

Not such a new boy now

The headmaster of Summer Fields on a political and educational legacy

THERE was spluttering in common rooms across the land when former Conservative MP David Faber's appointment as headmaster of one of the finest prep schools in England was announced in 2009. The reaction—'unusual' gasped one tabloid—was, perhaps, akin to the flutter in the museum world at Labour MP Tristram Hunt's recent parachuting into the V&A.

'There were raised eyebrows, but it blew over. The boys were great and the parents were prepared to trust me,' Mr Faber recalls. 'They pay a lot and make sacrifices and we need to be in touch with that, but I would hope that they know I'm one of them and can see it from their point of view.'

Mr Faber had written two respected historical biographies and was a governor at Summer Fields, his old prep school, as well as a parent—his son, Henry, was the fifth generation of the family there—but he had no teaching qualifications and had bypassed the traditional route of deputy head or housemaster.

'It's easy to say in hindsight, but I wished I'd done a teaching degree,' admits Mr Faber, whose warm, friendly style combines the reassurance of establishment with the glamour of the outsider. 'People had said I'd make a good teacher, perhaps because I'm bossy. I certainly had the teaching bent—my maiden speech was on education.'

Aged 31, he was part of 1992's bright young intake of Tory MPs, with Liam Fox, Iain Duncan Smith, Alan Duncan and David Lidington—I'm pleased to see that some of my generation are having a renaissance under Theresa May'. As the grandson of a Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan—I got to know him well as he didn't die until I was in my twenties and I remember him very fondly and with pride—and the descendent of three from the 18th century, including the 4th Duke of Devonshire, as well as the possessor of

film-star good looks, he received more attention than most.

Mr Faber served in the Foreign Office and Health and was a shadow spokesman on foreign affairs under Michael Howard—he suffered from a bad press, but he was a very kind man and a great mentor—but stood down in 2001. It was partly prompted by the prospect of a new young family (his second wife, Sophie, has a distinguished career in the fashion industry) and partly, he admits, by doing time in the fog of opposition: 'a sort of emperor's new clothes existence'.

His uncle (by marriage) was the politician Julian Amery, whose father, Leo, famously told Chamberlain: 'In the name of God, go!' Their family tragedy was the execution, for treason, of Julian's brother John, who broadcast Nazi propaganda. Mr Faber had unrivalled access to the vast family archive, now at Churchill College, Cambridge, where it's the most accessed after those of Churchill and Thatcher, and, encouraged by literary agent Michael Sissons, whom he knew through the MCC committee, he wrote a book about the trio, *Speaking for England* (2005).

He followed up with *Munich* (2008) about Chamberlain and the appeasement crisis of 1938. This did well in America—where *Munich* is a byword for 'copping out'—and got him onto the schools lecture circuit here. 'Radley [the first

engagement] fostered a hunger for teaching and school life,' he explains. He was pondering how to make the jump when Robin Badham-Thornhill announced his retirement from Summer Fields. Mr Faber was expected to head up the interview panel, until 'I thought, actually, I'd like to go for it'.

‘I do worry about the state of education—it's a political football,’

Summer Fields was founded in 1864 by Gertrude Maclaren—I'm proud that it was started by a woman—to cram friends' sons for Eton. Her husband, Archie, was fitness coach to the British Army; the school's motto is 'A healthy mind in a healthy body' and it still owns 70 of the original 200 acres in which it was set. Besides Macmillan, alumni include novelist Dick Francis, food writers Tom Parker Bowles and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Lord Redesdale, father of the Mitford sisters, and actors Patrick Macnee and Christopher Lee.

The school's long-held status in academia—and in games and music as well as a strong board-

ing ethos—remains: 25% (15) of the class of 2016 went to Eton, with four scholarships. 'I think we've maintained the reputation. The academic feel has prevailed and that's what many parents come for,' says Mr Faber. 'We can attract good teachers because we're in Oxford and in a circle of academia.'

'Thirty or 40 years ago, the word "hothouse" was used and we wouldn't recognise that now, but the past few years have been a purple patch and we've been very successful in marketing our output. I think we're known for excellence and for trying very hard. We are ambitious for the boys, but it's also a happy environment. The atmosphere of families and dogs [living on school grounds] is good for them.'

He says a Summerfieldian is typically 'confident, but not cocky, and a good "joiner-in"'. I'm confident they won't be lost when they arrive at their senior school'. He does, however, worry about the effect of the modern education system. 'There's a lot of pressure on these boys. They're being tested younger and younger (*page 96*) and that has become an industry in itself. It can drag on and one of my jobs is to guide the parents and manage their expectations,' he explains.

'It's the biggest change I've seen in my six years here. I do worry about the state of education—it's a political football. Both sectors [independent and State] are under constant reflection and change. We're holding our breath on the Green Paper. The charitable benefit is up for grabs again and we're waiting to see what happens with grammar schools. It doesn't stand still.'

