

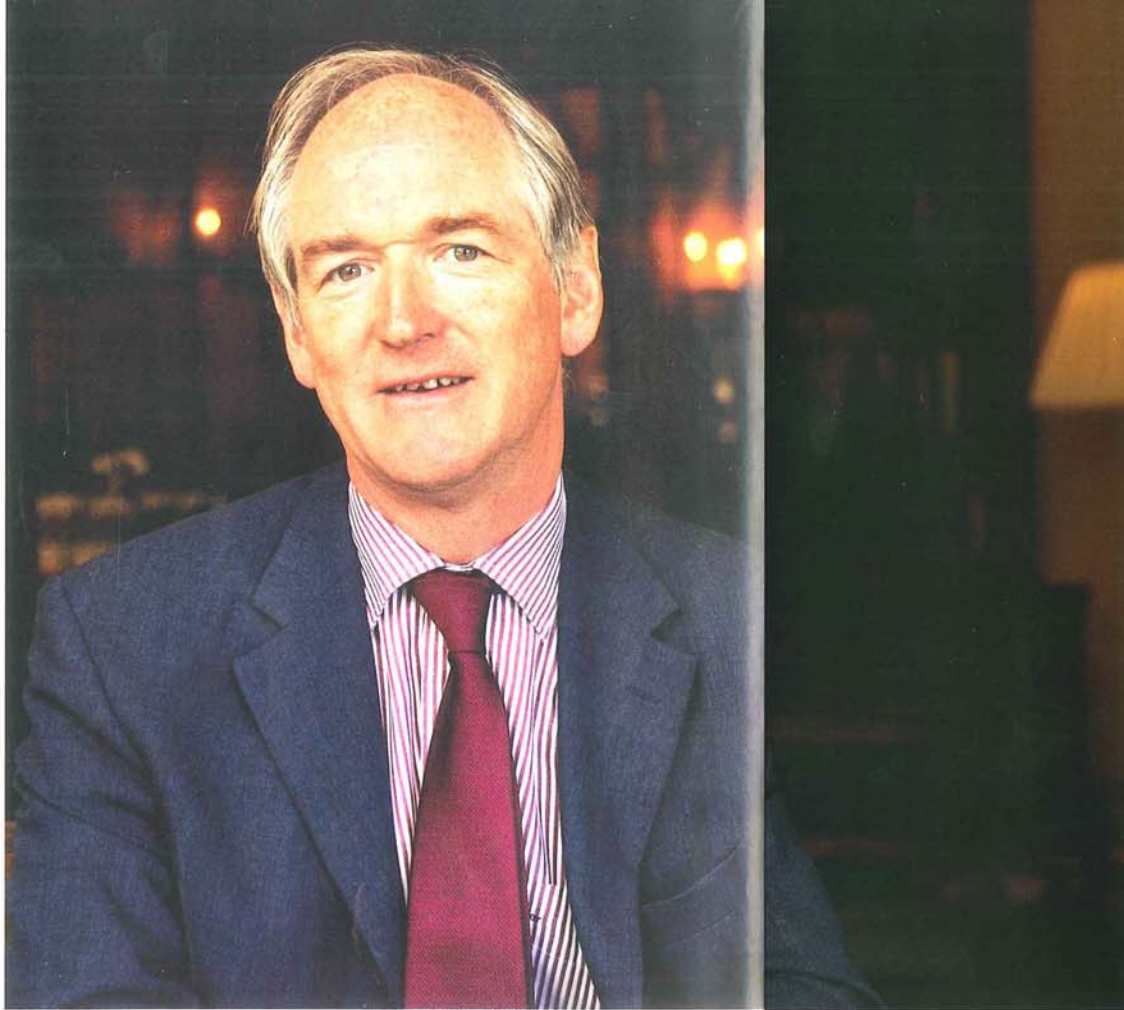
Keeping the fun in education

Summer Fields, Eton's main feeder, is a prep school where boys can enjoy themselves 'unashamedly', with golf and camping on the agenda, but games consoles and mobile phones firmly off. Clive Aslet meets its headmaster, Robin Badham-Thornhill

THE entrance is behind Marks and Spencer,' I was told on visiting Robin Badham-Thornhill, for 12 years the headmaster of Summer Fields boys' prep school in Oxford. Not very promising, you might think, but then the gate opens onto 70 acres of lawn and trees, on which the eye can see nothing but boys in whites playing cricket or tennis, some of them, because it has just rained, in wellingtons. Summer Fields is in Oxford (useful for attracting high-quality academic staff and making excursions to the Pitt-Rivers Museum), yet apart from it: a legacy of its foundation in 1864, when land on what was then the edge of the city came cheap. Then, the school had seven pupils, taught by Gertrude Maclaren, a classical scholar, and physically improved by her husband, Archibald, who fenced and ran a gymnasium. Now, it has 240.

Although still relatively small, Summer Fields has the enviable reputation of being the prime feeder school for Eton. This year, Summer Fields boys won no fewer than four King's Scholarships to Eton. 'That shows we can get the best out of the brightest boys,' observes Mr Badham-Thornhill, from the elegance of a drawing room furnished with inlaid bookcases and Georgian fauteuils.

