

Gentlemen,

In the past, we have had, as after dinner speakers, former Buckwellians who have been an accomplished lawyer, a film director, a highly successful businessman and an owner of a football club.

Tonight you have me.

One of the responsibilities of being Chairman is to fill such a void and say something vaguely interesting.

And I have to confess, I struggled.

Normally I can find something to talk about. Some might say rather too easily. But I found myself wondering: what exactly should a Chairman say to a group of men whose principal qualification for being here is that, many years ago, our parents happened to send us to the same school in Essex?

Then I read something about artificial intelligence.

Apparently, some experts believe there is a not insignificant chance that AI could ultimately pose an existential threat to humanity.

Which is slightly alarming.

And it made me think back to my own introduction to the brave new world of computing — at Buckhurst Hill County High School.

I was in the first cohort at the school to take Computer Studies.

At the time, this felt extraordinarily futuristic.

As part of the course, I remember being taken to Stratford to visit a computer centre. And there, in a dedicated room, was an enormous computer.

I can't remember precisely what it did. But I do remember that it was impressive. It was large. It was complicated. And presumably there were several people employed specifically to make sure it continued doing whatever it was supposed to do.

Today, that enormous machine almost certainly had less computing power than the iPhone in my pocket.

A device which I principally use to check the weather, read emails I don't particularly want to receive and look up the name of an actor whose name I can't remember.

It is extraordinary when you think about the technological journey we've witnessed.

Back then, computers were going to transform our lives.

They were going to eliminate paperwork.

They were going to save us enormous amounts of time.

They were going to give us more leisure.

That all went well.

Instead, we've acquired passwords we can't remember, two-factor authentication, QR codes for restaurant menus and websites which regularly require us to prove to a computer that we are not a robot.

And now, of course, we have artificial intelligence.

AI can write essays, produce pictures, compose music, translate languages and analyse enormous quantities of information in seconds.

It can even write after-dinner speeches.

And yes, before anyone asks, I did consult ChatGPT about what I should say tonight.

It had some excellent suggestions.

I ignored most of them.

But thinking about that enormous computer in Stratford and comparing it with where we are today made me think about something else.

Because, while technology has changed beyond anything that the schoolboy version of me could possibly have imagined, there are some things that haven't changed very much at all.

And perhaps one of them explains why we are all sitting here tonight.

What does a school actually give you?

Obviously, it gives you an education.

Some of it we remember.

Quite a lot of it, in my case, has disappeared completely.

I'm sure there were things I once knew about quadratic equations, chemical formulae and the causes of the Franco-Prussian War. If so, they have long since departed.

Computer Studies, on the other hand, turned out to be rather more prescient.

But when we think back to our schooldays, I suspect it isn't primarily the curriculum that we remember.

We remember people.

We remember teachers.

We remember friends.

We remember the boys we sat next to.

The people we played sport with.

The people we got into trouble with.

The teachers we liked — and perhaps even more vividly, the ones we didn't.

We remember incidents which would mean absolutely nothing to anyone outside this room but which, mention them to another Buckwellian, can transport us instantly back several decades.

And I think there's something rather interesting about that.

Most of the people we encounter today know us as we are now.

They know the adult version.

They know what we did for a living. They know the jobs we had, perhaps the businesses we built, the families we raised and all the other things that happened along the way.

But old school friends know — or at least remember — a rather earlier version.

The version before the job titles.

Before the qualifications.

Before the grey hair — or indeed the absence of hair.

Before we'd really worked out who we were going to become.

And perhaps that's one of the reasons organisations such as the Old Buckwellians Association matter.

We can sometimes describe ourselves as though we're preserving the history of a school.

And of course we are.

But I think we're preserving something else as well.

We're preserving connections.

Because there is a difference between being connected and having a human connection.

We live in probably the most connected age in human history. Within seconds, I can communicate with somebody on the other side of the world. I can find somebody I haven't seen for 40 years. I can have hundreds — even thousands — of so-called friends online.

And yet none of that quite replicates sitting around a table with people with whom you share a piece of your history.

Perhaps that's the irony.

We were amongst the first generation at Buckhurst Hill to be taught that computers were going to change the future.

They were absolutely right.

What perhaps nobody told us was that, as technology became ever more powerful, one of the things we might increasingly value would be something much older and much simpler.

Human connection.

I don't want this to sound like an argument against technology.

Far from it.

What has happened since I stood looking at that computer in Stratford is extraordinary.

And I suspect what happens over the next ten or twenty years will be more extraordinary still.

But AI can only ever reconstruct the past from information.

We actually lived it.

AI didn't sit next to us in class.

It wasn't on the playing field.

It wasn't there when we were praised by a teacher — or terrified by one.

It didn't share the jokes, the embarrassments, the triumphs and the occasional disasters.

It doesn't remember Buckhurst Hill County High School.

We do.

And perhaps that's ultimately why the Old Buckwellians Association still matters.

We're not simply keeping alive the memory of a school.

We're keeping alive the connections that school created.

Connections which, rather remarkably, have survived while the enormous computers of our schooldays have shrunk into our pockets and evolved into machines which can apparently think for us.

So thank you all for coming tonight.

Thank you to everyone who has helped organise this evening and, more importantly, thank you to all of you who continue to support the Association and keep those connections alive.

Long may that continue.

And if AI really does have a 10% chance of wiping us all out...

I suggest we enjoy the port while we still can.

Gentlemen, have a wonderful evening.