Mr Faber admits to missing politics—when he can't sleep, he watches his friends on the Parliament Channel—and he'll write another book, but the prep-school world's mix of nostalgia and progress has him captivated for now. He is a welcome addition. 

Kate Green

On the record

Summer Fields in Oxford offers full boarding (£9,357 a term) and day school (£7,246) for about 260 boys aged 8–13. For details of bursaries, visit www.summerfields.com

Where is your favourite place in Britain? To be specific, the sixth tee at Royal St George's, Sandwich, Kent

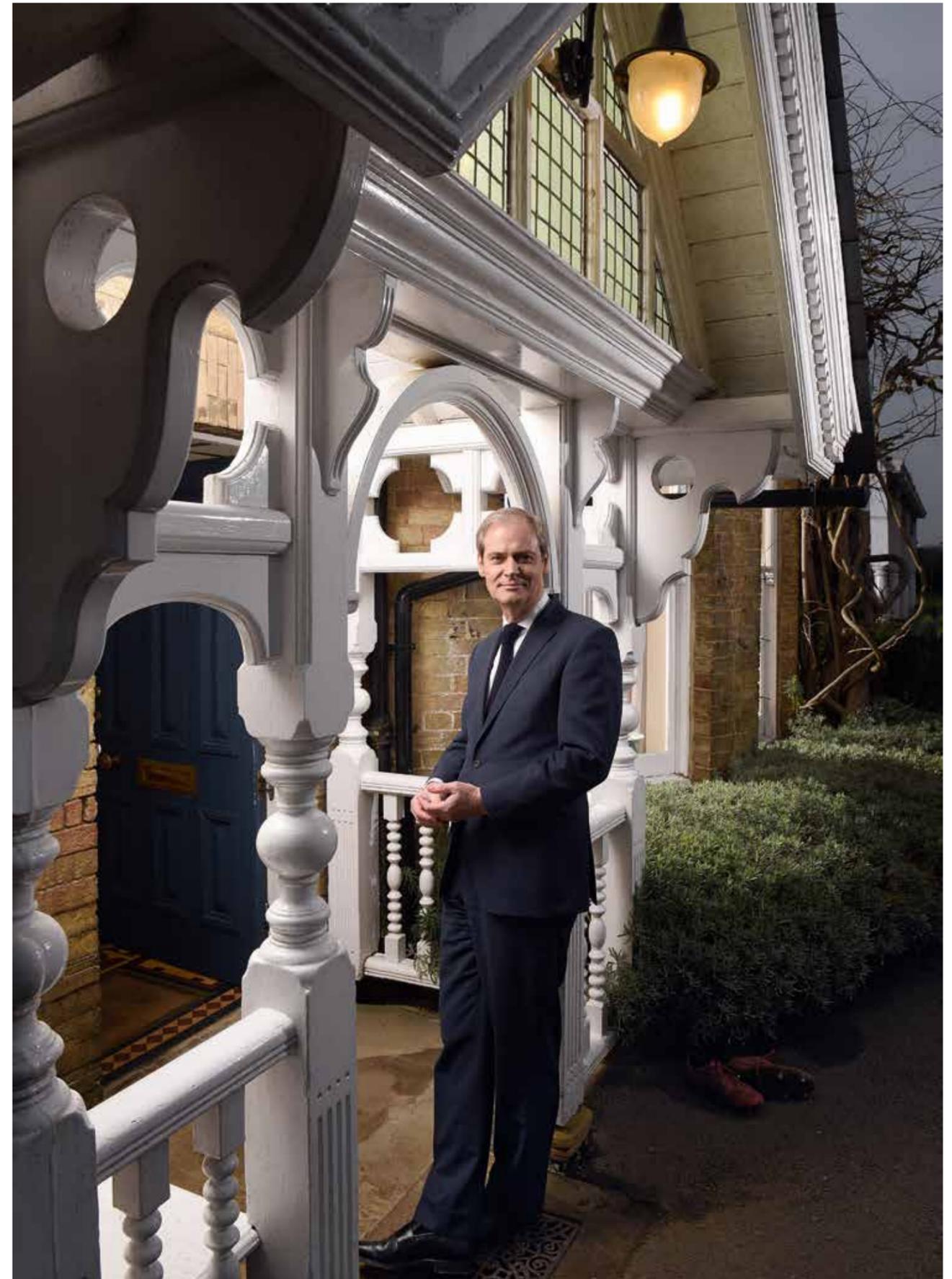
What is your favourite building? The London Library

Book? Eric Ambler and John le Carré

Music? The late 1970s and early 1980s as heard on Jack FM (only in Oxford)

Day off? Watching Chelsea at Stamford Bridge with my son (we're season-ticket holders)

Alternative career? Cricketer or golfer



John Miller