

The School Song

When our ship shall leave the river bank,
Its timbers brave the main,
Our port shall gleam through mists of time,
And beckon back again,
Then each adventurer shall feel,
As onward strains the eager keel,
From the School beside the church and sea
The speeding wind of memory,

~

*And he who takes the long white road
Beyond the sloping down,
Shall proudly bear, for all to see,
The token of his town.
For him who toils alone and long,
For him swept forward by the throng,
There nothing difficult shall be
Through strength of ancient memory.*

~

And some shall picture pounding ball
On turf of sodden field,
And some the fight on fiery pitch
When grit refused to yield;
And some shall think of desk and pen,
And organ-voices heard again,
And laughter ringing merrily
Adown the aisles of memory.

~

*And a cry shall wake the sleeping years,
A shout "shoot hard for goal!"
The strain of the race shall steal the breath,
The thrill shall seize the soul.
And the voice of one shall sound to all
As it sounded oft through crowded Hall,
And then the least of us shall be
The nobler for the memory.*

~

Here make we then, as old time men,
The pledge our souls demands:
To build as they, the best we may
The house not built with hands.
So, one with Future and with Past,
Our work in School shall live and last,
And through the centuries to be
Our School shall grow in memory.

**H.L. Elvin [Tuscany, 1917-24]
Senior Prefect, 1922 – 24**

Professor HL Elvin and the School Song

It had been hoped to produce an article for 2005 Magazine on the life of Professor Lionel Elvin. Regrettably, his health was poor when contact was made in the Spring of 2005, and was not possible to meet with him.

The following article appeared in the 1956 Magazine on the origin of the School Song, whose words (above) were written by Professor Elvin. The second and fourth verses above (*in italics*) have not been sung for many years. It is followed by an obituary from the Independent Newspaper following the death of Professor Elvin died in June 2005, a few weeks before his 100th birthday.

The final article by Gerald Usher about the School Song appeared in the 2008 Magazine.

Article from the Old Southendian Magazine of 1956

It is some years since the School Song has been sung at a Reunion Dinner. Led by the strong youthful voices of the boys of the Sixth it received a spirited rendering at the last Reunion and it is most pleasing to learn that the Association intends it shall in future always be associated with the toast to the School. However much "Forty Years On" means to the Old Boys of another generation the fact remains that they form, year after year, a steadily dwindling proportion of those who have passed through the School.

With this in mind it has been felt appropriate that the School Song should appear in this issue so that Old Boys everywhere should be made aware of what the present pupils sing on significant occasions. We have gone further and written to Elvin for the background against which he composed it and consulted Mr WB Wyatt for the history of the stirring tune. Elvin, replying from 5 rue Leopold Robert, Paris 14, says:

"As to your enquiry about how I rashly ventured into not very good verse, all I can remember is that I said, I suppose in 1923, to J.F. Nichols (our excellent history master of those days) that it was a pity we had to sing a song written for another School. (I think that as a soccer player I also felt those references to a kind of football we did not play to strike a rather false note). Mr Nichol's said "Why don't you try your hand at writing one?" I did: he showed it to Mr Hitchcock and I admit no responsibility for what happened after.

"As to the tune, that was written by Mr P. Small, the music master – I think at Mr Hitchcock's request. I had had a notion that it might go not too badly to the eighteenth century tune 'The Lass that Loves a Sailor' but the idea 'new words, new tune' (even if both were much inferior to those till then in use) had at least the merit of logic.

"You can gather that I range myself with the dwindling band of those who sang 'Forty Years On' and enjoyed singing it; but though I ought to apologise for the thought that we were ourselves, not Harrow, and ought to have a song of our own. I hope somebody will come along without further loss of time and really write one as good and as a singable as 'Forty Years On'.

Mr W.B. Wyatt confirms that the words were set to music by Mr P. Small and his version was in use until just before the war. Then Mr Arthur S. Hutchings, Music Master from 1938 until 1947 and now Professor of Music at Durham University, composed probably in 1939, the exhilarating tune, perfectly fitting words, and spirit, which is now always employed. Well, there for the record is the story before it is forgotten. The School is fortunate to possess a Song of this quality written by a School Captain who was pre-eminent in every aspect of School life. As one who was contemporary with him and privileged to play under his inspiring captaincy in the School Football XI 1922/23 the School Song, the distillation of what the School came to mean to him during his years there, must always have for me as for so many others who worked and played with him, a very special meaning. It is felt that the ever widening circle of past pupils will welcome this account of how it came into being.

Professor Lionel Elvin

Principal of Ruskin College and Director of the Institute of Education, London University

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Lionel Elvin enjoyed one of the most distinguished and varied careers in education of the 20th century, serving as Principal of Ruskin College, 1944-50, as Director of the Department of Education at Unesco in Paris, 1950-56, and then from 1958 until his retirement in 1973 as Director of the Institute of Education at London University.

Herbert Lionel Elvin, educationist: born Buckhurst Hill, Essex 7 August 1905; Fellow, Trinity Hall, Cambridge 1930-44, Honorary Fellow 1980; Principal, Ruskin College, Oxford 1944-50; Director, Department of Education, Unesco 1950-56; Professor of Education in Tropical Areas, Institute of Education, London University 1956-58, Director 1958-73, Emeritus Professor of Education 1973-2005, Honorary Fellow 1993; married 1934 Mona Bedortha (died 1997; one son); died Cambridge 14 June 2005.

