

OBITUARY: Vic Callaghan

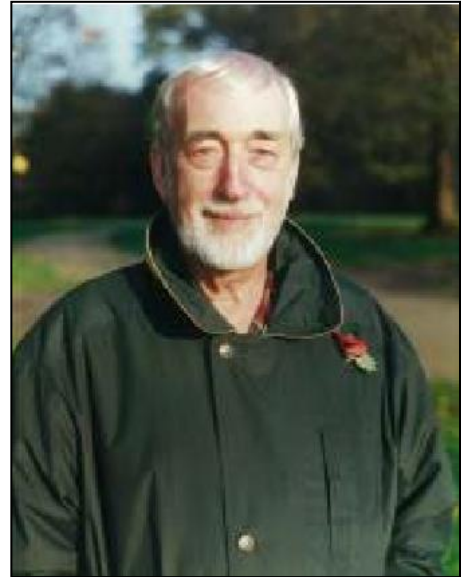
By Alan Schneider

It is with great regret and sadness that I am writing to tell you that Vic Callaghan died on April 14th. He was 89. Vic taught at KGS from 1952 to 1960. I cannot imagine that there was anyone at school over these years who did not know Vic, whether through lessons, or drama, or school trips, or various societies. He had a personality and image and style of teaching totally different from anyone else.

Born in Hull in 1919, Vic joined the navy when he left school at fifteen. The general age for leaving school in those days was fourteen, but his school enabled pupils to stay another year, during which he started to learn French, which was to prove most fortuitous. On the outbreak of war he transferred to the Fleet Air Arm. Initially, because of his medium stature, he trained as a turret gunner and flew, either from aircraft carriers or from land, in Fairey Swordfish, Boulton-Paul Defiants, and Bristol Blenheims. When he was sent on a telegraphy course, he found one of his officers was Laurence Olivier.

He then trained as a FAA pilot, and spent much time sailing to USA west coast to collect Grumann Avenger aircraft, flying them back to east coast where he landed them on carriers to be shipped back to GB. He was happy enough to fly the Avenger, but when the war ended the FAA decided to replace that plane with the Firefly, an adaptation of the Spitfire. For reasons we will come to, this made him leave the FAA, with a permanent commission, in 1948.

Vic wanted to read English at university. Having spent his extra year at school learning French, he now mastered that language sufficiently to enable him to get a place at Oxford, where they did not insist on Latin to read English. From Oxford he came to teach at KGS in 1952. He told me that the Head was reluctant to take him on the staff because of his beard. Vic explained that it went very well with the character he was playing in a Greek play he was currently in at Oxford. The Head later told him he assumed the beard was just for the play and would not have given him the job if he had known the beard was permanent.



In 1952-53 I was in 1A and this was one of Vic's first classes. We knew Vic was no ordinary teacher when, for his first lesson with us, instead of entering the classroom with a pile of books he brought in a large model of the Globe theatre which had lain for years unlooked at in the art room. Using the model, we learned how Shakespeare's plays were performed. In those days this was a total innovation for an English lesson, but to Vic it was the obvious thing to do.

In our form there were several aeroplane enthusiasts and we had formed the Junior Aeronautical Society (there already was an aeronautical society, but they barred first and second years!) We asked Vic if he had been in planes in the war, and, when he told us he had flown with the FAA and agreed to give a talk to us, we couldn't believe our luck. The following week we placed a note on the Head's desk to be read out after prayers: "*The Junior Aeronautical Society will hold a meeting at lunch time when Mr Callaghan will give a lecture on flying in the Fleet Air Arm.*" The Head registered a look of incredulity. He thought, "*What was the Junior Aeronautical Society?*" Even more so, who was Mr Callaghan?

We had booked the lecture theatre - Room 7 - and we hoped we might get a dozen people. By the time Vic came in the room it was packed to capacity, from first year to sixth form. We were expecting a talk full of technical detail about flying and planes, but we realised this was going to be a different kind of talk when Vic started to describe his attempts to fly the new Firefly. "*If I put my feet on the pedals, I could not see out of the cockpit, and if I looked out of the cockpit, my feet couldn't touch the pedals*". Within minutes the entire room was convulsed with laughter, and continued to be as Vic recounted story after story. The lecture could not have been a greater success and Vic's presence at KGS was firmly established.

Vic had a light voice, and never shouted. When he needed to exercise control over a class he used emphasis, eg: "*You do NOT shout out*". To a particular boy he would make some remark that had a fine mixture of humour and cutting edge that never failed to have the required effect. Physical punishment never entered his mind.

By the late fifties for those in the fifth and sixth forms his teaching came with a view of the world that created new horizons for us. Not least was his mastery of Freud's work. A Freudian interpretation may not have been essential for exams, but it was a tremendous way to understand

the exciting ideas we were taking in every day in the new novels and plays and films of the time.

