

23 July

Fr PETER HACKETT

21 October 1924 – 23 July 2018



Peter Hackett did more than most to change the face of Jesuit education in the British province. He only came to Africa in his later years when his energy was declining. He was born in Boscombe, SW England, the eldest of three brothers, all Jesuits and the only children of their parents. (The photo shows from left: Paul, Peter and Mark).

Although he entered the Society in 1942, he left the novitiate for the

duration of the war to serve in the navy and found himself at one point accepting the surrender of part of the German fleet in Greece. Resuming his formation after the war, he did a degree in English at Campion Hall focusing in part on early English and could quote from the 7th century Song of Caedmon at any opportunity.

He was headmaster of five of our schools successively and became Assistant for education in 1980. Kevin Fox tells us he rethought

this most traditional apostolate of the province in a period of radical national change. The normal school structure in England was moving from selective to comprehensive. ... this was a time when our school gates were breached by at least a few of the 80% of the male population who had previously been shut out. For the century and a half after the restoration of the Society, the province's schools had been exclusive, either socially or academically. In Preston, Peter argued strongly, and not alone, that both the traditional independence of the religious orders and the prestige of grammar schools should be subordinated to the diocesan scheme (which aimed to fall in line with government thinking).

Peter liked to quote a colleague's image of a comprehensive school as 'like the medieval church, welcoming rich and poor, sick and healthy, advantaged and disadvantaged, saint and sinner.' Peter, Kevin continues, 'brought both experience and vision; the Lord's saving justice is at the heart of school life; good order can be combined with friendship and the humble should be lifted high.'

Peter moved on to be Master of Champion Hall in Oxford where he brought his thoughtful courage to bear on the traditional life there which was often misogynist, hierarchical and even, at times, racist. In the 1990s he moved to Barbados and later Zimbabwe where he did pastoral work at the Cathedral where he was much appreciated especially in his homilies and he was able to pursue his lately developed passion for painting. His experience prompted his saying that, 'matrimony seems the perfect sacrament in that it recognises the holiness of human relationships. It establishes the family as the unit from which the parish community is formed, a concept more fundamental than that of the parish as a section of the diocese.' Some of his paintings still hang in our Cathedral house. He produced a much-appreciated booklet on the Cathedral to mark its jubilee. His sense of humour – quirky, quizzical, oblique – was often on show. 'There was nothing ritual about the feeding of the 5000. It was a last-minute solution to a perceived need.'

His final days were peaceful, 'a gentle decline.' Mark was there for his death as was the third brother, Paul who was a member of the community.