

Basil Boothroyd: Writer, Humorist, and Broadcaster

Item of Interest No 70

From the Garton Archive at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School

Compiled by Peter Harrod

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John Basil Boothroyd

It would be pleasing to claim, just for the drama of it, that in September 1919, I set fire to Burghersh Chantry, Lincoln's low old sprawling Choir School, tucked down an obscure lane of the cathedral precincts. I was nine, young for an incendiary, and in fact innocent, having slept through it all and missed it. What a swizz.

So begins Basil Boothroyd's autobiography, *A Shoulder to Laugh on*, which proclaims his association with Lincoln, and who went on from the Choir School to attend Lincoln School as a boarder.

Basil Boothroyd has earned a place in Professor Charles Garton's *Lincoln School: A Summary Honours Board* as a writer and broadcaster. He is recorded as having contributed to *Punch* from 1938 and has written over two million words for the magazine, becoming its assistant editor from 1952 to 1970. He received the Best Comedy Award for broadcasting in 1976. His major contribution to television was the 1979 BBC series, *The Diary of a Nobody*.

Wikipedia fills in some of the detail informing us that John Basil Boothroyd was born in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, on 4th March 1910, later describing his birthplace as either in the heart of the Nottinghamshire coalfield, or in beautiful Sherwood Forest, depending on the nature of the article he was writing. He was an English writer and humorist best known for his long association with the satirical magazine *Punch*. As a

young man he worked for a bank, but began contributing articles to *Punch*, and became its assistant editor to Malcolm Muggeridge, a post in which he served for eighteen years. His career as a writer for the magazine spanned the editorships of E V Knox to Alan Coren. Boothroyd's chief literary work outside the comic essay genre was an official biography of Prince Philip undertaken at the request of its subject in which he described the Prince as a man of 'invincible honesty' and 'great kindness'. Boothroyd also wrote for television and radio and was a frequent broadcaster for the BBC over many years.

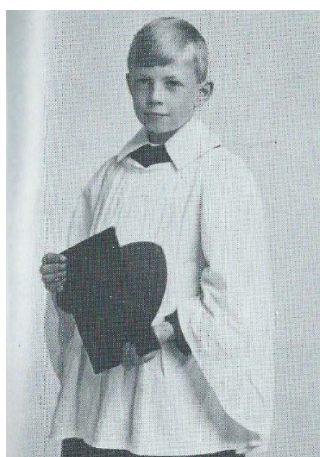
The Lincoln School Admissions register recorded that Basil Boothroyd had been privately educated before enrolling in the School. In one of his radio talks, *Educational Notes*, he informed listeners that his first headmaster was a headmistress, a Miss Bertram who wore a striped blouse with a high-boned collar. He humorously labelled himself as a 'mixed infant'. He then went on to boarding school and began his musical education as a choirboy at Lincoln Cathedral Choir School, otherwise known as the Song School (See Note 1 below). In his autobiography *A Shoulder to Laugh on* he claims that in 1919, when he was 9 years old, he set fire to the Burghersh Chantry. In that old building in James Street near the cathedral precincts, the choirboys slept several to a room perhaps dreaming about tomorrow's Matins or Evensong and wondering if they could reach the high B-flat of Stanford's Magnificat, and how much would the Cathedral organist and choirmaster 'Old Bennett' (See Note 2 below) grunt from the organ loft as he strove to hold back the choir from hurrying the psalms. Elsewhere (Punch, 19 September 1968) Boothroyd wrote that he had his first taste of tobacco from Old Bennett, who apparently smoked a hookah. His yellow-stained fingers reeked of nicotine as he forced his young protégé's mouth apart to encourage the properly rounded notes to emerge, and complaining, "Boys won't open their mouths – that's the trouble with boys." In the same article, Boothroyd described his Song School 'initiation ritual'. He was manhandled onto a piano stool and told to play something. That was no problem for Basil. He could have opted for some simplified Chopin (he was not yet able to stretch an octave) or Schumann's *Merry Peasant*. However, the entertainer in him settled for *Chopsticks*, notorious as a piece for those who cannot play anything else, and was painfully ostracised for it!

Boothroyd wrote that education at the Song School was a hit-and-miss affair. The mornings and afternoons were spent mainly in the Song School, and somewhere in between the choirboys had to wedge in a little Latin. They rapidly learned to sing and study simultaneously, and Basil recalled that well-placed worshippers could be surprised to see that the boys had been fluting 'O Lord make haste to help us' from *First Steps in Latin*; its title invariably amended by accepted practice to *First Steps in Eating*! In my own case it was Kennedy's 'Eating' Primer, so little had changed in some 40 years other than the textbook! Boys will always be boys!

