

Fiona Hackett – Chair of Grounds and Buildings Committee
Speech – KASS AGM 2024

Good evening everyone, I am Fiona, Chair of the Grounds and Buildings committee. I have been on Council for more than 20 years with two children who were here throughout their education and are now in their 30's, so its been a long association and I still feel very privileged to be here. The role of our committee is to support the school in thinking about projects large and small, what impact they might have on the site and how best they might be executed.

It is customary for me to talk through the last year and any developments there might have been but it has been a quiet year in terms of major projects and so on this occasion I would like to go back a bit further not least because our Estates manager Zah is leaving for pastures new and it seemed a good moment to think about what he and I have shared in terms of the school site over the last twenty years.

In fact he said that within 10 days of his arrival there was a lightening strike to a crane in the housing development being built which burnt out a massive amount of circuitry in the school and incidentally lifted people off their feet in the gym and Zah said it certainly was a literal crash course in the infrastructure of the buildings to get everything up and running again.

There have been many such occasions of 'natural disasters' to cope with from major gas leaks, to massive flooding but

through it all Zah and the team have managed to get the school functional again as quickly, and with as little disruption, as possible.

He also brought in a system for recording the status of the infrastructure for every building so that repair and maintenance happened in a timely manner rather than always responding to some kind of emergency failure. This in the long-term saves the school money and helps with the smooth operation of the whole site. There is also very regular appraisal of all the trees which are such an integral part of the school, to make sure they are healthy and safe.

There has, over his tenure, been many big building projects which started with the DT building in Ivy Wood. I think I had just joined the G and B committee and I remember the hoarding around it being decorated by the children, with the help of an artist parent. Each child painted a tile which became part of a bigger picture which when installed created a huge and very impressive image of a JCB. Within it there were little windows so they could see through to the construction work beyond. The building was beautifully made, fits the site so well with its green roof and timber cladding and still serves its purpose without effort.

The fives court building followed and Zah reminded me how our school architect at the time, Belinda, had a brainwave of taking the plans provided by the architects Walters and Cohen and shrinking everything so that it could be built from standard length building materials which made it much more cost effective and essentially became a design and build

project. It also gave us the undercroft area which provided storage. Another beautiful building; I have always liked the way the staff room is just a step away from the playground, I know this was intentional to support the KAS ethos of teachers being approachable and available and is such a lovely way to foster this idea.

The tree house was also rebuilt, after the old one became too rotten for safety. New regulations had come in and it now had to comply with BSEN 1176 – safety standards for play equipment. Those who remember the old tree house will know it was very high and challenging and definitely would not have complied. Somehow, with the help of parent and engineer Tim Lucas, oak trees were brought from a wood in the Midlands arriving on huge lorries and being erected on metal shoes to prevent them rotting. So we do have a modern equivalent and there are plans in the pipeline to extend it and add another platform which the students are helping to design.

There followed the fitness studio on the site of the boat building shed which has come into its own and is very well used. It sits on the edge of a small meadow – one of the small tranquil spaces which KAS offers to its community. Belinda designed and she and Zah oversaw the building of the new estates office, which I think is a lovely little building, on the site of the staff smoking room - hard to believe we had one of those!

One might have imagined Covid would have put a stop to further building ambitions but not at all – the Sixth Form

Center was built during this period despite soaring costs and difficulties obtaining materials - Zah recalled meeting a supplier on the hard shoulder of the M25 for those last few bags of plaster and a mad dash to pick up the accoya handrail from a supplier who was literally closing the warehouse doors for lockdown. 36,000 screws later (Zah put in the last screw) the building was finished on time and on budget and very beautiful too. They even managed to protect the Persian Ironwood tree which is quite a rare specimen. It has provided the school with a wonderful space to encourage and support our Sixth Formers and has allowed for many more to come in from other schools to access our education for those last two crucial years.

None of this could have happened without a strong estates team, led by Zah, who have also had to manage greatly expanding pupil numbers; there were 400 in 2003 and we now have 715 which results in greater wear and tear on the fabric of buildings and erosion of the grounds. Of course some members of the estate team are more visible to Council than others – Aaron waiting to clear our debris after a longer meeting than usual for example, but our thanks must go to them all.

In addition these days there are more stakeholders, from insurers to Health and Safety, whose input and expectations are greater and more onerous than twenty years ago.

And yet the grounds still have quiet corners and a feeling of space and freedom which we must continue to cherish and nurture. I had this brought very forcibly to my attention the

other day when I met with a landscape architect who had never been to the school before. He was clearly astonished by what he saw - he could not believe that the students with DT had built a crane to move the huge trunks of the sweet chestnut tree from Squirrel hall over to the treehouse . He marvelled at the treehouse itself. He was altogether very excited despite being used to working with a number of North London private schools. Just for a moment I saw KAS with fresh eyes as I stood under the huge poplar tree by the tree house and realized anew just what a special place this is.

I can't say how things will look in 20 years time, except that there will be other new buildings and a continual thoughtful evolution of the site guided by our Masterplan. I can also say that the success of the previous twenty years has been in large part a tribute to Zah's diligence, expertise, long hours and love for the school and I would like to say a huge thankyou on behalf of the G and B committee for making that commitment and we wish him every success and happiness in his new school.