

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 22

Team Building

Marcus Brampton's first task when he took up his Headship at the new school in Market Upabit was to hire a few others – everything in fact from Deputy Head to cleaners. The first tranche of two hundred transteree pupils were due in September. It was now April and anyone currently in a post at another school had until the end of May to resign. Mindful of the peremptory way he was recruited and selected he vowed that he would be more 'professional' than that. But what was being 'more professional'?

Well, there was a vogue in business and industry, he was told, for problem-solving exercises, in-tray exercises, professional quizzes, pre-interview classroom observations - on top of the familiar application forms, accompanying letters, references and interviews, all the accepted managerial paraphernalia of the times. But time was a commodity he had not got.

Marcus explained to his wife, Ros, that at this point his Chair of governors, Andy, a long-time councillor and chartered engineer, came to his aid.

'O.K. it's your call,' said Andy, 'but consider this, 'the governors appointed you after an application form, two references and a twenty minute interview... 'the twitching nose' and 'the whiff of success' triumphed over mere logic... and you can't say we got it wrong, can you?'

Well, no, I couldn't! A good point.

And so application forms, references and interviews it had to be. But at least, I vowed, I will take all day over it, inviting interviewees to morning discussions and question and answer sessions, followed by afternoon interviews – with a proper lunch and access to oodles of tea. It was, after all the English countryside the school was serving - four hundred square kilometres of fields, trees and five-barred gates. Tea out of china cups and cakes on patterned side plates seemed the right thing to do.

It all appeared sober and straightforward.

And it was... for most of the time. Chair Andy and I - and eventually my new Deputy, Olivia, sailed through candidate after candidate, congratulating ourselves on the astuteness of the appointments.

Then came the day when Andy could not join us. Never mind, he said, Vice Chair Jezebel needs the experience. So the Honourable Jezebel Fortesque joined the team – and did so on many more occasions as the years rolled by and the school grew.

Madame Vice was indeed a local dignitary, very active, much respected. No-one could overlook her. She was immediately distinguishable by her habit of wearing an army great-coat, which, she told me, she had purchased from the Army and Navy Stores, and a black beret reminiscent of the wartime French maquisards.. She also sported a black eye-patch following a horse-riding accident in her youth. A large shepherd's crook completed the picture – an image Breughel (The Younger) would have been proud of.

She was by now in her 70s but during the WW2 she had been a sprightly ambulance-driver, I understand. For all her eccentricity she was highly entertaining and shrewd. Her unconventional approach to interviewing....well, to all life actually.....made selection days with her a joy...and sometimes a trial! You see, she had a habit of talking in a horsey language of her own devising – highly metaphorical, totally uncompromising and utterly engaging.... If you were not on the end of it.

She was not averse to asking candidates how they would rein in unruly pupils with bridle and bit, or what would be the first thing they would do after two hours with a hot and sweaty stallion between their legs on a Friday afternoon. She was referring, of course, to the importance of looking after your horse first, following a day at the hunt, but not every candidate cottoned on to that straightaway.

'Do you mean....a horse?' asked one History hopeful timorously.

'I do....,' replied Jezebel sweetly. 'What else do you think it might be?'

I have no idea what the lass replied. But I do remember when she fixed a specialist A Level teacher with a mono-eyed look, and enquired casually, *'I can see you are good at giving high fliers their head.... but can you do the mucking out in the main school?'*

'I will muck out wherever I find muck ,' replied the candidate....and promptly got the job.

Jezebel was bringing the art of interviewing to a new level.

But that was not all. At the decision stage she had a habit of confounding the panel with her singular summing up of a candidate. They were peculiar, dotty, but somehow extraordinarily perceptive.

About a candidate for a Science post: *'She needs to be put between the shafts for a month or two'*.

A diminutive Maths teacher *'would never survive a good whipping.'*

She found a budding Languages teacher, *'Good fetlocks.... But a bit large in the nose.'*

Of another candidate she remarked: *'This one looks as though he has been put out to grass.... or ought to be.'*

'That one needs her withers wringing.' This sounded pretty decisive until I realised that I had no idea what *'withers wringing'* was!

Then came the most memorable occasion of them all. We had before us one 22 year old male PE candidate from a top PE college. He had applied for a post open to newly qualified PE teachers. When it came to Jezebel's's turn to ask a question, she pointed a pencil at the candidate.

'What do you know about Ignatius Loyola, eh?' (Readers may know, I expect, that Ignatius of Loyola was a saint who founded the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus).

But, this poor lad, who just wanted to teach PE, did not know whether Loyola played outside left for Real Madrid or cricket for the West Indies, or what! His mouth dropped open, and he looked round the panel appealing for help! It was Deputy Olivia who sprang in to reassure him.

'Don't worry, Mr. Miles. There are always questions that are difficult. If you don't know the answer just say so.'

He was clearly grateful and his mouth closed. When he had finally left the room I asked Madam Vice why on earth she had asked that question.

'Well, she said, it was obvious he knew all the answers to teaching questions. But you need to see a PE teacher's reaction under pressure. We can't have a PE teacher with broken wind.'

So that was that! We did not appoint him. If my memory serves me right it we chose the one with shiny flanks, a good-looking pastern, and attractive mane.

And you won't be surprised, either, to hear that all Jezebel-inspired appointments turned out to be first-rate. Uncanny....against the odds.