After the Choir School had apparently 'foundered and sunk', later to be 'reconstituted and to flourish', the boys found themselves lodged with vergers and their wives, or

other 'good cathedral souls'. They also found themselves learning fresh settings, having been 'disruptingly whisked into Lincoln School as day boys.' At Lincoln School, Boothroyd described the choirboys as 'creatures apart', dressed as they were in their Eton suits and collars, mortar boards, and the choir's retained uniform. They were regarded by the other boys with a mixture of envy and scorn! They rose and left classrooms at will with staff scarcely nodding from their elevated dais as they smugly trotted off to sing. Time was of the essence. The Chantry had been a mere two minutes' scuttle from the cathedral; Lincoln School was a mile away down Wragby Road. Long division and Pitt the Younger were joyfully abandoned with ample time in hand! According to Basil, the School was nothing; the Cathedral everything.

Then the voice went, from top 'A's to bottom 'B-flat's with intervening yodelling, and Basil became a boarder at Lincoln School with full attendance. He was not considered to be the 'university-going class', and failed to pass many examinations, confessing to getting 14 out of 400 in his last Maths paper. It is impossible to judge the effect of the disruption of being a chorister on Basil's school career, but it must surely have had an impact. In fact, in one of his radio broadcasts, *My Kind of Country*, he confessed that being a chorister at Lincoln school was 'a bit of a lark' because he could always stand up in class and say, "Got to go and sing the Litany, Sir", and he wondered if that was why he had so many gaps in his education. He pointed out that if the Litany had occurred in the middle of a history lesson every time for four or five years, he would have missed a terrible lot of history! Nevertheless, there is one indication of his burgeoning talent that I was able to find by scouring the pages of *The Lincolnian* magazines: he won the English Literature Prize in 1926, his final year at the School.



The Cherubic Lincoln Cathedral Choirboy

Despite his alleged mediocre school career, however, and following a brief episode in banking at Lloyd's Bank in Horncastle where he was a member of the town's amateur dramatic society, Boothroyd managed to pursue a highly successful career

as an assistant editor of *Punch*, and a writer for films, television and radio, earning the Best Comedy Award in 1976. The Old Boys' Chronicle of the Christmas 1937 edition of *The Lincolnian* magazine recorded his early talents as a writer reporting that the former bank clerk had published an amusing work entitled *The Adventures of Mr Pitkin, Bank Manger*. This was a collection of articles published in *The Dark Horse*, the Lloyd's Bank staff magazine, which had attracted interest from all over the world.

In addition to his many articles, Boothroyd also wrote several books, and copies of most of them are shelved on Professor Charles Garton's ex-libris collection in the Garton Archive at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School. His musical education enabled him to join a band as a saxophonist, and he demonstrated his versatility by joining the St Pancras People's Theatre repertory company for a while. Although not considered at school to be one of the 'university-going class', Boothroyd did have some interesting views on the academic élite. His book *Boothroyd at Bay* is a collection of transcripts from his many radio talks, and the following passage is taken from a talk titled, 'Too late for learning':

I wonder if people still talk about 'The Varsity'? Hope not. It's hard to believe they ever did, somehow. There probably isn't another word in the language as packed with instant class and built-in privilege, and if it's vanished from circulation, it's not before time.

Boothroyd went on to point out, no doubt with a touch of irony, that the term 'Varsity Man' referred only to Oxford or Cambridge and that Leeds or Leicester would have been considered as second or third choice had he ever had the chance to be in a position to apply for a university place. Even in the 1920s, when only a very small proportion of people went to university, there was a strict hierarchy based largely on tradition, elitism, and prejudice. He gave two reasons why he did not go to university; he hadn't the brains and his family hadn't the money. However, it so happened that his first employment was in a bank in Cambridge and he wrote that he 'got in with a bunch of – well, Varsity men!' That passage is a good illustration not only of Boothroyd's social attitudes, but also his humour, his wit, and his command of the English language and its playful nuances. Oh dear! I can hear his English master at Lincoln School intoning, 'Boothroyd! Where's the finite verb in that sentence?' And just imagine the wrath that would have descended upon him had he split an infinitive or begun a sentence with the word 'and'! I have to point out, however, that these were transcripts of spoken English and it does seem, from his colleagues' eulogistic tributes listed below, that Boothroyd was in fact something of a perfectionist when it came to the minutiae of the written word.