His temperament was to maintain calm at all times, to observe quietly, and comment. One could never imagine him becoming involved in any heated argument, but when I asked him how he received the scar across his forehead, usually covered by a lock of his deep red hair, he told me that in 1950 he had taken part in a demonstration against the re-arming of Germany. He could not accept the absurdity of having been at war with the Germans and then rebuilding their army after only five years. It seems the police tried to break up the demonstration and in the melee Vic was kicked by a horse. *Plus ca change.*

Music played a big part in Vic's life and I am sure he would give a wry smile if he had known that he passed away on the 250th anniversary of the death of Handel. His father was a professional musician and played clarinet and saxophone in orchestras accompanying silent films. Vic himself did not play an instrument but he loved music, classical and also jazz and popular songs across the decades. He once came to Covent Garden to see the mighty production of *The Trojans*. This was a solitary visit due to the exigencies caused by teachers' miserable salaries at the time. In later years he was a frequent opera-goer.

Half of Vic's contribution to the life of KGS was teaching. The other half was the part he played in the school's dramatic productions. He first assisted **Mr Peter Wright** (PKW) on the production of *Coriolanus*, particularly in producing the crowd scenes. PKW then produced a staff play, *Arms and the Man*, in which Vic played the leading role of Captain Bluntschli. His quiet but clear voice could be heard throughout the hall, and it put the emphasis on the character's philosophy rather than bravado. The success of this partnership with PKW, as well as the presence of **Graham Bell** to play the part, led to the decision not only to produce *Hamlet* as the next school play, but to take it on tour to Germany. Without Vic, this project would not have been possible.

Indeed the production partnership between Vic and PKW worked so well that PKW wanted to leave teaching and become a professional producer with Vic as his assistant. Vic declined this invitation however. If he was going to be involved in professional production he wanted to be the producer, not the assistant. He also had a large family to support and he knew the stage was a risky way of earning a living. And perhaps he could see that styles of acting and production were rapidly changing

and PKW's style belonged to an earlier time. Vic's decision was almost certainly the reason why PKW no longer wanted Vic to assist him with the next school play, and in consequence Vic played no part in the production of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 1958.

Vic did much for those of us who happened to be in the senior years of the school 1957-60. He took groups of us to plays at RADA's Vanbrugh Theatre, thereby introducing us to Brecht, and to the Royal Court Theatre. His love and understanding of film, from the 'silents' to the latest Ingmar Bergman, was a great influence on those of us just discovering the world of cinema. He encouraged us to form a film society and this was very successful. He arranged after-school play readings, often followed by impromptu parties at his house off West End Lane. His then wife remained undaunted as half a dozen schoolboys came through the door, and his youngest daughter used to run into the room 'to see the trousers'.

At the end of the 1959 summer term Vic produced a play written by **Gabriel Chanan**. The actors included girls from BKHS, the first joint drama production between the two schools. This was so successful that he asked Gabby to write another play for next year, which was put on with the same success (full details of these are in the last part of my Drama History).

Mr Wright left KGS in 1959, not to become a professional producer, but as one of the great exodus of staff that found large comprehensive schools and FE colleges could offer far more money than teaching at KGS. This left the position of Head of the English Department open, and no one could have doubted that Vic would be appointed. But then came a bombshell - PKW did not support Vic's application. Without that support, Vic had no hope of getting the job. He never found out why Mr Wright did this. It may have been personal, it may have been political (Vic drew a definite line between socialism and communism) but it always remained a mystery. Vic immediately looked for another job, and left KGS in 1960 to become Head of Department at Harlow Comprehensive School. The loss to KGS was immeasurable.

A few years at Harlow was enough and Vic took a post at the then Manchester Polytechnic in 1965. But, just a few months after moving north to Swinton, a terrible tragedy struck with the atrocious death of his youngest daughter. Having just moved his family Vic felt he had to stay and he continued to teach in Manchester until he retired. In the late

sixties Vic met Joan and eventually they married and set up home in Altrincham. They had a devotedly happy life together to his final day.

We were always in touch, and over the years he would send me copies of the brilliant poetry he wrote. When I went up to see him from time to time we would discuss many things and would always talk about KGS and the latest political disasters. His condemnation of those who had betrayed socialism was scathing.

I invited Vic to the special OB Dinner to mark the school's 100th anniversary in 1998 and he was most moved by the way so many people remembered him, whether they had been taught by him, or been in plays, or simply because everyone in his time at KGS knew Vic. He came to several more dinners until deep vein thrombosis prevented him making the long journey to London.

In 1998 Vic was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He fought defiantly against ill health for ten years until the cancer and some small strokes took their toll. But his powers of thought remained unimpaired to the end and happily I spoke to him only two weeks before he died. His funeral, attended by his family and many friends (including **Donald Measham**, who taught at KGS 1957-59), was very simple and I was asked by Joan to read one of his poems.

Vic had a tremendous mind with acute powers of interpretation and analysis. His love of English, its sound, its structure, its poetry and its drama, and his ability to inspire this love in those he taught, was a gift to us for life. He had an all-embracing breadth of knowledge and understanding of all the arts and the creative world which was always part of his teaching. He was also a very funny man and we loved his humour and sharp wit. He was our friend. We would chat and joke and discuss anything with him. We who were at KGS during Vic's years had the greatest fortune to have had such a wonderful teacher.

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Victor Callaghan 1919-2009.