

Top marks for school shoot

Fears for the younger generation were dispelled when Richard Negus visited Sedbergh School and saw their hard work

I was invited to give a speech at Sedbergh school. To be requested to speak at such an illustrious place of learning, or any school for that matter, is in concert both an honour and a trial.

The distinction of being singled out as sufficiently knowledgeable leaves you with a self-satisfied glow, swiftly followed by trepidation that you might be publicly outed as an unlettered yokel. My host was Dr Phil Hoskin, the seemingly inexhaustible live-wire master of Cressbrook, one of the 494-year-old school's prep houses.

The prep school lies in Casterton, some 20 minutes from the senior school in Sedbergh itself. Nestled at the foot of some spectacular Westmorland hills, it makes a passable impression of Hogwarts.

Dr Hoskin led me around Cressbrook. Rugby is an integral part of life at Sedbergh and the shirts of various old boys adorned the walls bearing England's rose and Scotland's thistle. The school seems to churn out rugby internationals with impunity. Leaving these sporting trophies

behind, I then found stuffed game birds and wildfowl; paintings of partridges and pheasants, posters of tractors and agricultural machinery. This school is not just 'in' the countryside, it is 'of' the countryside.

Arriving at the senior school I met chemistry teacher Andrew Worgan, who as well as his teaching role runs the conservation efforts around the school grounds. History oozes from every pore of this place, yet as we trudged through the rain to have a look at some ponds the pupils are renovating, we passed a new building called the Hirst Centre.

Clearing weed

It melts into the landscape – all sedum roof, local stone and contemporary design. Struggling through a raft of Himalayan balsam that surrounded one impressive pond called Bruce Lock, four mallard lifted off the water. Andrew pointed out where pupils were going to be tasked with clearing out this invasive weed and ranks of phragmites that threatened to choke the habitat.



Freddie checks the electric fence is working correctly before leaving the duck pond

He then took me to a five-acre copse of native trees, ranging in age from sapling to 15 years old, all planted by the pupils.

As we wandered through the plantation, it struck me that the young people who leave the school will be in a minority of teenagers who can tell an oak from a beech.

Andrew had teaching to get back to so he passed me on to the school's head of design, Simon 'Arnie' Arnold, the man behind Sedbergh's shoot. Alongside him, busily chatting about rucks and release pens, stood his underkeepers, bedecked in their school waterproofs.

I have encountered a few shoots at independent schools. The usual form seems to be that a keeper is employed and the whole thing runs along the lines of a syndicate.

Parents pay a large wedge of cash for their children merely to pitch up on a shoot day, oblivious to the skills



James (left) helps to ferry water bottles up to the pheasant shoot where they're poured into butts

and effort of those working to put birds over their peg.

Sedbergh does things in a refreshingly different way. Any pupil wanting to become a member of this shoot needs to pay his or her subs, a very reasonable fee, and work – lots of physical work. The shoot itself is situated some 25 minutes drive away from the school.

The first thing that struck me was the terrain. The shoot is very hilly, heavily wooded and narrow, with a large slab of glacial rock escarpment running horizontally along its length. Mr Arnold immediately set the boys to work in pairs, with each duo looking after a beat. I followed one group who headed off to the sturdy and spacious release pen, made by the pupils themselves.

Lugging feed

They lugged bags of feed (they made all the feeders in Mr Arnold's craft, design and technology classes) and hefted endless water containers up the steep banks to fill the bowsters. The birds were starting to feather up well and took shelter from the never-ending rain (unsurprisingly the shelters were also made by the boys).

While I stood watching all this physical endeavour in churning mud and atrocious weather, my mind returned to the school's motto: *Dura virum nutrix* (A stern nurse of men). While Mr Arnold is no 'stern nurse' – he is an approachable and knowledgeable mentor – the climate and landscape here certainly is.

Another motto the school uses is 'Resilience', a trait that I saw in abundance. Not once did I hear a complaint from the mud-daubed pupils as they went about their work,

soaked to the skin and weighed down by grain and water.

The perceived wisdom is that the youth of today are an indolent bunch. Public-school children, in particular, we are told, live in a gilded cage, cut off from the strife and struggle of we mere mortals. Sedbergh is doing something right. This is a thriving

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shoot that puts down 1,000 birds. The boys will shoot three times in the season and they will relish every bird they kill and cook in their house kitchens because their sweat and toil is responsible for their sport.

Glad to get back to my truck and out of the deluge, we motored back to Sedbergh where I shook hands and bid adieu to Mr Arnold and his underkeepers. These young men and women know they are fortunate to attend a school where the fees amount to more than my annual salary.

But there was something reassuring in watching these students getting dirty and learning about shooting from the ground up. It gave me a sense of hope for the future management of the countryside, for surely, I thought, this is where many of their futures will lie.

Peeling off my waterproofs I got dressed into clothing that passes for my 'smart attire' and prepared for my lecture at Cressbrook House. An auditorium of faces looked down at me, aged from the youthful prep school boys and girls to former pupils and masters.

Strong ethos

My title was *Ask the fellows who cut the hay*, an appeal to them to hold in regard the keepers, farmers and, indeed, hedge-layers who get their hands dirty so that others may enjoy fieldsports and the countryside.

I had written my speech well before I had visited the school's shoot, and midway through my diatribe I

realised I was speaking to the wrong group of people.

The school's ethos of resilience, the rugby, the physical work and the harsh landscape has already imbued these young people with a strong understanding of the British countryside and its people.

I couldn't afford to send my son to Sedbergh, but I was impressed with the place and I will take Mr Arnold up on his offer to return on a shoot day. If the boys shoot half as well as they graft, it will be a day to remember.

Below: Richard Negus gives a talk about the vital work of countryside workers



Andrew Worgan (left) and Richard Negus survey the reeds targeted for clearance