'This place can transform lives'

That's the message from a state boarding school head on his retirement, says **Chris Woodhead**

Picture: PHILIP HOLLIS



only recognise what a state boarding school can offer." I was talking to Chris Potter, who has just retired after 23 years as head teacher of Old Swinford Hospital School in Stourbridge, West Midlands. Its reputation has recently spread to some of the most disadvantaged south London housing estates.

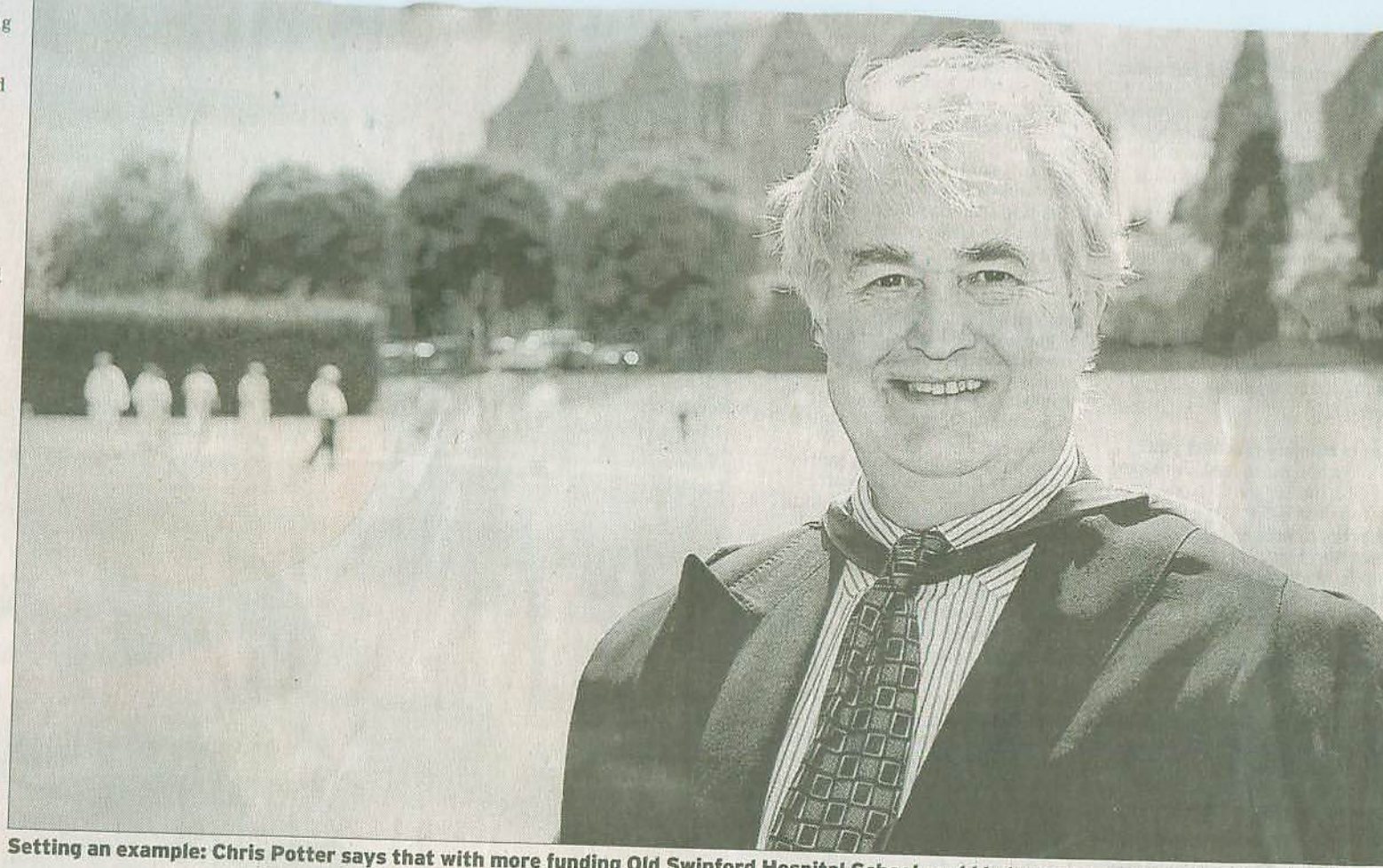
"This year, we've had 17 applications from African-Caribbean families who are desperate for their boys to come and board with us," said Potter.

