

JOHN HOPKINS
A Tribute from Professor Graham Virgo QC (Hon)

I first heard the name of Mr John Hopkins in May 1983 from my head teacher who had heard I was contemplating applying for Law at University and who encouraged me to consider Cambridge. He sent me a note: 'think about Downing, our friend John Hopkins is there'. Even though he was the head of a large comprehensive school in the Midlands, which rarely sent students to Oxbridge, of course John Hopkins knew him – he cultivated links to many schools.

It was suggested that I go to Downing to meet Mr Hopkins. I went to his room and knocked. He shouted 'Come', in that unmistakable booming voice and I opened the door.

What did I expect? The stereotypical Cambridge don's study? I suppose it was: lots of books/piles of papers/mismatched furniture/pipe smoke. The stereotypical don? Perhaps. Mr Hopkins sitting in that slightly too big for him chair – austere, patrician, with pipe in hand. Then he smiled and I saw that mischievous glint in his eye – not what I was expecting – and of course obviously not stereotypical – unique.

I sat opposite him in the smaller green interview chair – the one which felt that it could give way at any moment. I perched on the edge and we started to talk, or at least he did. I was very shy and he told me, as I saw so often with hundreds of applicants subsequently: 'sit back you, will find it a lot more comfortable'. I did and I did. He seemed genuinely interested in me and encouraged me to apply. I did.

I was interviewed in December. First by Mr Harpum. Then by Mr Hopkins and Mr Lloyd-Jones – as he then was - together. This was before the *Liversidge v Anderson* days, where the candidate was given a piece of paper with 'the Secretary of State has reasonable cause to believe' and had to interpret it. My interview was more conversational: why Law, what did I think of Lord Denning and then, if I was marooned on a desert island what record would I leave behind never to hear again? If I had said something by Wagner or Mozart my life might have been very different.

I was offered a place. Mr Hopkins obviously saw something of the Squirrel Nutkin rather than the Eeyore: his answer whenever asked what he was looking for – students who were wide-eyed and bushy-tailed.

I had three life-changing years – particularly because of Hoppo, as we called him, and his supervisions where we were taught to think like lawyers. In the first year: Constitutional Law and Roman Law on a Saturday morning. In the second year: International Law, which we all thought was a compulsory subject. Equity in the third year – where Hoppo exhibited rigorous analysis, a search for logic and structure and principle, and was critical of judges: sometimes saying, 'I taught him you know – he never understood Equity.' And there were supervisions in Tort and Contract with Cherry too. Hoppo and Choppo the dream team.

Hoppo did hours of supervisions for Downing and many Colleges each year and this continued after his retirement, at Hughes Hall.

Hoppo was Director of Studies and Tutor to the Downing lawyers. He provided careers advice to us. In the second year he would sit us down and tell us which Law firm or which Chambers to apply to. For me, it was Cloward Chance and various mini-pupillages. I decided to become a barrister. Whilst at Bar School, he wrote to me and suggested I come back to Downing to teach. I did and taught Law with John for the next 15 years.

I learned a great deal from John over that time. How to interview applicants. How to supervise. How he genuinely liked students. He was interested in them and shared with them their

triumphs and disasters, whether academic or sporting. He cared about his students, and would invite them to his room for a chat if he was concerned about their welfare or if he felt that he needed to light a rocket to get them to focus on their studies, an approach which usually succeeded. His approach was student-centred. At a time when universities are being swamped by data and judged by metrics we must never lose sight of the students as individuals at the heart of the university.

John had a particularly impressive tendency following a meeting with a student who needed their spirits lifted to say to me as the student left, but before the door closed, 'she is really bright' or 'he could get a first if he knuckled down'. The door shut and then he would tell me: 'I meant them to hear that'. But timing is everything and when I have tried the same technique, often the door has shut before I got the words out.

John's care of his students continued after graduation. He provided an extraordinary after-care service. He had a prodigious memory for his former students' names and schools. He was a life-long mentor and adviser. He had a profound influence on my own career. Even now when I have to make a significant career decision I find myself thinking, 'and what would John say?'

At the end of the academic year John's teaching did not stop. Every July he would teach American law students from Mississippi and Richmond international law. I well remember his speeches at the end of course dinner for the Mississippi lawyers. Perhaps then he consciously played the part of the stereotypical English don, giving them what they wanted and welcoming them back to 'the true allegiance': he could easily have said he wanted them to 'Make America Great Britain Again'.

Over the forty plus years as a Fellow at Downing, John built Law in the College. Numbers applying and being admitted increased under his guidance. He also built up the College law library. At the end of Easter Term he would solicit a 'voluntary contribution' from his students and would go with the other Law fellows on a road trip to Wildy's warehouse in London: a truly Dickensian building, where he would build up collections, book by book, filling gaps each year and then returning to Downing with the boot of his car full of books.

John had a profound influence on the College, including as Senior Tutor and Admissions Tutor. But fellowships being what they are, John did not always see eye to eye with all the Fellows. I remember the retirement dinner of one Fellow who disagreed with John about just about everything. In his speech at the dinner that Fellow said directly to John: 'We will never agree about much, but I respect you for what you have done for the College and because you care about the students'.

John was strong-willed, but he was willing to admit when he got things wrong. Most significantly, he acknowledged readily that his early opposition to admitting women to the College was wrong and he became a strong encourager of women forging successful careers in the Law.

What makes a great man? Personal achievements certainly – and with John there were many. But the true mark of greatness is personal influence. For those of us he influenced, we carry on what we learned from him and will pass it down the generations. I know that this is true of John's children and his grandchildren in whom he took intense pride. It is true of those he taught and who have gone into the law, as judge, partner, barrister or solicitor, or who have done other extraordinary things. It is true of those he taught and who now teach – who aspire to exhibit his intellectual rigour, clarity of thought and expression, compassion, humour, fun – this is the standard by which great teaching is judged.

This is the mark of a great man – his influence on all of us here - whatever we called him, Mr Hopkins, Hoppo, John, and whatever we went on to do - he was our friend at Downing.