

Seven Stories

Ampleforth



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What makes Ampleforth so special? Why do people keep coming back to the valley throughout their lives? Is it the tranquillity and beauty of the place? The grandeur of the buildings? The kindness and wisdom of the monks? The memory of happy times, learning and growing? Or is it something that runs deeper, something more difficult to explain?

It has been said that people who leave Ampleforth for the wider world take with them 'a compass for life' – a personal direction-finder that will always allow them to hold onto their moral bearings; to seek their own true north, even when life is treating them roughly. This is not the arrogance or overweening self-confidence of youth but a quiet, steady sense of one's place in the world.

Of course, the first-class teaching and outstanding, all-round education, the broad social experience, the magnificent setting and facilities have something to do with this. Where Ampleforth is truly different, however, is in the Benedictine ethos that forms the bedrock of everything that happens in the college and its prep school, St Martin's Ampleforth. Compassion, inclusion and generosity, not always so easy to find in the modern world, are just three of St Benedict's principles.

But this idea of a compass means different things to different people. Rather than try to explain it ourselves, we've invited seven Old Amplefordians to tell their own stories. We hope you enjoy them.



OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Sebastian Wade



‘You get a keen sense of your own worth when someone wants to ransom you for four AA batteries and a bag of doughnuts’



‘You get a keen sense of your own worth when someone wants to ransom you for four AA batteries and a bag of doughnuts,’ says Sebastian Wade. He is recalling his experiences negotiating with Liberian rebels during the Sierra Leone conflict in 2003.

By his own admission, adventure was one of the main attractions of army life and during a sixteen-year career in the Grenadier Guards, he was seldom short of it. In Northern Ireland he dodged petrol bombs. In Sierra Leone he travelled unarmed into rebel territory. As a peacekeeper in Bosnia he rounded up criminals. In Basra he ran a prison with a hundred Iraqi detainees. Most recently he gathered intelligence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Now he has left the army and is about to take up his first civilian job, in Dubai, helping the Abu Dhabi civil service train its leaders. ‘I’ve come to be fascinated by the leadership and management, the psychology of large groups of people,’ he says.

It’s a fascination that began when he left Ampleforth and spent two months training at

the then Guards Depot at Pirbright. Aged eighteen, he found himself in charge of twenty-four recruits. He was the third youngest of the group and one of only three without a criminal record. It was the most challenging experience of his life.

‘I went from boy to man overnight,’ Sebastian says. ‘But looking back, I think Ampleforth gave me a head start. The Benedictine way is a very generous, giving one. It makes you open-minded, ready to look for attributes in others, ready to believe that everyone has something to offer – and that allows people to trust you. Though I don’t think I realised that’s what it was at the time.’

He went on to Exeter University where he read chemistry and played international level rugby for the Combined Services team, before entering Sandhurst and a career that has since offered him all the excitement he could have wanted. Though there are other aspects of army life that he found equally rewarding. ‘In Sierra Leone, for example, I really felt as if we were a force for good,’ he says. ‘One person like me, in a huge geographical area, could

make a big difference by sorting out something like medical supplies. Here in the UK we’d have been strangled by red tape.’

Sebastian’s understanding of the way organisations work has brought him a new respect for Ampleforth, to which he returns quite regularly. ‘I love the place,’ he says, ‘the feeling of homeliness, of permanence. Yet it’s not stuck in the past. On the contrary, it’s very forward-thinking. It’s an unselfish place whose approach to leadership sits very well with the modern world. The sense of community makes it a really strong institution.’

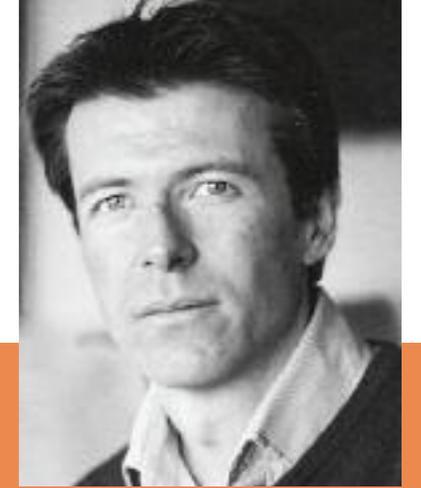
He recalls a recent school reunion. ‘There were ten of us, all very different, all twenty years on in our lives. Yet I felt an extraordinary amount of warmth and mutual respect which had nothing to do with public school clubbiness. It was almost like an extension of the place itself. You can go away for decades and you’re always welcome when you come back.’

