

A trip to the Palace

Barrie Martin is Chairman of the Friends of Queen Elizabeth's, and you may already have met him without realising it. He greets would-be Year 7 pupils, as they queue to take their entrance exams, and his bronze bust presides over the entrance foyer to the swimming pool. When Barrie agreed to meet myself, Quentin Carruthers, and German exchange student David Kuerstgens, our plan was straightforward: to interview him about his recent trip to Buckingham Palace in February to collect his Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) award from Prince Charles, and roll out that red carpet for you to read here. How wrong we were!

Instead, over a cup of tea, we first learnt that Charlemagne – King of the Franks between 768 and 814 – established his capital in Aachen. You see, Barrie loves history and David is from Aachen in Germany, so David had quickly become the interviewee, as much as Barrie.

This was a chance, also, to find out a little more about Barrie's own background. It turns out that he had a difficult start to his own education, suffering from acute kidney disease as a child from the age of ten to fourteen, until a new medicine from America helped him recover. Despite having shown great academic promise, Barrie's poor health set him back. He left school at the age of 16 and went to work for the local estate agent and surveyors firm. He started studying in his own time and went on to pass, first time, all his chartered surveyor exams – an achievement he remains proud of today.

"That was the time," Barrie says, "when I realised how important education is."



Barrie Martin MBE

The MBE awarded to Barrie is for his long-term contribution to education as a school governor, not just at Queen Elizabeth's School – where he is Chairman of the Governing Body - but also as a governor at his sons' primary school. In 1987, when Barrie's elder son Piers joined QE, there happened to be a new headmaster, Eamonn Harris. This was a crucial moment in the long history of the school, which had slipped into becoming an under-subscribed school, after more than a decade spent as a non-selective, comprehensive school.

“Mr Harris saw that the school was failing and he wanted to change it,” recalls Barrie. “So he set out to get the parents to cooperate with him, to have them encourage their boys to do well, and he made discipline stronger. The buildings were also in a poor state. As a surveyor, I could help him with the buildings, which was when I started my commitment to QE.”

And so, onto the interview . . .

David: What happened, when you received your MBE?

Barrie: To my great surprise, I got a letter in mid-November, from the head of the civil service on behalf of the Prime Minister, saying that he was minded to ask the Queen if I would accept the honour of becoming a Member of the British Empire. I thought, “Is this real? Is someone trying to get money out of me?!”

Of course, I said ‘Yes’. But when I later checked the 2014 New Year's Honours List, I just couldn't find my name. There are all sorts of honours, down to and including a medal, and I was running through the list. Then, on the next page, I found my name.

David: How did you feel about going to Buckingham Palace?

Barrie: Well, you are allowed to bring three guests with you. I thought, “Fine, I will take my wife and my two sons with me.” But my sons don't live in London – my older son lives in Cheshire and my younger son lives in Bath. At the time, there were floods here in England, as well as a scheduled tube strike. So I was very anxious beforehand.

In the end, everything went well. My sons made it to London and the tube strike was called off. When we finally arrived at Buckingham Palace, they checked the car and then they separated the guests from those receiving the awards. I walked through the picture gallery - which is a very big room – and I still kept thinking that something might go wrong, that I might trip up.

David: What did you speak about with Prince Charles?

Barrie: The people receiving their MBEs are called out ten or twelve at a time. Somebody whispers in Prince Charles' ear, to tell him what the MBE is for. I was all ready to talk about the top universities where QE sends its pupils, and that they play rugby too. And then Prince Charles said, "I hear that Queen Elizabeth's is a very good music school."

David: What do you want to do in your future – do you have any plans?

Barrie: That's very kind of you to ask! I want to catch up on my education, through reading and listening. I also want to improve my knowledge of languages – to show others that the English are not as bad at speaking foreign languages as they think – and to travel.

Barrie's travel tips

Barrie always tries to speak the local language whenever he travels to a foreign country, by ordering something from a cafe and by buying some stamps. Here are Barrie's phrases, with German translations provided for his next trip – a cruise down the Danube.

- 1 Please may I have two stamps for a postcard to England?
Könnte ich zwei Briefmarken für eine Postkarte nach England haben, bitte?
- 2 Please may I have a cup of tea with milk and a piece of cake?
Ich hätte gerne eine Tasse Tee mit Milch und ein Stück Kuchen?

Barrie adds, that it's also very useful to be able to count!

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