



OBITUARY: KIM TAYLOR

KIM TAYLOR 1922-2013

*Headmaster of Sevenoaks School (1954-68)
Old Sennockian and former Governor.*

Leonard Clive Taylor was born in Calcutta under the Raj. His father owned an advertising agency. His mother, his father's young, second wife, had, until her marriage, performed in a troupe of travelling entertainers. As was common, his parents sent their son to boarding school in England at the age of six; he rarely saw them thereafter. His father died when Kim was only nine. School became Kim's home, its values his.

Kim joined Sevenoaks aged ten, beginning a lifelong association with the school. Clever, strong and a good sportsman, he became School Captain, as well as Captain of Boxing and Rugby. At the outbreak of the Second World War, aged 17, he was sent back to India, where he began teaching at St Paul's School, Darjeeling. In 1942 he was commissioned into the Indian Army and survived the siege of Akyab before spending the rest of the war gathering intelligence about the Japanese army. After demobilisation Kim returned to England and gained a first class degree in History and a boxing 'blue' at New College, Oxford. He spent a further year studying Psychology at the University of Chicago, and while in America, met his wife, Suzanne Dufault, who would contribute to his success as a schoolmaster and headmaster.

Kim was Head of History at Repton when he was invited by his former headmaster to succeed him at Sevenoaks. Kim was then the youngest

headmaster of a public school. He transformed Sevenoaks, which flourished under his energetic leadership. His ideas, described in the book *Experiments in Education at Sevenoaks* (1965), have taken root so widely that it is easy to forget their originality. Beyond Sevenoaks, Kim was one of the founding members of the committee for VSO.

After 14 years, Kim left Sevenoaks to become director of the Nuffield Foundation's Resources for Learning project. His next role took him to the Centre for Educational Resources and Innovation in Paris; he took a particular interest in Portugal and was appointed a Commander of the Order of Prince Henry the Navigator for his work there. After five years at the Independent Broadcasting Authority as Head of Educational Programming, Kim ended his career as Director of the Gulbenkian Foundation. Meanwhile, he became a Governor of Sevenoaks School in 1983.

In retirement, Kim cared devotedly for Suzanne during her long illness, moving to Chichester after her death. The last eight years of his life were happy; he received frequent visits from his children, grandchildren, neighbours and friends, welcomed visitors to the cathedral as a magisterially robed door-keeper, maintained a wide correspondence and spent many hours reading (pencil in hand to take notes) in an armchair by the front window of his house. It was there that, aged nearly 91 and in full possession of his faculties, he died of heart failure while asleep. Among the many friends who wrote letters of condolence, one described him as 'the most complete man I ever met'.

Adam Taylor (OS 1972)

Kim and Sue Taylor with Sevenoaks prefects, 1955

Left to right: Top row: Michael Morelle. Row 2: Robin Southby, David Greene.

Row 3: Peter Ridout, Charles Hopkins, Colin Richardson, Jeremy Clifford.

Bottom row: David Stuart-Smith, Roger Huddleston, Michael Constable, Kim Taylor, Sue Taylor.

The 11th prefect, Peter Gardner, was not present for the photograph.



Kim Taylor
with (left) James Higgs Walker,
Headmaster 1925-54,
and (right) Geoffrey Garrod,
Headmaster 1919-25

KIM TAYLOR AND SEVENOAKS SCHOOL

Kim Taylor's life was, in the fullest sense, extraordinary. His achievements stretched from Calcutta to Chichester by way of Sevenoaks, Darjeeling, Oxford, Chicago, Paris and Lisbon. In their midst, however, lay a deep love of Sevenoaks School, of whose reputation over the last 60 years he was the true creator. As Headmaster and Governor, he balanced a deep knowledge of the school's past with the imagination and ambition to create what it has become.

I first met Kim in 1955 in his large study in Old School. Young, informal, energetic and immensely fluent, his intellectual and moral stature was obvious. In November 1956, I heard him speak to the school in Johnson Hall on the simultaneous crises in Budapest and Suez. How many Heads today would or could do likewise? In a Reithian manner, he was prepared to tell us that beyond our teenage concerns were things we should care about. He made a point of teaching all the new boys in their first year in the school, a memorable experience as he read Arthur Miller in a range of American accents. Later, in the Sixth Form, Kim inspirationally taught us the English Reformation:

we visited the wool churches of East Anglia, the Carmelite Monastery in Aylesford, read *The Man on a Donkey*, and saw one of the first performances of *A Man for All Seasons*; one of our last conversations was about Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. And despite, as we noted, a passing physical resemblance to the young Henry VIII, he assured us that 'Henry was not a very nice man!' He had a wonderful ability to sum up the famous: 'Lenin was not the sort of chap you would want on your cricket team.' What struck us was his intellectual energy, his way of making ideas exciting and necessary; making us read, making us think. And around him Kim gathered exceptional teachers whose intelligence and love of their subjects made university study often anticlimactic.

The Report of HM Inspectors in 1960 had spoken of a 'gifted Headmaster [whose leadership] can only be called distinguished'. It noted that he was an exceptionally fecund innovator whose ideas were not sparks that fizzled and died: as it went on to say, 'The Headmaster knows how to combine three virtues that are not always found together: lucid long term planning, careful working out in detail, and, most important of all, a profound concern for the individual.' Looking back it is remarkable how limited the facilities of the school then were: new science laboratories and a Dining Hall were added but the keys to the outstanding education Sevenoaks gave were people and ideas. Many of his experiments have become part of the mainstream of British education and indeed the extent of their sheer originality has perhaps been hidden by time. He created the 3L French Exchange with St Martin in Pontoise, an early and ambitious experiment in language learning; a combined humanities course – PEB (Predicament, Experience, Belief – Kim had a love of slightly offbeat names) – that linked History, Geography and Religious Studies; Vista, the Technical Activities Centre, where boys learnt engineering and scientific principles through direct experiments and making models; and the International Centre in 1962, an enduring pioneer experiment in international education. It is difficult to pick out the most significant innovation but the Voluntary Service Unit has perhaps the best claim.



Prefects of 1939,
with Kim Taylor front left

An article in *New Society* in October 1965 noted that 'The idea of weaving the school into the life of the community is one of the headmaster's constant preoccupations' and that VSU at Sevenoaks was 'distinguished by its scale and the care with which it is planned'.

It is difficult to convey the intellectual excitement that Kim generated. For all of us who were taught by him or taught under him there was a sense that ideas and education matter greatly. And not just as ideas to be played with in some ivory tower but to be translated into practical reality: I remember Kim explaining the difference between Aristotle's realism and what he termed Plato's 'dotty proposals in *The Republic*'. If occasionally Kim became carried away by his enthusiasms, Sue

Taylor, sharing his intelligence and practicality, would bring him back to earth. The 1960 Report indeed refers to the Headmaster's 'gifted wife'. One evening, after a very long staff meeting at which Kim was in full stride and seemed likely to continue for some while, the door opened to the Common Room and in came Sue with a small child: 'Come home, papa...'

Kim was, I believe, the greatest Headmaster of the middle years of the last century. He was the *fons et origo* of Sevenoaks' present reputation but beyond his immense contribution to the school his deepest influence was on the lives of so many of us. He showed what a full life, what generosity of intellect and spirit, could mean.

John Guyatt OS, Undermaster 1986-96