

## Bertie Mawer [1926-2020]



Compiling this obituary has been a huge privilege. It has been a fascinating experience reading through the many glowing tributes to Bertie from past members of staff and former pupils at King Edward's School Witley. All the contributors had a wealth of positive memories, and phrases which encapsulated their response to Bertie (as one of the longest serving members of Staff) including, "very much a one-off; admired and revered by those he had taught and held in great esteem and affection by his former colleagues"; "He was a lovely, generous minded man with a good sense of humour and much respected"; "I could not imagine KESW without Bertie"; "Bertie WAS KESW"; and "He was my Mr. Chips". All paid tribute to his wide-ranging talents, his great sense of fun, but above all to his total dedication to the School, which continued well after he retired in 1986.

From a teacher's perspective, Bertie was more than just a colleague, he was an extremely supportive friend, especially to new members of staff. One such tells of the time when, having to make a massive detour returning to School, she had to phone the School Office and plead for someone to step in and take her first lesson. Arriving at the top of North Side, completely out of breath she was startled to find the Senior Master standing magisterially over her extremely well-behaved class! Another colleague remembers Bertie taking Junior Chapel and having the staff and pupils in stitches with recitations from Winnie the Pooh – the moral of the story was then spelt out, humorously and memorably! He had a big voice when needed: another colleague remembers

that, during the Falklands war, Bertie boomed across the quad to him, "We've got Goose Green!" He was a wonderful raconteur with a huge fund of stories, and he had an actor's ability to bring anything he said to life.

Bertie was a talented and versatile teacher whose warm personality endeared him to his classes. He always had a genuine concern for the less able who might be falling behind. He was extremely patient with the struggling, but could be severe towards those he felt were giving less than their best.

The following account, written by a pupil from the early 1960s, gives a flavour of Bertie's wonderful ability to engage with and enthuse his pupils. "I could recount many anecdotes about Bertie, his kindness, teaching skills and passion for music but the one event that stands out above others was a school visit to Maiden Castle, Dorset when I was a junior:

As we neared the awe-inspiring ancient monument, Bertie leapt out of his coach seat and vividly described the building of the castle and its eventual demise at the hands of the Romans. We were quickly captivated by his ability to create a picture of life at the castle. After a welcome packed lunch, Bertie announced we would walk right around the top of the ramparts and then we would have a surprise. Bertie liked giving his students surprises! During our walk, Bertie occasionally halted to expound on some feature and eventually we returned to the castle entrance.

"What about our surprise?" came a chorus of voices.

Bertie then explained that we were to imagine that we were Roman soldiers and experience the emotions and physical difficulties of climbing the ramparts to attack the wild and shouting enemy. We assembled at the bottom of a ditch and looked up at the now even steeper embankments. Bertie set the scene and then announced that we were to charge up to the top as quickly as possible. We thought it would be easy, and with Bertie rousing us on and up, we stormed the ramparts, but few of us reached the top without stopping for breath due to exhaustion."

Bertie was also a talented sportsman, playing and coaching both cricket and soccer. Together with his predecessor as Senior Master, Bill Reynolds (also a talented sportsman) he played cricket for the local club at Brook, and once he opened the bowling with the future England captain Bob Willis (then a Surrey University student). Bertie and Bill were a formidable pairing when playing for the OWs' team against the School 1<sup>st</sup> XI.

He wrote the history of King Edward's School "Bridewell to Witley" (Ian Allan), published in 2000. He was uniquely qualified to do so as he joined the School, when it was very small; only boys; and inhabiting the less than salubrious old workhouse down the road in Hambledon, its original building in Wormley having been requisitioned by the Navy for the development of naval radar during WWII. After the School returned to its former home it proceeded to grow out of all recognition, under the leadership of two dynamic and visionary

Headmasters. Some of the 'old' staff found this rapid and radical transition difficult, but Bertie's enthusiasm took full advantage of the new opportunities. The School grew numerically; became co-educational (one of the first independent schools to do so); and transitioned from being a 'trade school' to one with sound academic credentials. Soon there would be the magnificent Charter Hall, the Countess of Munster Music School, and entirely new and innovative co-educational boarding houses built on Upper and Lower Side.