THE SCHOOL SONG: a personal viewpoint

My recollections of the song go back to the very early 1950s when it was still being sung to piano accompaniment, pending reconstruction of the war-damaged organ. I can claim to have listened to it quite carefully, as voice had broken on the very day I became a pupil of the school and I just couldn't bear the noise it made, so remained determinedly tacet as others around me warbled.

First impressions were favourable, musically speaking, though the words seemed a bit posh. I especially liked the bass, beginning with a thumping bottom C and then marching its way rhythmically all the way through the piece. What a pity that everything stopped so abruptly at the end – such a grand tune seemed to deserve a triumphant coda, like they have in grand opera! I was to wait nearly half a century before that wish could be consummated.

In 1953 the organ was re-dedicated in a special service during which, for the first time, the School Song was accompanied for the console by our recently-appointed music master, Mr. Reginald Foxwell. I was mesmerised. It didn't just sound different, but took on a whole new dimension. The melody rang out across the resonant hall, the harmonies seemed somehow richer and that walking bass grabbed you by the seat of your pants. I believe I actually joined in and sang!

What I didn't know at the time was that the music had never been published or even printed: the composer, former music teacher Arthur Hutchings, had merely sketched it in pencil at the back of the hymn book with an accompaniment laid out for piano but somehow looking as though it ought to be played on an organ. Uncle Reggie (as we called him) adapted the texture perfectly to suit our newly-restored instrument but never actually wrote down what he played and sometimes strayed a bit from the original as, for example, in the soundtrack of a 1954 film about the school where he even changed a couple of the chords.

Over the ensuing few years, singing of our theme tune to the organ became a firm tradition at every auspicious event but Mr. Foxwell's sudden and untimely death in January 1957, with no successor appointed until a year later, put the leading of the School Song into new hands: mine! I was by then a 6th former, one of two studying for A Level Music. The other student was Paul Green and, unbelievably, the pair of us were left to run most of the music in the school until a new teacher could be found. Paul did the conducting and I looked after the playing side, so the organ seat became almost my residential perch.

No-one knew what had become of the hymn book with the original pencilled song in the back, so I just played what had been embedded in my subconscious since 1953 and Paul taught singers the tune as we both remembered it. I'm pretty sure we got it exactly right and until we both left in 1958 it was delivered with great gusto on numerous occasions.

By the time Paul and I had departed, a new and well-qualified Head of Music (Keith Kent) had been appointed to the school, but I have no idea whether the song was kept on the go in subsequent years. This would have been possible only if the written copy were unearthed, as Mr. Kent, though a fine musician couldn't play by ear and I hadn't bothered to write it out during my tenure. The words, however, were printed in various school publications so never went astray.

For the next three decades, during my career as teacher, music adviser, schools inspector and finally Head of County Music Services, I had little contact with the school (and, to my eternal shame, never joined the Old Southendians) (you have now though Ed) so do not know how often, or in what form, the Song was used. However, in 1993, on taking early retirement from my Essex post, Michael Frampton asked me if I would care to return to SHSB and teach A Level music, to which I was pleased to agree; and so the link between me and the subject of this story was resuscitated. Soon after arrival I asked Richard Wade, the Head of Music, if the song was still used. His reply was 'not much, the music is pretty awful and there is only one tatty copy of it around.' I was slightly puzzled by that evaluation until I set eyes on that 'tatty copy', to find that the music had been considerably altered – even the first chord was wrong! – with some tasteless chromatics, though mercifully the melody was unadulterated.

How, and when, this garbled version had evolved remains a mystery.

Over the ensuing years I ran a crusade to re-instate its use, in original form, on every possible occasion, and wrote the whole thing out by hand from memory, every note and word of it, on a sheet of manuscript which was then photocopied and distributed.

Secretly I wondered if I really had remembered all the harmonies absolutely correctly after 40 years, but a couple of years later someone showed me an edition of the Old Southendian, dating from just after World War II, in which was printed a facsimile of Hutchings' original. For the first time in my life I set eyes on the genuine article! To my great relief, if not delight, it differed from my memorised version only in one passing note and a slightly spread chord. Obviously the time has now come for the music to be properly printed and set out to suit the organ for which it was first envisaged (including, at last, the grand coda!) and I hope to complete that during summer 2008.

This being a musician's account, I have thus far barely commented on the words and know relatively little of their background. They pre-date the music, we know, by at least a decade and were originally sung to a rather limp, Victorian-sounding, hymn tune.

Thank heavens for Arthur Hutchings! On first acquaintance the lyrics sounded a little dated (they are, of course, more than 80 years old) but the three verses currently in use are marvellously evocative of their time and when we sing them nostalgia flows in abundance. Recently I saw a copy of the two verses which have been omitted since the Thirties and can understand why! To my untrained eyes they seem dreadfully stilted, rather bad poetry and doubt they could ever hope to have commanded the almost reverent following the other verses over the years.

Hutchings' score is unquestionably one of the finest, if not the finest, of its genre – and that is not merely a personal opinion, since I have shown it to, and discussed it with, many notable musicians around the United Kingdom. The consensus is that, by comparison with ours, the more famous examples from Eton, Harrow, Rugby and the like sound banal and trite. The vigorous and shapely melody with a slight modal touch, and that fabulous bass line, impart a distinction which others can only envy. Southend High School For Boys and the Old Southendian Association can be proud of many unique traditions but none more so than the song that lives on in so many of our hearts.

Gerald Usher (*Athens, 1951-1958*)