing so he offers guidance on how such a staple of school life can be used to shape a community, and shares transferable lessons on how assemblies can be planned and delivered effectively.

Suitable for both established and aspiring school leaders, especially those who are thinking about the kind of school they would like to run and how they can shape it.

This inspirational book offers a model of how school leadership enriched by a deeply human hinterland can transform students, teachers and a community.

Anne Watson, Professor Emeritus, Department of Education, University of Oxford

An honest, touching and inspirational tale with pearls of wisdom and useful practical ideas.

Katharine Birbalsingh, Head Teacher, Michaela Community School

Handscombe is the Montaigne of education writers. His book is a beautifully written smorgasbord; a feast of thought.

David Didau, Senior Lead Practitioner for English,
Ormiston Academies Trust, and author of *Making Kids Cleverer*

A School Built on Ethos offers an insight into the framework that differentiates this school and enables it to achieve all it does.

Janine Glasenberg, Head of EMEA Graduate Recruiting, Goldman Sachs

The assemblies beautifully illustrate the points made in each section of the book and enable you to see the author who walks his talk on a daily basis. I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

Mark Enser, Head of Geography and Research Lead, Heathfield Community College

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James Handscombe studied mathematics at Oxford and Harvard before training to be a teacher. He worked in schools in south Wales, Australia and south-east London before becoming the founding principal of Harris Westminster Sixth Form in 2014. He occasionally gets invited to speak at conferences and sometimes finds time to write things – mostly articles for the *TES* and letters to the editor of *The Times*, but he's also written for *Schools Week* and *The Spectator*'s *Coffee House* blog.

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