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Alexander MacFaul



‘Father Leo, my housemaster, recognised that I was passionate about art and he made sure I was supported by the school’



The Thames at twilight, a rain-veiled Manhattan, an autumn morning at Ampleforth – generous washes of light and colour characterise Alex MacFaul’s contemporary cityscapes and landscapes. These are paintings suffused with mood, movement and emotion.

‘I wanted to be an artist for as long as I can remember,’ he says. ‘I was always drawing through my classes at Ampleforth and the monks never stopped me. Father Leo, my housemaster, recognised that I was passionate about art and he made sure I was supported by the school. There was a great art department and I was given the space to really enjoy learning, to develop a love of my subject.’

Today 36 year-old Alex’s studio is in a converted sweet factory in London’s east end, ‘a very bohemian place, full of other artists, instrument makers, recording studios and so on.’ The nurturing of his creativity in those early years at Gilling Castle and Ampleforth has borne fruit. After a foundation course at Chelsea College of Art, Alex studied graphic design at Camberwell

and went on to graduate from Christ Church College, Canterbury with an MA in fine art. Since then his work has won national awards and is shown in galleries in London and Manchester.

This success didn’t come overnight. Surviving as a young artist meant taking whatever jobs came to hand, ‘in shops, restaurants, factories.’ But the Ampleforth education was not just about his study subject, Alex recalls. ‘It was more of a preparation for life, and it helped me to make the most of whatever situation I found myself in, whatever kind of people I came across. There was a very relaxed, friendly ethos at Ampleforth. It was based on the Benedictine principles and it taught us a sense of generosity and responsibility towards our fellow men.’

When he left school in 1990 and headed for London, Alex gave Ampleforth little thought. But six years later he found himself drawn back to North Yorkshire and spent a year living and painting in the village of Oswaldkirk, a couple of miles down the road. Then, in 2000, he was invited to become

Ampleforth’s artist-in-residence. Although initially nervous at the thought of working, and living, in his former school, it turned out to be an enjoyable and enriching experience.

‘As an adult I was immediately aware of what a tight-knit community it is. I was also able to observe the special Ampleforth pupil-teacher relationship very clearly. It’s a peaceful place and I produced work that I was happy with, and that sold well, while I was there.’

Today Alex finds Ampleforth is a constant for him. He is still in touch with many of his school friends and, whenever he returns to the valley, the monks are always interested in whatever is happening in his life. It’s a thread, he says, that’s very easy to pick up each time.

‘They were generous in encouraging me to follow my dream,’ he concludes, ‘even though it went beyond the curriculum. Now I try and do the same thing in my own teaching. I try and encourage people not to be railroaded into things, but to be their own person.’

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Joy Boro



‘I’m glad I have my experience of Ampleforth. I can talk about my faith with conviction and tell people all about the monastic life at the school I went to’



Despite the poor quality of the line to Khartoum, Joy Boro comes across as a confident, assured 20 year-old. She needs to be. Things in Sudan are difficult at the time of this conversation in late summer 2008. After three years of peace the threat of civil war looms again. Rebels from the Darfur region are encroaching on the capital and Joy’s medical studies have been punctuated by curfews, gunfire and the hasty evacuation of hospitals.

Both Joy’s parents are Sudanese. They returned to Khartoum after more than twenty years in the UK and both have strong links with the Sudanese establishment. But they are minority Christians in this Islamic state, whose stability has been further undermined since its president was indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

Joy’s passion is politics and law but her only choice here would have been to study the system of Sharia law, and so she has settled for medicine instead. Now her studies in

Sudan may be coming to an end. United Nations personnel have already been ordered to leave and she and her family may also have to leave ‘within a month.’

‘I’ve taken to wearing a large crucifix,’ she says. Not to flaunt her Christianity, she explains, but so she can at least be recognised as a person of faith in this almost aggressively religious society. ‘I’m challenged nearly every day, at the moment. I’m asked why I’m a Christian, and why Christians aren’t as religious as Muslims. I’m glad I have my experience of Ampleforth. I can talk about my faith with conviction and tell them all about the monastic life at the school I went to.’

