



**Abbotsholme School's OAs are a veritable mixture of success in such a variety of fields. You can read here what some of them think about their time at Abbotsholme and how it has shaped their careers.**

## Ed Higson

For the past three years, I have worked for Dalcour Maclaren, a company which offers specialist chartered surveying services to clients in the utility and infrastructure sector. My focus is on DONG Energy projects to assist the delivery of green energy to the National Grid.

A lot has happen in the nine years since I left school. After university, it took years of hard work, whilst at the same time enabling various utility companies to secure access and rights over private land across the South of England, to become a Chartered Surveyor.

Some ten years ago, though, whilst I was still a Sixth Former, I took a leap of faith and decided to take part in the production of *Les Misérables* - an excellent production, the memory of which will live on forever for me. This added a completely new dimension to my time at the school, as previously I would more likely have been found on the school's extensive farmland, or on the rugby pitch. I am still a keen rugby player, and still like to get my hands dirty whenever I get the opportunity.

I learnt a lot in my time at Abbotsholme, far more than just academics. I came into my own in the Sixth Form, particularly as for me as it included a three-month educational exchange to South Africa. I developed personal and practical skills, both on the farm and on the many and various outdoor expeditions which were available to us, all of which have set me up for the challenges which arise in the work place. There is no bigger or better challenge than spending eighteen days in deepest coldest Norway, testing both leadership and survival skills. After that, nothing seems impossible!

I'm proud to work for Dalcour Maclaren. I've got a lot of responsibility and the job is very rewarding. I've been able to advise clients and really get involved in what the company does. There are some common traits in the people who work here: everyone's dynamic, they're looking to deliver and to do their job to the best standard possible.



## Leah Kirby (now Leah Masters)



The Lower Sixth started for me in 2002, a short thirteen years ago... I really had no idea what I wanted to do after Abbotsholme so, at first, choosing A Levels seemed a little daunting. I was advised by my parents and the school to choose subjects I found interesting or felt passionate about, therefore giving myself not only an enjoyable two years of study, but also the confidence that this would guide me towards a rewarding future. In fact, I have tried to keep this mentality throughout my education and career ever since. The fact that

Abbotsholme offered and encouraged such a broad range of subjects at A Level was of huge importance to me, as it allowed me to study science, languages and the arts. You can tell I was keeping my options open!

At that time in my life though, my passion was the theatre, and taking part in *Les Misérables* was, without a doubt, one of the highlights of my school years. It pulled together an ensemble made up of all walks of Abbotsholme life - established theatre lovers, expert musicians, quiet academics and stars of the sports field - many of whom had never stepped foot on stage before, all working together to create a production that has stayed with many of us ever since. It was a true reflection of what makes Abbotsholme such a special place.

After six years, Abbotsholme felt like a second home, and it was with great pride that I helped to lead the prefect team as Head Girl in my final year. Being involved in the running of the school exposed me to new situations that were challenging, exciting and intimidating but, most of all, hugely rewarding. All of these experiences made it that much harder to say goodbye, but left me better prepared than ever.

After a gap year spent working and saving, I went off to *East 15* to undertake a one-year course in Theatre Arts. I still look back on this year as one of the best of my life; the close-knit drama school environment was so familiar and comfortable, thanks in part to years of team- and character-building experiences throughout my school life. After a fantastic year, I chose not to pursue acting as a career, though, opting instead to go to university. This was a decision that I was able to make confidently, happy that I was able to take so many transferrable skills with me. Abbotsholme is great at enabling its students to take everything possible from any experience, no matter the direct outcome. Two years after leaving, Abbotsholme still guided me through the university applications process, for which I was really grateful. Three more years and a degree in Public Relations later, I still didn't know what I wanted to do! After a few years of work, I realised that I missed feeling passionate about my day-to-day work, so applied to a company with, I now recognise, very familiar values, since the John Lewis Partnership is built on 'spirit' - success, openness, fairness, transparency and pride. It empowers its Partners (all employees are part-owners) to take responsibility and accountability for the business success, and in doing so provides an incredibly rewarding working life. I genuinely hadn't noticed, until writing this account, just how much this decision must have been influenced by my time at Abbotsholme.

Within that time, I also met my husband, Rich, and we are currently living in Clapham in South London, but looking to move a bit further out into the country, as I miss the green space and fresh air! I see a number of OAs on a regular basis as there are quite a few of us down in London now, and recently one old school friend and I took our other halves out of the smoke and up to the Lake District for a weekend of hiking and outdoor pursuits. You can take the girls out of Abbotsholme...