Shortly after the move to Wormley, Bertie founded the School library, and then helped to plan the innovative new Gerald Coke library, becoming the Master in Charge. He initiated the House Music competition and helped develop the School orchestra from 'obviously amateur' to one with an extremely high standard, always playing the trombone with self-deprecating flair. He had a fine, flexible singing voice and could sing either tenor or bass in the School choir. Perhaps his most memorable roles were in School productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas where he excelled in the comical authority roles (think Poo Bah!). His strength and depth of his musical talent had been clearly demonstrated when he wrote and produced "The Masque of Bridewell" to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Royal Hospital's foundation in 1553.

There was delight and genuine rejoicing throughout the school when the seemingly supremely contented bachelor announced that he was to marry Dr. Rosemary Page who was working as a local GP. They married on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1964 and went on to have two sons, Nicholas in 1967 and Charles in 1969. Rosemary was to prove the perfect companion and collaborator, aiding Bertie in all his many initiatives, and becoming a beloved member of the school community.

Bertie was the Chair of the School's Arts Society for many years and was thus instrumental in broadening the cultural and artistic awareness of the staff and children. In 1997 Bertie helped to launch the "Vivartis Arts Festival" which attracted much local talent to the school.

One of Bertie's abiding passions was the support of disadvantaged children, echoing the founding principle of the School back in 1553. To that end he became increasingly involved in schemes to provide more bursaries. He proved to be an energetic and skillful fund-raiser. His retirement gift to the School was the first of many first-class fundraising concerts. Because of their success he was invited to be Honorary Fundraiser for KESW after he retired, which he did with considerable success, raising the money for both the Sports Hall, as well as many bursaries. He was also a trustee of the Education Trust and one of the first Bridewell Fellows.

In retirement, Bertie continued to pour himself into the life of the School through his work for the Old Witleians. He helped to establish a proper Office for this continuing work, edited the Old Witleian magazine, and had an

encyclopaedic knowledge of the whereabouts and activities of OWs, often ringing me up to share good news about the career of an OW.

The School Governors showed their gratitude for his commitment and support of the School by nominating him for the Freedom of the City of London, and The Guild of Freeman; naming a room in the School after him; and having his portrait painted by Jane Allison. She captured him with that well-loved broad, beaming smile!

Outside School activities included membership of a small chamber choir, and becoming a founding member of Opera Omnibus, which later became Opera South. He sang in over 30 operas with the company, appearing on stage into his 80s. He had the idea of commissioning an opera for children to perform from the local composer William Godfree – “Child Roland”.

After discovering operetta while serving in Army Education in Germany in 1947, he developed a lifelong love affair with everything Austrian. Holidays in the Alps; Vienna for the Ball Season, Bad Ischl for the Lehar festival, and regular ‘Stammtisch’ gatherings with the Anglo-Austrian society. He also joined the prestigious Johann Strauss Society.

Also in retirement he enjoyed trips with Wildlife Travel holidays and became the best lookout for new wildflowers! (In part due to his inability to sit still!)

**Albert Edwin Mawer** – always known by everybody as Bertie – was born in Lincoln on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1926. His father is described on his birth certificate as a labourer and, during the ensuing Great Depression, he was out of regular work for nearly 3 years. Bertie was influenced by the family’s relative poverty and remained generous to a fault all his life. He was always deeply caring for the unfortunate, especially those who came to King Edward’s School needing the support of bursaries.

He was educated at Lincoln School, where, aged 7, while singing in the choir of St. Peter’s, Eastgate, he developed his abiding love of music. He gained his teacher’s diploma at Bede College, Durham University. He was called up for National Service in 1947, initially, and mistakenly, into the Bath and Mobile Laundry unit (of which posting he developed a fund of humorous stories), before being sent to his correct posting in the Army Education Corps stationed at the College of the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR) in Göttingen. He joined KESW in 1949, and taught History and English. He entered the first pupils into the national examination system for English. He was Edward House Master for 27 years and was then appointed Senior Master (Deputy Headmaster). His reputation was as a brilliant and inspiring teacher, and in particular for his compassion for the children who perhaps other teachers struggled to engage. The many visits from Old Witleians over the decades to

Fernside Cottage are a tribute to his formative role in so many lives and the welcome they received from Bertie and Rosemary.

He is survived by his wife Rosemary, two sons, Nicholas and Charles, and four grandchildren, Lizzie, Katie, Kit and Jem.

When I am forgotten, as I shall be,  
And sleep in dull cold marble where no mention  
Of me more must be heard of, say I TAUGHT THEE...

*The speaker in this quotation is the recently condemned Cardinal Wolsey, speaking to Thomas Cromwell. Shakespeare: Henry VIII, Act III, Scene 2.*

