

1962 The Rivals Show Banner and Clock Tower Ascent

by Tom Oxley, June 2024

Background

Four things have led to me finally writing about the placing of the banner on the Clock Tower advertising The Rivals

The first was a note “out of the blue” on Friends Reunited from John Lumby Bishop in April 2010. The relevant extract is: “My goodness; a long time since we climbed on top of the school entrance tower to advertise The Rivals...”

The second was the discovery of a very rough sketch I made as part of the detailed planning for the event. It was in an old file marked “Pending Attention” [for some reason...]

The third was requests from Keith (Ebenezer) Morris persisting over several years to write up the event...

The final and crucial thing was the polite insistence by Ged Moss to write something for the ORA website. I'd sent him three old photographs for him to display at the 2024 ORA AGM.

Some background first of all, and also an indication of the significance of 1962 to me personally.

1962 was quite an eventful year for me. At the request of my German teacher, the board of governors had given me a £10 grant so that I could cycle to Germany. It is not a lot of money now but in 1962 it certainly was! On one of my many visits to Nottingham Archives for the ORA I eventually found reference to it in the accounts of expenditure submitted to governors' meetings. It was listed as follows: “July 26 1962 paid Thomas R Oxley £10.00 allowance for travelling to France”

That four week cycle trip through Belgium, Germany and back across France was a formative period of my life. I had just turned seventeen when I got a lift on a CWS Glassworks lorry down to Dover, and it was only the second time I'd been away from home...

This trip largely funded by Retford Grammar School instilled in me a drive to travel which has stayed with me ever since.

The following Easter I hitchhiked with Keith Morris through Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and France.

In July 1963 I went to school with my rucksack and spent two months hitchhiking alone through Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, France and Spain.

In early 1964 I drove to John O'Groats and down to Lands End on my newly acquired motor scooter to prepare for my driving test. I passed...

In July 1964 I set off on my motorbike with Keith Morris aiming to visit Istanbul but only made it as far as Pizen in what is now the Czech Republic. There I had a serious accident and spent the next five weeks in hospital. Keith Morris was largely unscathed and lived in our tent for five weeks, visiting me every day, before we were flown home and our passports were confiscated.

I had to postpone my University course for a year but returned to Plzen on my motorbike after I'd learned to walk again. What happened after that is a long story which I may recount sometime. Suffice to say I had another accident in Frankfurt, writing off my motorbike; and I eventually spent over three months running a Buffettwagen on the Deutsche Bundesbahn.

Years later after graduating and working, my wife and I emigrated to Canada in 1970 to save money to travel. In 1972 and 1973 we spent 398 days travelling in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Guatemala.. That trip included just under a year living in a split screen VW campervan. One day I may write a book about the journey: I filled six logbooks and have about 2,500 slides.

Roof adventures

Anyway, returning to 1962 the saga started when Bob Fearnley and I discovered that we could get into the school roof via an access point above the cloisters. We enjoyed wandering around inside despite the accumulated filth; and we stored some old clothes up there to change into. I also went in with Hedgy Barber, who had found out how to get in. On one occasion we left lit candles on the tinder dry rafters to mark our route. We were delayed either above the staff room or the headmaster's house and when we could eventually make our way back the wicks on several candles were floating on liquid wax... A few more minutes and the whole roof could have caught fire... It could easily have meant a premature end to the Retford Grammar School...

On our visits to the roof we'd noticed a trapdoor on the ceiling above the steep staircase to the belfry; and I used a rope to abseil down leaving messy footprints on the wall... That was more than stupid because Gover regularly went up to the belfry to teach...and no-one could fail to notice the footprints when walking down the stairs...

Coming back to the banner I can't remember what prompted the construction of it, but I do remember buying the wood and materials from an hardware shop just over the canal bridge. Bob Fearnley and I designed and built it together under the stage in the hall during free periods. I think Bob must have painted most of the lettering on the cotton sheet since it is far neater than I could have managed... We were quite proud of the size and appearance of the finished product. As you will see from the last photograph we added our initials: TRO (Thomas Robert Oxley) , DF (Derrick Fisher), JLB (John Lumby Bishop), RCF (Bob Fearnley) and TKM (Thomas Keith Morris) under The Rivals.