Listening to him, I could understand why. Old Swinford is no bog-standard comprehensive. The majority of boys board, which is rare, even in that handful of state schools that have some boarding provision. Academic standards are exceptionally high. The school has topped the league tables for non-selective schools more than once. Last year, eight boys won Oxbridge places. The facilities are superb. There is a wide range of sporting and extra-curricular activities.

Above all, it is a deeply traditional school. What matters most to Potter, his staff and, I suspect, the boys are old-fashioned virtues such as respect, honesty and loyalty.

When I talked to some of the prefects, they moaned about the absurdity of AS-level examinations and "key skills", but when they started talking about the school, they could not have been more positive. The word "community" was used repeatedly. Old Swinford was a school where you made friends who mattered, where expectations and rewards were high, where teachers were talented and accessible. "How much have you been paid?" I joked. The reply was that they meant it and I am certain that they did.

The school was founded in 1667 by Thomas Foley, a rich merchant who had wanted to give 60 poor boys from parishes in Worcestershire and Staffordshire the opportunity "to learn to read and write and cast accounts". With 535 boys on the roll, it is larger now than it has ever been. One year recently, there were five applications for every place. Boarders are interviewed to see whether they are likely to fit in and contribute to the life of the school, but they are not selected on academic ability.



Setting an example: Chris Potter says that with more funding Old Swinford Hospital School could help many more disadvantaged children

The boarding fees are £6,000 a year — low compared with those charged by independent schools, but for many a hefty sum. The trustees do what they can to help with cases of real hardship.

Potter would like to be able to do a lot more. He accepts that boarding and the Old Swinford ethos are not for everybody, but he knows that boys who were languishing in ordinary comprehensives have flourished in this more structured environment. "If we had a £40,000 grant," he said, "we could transform the lives of another seven boys, whose lives might otherwise be ruined." Neither of us mentioned Damilola Taylor, but we were both, I am certain, thinking of him and, indeed, of the four teenagers charged with his murder.

Forty thousand pounds is peanuts in the great Government scheme of things. Millions of pounds, as Potter reminded me, have been wasted introducing the new performance pay scheme for teachers.

One little anecdote summed up the whole bureaucratic absurdity. Everybody knew that Potter was retiring this summer, but an adviser had to visit the school to talk to the governors about the targets they should set so that they would be able to assess his performance next year.

His message was clear: we would have better schools if politicians and bureaucrats understood what education was really about and what parents wanted for their children, if they stopped inventing harebrained schemes that do little or nothing for the young children roaming the streets, if they were more prepared to trust schools such as Old Swinford that have a proven record of success.

Potter spent his last week as a teacher back in the classroom where he began. His father and his grandfather were both head teachers. He has run Old Swinford in, as he put it, "a straight down the line way". It has worked and he will be sorely missed.

A sensible Government that really believed in diversity and choice would fund the school so that it could help more boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. And it would appoint Potter to the National College of School Leadership so that his commonsense wisdom might benefit the next generation of head teachers.

Boarding places

State boarding schools offer high-quality education at a low cost. Parents pay only for boarding costs – a fraction of the fee for an equivalent place in the independent sector.

Sixth-form boarding is an excellent preparation for university or employment away from home. All schools have boarding and day pupils. Boarders have a ready-made circle of friends in their boarding house and the chance to mix with local children. Weekly boarding is increasingly available.

● ***'The Parents' Guide to Maintained Boarding Schools' is available free from the Department for Education and Employment Publications Centre, PO Box 5050, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 6ZQ.***