



Bristolians

JANUARY 2002 - ISSUE No. 22

MICHAEL BOOKER 1915-2001



Michael Lee Booker was born on April 29, 1915. He attended Shrewsbury School 1928–1934 and went up to Balliol as Guinness Scholar in 1934 to read Literae Humaniores. In 1938, he took his BA and on 15 September of the same year he started teaching at Bristol Grammar School. He had held no previous teaching posts and he had enjoyed no training in teaching. But, thanks to his education, he was specially qualified to teach Latin, Greek and Ancient History, so they set him to teach Latin, Greek and Scripture and put him in charge of IVA, *vice* Mr Caudwell. Military service claimed him from June 1940 until May 1, 1946, and then Colonel Booker returned to Bristol. The record continues, House Master 1948–1967, Master in charge of Fourth Form Entry from 1967, Third Master, Senior Master January 1973, Second Master January 1976. By the time he retired in 1980, he had outlasted the Staff Register and there is no reference to that retirement. This is appropriate, as he immediately returned to mastermind the Appeal for the Princess Anne Building, to be the School's link with the Old Bristolians' Society and to run the School's Archive Office. Even when he retired again in September 1994, he remained an ever-present adviser, addresser of envelopes and Society Committee member.

There is so much more behind these bald facts of his employment record. There is so much that he gave to the School, to his friends and colleagues and especially to his pupils, and one of them was moved to say, '... about Michael Booker I could be eloquent. He was, & is, a great influence for me.' So 'whence by what way how purposed' did the Salopian son of an Eton House Master, named Lee for a Master at Rugby School and educated at a College which Bristolians for many years did not frequent, reach the 'well-nightingaled vicinity' of Clifton?

He was educated at Shrewsbury from 1928 to 1934. There he was a School Prefect and in the Football First XI – their major sport. Moreover, he was taught classics by Ralph Westwood Moore (Headmaster of BGS 1938–1942) and balanced sporting prowess on the football field with academic success in the Sixth form. At Oxford, he presumably maintained his friendship with classical authors, but the record has more to say about his membership of the Oxford University Centaurs XI and his enthusiasm for hockey, tennis and cricket. A less well-known interest was acting. He was for several years a keen member of the Balliol Players, who for a week every summer took Greek plays to various pleasant venues such as Whitgift School. At one School, however, the applause was so rapturous and so extended that Michael, due to deliver the Epilogue, gave up all thought of returning to the stage and effaced himself. With typical Booker self-deprecation, he recounted that story with wry satisfaction.

By a happy chance, he graduated from Oxford just at the time that J E Barton had retired and Michael's former teacher, R W Moore, had been appointed Headmaster of Bristol Grammar School. The story of the telegram bidding Michael 'Come at once' is famous: but how did Moore know what his old pupil had to offer his new School? Moore and Booker started together, but all too soon Michael's teaching career was interrupted. Initially his war effort was directed towards digging the School's air raid shelters, without which the boys could not return, but before long he was called up and after

service in Africa found himself in Italy – though without much opportunity for classical research. He did, however, enjoy watching the eruption of Vesuvius, from Pliny's own standpoint.

He returned to teaching, but was in no hurry to do so. Moore had advanced to Harrow (did Michael ever have the opportunity or desire to follow him?) and his successor was eager to regularise his staff room. He wrote to offer Mr Booker accelerated demobilisation, but (with that smile) Mr Booker refused, because it would have meant losing £200 demob pay plus leave.

He and his fellow Salopian, Eric 'why did Michael get a telegram when Moore only sent me a letter?' Dehn, returned to Bristol together, to share 'digs, dates and dinners'. He resumed teaching. Michael's lessons attract such adjectives as 'jolly' and 'fun' from his former pupils, and as one Headmaster wrote to another, his form 'literally eat out of his hand.' He became Form Master of the Classical Fourth, and in the early years his form room was in a prefab hut by University Road. One pupil recalls 'that winter' of 1946–1947, when they sat shivering, 'muffled to the teeth and warmed (a euphemism) by one or two electric fires'. He imparted to his pupils enthusiasm for the classics and a love of the English language. He also added much to the School's sporting reputation. BGS played and plays rugby rather than soccer, but there was also hockey. When he arrived, Michael found that hockey was in disfavour, that the then sports master regarded it as a 'cissy game, lacking character building virility', but as master-in-charge he put hockey on the school map, and kept it there. His contribution to fives and cricket is well known, and with Dick Fox and Dick Fox's vintage Rolls Royce he founded the Bedouins, the Staff Touring XI.

It is hard to believe, but his description of himself for most of his teaching life at BGS was 'a junior master'. He underlines this with a description of his first term back, in summer 1946. Wednesday period 8 had just been introduced, and the Saint was timetabled to take Remove Classical. Every Wednesday, a boy arrived at the Common Room door to say no-one had come to teach them. Every Wednesday, the Saint was too busy reading a French novel, and every Wednesday the junior Classics master, Mr Booker, took the lesson. But his power base grew, and when some fifteen years later the Senior Classics master died suddenly, Mr Booker amazed Mr Beecroft by efficiently coping with the resulting timetable adjustments.

At about the same time, he electrified the School with a change in his domestic arrangements: the Vice Chancellor of Bristol University lost his Secretary and Michael gained a wife and 'an ace mixed-doubles partner'; to these blessings were added, over the years, his daughters Claire and Heather and – so far – five grandchildren.

His seniority by now was not in question, and by the time he retired in 1980 'Bk' was Roy Avery's Second Master. However there was still work to be done, and, with his encyclopaedic knowledge of past pupils, Michael was well qualified to run the immensely successful Appeal which resulted in the new

classroom block. The next year, in 1981, he was chosen to be President of the Old Bristolians' Society and to hold office during the 450th celebrations of the Grammar School's foundation in 1532. In his outgoing speech at the Annual Dinner in 1980, his predecessor as President had commented that on joining the School in 1939 he thought 'that two enemies were threatening his life: Booker and Hitler – in that order!' Michael's riposte was a kindly reference to his pupil's 'little Latin and less Greek.'

Apart from his legendary daily tussle with *The Times* crossword – as the years pass, the time diminishes from 'over breakfast' to 'five minutes' – Michael enjoyed his membership of the Friendly Reading Society, oldest of the three Bristol book clubs, supported the National Trust ('Why don't you have a Trust sticker on your car?' 'Because it biodegraded itself!'), and sang bass. He was an enthusiastic member of the School Choir, which, in his own words, 'might not have suited a professional, but we had a rip-roarious time.' He even brought music to his pupils, with such Greek delights as 'Pheu, pheu, ti pote gegone'. [Corrected from the Greek of Mr Evans ...]

In September 1994, Michael retired again. He could not be replaced, but two people manage to cope with some of the work he used to do for the Old Bristolians and the School Archives. Two more people and a database have been employed to take up the work he did with the Appeal. His farewell luncheon at Failand that November was, shall we say, very well attended. Most appropriately, the new Old Bristolians' Society Office is clearly labelled 'The Booker Room' and adorned with his photograph.

On the occasion of his *first* retirement, Michael composed an Ode to his classical colleagues, paraphrased from Horace. Now sadly, we must paraphrase even that, and yes, Michael, I have checked my quantities.

Eheu fugaces, O comites mei,
Labuntur anni: nunc series mihi
Adduxit annorum quietem
Vix numerabilis sempiternam.

Heigh-ho! Fleetingly, my comrades, the
years slip by; now a line of them almost
beyond counting has brought me rest
everlasting.

M L Booker 29 April 1915 – 25 November 2001

Readers are referred to the notice on the Obituaries' page

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