We'd discussed where to erect it and having climbed on the roof to check access, we'd decided to put it on the most prominent position: the clock tower. We'd located a ladder, and then all I had to do was plan the timing and execution of the task. It was like a military operation, and I think nearly a dozen friends were involved, a lot acting as lookouts at strategic points. I don't know why I saved the attached very rough sketch but I did, finding it over fifty years later...

We had to abandon the first attempt... As we carried the ladder very quietly up the fire escape outside the hall we saw teachers playing badminton. We decided to leave the ladder out of the way on the roof; and then gingerly and very quietly retraced our steps down the fire escape. We should have checked before we set off... Anyway, we agreed to return the next night.

This time the hall was deserted. Getting over the roof was quite easy but the last bit was tricky, having to carry the banner and manhandle the ladder so that we could lean it against the tower. We then had to climb up and pass the large banner up very carefully. Fortunately it wasn't very windy otherwise the banner could have blown away. At any time we could also have dropped it - a disaster. It was late at night but the other major risk was people looking up and seeing the activity on the roof. Hence all the lookouts...

The final approach was quite scary. I think Bob and I held the ladder while Hedgy (Jack Barber) and Fish (Derrick Fisher) climbed up to the terrace around the base of the spire. I and Bish (John Lumby Bishop) then followed and between us we gingerly passed and manoeuvred the banner into position on the front of the tower. Somehow we managed to get some rope around the tower to secure it albeit at an angle. As you can see from the photograph it was quite a messy job really... Very relieved that we'd done it, we then all climbed back down over the roof and replaced the ladder. By this time it was late at night. I'd cycled to Retford from Worksop on two consecutive nights, and I was quite tired, probably mostly from all the stress and excitement, by the time I got home. I can't remember what I said to my mum and dad about being so late back on two nights...

I have a vivid memory of the following morning. When we arrived at Retford on the train from Worksop we could clearly see the banner on the clock tower - even though it was a long way away. Elated but with some trepidation we walked to school. When we arrived it was clear that the banner had caused a bit of a sensation...

Steeplejacks

The next photograph shows steeplejacks who were brought in to remove the banner from the tower. They used a very long ladder. The banner was dislodged and crashed to the ground. Bob and I had built it very well, however, and only part of the frame was damaged.

Re-used

What happened next was probably my proudest moment. I'd noticed the damaged banner through the open door of a storeroom nearly opposite Gover's study. I organized a group of about twenty people and we smuggled the banner out of the cloisters and walked quickly with the banner between us all the way to the street behind the Fives Court where the final photograph was taken.

I am ashamed to admit that I can't remember everyone's names but from left to right stand: John Olsen, ?, ?, John Lumby Bishop, Bob Fearnley, me and ? Having taken the photograph we successfully walked all the way back to the cloisters in the same formation; and we managed to replace the banner in the storeroom without being seen. How we achieved this I have no idea but we did, and I am very proud of it.

Some of us were punished but some teachers including McNeil Watson bought photographs from me of the banner on the tower and also the picture of some of the participants in the operation. John Lumby Bishop told me recently that he'd found out later that Gover had secretly been quite impressed. However, that was not his attitude at the time: he could hardly condone such risky and dangerous behaviour by pupils at the school...

Epilogue

I am sure that many Old Retfordians will share my appreciation of the years spent at Retford Grammar School. Passing the 11+ transformed my life entirely. I was the first member of our family to do so, and later the first member to go to University.

The £10 allowance I was given in 1962 culminated in our "life plan". This was basically to build a firm career foundation, save money to travel, and then return to the UK, find a job, buy a house and raise a family. We have three children, six grandchildren and have lived in the same house for over 43 years...