

Summer Fields forever

David Faber followed generations of his family, including his grandfather Harold Macmillan, to prep school at Summer Fields. Now the writer and former MP is returning as headmaster. Here he tells why he's going back to school...

In June 1992, as a nervous 'new boy', I made my maiden speech in the House of Commons during a debate on education. I went on to become Secretary of the Conservative Backbench Education Committee and, throughout my parliamentary career, was fortunate enough to represent a constituency, Westbury in west Wiltshire, that boasted a rich variety of educational establishments. In common with many MPs, I found that school visits were much the most stimulating aspect of constituency work.

Ten years later, shortly after leaving the House of Commons, I became a parent governor at Summer Fields in Oxford, renewing a family association with the school that stretches back almost 150 years and traverses several generations, including my grandfather, Harold Macmillan. I later became Vice-Chairman of the Board and, as I spent more time at the school, I got to know the staff and my fellow parents well, acting as the unofficial 'masters' governor' (every school should have one). At the same time, having embarked on a career as a writer and historian, I also found myself an increasingly regular visitor to lecture or take lessons at various schools. I soon developed a sneaking envy of the teachers I left behind at the end of the day – there can be no greater responsibility or more worthwhile occupation than to be responsible for a child's education and development, especially during the crucial prep-school years. When the headmastership of Summer Fields became available it was an easy decision to apply for the job. At a personal level I will be moving from the solitary lifestyle of the writer to the bustling world of a boarding school. In the space of a few years I will have made the change from a career that is now, sadly, almost universally reviled to one that is, for the most part, admired.

Many of my most vivid early memories are of my own prep-school days at Summer Fields: inspirational and often larger-than-life teachers, who somehow made classics fun and encouraged reading beyond the reading list; an early interest in languages that opened up educational opportunities for me, as well as leading to lifelong friendships; daily worship in the beautiful Victorian chapel, a firm foundation for faith; taking part in the poetry declamation competition, judged by Cecil Day-Lewis's widow, Jill Balcon; a love of cricket that has led to a lifetime of enjoyment playing the game and to a modest involvement in its administration as a member of the MCC Committee; and the first few steps in assuming personal responsibility as a prefect and a captain – the former far from a success, the latter hopefully more so.

Only later in life did I fully appreciate everything that Summer Fields had given me. It still prides itself on bringing out the best in every boy, instilling in them a self-confidence that is far removed from arrogance, and a healthy respect for their peers. I remember particularly the long-suffering patience of my cricket master, who eventually succeeded in drumming the concept of team spirit into a rather self-centred and noisy young sportsman.

The school enjoys a well-deserved reputation for academic excellence and outstanding pastoral care. The outgoing head, Robin Badham-Thornhill, himself a former *Tatler* Best Head of a Prep School, has presided over a period of great success and will be a hard act to follow.

In the wider prep-school world, there remain many challenges. Nobody seems able to predict how long the recession will last, nor how severe will be its ultimate effect on the independent sector. The Charity Commission's recent interpretation of the 2006 Charities Act (in itself a perfectly laudable piece of legislation) has understandably sent shockwaves through prep schools in particular. And the ongoing debate within the public-school world as to the validity and worth of GCSEs and A-levels will undoubtedly lead many of those schools to re-examine their own assessment criteria for entry, as some have already done.

One former school-friend, who I had not seen for many years, wrote to me on reading the news of my appointment: 'Many many firsts! For me Summer Fields is the cornerstone of my formative years, the basis of my development thereafter and without it I would be much the poorer in mind, body and soul.' I can only hope that future pupils of mine will write about the school in similar terms in the years to come. □
Munich, The 1938 Appeasement Crisis by David Faber is now available in paperback from Simon & Schuster, £8.99.

'I remember particularly the long-suffering patience of my cricket master'



Hello, Sir: David Faber at home in Chelsea

David at Summer Fields, age 12