During the Second World War Boothroyd joined the RAF Police as an instructor. He was later commissioned and became personal assistant to the Provost Marshall, being demobbed in 1945 with the rank of Flight Lieutenant. In a passage from the same book of radio talks, he wrote that one of the chief attractions of joining the RAF

was that even those men in its lowest form of life were allowed to wear a collar and tie, whereas in the Army or the Navy you had to get yourself commissioned first. When he did come before a commissioning board, and some Air Vice-Marshall fired at him the stock question about why he had picked the Air Force, he recounted the story about the collar and tie and was rejected for trying to be funny. The great danger in having a sense of humour, Boothroyd bemoaned, was trying it on with someone who hadn't got one. He knew better the next time he appeared before the board, replying to the same question by saying that it was because the RAF was the finest fighting service in the world, and was accepted 'like a shot'! He also found humour in service life as the titles of two of his books suggest: *Are Sergeants Human?* and *Are Officers Necessary?*

In 1970 Boothroyd was invited to write the official biography of the Duke of Edinburgh apparently at the duke's request. The Times review described the book as 'lightly and elegantly written' and commented on both the quality of research and the occasional frivolous detail. However, no mention was made of his use of punctuation! More significantly, perhaps, the book was well received by the duke himself. Having been consulted throughout the process of writing it, Prince Philip gave it the seal of approval, well documented in *A Shoulder to Laugh on*. Having been a considerate critic in reading the drafts, with the occasional 'gentle rebuke' he finally wrote in a letter to Boothroyd that he had discharged his biographer with full remission for considerate behaviour after two years of hard labour. He also warned him, and possibly himself, to stand by for the critics! It should be pointed out, however, that the biography was published in 1971, some fifty years before the prince died, and there was plenty more 'biography' to follow! Perhaps the qualifying adjective in the book's title should have been 'provisional' rather than 'informal'? In fact, the book topped the best-selling non-fiction lists for several weeks.

One of Professor Charles Garton's 'Numbered folders' contains correspondence between Charles and Boothroyd. In one exchange, Charles told him that he had read about the biography of Prince Philip with enormous pleasure, describing it as 'original in both approach and style' and mentioning one of Philip's many anecdotes, "I declare this thing open – wherever it is!" In his reply to Charles, Boothroyd wrote that he liked the prince but writing the book was a chore, and he used to wake up in the night realising that he must have been out of his mind to have agreed to it.

Alan Coren, who wrote Boothroyd's obituary, described him as 'the most professional writer he had ever known, and consequently the most self-punishing and least self-satisfied.' He was obsessed with 'making a sentence right' or searching his 'bottomless vocabulary' for the *mot juste* that he was seeking. Very few, wrote Coren, would have sat as he did staring at a typed semi-colon for half an hour and wondering whether a full colon might have produced a more effective pause, and then returning to the script some two hours later and changing it to a comma! I wonder if some Lincoln School English master might have been to blame for such obsessive attention to detail? Conversely, the School should undoubtedly

take some of the credit for his skill and talent as a writer. As a former teacher myself I am aware how challenging it is to strike the right balance between the compositional and secretarial features of written English. However, I do know where my own priorities lie and it is not with commas and colons, semi or otherwise! However, no one should criticise his attention to detail in his writing, and he admits in his autobiography that he 'writes very, very slowly in a hut in the garden.'

I am quite sure that many readers will remember *The Gossiper* columns in the Lincolnshire Echo. 'Gossiper' Fred Morton's column of 10th July 1961 reported that a select circle of Lincoln School pupils and their parents were treated to a private peep into the pages of *Punch* at the School's annual speech day at which the guest of honour was old boy Basil Boothroyd. Basil treated the audience to several samples of his humour, including a story about a soprano in a church choir who lost her stiletto-heeled shoe as she was singing while processiing. The heel stuck in a grating but with great presence of mind she lifted her foot out and, without missing a beat, carried on singing in the procession. Following her was a man who, with equal presence of mind, picked up the shoe with the grating attached and walked on also without missing a beat. However, it was the chap who came next who missed a beat. He fell into the hole! Forever the humorist! Headmaster Patrick Martin had invited Boothroyd who replied that he really had no excuse for not accepting the flattering invitation, but that the whole idea filled him with emotions so complex as to be practically suffocating (correspondence in Professor Garton's numbered folder). Two years later Boothroyd was the guest of Roy Plumley's Desert Island Discs during which he revealed that his musical tastes varied from Mozart to Dave Brubeck.

There was a special place in Boothroyd's heart, as indeed there is in mine, for the novelist P G Wodehouse not least because both he and Boothroyd began work as bankers. Wodehouse wrote of Boothroyd, 'There are very few humorists you can rely on to be funny every time. In fact, I can only think of one. He is a writer of whom I never miss a word.' There can surely be no greater tribute to one of Lincoln School's most distinguished alumni. Basil Boothroyd, of Cuckfield, West Sussex, died on the 27th February, 1988 leaving a wife and a son. His estate was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* to be worth over £120,000.

Note 1

A history of the Song School may be found in 'Item of Interest 45' from the Garton Archive: *Lincoln School Choristers*. Some of the same sources are used for parts of this article.