Joy joined Ampleforth in the sixth form as an Ogden Trust scholar, studying chemistry and biology. She first heard about the school while singing in a madrigal group, and met Ampleforth boys at a choir competition run by BBC Radio 4. Although coming to Ampleforth was a huge change from her previous school, she took to it at once. ‘The people were very loving and friendly, always

ready to give advice. And living with friends, going to mass together, experiencing the whole monastic side of school life, brought me closer to people.

‘I learnt a huge amount not only about myself but about the world,’ she continues. ‘I got involved in the overseas friendship and aid programme, FACE-FAW. Helping to raise money for African countries really opened my eyes. It gave me a sense that life didn’t begin and end in Yorkshire, or even England.’

Now Joy is calling on all those inner resources, not just to weather the daily challenges of life in Khartoum, but the uncertainty over her and her family’s future. If she returns to the UK and decides to continue with medicine, she’ll have to start again from scratch. But the self-belief is there in her voice, even on this faint long-distance connection, and one senses that however things turn out, Joy will make the best of them.

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Jozef Mycielski



‘There’s a confidence that comes from the simplicity of the Benedictine tradition, from being among people who cut straight to the really important things in life’



Long before Jozef Mycielski came back to work at Ampleforth as Director of Fundraising, he used to return to the valley at regular intervals in order, so he puts it, to ‘reboot my hard drive.’

Joe, now a boyish-looking 36 year-old, left Ampleforth in 1990, although even as an 18 year-old, hungry for the wider world, he was aware that the thread was not being severed, merely laid aside. After a gap year in Africa and Italy, he studied at the City Business School and then found a job in shipping which took him eventually to the Gulf States.

Nevertheless, he still managed to return to Ampleforth from time to time, for the camaraderie of sporting events and to renew and deepen his friendship with particular monks, whose compassion and understanding had made such an impression on him as a schoolboy.

This had begun when he first arrived at Ampleforth, very homesick, and his housemaster had invited Joe to join him every afternoon for a chat. ‘It was a year before I was able to stop making that daily visit,’ he says.

The connection was strengthened when he came back from the Gulf to join a London PR and marketing company, whose managing director was the sister of a former head boy of Ampleforth. With clients such as Piaggio & Vespa, Faber-Castell and Hugo Boss, the job was an important career move. ‘I was in my twenties,’ he says, ‘committed to making money, living in London, looking for excitement and adventure. And yet...I felt there was something missing from my life.’

Then he was contacted out of the blue by a ‘lifer’ from Wormwood Scrubs, wanting one of Joe’s clients to sponsor a charity fundraising event run by prisoners and prison officers. Joe took up the challenge and became personally involved in setting up the triathlon at the Scrubs, which ran for five years and raised over £100,000 for children’s causes. It proved a turning point for him. He quit the world of agency PR and, for the next few years, worked for children’s charities as a fundraiser and communications director.

Eventually he heard about the vacancy at Ampleforth, and knew at once that, although it would mean giving up his life in London, he would take the job if it was

offered. It was and he did, though in this respect he is unusual. Strong as it is for many Old Amplefordians, the thread stops short of drawing them back to pursue their careers where they were once taught!

Today Joe reflects that Ampleforth has always been where he feels most himself, the place where his compass is pointing due north. It’s where he has consistently found stability and clarity of thought, in the company of people he would trust with his life.

There is a strong sense of continuity that flows from Ampleforth, he believes; of being part of a community governed by a set of rules that have been around for 1500 years. ‘There’s a confidence that comes from the simplicity of the Benedictine tradition, from being among people who cut straight to the really important things in life,’ he concludes. ‘And I know the compass will always be with me, helping me to cope with whatever lies ahead.’

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Jonathan Perry



‘Community and the voice of Christ in scripture changed my way of looking at life. It was as if a time bomb had been ticking away, a time bomb that Ampleforth had helped plant.’



From his office in Santiago, Jonathan Perry can see the distant snowcaps of the Andes and, closer at hand, the hill from which his Catholic community, the Manquehue movement, takes its name. Manquehue means ‘place of the condor.’