This is important to any headmaster. As fees go up, so parents increasingly expect to see a return on their money, particularly as regards which schools their children pass into. But Eton isn't everything. 'We are just as pleased with boys who pass into other schools,' he says. And he means it. Summer Fields isn't



BT is proud of his school's Eton record, but believes dog shows and choir are just as crucial

On the record

Marital status Married to Angela and has two girls: Sarah, 23, and Polly, 20

Education Cheam School, Cheltenham College and Exeter University

Why do you teach? 'To inspire receptive children and to make a difference'

Currently reading *D-Day* by Antony Beevor

Career Headmaster of Lambrook School 1993–97; headmaster of Summer Fields from 1997

Favourite subject History

Heroes 'St James the Apostle, Churchill, Gen Patton and my father'

School motto *Mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body)

Favourite place Bath

rigorously selective. 'About a third of the boys are bright,' he reveals, 'two-thirds are average. We would expect to take all boys for whom their current school gives a good report. Any assessment that we make is about where to put him when he comes.'

In tweed jacket and flannels, Mr Badham-Thornhill (BT as he's known) seems to be a schoolmaster's schoolmaster—certain of his views, faintly donnish, able to identify each boy in the school by name. Like his own charges, he boarded, at Cheam School, near Newbury, from the age of eight, and has been in teaching since he left Exeter University (he studied economics, politics and history, before taking his post-graduate certificate in education in history). After four years at Bruton School, he went back to Cheltenham College, then all-boys, now co-ed, where he himself had been a pupil. After 12 years, he moved on to become headmaster

Summer Fields School 01865 454433; www.summerfields.oxon.sch.uk

- Founded in 1864, with just seven pupils
- Originally called Summerfield
- Founded and first run by Archibald Maclaren, a fencing teacher

● Robin Badham-Thornhill took up the reins in 1997. David Faber will take over on September 1, 2010

- Boys are organised into leagues: Maclaren, Moseley (after Henry Moseley of Moseley's Law), Congreve (after William la Touche Congreve, VC) and Case
- Based in 70 acres



of countryside, 1½ miles from the centre of Oxford

- Ages range from seven to 13. Of the 240 boys, 220 board

- The maximum class size is 17
- The school has a sports complex, art department (DT workshops, pottery), and science labs for experiments and explosions

● 85% of boys play an instrument, and there are three choirs, which perform nationally

- The boys visit a *château* in Normandy in the third and fourth years to improve their French
- Notable old boys Harold Macmillan, Field Marshall Lord Wavell, Christopher Lee, Patrick Macnee

much pressure on their offspring, whereas it may be best for them to find their own way through trying things out.' Camping bulks large. The variety of offerings—dog shows, triathlons, concerts, golf, 'endless boy activities'—ensures that electronic media (which, in the form of mobile phones and games consoles, are banned) aren't missed.

With two university-age daughters, Mr Badham-Thornhill knows that boys' requirements are different. 'Boys like structure. Girls are usually more organised and more focused; boys catch up at a later age. We offer a safe environment where they can be like mini adults, taking responsibility for their organisation and, for the older ones, helping to run the school. When they go home with mummy and daddy, they become little boys again.' A prep school—the family home is on site—provided 'a wonderful place to bring up my own family. As children, they had lots of people of their own age. They could see what was happening; I was always around, even if not always available.' It was, he says wisely, 'quite good having two girls'.

Meanwhile, Mr Badham-Thornhill's wife, Angela, teaches history. They don't have children in their own house: after 20 years as house masters, they found it too much of a tie. But Mrs Badham-Thornhill has something of a wife-of-headmaster role to fulfil, if only through being a mother herself and knowing all the boys in the school, and thus able to respond to any anxieties that may arise.

Summer Fields' objective is to maximise potential. Of course it is: every school sets out to do that. But a walk through the buildings suggests that this is somewhere that lets few areas of nascent talent go unrecognised. In the theatre (a fully equipped one), groups of 11 year olds are excitedly unpicking *The Taming of the Shrew*. In the music depart-

ment, they are playing instruments or (because this is the end of term) glued to *Amadeus*. Every pupil in the school has attached a piece of artwork to the tree of life in the art room. Huge mobiles made out of cane, tissue paper and streamers float over the Hogwarts-style dining room. *Papier-mâché* elephants and tigers stalk the library. There must be an aliquot of rugger players, but they're also exposed to art. The chapel has pre-Raphaelite stained glass by Henry Holiday: 'The boys sing with great gusto.'

'We offer a safe environment where boys can be like mini adults, taking responsibility for their organisation and helping to run the school'

Chapel is an important place. Everyone attends what the chaplain, Rev Robin Lapwood, calls the 'unashamedly Christian' acts of worship. ('Muslim parents, for example, regard it as a positive advantage for their children to worship in chapel—it is their way of saying "thank you" for the open and supportive way we nurture their children's walk with Allah.') Mr Badham-Thornhill teaches religious studies as well as history, and is halfway through a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, which he is taking a week at a time. The idea was hatched when he visited Vézelay four years ago with the school choir. Not even his family accompanies him when walking. A religious experience? 'I would prefer to say spiritual.' Perhaps it has given him the inner stretch to leave Summer Fields, which he intends to do in July 2010. 'I'm in my fifties. I feel I've got another career in me.'