

# The official opening of Rhyl High School



**A High  
quality  
Highway to  
the future**



*Report by Len Threadgold of the Rhyl Grammar School Reunion organisation*

Those who are products of a school which has had a lasting effect on our lives and to which we owe so much will be delighted to learn that its successor is now in a superb new building, the quality of which is a metaphor for the high standards the school is setting for all of its pupils.



In May 2015 when a group from RGS visited the school prior to the last RGS reunion, the Headteacher, Claire Armitstead showed us around what we all knew as the New Building. Many, if not most of the classrooms were still used for the subjects which were taught in our day and, whilst being equipped with computer technology, they had clearly seen better times (our

day!!), which was understandable after some 70 or more years!! Staff and students had worked hard under the leadership of the new head and senior professional team but, although there was evidence of rising educational standards, the built environment was not one to encourage and inspire pupils.

We could see signs of construction of the new school building over to the right hand side of the school fields but at that stage it was impossible for us to know how the new building would turn out. That needed knowledge of the quality, vision, tenacity and commitment to high standards of all those involved. It is to their credit that what has been produced is a beacon to education, not just in the area but throughout the country; they should all be – and we believe are - extremely proud of what has been achieved.





The official opening of the school was scheduled for Friday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2016 and it was blessed with a beautiful autumn day. The numbers attending from the RGS reunion group were limited by the need to accommodate officials from the local and Welsh government, as well as representatives of the design and construction team, school staff and pupils.

The RGS representatives in the photograph, left to right, were Len Threadgold, Alan Nuttall, Robert Scott, Gwyn Williams, Carole Deutch (Harrison), both over from Canada for the event, and Moira Essex (Griffiths), whose birthday it was.



We were greeted by the school staff and the head boys and girls at 10am and shown around the new building by the Headteacher and Deputy Head, Juliet Peters (a former pupil) with guests and dignitaries.



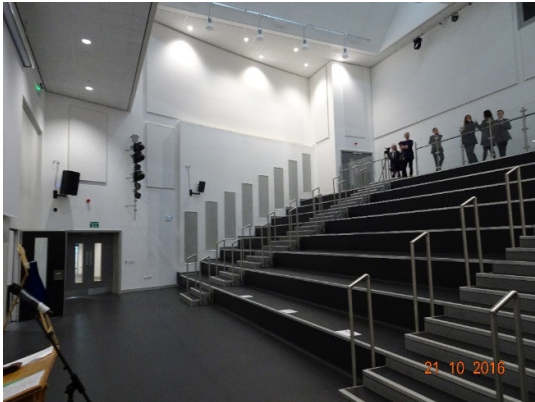
This happened whilst classes were in full swing and this in itself illustrated the high standards of the new facilities. The building is truly breath-taking. It is on three floors and makes use of natural light wherever possible with windows and atria which

throw light on the main staircase and dining halls as well as the library and other communal areas; the effect is very uplifting.



The school building houses both Rhyl High School and Ysgol Tir Morfa, the school for students with special needs. We were shown a remarkable sensory area which uses electronic technology to augment senses and experiences. This and other elements within the school create a real feeling of community.

The opening ceremony was held in the main theatre which has terraced seating as the photograph shows. Presentations from Denbighshire County Council members and their



Chairman, Ann Davies, were followed by those from Headteachers of Rhyl High School and Ysgol Tir Morfa and then by pupils of both schools. Each spoke of vision, team work and tenacity as well as the thrill of achievement and the joy of working in a new and supportive environment with new equipment. This reinforced belief in the importance of

education to individuals and the community.

Use of the school buildings began in April but the scale of the transition from the old building gave staff and students insight of the work involved in such a major task. A real sense of a caring environment in the schools came when one of the Ysgol Tir Morfa pupils on stage, who had spoken earlier, found the occasion overwhelming and was comforted by a hug from the High School Head Girl. The situation was resolved and it really brought a lump to the throat. A presentation from Willmott Dixon who built the school, dealt with the practicalities of taking the project from design concepts to a completed building and expressed satisfaction at a job well done. The official opening ceremony reached a climax with words from Kirsty Williams, Welsh Assembly Member and Cabinet Secretary for Education and the unveiling of a plaque by her and pupils to commemorate the event.