## Danni Knott

The Sixth Form was, for me the most academically-focused section of my time at Abbotsholme. I was determined to get good grades whilst still achieving a balance between my hockey (both in and out of school), saxophone and singing lessons, Outdoor Education pursuits, drama – all too often wearing a fake moustache and playing a man, much to my mother's horror, though I was cast as one of the 'Lovely Ladies' in *Les Misérables* - and my part-time job at The Tavern in Denstone. I found time, though, to continue to develop the friendships that still exist today.

Fortunately, I was encouraged (with gentle persuasion) out of an immediate career in the Army, and into an application to university, and I moved on from the Sixth Form with three grade As at A Level. I had been inspired by Mr Palmer's Business Studies classes into becoming a



businesswoman, and this took me to Loughborough to study Management Science. Four years of fun later, I had met some more life-long friends to join my core Abbotsholme group, including Jimmy, my partner of six years now. After a year's industrial placement working for Johnson and Johnson, I gained a 2:1 degree, then started on Accenture's Management Consultant graduate scheme.

Accenture gave me experience in numerous industries and functions, and I picked up good foundations in Project Management and Stakeholder Engagement in particular, but I lost some of the balance I had achieved in the Sixth Form and sought a company where I could stick to the values I learnt at Abbotsholme. I joined Tesco in 2014, and now run Operational Change Programmes for their online business, looking at new ways to fulfil online customer's orders from Tesco's expansive estate.

I have achieved my balance again, joining a local hockey and tennis club, and I meet regularly with both my university and Abbotsholme friends.

## Tom Robinson



*Yes, but what has Abbotsholme ever done for us?*

Well, there were the O.Ed trips every weekend; and the exciting drama productions that were put on at least once a year; and that working farm with the sheep and cows and horses that no other schools have; and the small classes so that you got the right amount of attention in your work; and constant opportunities to get involved in international projects; and the lovely, fresh environment to learn in.....

*Yeah, there was that, ok, but besides that, what has Abbotsholme ever done for us?*

Good question.

As we go about our daily lives and along our journeys as OAs, I guess we don't really spend time reflecting on what our old school has done for us. But now I come to think about it, there may be a lot of parallels between what Abbotsholme has done for me and a well-known Python sketch.

As I look back now, ten years after leaving the Sixth Form, it amazes me to think about the sheer volume of opportunities that were on offer to us as young adults. During every Chapel, on every board in the Roseyard Corridor, and on every teacher's wall, there was a myriad of opportunities being presented to us....every day. It was truly incredible. How does a school with around 300 pupils offer all of these trips/programmes/sessions/lessons/classes and sports games...and where do the staff get their energy!

I was fortunate enough to be invited back to the school a few weeks ago by my old tutor, Tom Palmer, to give a talk about sustainable business to Sixth Form business class, and to speak in Chapel to the whole school. The thing that hit me the most is that the huge number of opportunities is still there! In fact – they have increased and may have even got

better! Little did the sixteen or seventeen year old me know that I was amongst some of the most privileged young people in the world, but it really hit me returning as a twenty-something-year-old OA!

So, how have the experiences that I had at Abbotsholme affected me as I have embarked on my journey since leaving the red-brick walls of the school?

Well, in short, profoundly. The 'New School' as Reddie called it, presented me with boundless experiences that, if I think about it now, form a deep part of who I am.

My experiences with friends, walking in challenging conditions across scary mountain ridges armed with compass, map and a resourceful mind, have encouraged me to travel and climb the world since leaving school. I have spent three years travelling, climbing, surfing and working in some of the most challenging places this awesome planet has to offer. It also showed me that you *can* do it and you *shall* do it! The lessons of being resourceful when things aren't all rosy will always stay with me, whether in business or in mountains.

Drama productions such as *Les Miserables* demonstrated to me the startling truth that I couldn't sing for toffee... and that I'd better not try to do that in the future! That's why I got the part of the revolting innkeeper, Thénardier! I guess in a funny way, some of the most formative lessons you learn are from finding out what you are not so good at! But in all seriousness, the ability to stand in front of people helps me every day nowadays in my role as the founder of a start-up company.

