

'Squirrel' 1963 (BRGS magazine)

Mr E. H. Holden

Headmaster: 1921-1948.

On Mr Holden's retirement in 1948, many paid tribute to his brilliance as a teacher and his distinction as a headmaster. I can well believe that in the former capacity he was eminently clear, incisive, thorough and successful, whilst I know that in the latter he was a first-rate administrator with a comprehensive grasp of every aspect of school life and an incredible interest in, and memory for, the many hundreds of pupils who passed through the School during the twenty-seven years he was at the helm. There are, of course, facts and figures to prove the great progress that the School made during this period: it expanded physically, the number of its pupils doubled, it acquired playing fields (almost certainly as the result of Mr Holden's initiative and enthusiasm), it developed all kinds of extracurricular activities, it gained the highest academic honours, it grew in reputation and perhaps most important of all, it sent out hundreds of young people to positions of responsibility in varying spheres of life and in different parts of the world. For this progress, none would deny that Mr Holden was ultimately responsible.

But a record of his achievements is not the whole man and, when I think of Mr Holden, it is not primarily the great headmaster I remember, but a warm and forceful personality with faults as well as virtues, weaknesses as well as strength. His great ability won my respect, but it was his humanity that evoked an affection that strengthened with the years.

Perhaps Mr Holden's most outstanding quality (and of course one reason for his success) was his selfless dedication to the welfare of the School. The School was his life; he gave unsparingly of his knowledge, his time, his energy. He was a meticulous planner, no detail was too small for his consideration. He would listen patiently to, and ponder long over, any suggestion or complaint by teacher, pupil or parent. I can see him now on such an occasion in his characteristic stance; head bent, hands clasped behind his back, pacing slowly up and down his study.

Mr Holden could at times be a hard taskmaster. He exacted the same high standards from his staff as he imposed upon himself: slackness, indifference, inefficiency he could not tolerate, indisposition was frowned upon. On the other hand, he could give unobtrusive help and encouragement to a young teacher in difficulty and in the case of genuine sickness or personal trouble no-one could be more concerned or sympathetic.

To me, a Southerner, Mr Holden was in many respects a typical Northerner. He was not always tactful, but he was sincere, straight and always scrupulously fair. He could be formidable in anger, but, invariably after a disagreement, he would meditate on the issue in hand and, if he felt he had been hasty or mistaken, he would apologize. It takes a 'big' man to do this.

It was in keeping with his integrity as a man that Mr Holden had a strong sense of professional loyalty. Whatever his private feelings may have been, he never discussed one teacher with another and he would vigorously defend his staff in the face of criticism by pupils, parents and outsiders. I can honestly say that I never heard him speak disparagingly of a colleague, even after his retirement, but no-one could have been more generous in praise. Essentially a modest man, Mr Holden never sought for personal acclaim or popularity – he was in fact embarrassed by it. On public occasions, such as speech days and concerts, as in private conversations, all credit for any success was given to staff and pupils.

One could write of Mr Holden's well-informed enthusiasm for all kinds of sport, not only for its physical and recreational benefits, but also for its character-building qualities. One could enlarge on his encouragement of the arts (though he remained a scientist at heart) and of all out-of-school activities. One could record too the difficulties, anxieties and frustration of the war years, which never found him at a loss. But my final and most enduring – and endearing – memory of Mr Holden is of his great kindness. I recall particularly one wet November afternoon when I went to tea with him and Mrs Holden (always his staunch ally) at Wimbledon. Had I been their daughter I could not have been welcomed with more warmth and affection. I was seated by the fire and plied with muffins – and questions, endless questions, about myself, about members of staff, the School, old students. Characteristically, Mr Holden did not want to talk about himself. We saw him twice after this and despite failing health, his concern for others, his eager interest in everything and everyone connected with BRGS remained with him to the end. Many hundreds of Rossendalians beside myself must have heard of his death in February 1958 with a sense of personal loss.

Mrs F. L. Ebden