Sixteen years ago, Jonathan, a Cambridge Blue, abandoned a promising career in industry to come to Chile and make a lifetime commitment to the community and its Benedictine principles. Today he lives as a celibate and works as General Secretary to the movement. He is based at Colegio San Benito, one of a number of the schools, centres and retreats the Manquehue movement has established in the Santiago area and elsewhere in Chile.

How did his life come to take such a dramatic turn? ‘I was very sporty and did well academically and socially at Ampleforth,’ he begins. ‘I only paid lip service to the religious aspect so I could get on with the other things I wanted to do. I was set on being an achiever.’ From Ampleforth Jonathan went on to Cambridge where, again, religion played little part in his life. He read history and represented the

university at cricket two years running, both times in the company of Mike Atherton. Then he joined BP as a graduate trainee. ‘It was another achievement,’ he explains. ‘I’d been to the best university. Now I wanted the perfect job, the ideal girl, the nice car. I was looking for success and the good life, like so many others of my generation.’

But then Jonathan started to question his desire for this material success. He began to read the philosophers and religious thinkers. Still in touch with the monks at Ampleforth, he was invited back on a retreat, where someone suggested he join a meditation group in London. He went along feeling nervous and sceptical but found ‘a bunch of normal people, doing normal things, asking questions, just like me.’ And there he met José Manuel Eguiguren, the founder of the Manquehue movement.

One thing led to another and in 1991 Jonathan found himself on retreat in Patagonia with José Manuel and his family. BP had generously offered him a two-year sabbatical but, within a short while, he had become completely involved in the life of the community in Santiago. ‘I simply loved it,’

he says. ‘I realised I’d discovered a vocation that I’d just never bargained for. Community and the voice of Christ in scripture changed my way of looking at life. It was as if a time bomb had been ticking away, a time bomb that Ampleforth had helped plant.’

Looking back now, he sees that ‘while I was largely deaf to the attempts made by the monks to convey their faith to me, I did leave Ampleforth with an awareness of God being a serious possibility, and of happiness not being bound up with material success and the most comfortable possible lifestyle.’

Today Jonathan visits Ampleforth once a year, partly for the pleasure of maintaining old friendships, partly in his role as supervisor to the seven Chilean undergraduates the Manquehue movement sends there for one term each year. ‘It’s a haven,’ he reflects, ‘a place where the faces are familiar, a place of stability. Ampleforth is simply always there.’

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS

Joe Cook



‘The monks gave me an amazing education in an amazing place. They taught me to interact socially, set me up to travel the world, and gave me the religion to back me up when I’m down.’



Forty-eight hours after the Sichuan earthquake struck, in May 2008, Joe Cook set out from Shanghai with a fleet of six JCBs and a team of operators. Three days later they reached Chengdu. There they met up with the Chinese army who escorted them down into the disaster area where they set about opening up roads that had been buried by rock falls and mudslides, reconnoitring areas that were inaccessible to other vehicles and eventually helping to clear ground for temporary housing.

‘It was incredibly challenging,’ Joe recalls, ‘very hot and very wet. Every day we were with people who had lost literally everything. We worked a lot with schools where many children had been orphaned. There was appalling suffering everywhere. But we had a job to do. We couldn’t afford to let it get to us.’

After a couple of weeks working round the clock, snatching sleep in the cab of his vehicle, Joe returned to Shanghai, leaving his team to continue the work of training the Chinese to operate the vehicles. These had been donated by JCB at the instigation

of the chairman, Sir Anthony Bamford, himself an Old Amplefordian.

Now 30 years old, Joe joined JCB straight from Newcastle University, where he studied agricultural business. Since then he has spent four years living in Brazil and travelling throughout Latin America and today his work takes him into all corners of China, where he currently lives and where it’s not only natural disasters that prove challenging. ‘The classic JCB digger is a completely new concept to the Chinese,’ he explains.

‘They’ve never seen anything like it and they don’t understand it. They’re used to things that either move or dig, but not both at once. Most Chinese don’t drive so you have to be very resourceful and very patient.’

Recalling his time at Ampleforth, Joe talks a lot about the scope he felt it gave him for being creative; how the sense of space, the grounds, the farm, the valley itself encouraged him to feel a certain freedom. He was inspired too by the enterprise that went on around him, the farming and forestry, the business of running the school and monastery. ‘I loved the fact that the monks had sunk their own

borehole, maintained their own orchards, ran their own fire brigade,’ he says. ‘I learnt about thinking of new ways to solve problems, being an individual.’