Note 2

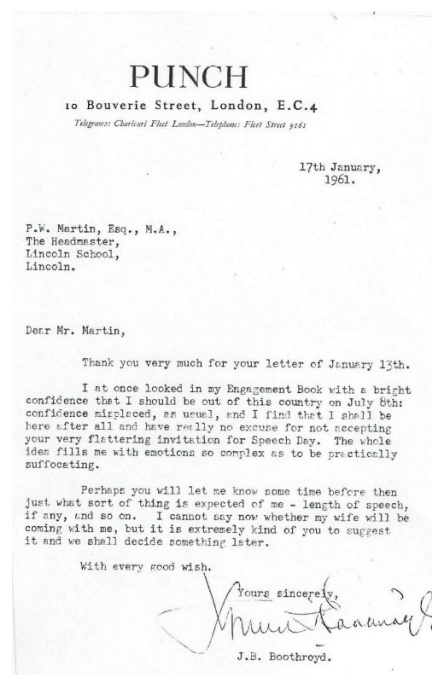
An article on Lincoln Cathedral music published in *Lincolnshire Life* described two towering figures in the shape of its organists who were largely responsible for the

direction of its music and musical events. Dr George John Bennett, appointed in 1896, was described as a dynamic figure who was responsible, with the financial aid of Lincoln industrialist Alfred Shuttleworth and others, for restoring the famous Willis organ, described by the Precentor as a 'queer old instrument', to its full glory. The other towering figure was, of course, Dr Gordon 'Gassy' Slater, who succeeded Dr Bennett in 1931 and served until 1966.

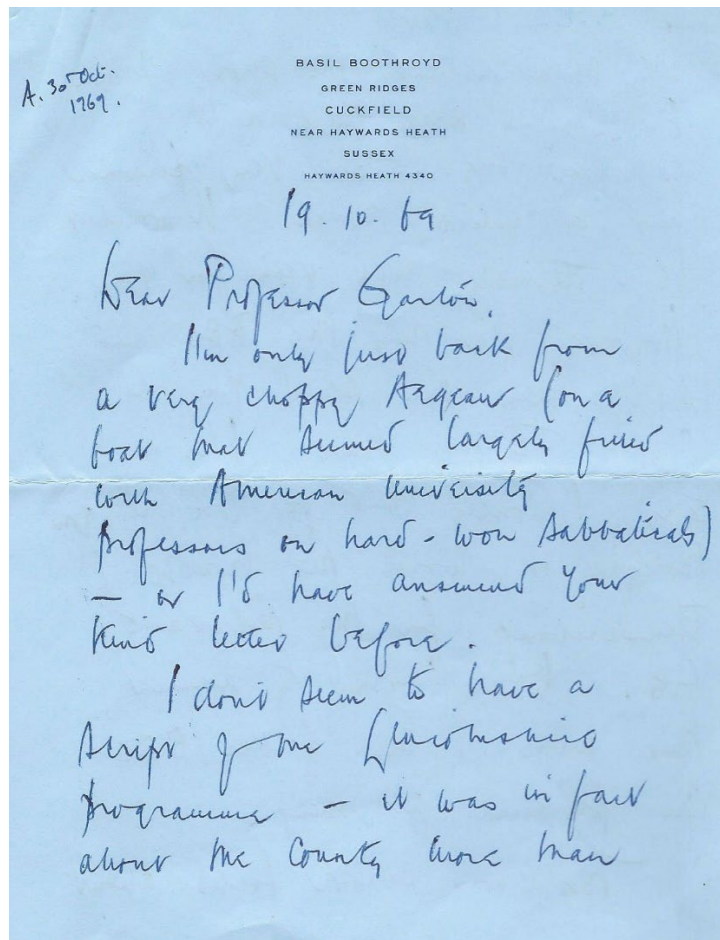
Reg Woodward, another distinguished Old Lincolnian and cathedral choirboy, described the Cathedral as a world of its own; a world of rules and protocols presided over by a hierarchy of clergy, some of whom bore a striking resemblance to the fierce Old Testament prophets featured in the stained-glass windows! For a choirboy, however, the entire universe revolved around the organist and choirmaster, Dr Bennett, who apparently enjoyed something of a turbulent relationship with many of the Cathedral dignitaries!

In those days the boys wore Eton suits and collars, topped by mortar boards, and striped trousers. Dr Bennett had a violent temper, and in the Song School at Lincoln Cathedral he would haul out a boy by the collar and administer a beating with a hard and heavy hand over the benches. Apparently, however, this somewhat sadistic streak, not unknown to schoolmasters of the time, was tempered by acts of genuine kindness.

Appendix One: Boothroyd's Lincoln School Speech Day acceptance letter



Appendix Two: A sample of Boothroyd's handwriting taken from a letter to Professor Charles Garton



References

Basil Boothroyd (1987) *A Shoulder to Laugh on: an Autobiography* St Edmundsbury Press Ltd

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www.lincolnshirelife.co.uk/heritage Lincoln Cathedral Music