Afterwards a cake was cut and mugs celebrating the event were distributed. An informal period for refreshment followed and the RGS delegation was able to find out more about the evolution of the school to where it is today.



Throughout the event it was clear that the staff and pupils had a wonderful relationship of mutual trust and respect. The school uniform was worn by all the pupils and this created an atmosphere of quality, coherence and pride in a school which will be the cornerstone of their lives and provide them with the key to their own self-belief and fulfilment of aspiration to be the best version of themselves possible.

High fives were not around in our day but to see the Headteacher, Claire Armitstead, engaged with the pupils in this way at the bottom of the main staircase during the transition between lessons, with smiles and respect all around will live long in my memory. Also her presence outside to wish all the students a happy half term at the end of the day was really moving and a testament to her commitment to doing the best for all those in her care.

All those attending the opening will have memories and photographs of their own which reflect their appreciation of the new school's ethos. During the initial school tour we found



the dining hall to be impressive with menus displayed to allow choice and orderly



queueing. In our day the choice was only "take it or leave it" and frequently the latter course was

taken since I have yet to replicate the revolting taste of mashed potato with black inclusions common during our times! Carole Deutch took these photos of the artwork, dining hall and menu as a record. Clearly we both appreciated the significant improvements.

The school buildings themselves from our time have been totally demolished leaving an area of playing fields for the future. It is understood, however, that their foundations remain beneath the grass to underlie the new facilities and bear witness to a great past and a developing future. Nothing is left of the building which was constructed in place of our Old Building and the whole area at the front of our school is given over to car parking, except for the war memorial garden which was at the front of the Old Building. This remains and is the only visible reference to Rhyl Grammar School. This area is in need of some TLC but its preservation and maintenance as an area of tranquillity for reflection and inspiration by pupils and staff is perhaps something to which we can turn our minds and contribute to its future. Approaches are being made to this effect and we will report later.



For me, the retention of two of the almond trees which used to be outside our New Building and blossomed brilliantly each spring showed a sensitivity on the part of the designers which is admirable. The trees formed the backdrop to many of the school photographs we have all appeared in and I love them.

Unfortunately security requirements for pupils these days means the intrusion of a high fence to separate the playing fields from the parking areas, but their preservation is really appreciated.

Another feature of the site is the community sports facilities and swimming pool which are used by the public and pupils. Robert Scott uses these daily and he showed Alan Nuttall and me around them. Pupils use some of the buildings which



pre-dated the new school but, in order to maintain security, a footbridge to allow them to cross the right-of-way path which cuts across the school site, without leaving the school's protected area, has been constructed.



Heating of the school and sports facilities is by use of biomass boilers, fuelled from a hopper at the rear of the sports building, and serves to emphasise the sustainability and efficiency of the whole site. We weren't shown around the school fields in the time available but looking from the windows there appears to be all-weather pitches which will revolutionise hockey which is the sport I played at school and afterwards.

A brochure to accompany the opening was produced by the school and a pdf of it, together with the programme for the day and a description of the school's organisation, curriculum and courses, is attached. The embedded photographs give images from the day and attempt to show both the people involved and facilities available. A visit on the Friday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2017, preceding the next RGS reunion on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2017 at The Oriel Hotel in St Asaph, has been arranged so that we can all see what has been created.

Overall the word "impressive" seems to me to understate what has been achieved at the school. It is so good to see that it will be a centre of excellence for the community, to raise local aspiration and encourage the development of the potential of all that attend.



*Headteachers and Deputy Heads of Rhyll High School and Ysgol Tir Morfa with the Head girls and boys and the RGS representatives celebrating the school opening*