Now Joe visits whenever he’s back in the UK. He comes to see the monks and speaks affectionately of their dedication. ‘They gave me an amazing education in an amazing place. They taught me to interact socially, set me up to travel the world, and gave me the religion to back me up when I’m down.’

For Joe, nothing can have tested the Ampleforth ethos more dramatically than the death of his father, when he was 16. ‘I couldn’t have been in a better place,’ he says. ‘Father Edward, my housemaster, gave me a little time every day. He understood, and said the right things, and helped me to be at peace. They really know what they’re doing over things like that, the monks.’

OLD AMPLEFORDIANS
Edward Kirwan



‘The idea that the monks are out of touch is nonsense. They have such deep wisdom. They know human nature doesn’t change.’



Had Edward Kirwan not been frightened of blood, he would have followed the rest of his family into the medical profession when he left Ampleforth in 1985. Instead, he studied history at the University of London and then went into the City where he worked with a firm of stockbrokers before training as a chartered accountant. ‘I wasn’t that good at it,’ he recalls. ‘I found auditing very dull, and what I really wanted was to be dealing with people, not figures.’

In due course the opportunity presented itself with a job in the private banking department of HSBC. Later Edward moved to Coutts and today he heads their charity investment team. His clients range from public charities such as schools, art galleries and medical foundations ‘who need us to manage their money for a rainy day,’ to those discreet private charities that make anonymous donations.

It’s not just the contact with the clients that he finds rewarding. It’s the nature of what many of them do. ‘Their values can be very different,’ he says. ‘And as a banker, whose

main job is to make people richer, it sometimes makes me think hard.’ He speaks of one client, an order of nuns who run a hospital in West Africa, but also have their headquarters in a valuable city-centre property, which they own. One day he asked one of the nuns where she would prefer to be, and without hesitation she replied ‘Africa, it’s where I do my work and am closer to God.’

‘I find it very inspiring, working with people like that,’ he says. And he believes that without the guidance he received at Ampleforth he might not be doing his present job, working in the charitable sector, aware that sometimes he is able to ‘make a small difference’ to the lives of people in need.

Today Edward is an infrequent visitor to Ampleforth, though he admits that some years ago he sought solace at the retreat centre ‘in a moment of difficulty.’ However, he would not hesitate to go back if the need ever arose again and he feels that the lessons he learned there as a schoolboy are those of a lifetime.

‘The most important thing I was taught was personal responsibility - through thoughtfulness, not the cane. And with that naturally comes a sense of responsibility to others. Community and togetherness are two words that come to mind when I think of Ampleforth.’

On the day of this conversation Edward’s father is undergoing open-heart surgery. ‘It’s a comfort to know there are people at Ampleforth who will support us if we need it,’ he says. ‘And these are people,’ he adds emphatically, ‘who are living according to a set of rules laid down centuries ago, yet who are engaged with all the issues of the modern world.’

‘The idea that the monks are out of touch is nonsense. They have such deep wisdom. They know human nature doesn’t change. I think their underlying ethos is as valid today as when it first came into being, and their values are priceless. I may work for a bank but I definitely still carry that compass in my pocket.’



A compass for life



We have told these stories to illustrate the many different ways in which the Ampleforth experience can stay with people throughout their lives.

Varied as they are, the one thing that unites all seven, from Santiago to Sudan, Shoreditch to Shanghai, is the sense that Ampleforth offers something comforting and constant, a compass for life. We believe this is unique. It goes beyond educational excellence, and no other school can offer it.

If you have heard an echo of your own experience here, or simply been touched by a snapshot of someone else's life, you'll understand why we want to tell the world about this remarkable place.

Please help us by passing on these stories wherever you go.

If you would like to speak to someone at Ampleforth please call Kate Robinson on:

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or email

llkr@ampleforth.org.uk

Our thanks to Joy Boro, Joe Cook, Edward Kirwan, Alex MacFaul, Jozef Mycielski, Jonathan Perry and Sebastian Wade for generously sharing their experiences with us.





Ampleforth

a compass for life



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