

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 23

Natural Selection

Teachers and school support staff can be just as keen about getting particular posts as any other profession. It can lead to intense pleas to be heard and bizarre claims to attention. It is not surprising that most Heads have files full of comic extremes. Marcus Brampton, Head of Market Upabit School, had a folder full of applicants' gems which he shared with colleagues at annual Heads shindigs. They would all share theirs with him, too.

The hilarity is caused by the over-enthusiasm and supra- determination that some candidates bring to their applications, giving rise to inadvertent, unintentional entertainment. Whenever Marcus drew an applicant's attention to how hilarious parts of their applications were they have, to a man and woman, roared with laughter and asked for a copy.

At the latest Heads annual dinner Marcus shared a batch with colleagues.

Natural Selection

Marcus told the gathering that his 'research' into staff selection was confined to a box of letters and notes he had from when I became a Head twenty years previously.

'While rummaging around in my archives I discovered some quotations from application papers that are worthy of a place in the back corridors of the educational pantheon,' he explained. 'I started storing some of the pearls early on in my headship. Later I asked Head colleagues to send me theirs. These were then read out at the annual Heads' dinners.

The first memorable reference I received came from a Head colleague in Wales, well known in headteacher circles for his erudition, pedagogy and terseness. I had met him at some conference or other and requested, I remember, a reference for a Head of Mathematics. His reply read simply:

*'Dear Marcus,
I have received your request for a reference for Mr X.
I could not let a friend down. Yours ever.'*

'My interest in the language of applications and references began there,' confessed Marcus.

But before the references come the applications. In the days when jobs were hard to come by, or in subjects where there were more candidates than posts the language sometimes becomes strident, sometimes frantic. Applications from abroad often had an added quaint touch, which could sometimes be beguiling and sometimes perplexing.

'You may wonder why I have not been in school since March last. This is because I was sat upon by an elephant on Clapham Common.'

We actually interviewed and appointed this candidate. It turned out that the incident had happened during a stroll across the Common where a circus was setting up.

The next one gets a grade A for effort. But it was unsuccessful.

'You will note that I have put down that I have a B.A. degree. Well, I did not actually get a degree, but I had a damn fine try.'

What heart-ache but what strength of character and determination lies behind this next one.

'On my teaching practice I have been mugged in the classroom, arm-locked in the corridor, and threatened with rape in the cloakroom. Could you tell me whether you tolerate this behaviour in your school.'

Sadly I cannot remember whether we interviewed her. But we should have done.

And then a really desperate one.

'I have applied for your chemistry post. If you have no vacancies in chemistry, have you any in history? I am particularly well up in 19th century Malayan social history.'

And one from a man, who had a touching belief in his all-round ability, included this:

'I have qualifications in painting, pottery, fabrics and nuclear physics.'

It wasn't clear from his application whether he majored in art or nuclear physics. We asked for a bit more information. He replied that:

'My degree was actually in Land Economy but I was told there was little call for that in schools.'

The next smacks of a smidgen of desperation..

'You will be pleased to know that I am above average size.'

And another one came from an ancient colleague who brought along his favourite. It was, he suggested, from an applicant clutching at straws. Needless to say it came to me in the early 1970s, not long after the university campus demonstrations. Heady times.

'I have had some administrative experience that you might find useful. At university I have organised two demonstrations and one sit-in. They were all very successful.'

While this next one, from Marcus's file, is also digging deep into the depths of his experience and qualifications.

'I am well known as a good disciplinarian. I have certificates in wrestling and karate.'

And in a similar vein ran:

'I started my career in a secondary modern school where I quickly learned archery and .22 shooting.'

The next one in response to a colleague's advert for a PE post with a willingness to lead outdoor activities also exudes confidence and self-belief..

'I have walked extensively in the Peak district and hold a St. John's First Aid certificate, which I can renew. I feel competent to lead your proposed expedition to the Himalayas.'

And then two trying the smarm approach.

'I have taught part-time in two big London comprehensives and have now resigned from them and moved to your part of the world because I want to teach in your excellent institution which deserves world-wide recognition.'

and

'I know there will be hundreds of applicants for this post. If I am successful I can assure you of my complete loyalty and devotion.'

Another Head at the dinner offered his two 'little gems'.

'I wish to apply for the post of Head of English. I have an exemplary health record apart from a period of absence last January following a fatal accident!'

and

'I have to be perfectly honest at the beginning of this application and admit that I was dismissed from my last teaching posit because of having an affair with the headmaster's wife!!'

The Head wondered whether his rejection of the application was premature as it clearly demonstrated entrepreneurial and debonair tendencies that he liked to think indicated leadership qualities.

And finally a snippet from a letter from a candidate for a Deputy post kept in Marcus's folder.

'I consider myself to be a natural leader. I am not a snob but I do find my colleagues inferior to me.'

The aphoristic nature of letters of application stemmed, I think, from the small space allowed for candidates to say something about themselves, although some candidates inadvisedly took advantage of the 'extra sheets' to just about write themselves out of the job!