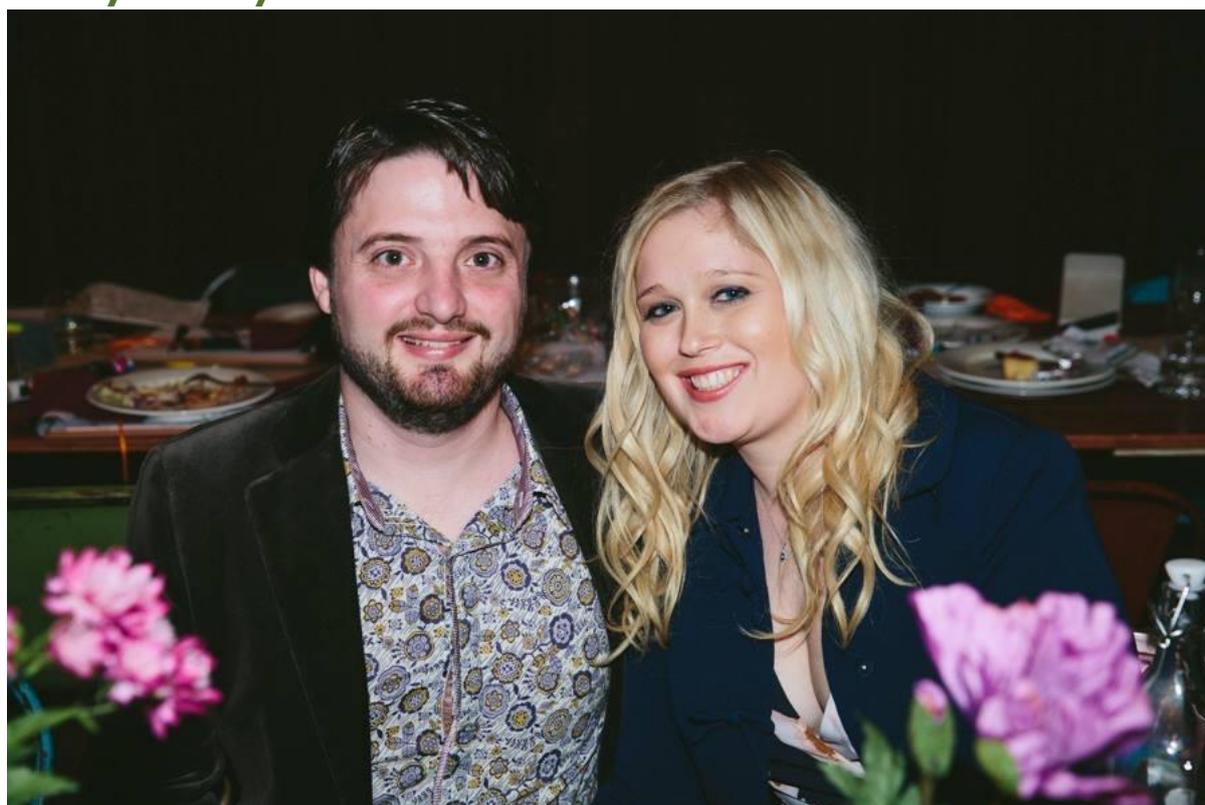
My time as prefect of Round Square played a massive part in my life in the Sixth Form, and during that year we increased the number of pupils involved from ten people in the first meeting, to around fifty pupils in the second – just from speaking to the school in one Chapel! This showed me that people at school *did* listen and were receptive to helping others and taking opportunities – even the 'cool' ones! Sometimes people just need a little encouragement to see what is available.

If I think about it now, this early tutorial in leadership helped enable me to start up my own company. We are leading from the front and challenging the way that conventional companies are making conventional materials. I believe that materials can be made in a better way for our planet, not from finite resources and ultimately sent to fast-filling landfills, and I aim to improve awareness of this and inspire people to follow me on that path. I guess those mornings in Chapel, trying to get more people to join Round Square committees, formed the basis of that.

*Yeah yeah yeah, okay, I'll grant you that. But apart from all of that, what has Abbotsholme ever done for us?*

Well, depends on how long you have to chat! Let's sit down and have a brew!

## Becky Kirtley



I look back on my time in the Sixth Form at Abbotsholme School as two of the best years of my life, so far. I tried to throw myself into as many aspects of school life and absorb as much of Abbotsholme into my soul as possible.

In Lower Sixth, whilst studying my AS Levels (English Literature, Biology, Chemistry and Theatre Studies) I embarked on a number of extra-curricular activities including Gold Duke Edinburgh, playing first team hockey and netball, being a part of Singers and the orchestra, a committee member of Round Square, chair of the Student Council, going on the Moroccan mountaineering trip and co-directing the school play with two of my peers. If I had gone to any other school, I would have been able to do all that. Abbotsholme creates such a safe and supportive environment where students can pursue all interests, not just one or two. I am now a teacher and I can say that in all my experience in other schools, I have never seen another school like Abbotsholme – a school where students are actively encouraged to get involved in all aspects of school life, not just one or two. Too often, students are pigeonholed into pursuing only the extra-curricular activities they really excel at and discouraged from simply joining in, participating to the best that they can, and having a good time. This aspect is probably one of my favourite things about Abbotsholme; everyone is welcome, always. This links in with the Round Square ethos of educating the whole person, not just part, and Abbotsholme does this excellently. I was a pretty appalling hiker, but my teachers encouraged me and I got through the Moroccan trip and achieved the Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award at Christmas the following year.

During Upper Sixth, whilst continuing the same four subjects at A2 level, I took part in my favourite project in my entire Abbotsholme career – ‘Les Miserables’. I was cast as Cosette and relished the fact that I was going to be one of the only characters not covered in mud who would still be alive at the end of the play, as well as the beautiful soprano melodies that character delivers. ‘Les Miserables’ was a truly awe-inspiring experience and one I will never forget. The number of students

and staff who were involved in the play was tremendous and once again, it was a case of 'all are welcome'; there was a part for anyone who just wanted to be involved, to commit. We had so much fun in rehearsals in the lead-up to performance week and the memories from that time are very precious. Yet, although preparing and performing in this play was my best experience at Abbotsholme, looking back is bittersweet. The wonderful young man who played my adoptive father in the play passed away a few years after leaving school, and so I look back on 'Les Miserables' with a smile on my face and tears in my eyes.

Being an Abbotsholmian, 'Les Miserables' wasn't the only extra-curricular activity I committed to that year and like many of my peers, I threw myself into Abbotsholme's world: continuing with Duke of Edinburgh, first team sport, and music, and taking on new exciting challenges including Chair of Round Square, which partly involved being a representative at the conference that year in South Africa, Prefect and Head of Weaver House. The leadership opportunities that Abbotsholme offers are brilliant. As leaders of the school, we were treated as adults, not children, and for a teenager about to be thrust into the real world, that was something I think was very important and which made us prepared for the 'real world'. We were responsible for running duty teams, helping out in the boarding houses and running events, to name a few of the roles entrusted to us. The trust that was given to us to lead and be role models for the other students was heartwarming, and we did our best to live up to the responsibilities given to us.

These activities and responsibilities taught my peers and me so much about each other, ourselves and how to take on the world beyond school. Sixth Form, and all opportunities Abbotsholme provides, gave us the confidence, the tenacity and the drive to succeed beyond the boundaries of the River Dove and into the big wide world. The bonds that we formed during Sixth Form were unbreakable. We may have all gone onto pursue our separate lives but we are all still united through Abbotsholme, through our experiences and fellowship. For some friendships, it may be a year between phone calls or Facebook messages but when we can get in touch, it is as though no time has passed, as though we are still hanging out in the Roseyard at lunchtime. For others, our best friends at Abbotsholme remain our best friends and it is true, even for me. When I get married next year, all my bridesmaids are Abbotsholmians.

After school, I took a gap year and spent five months as a teacher's aide in Vancouver at another Round Square School, assisting with Grade 4 and in the Senior Drama department. A gap year is not for everybody, but it was right for me; I wanted to see more of the world and grow as a person before going to university. I studied for a Bachelors of Arts with Honours, in North American Literature and History at The University of Birmingham, pursuing the passion for literature instilled within me at Abbotsholme. This degree included a study year abroad and so, two years into my degree, I left England for the University of Toronto, where I would spend my third year of university studying Canadian and American feminist fiction, and meet the man who will become my husband in 2016.

I returned to England after my year abroad and completed the Honours year of my degree whilst grappling with what I wanted to do next. This period after school was probably the most challenging, as I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do or who I wanted to be. I decided, given that my partner was Australian and was about to start studying medicine in Brisbane, that I would go to Australia and work there until I could say with utmost certainty that I was pursuing the right path for me. I was afraid of going down the wrong path and regretting it. I thought about all the times I was most happy and content, and Abbotsholme, as well as my experiences in Vancouver, kept coming up. I kept

coming back to memories of being inspired by a teacher, and the moment a girl in one of my classes in Canada finally understood how to construct a sentence, and the look of joy and accomplishment on her face. I realised that what I was meant to do was to teach, and continued to pursue my love of English and the Arts. I completed my Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education, in Australia the following year, and have now been in the classroom for five years, teaching English, Drama and Music. I was also fortunate enough to be promoted two years ago to Head of Events and Promotions at my school, utilising the skills I honestly believe I began to cultivate as a Sixth Former at Abbotsholme. If Abbotsholme had not given me the leadership opportunities and responsibilities that I undertook as a Sixth Former, or fostered my capability to lead, organise and manage groups, I would not have had the confidence even to apply for that promotion, let alone have the skills required to be hired.

In closing, Abbotsholme doesn't only produce people who can pass an exam or write an essay. Abbotsholme produces well-rounded individuals who are confident; who are willing to try anything; who can lead. I feel privileged to be in that group: to be an Abbotsholmian.