



Prince Charles's Hogwarts

The enchanted
place where
teachers go to
renew their
love of learning

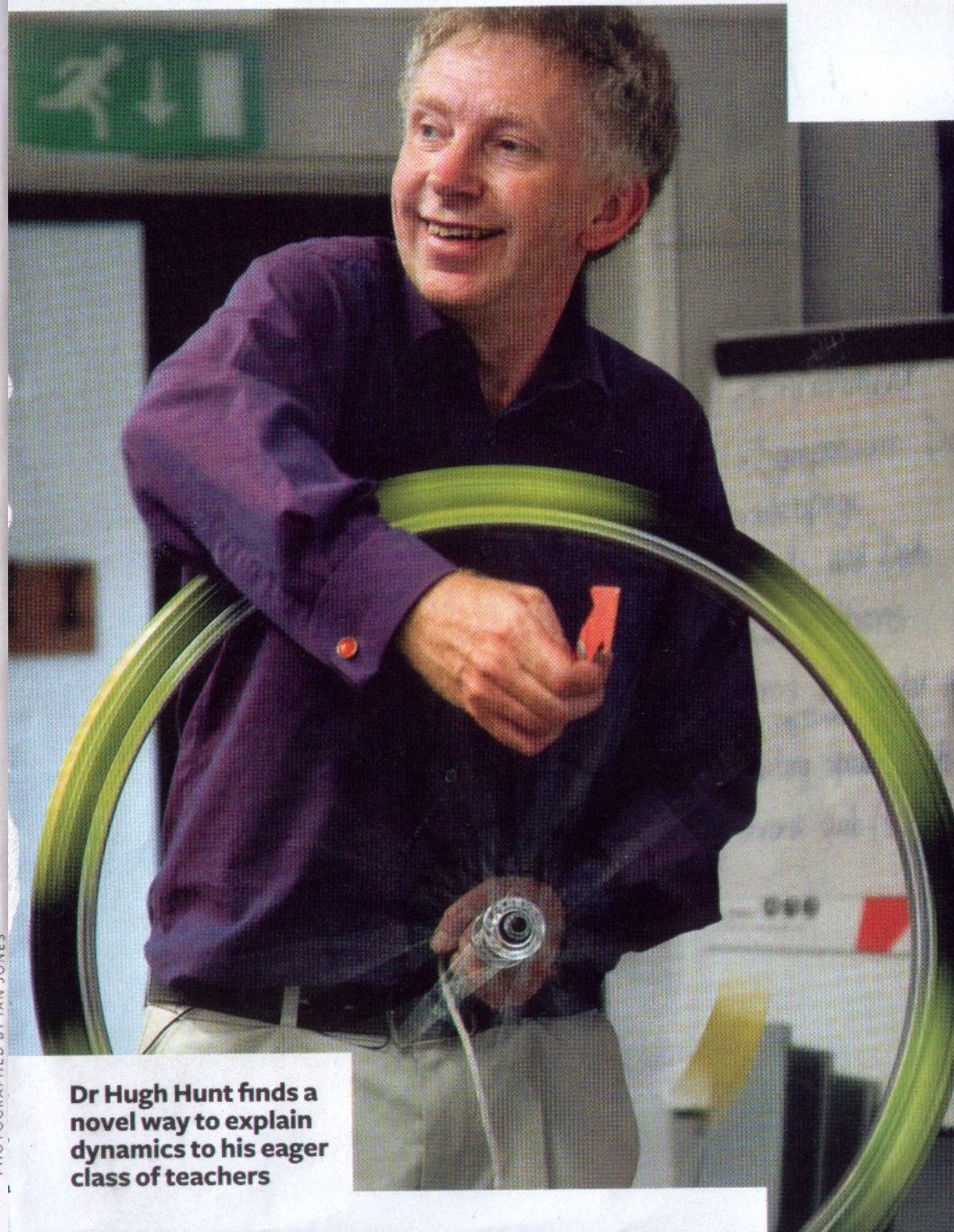
BY NIGEL FARNDALE

They doodle, they pass notes, they shout out answers when asked. But these pupils are not, by any standard definition of the word, normal. They wear too much corduroy for one thing. And those who are bald are not so through choice. One even has a grey beard. They look like what they are: teachers who have gone back to school to be taught, rather than to teach.

It's the Prince of Wales's idea. For the past seven years he has been running summer courses for state secondary school-teachers, as a way of revitalising them, inspiring them, reminding them why they wanted to become teachers in the first place. You may not have heard of this project—it has been kept below the media radar—but it is the stuff of educational fantasy.

Who would be your dream English teacher

PHOTOGRAPHED BY IAN JONES



Dr Hugh Hunt finds a novel way to explain dynamics to his eager class of teachers

if you could have your time at school again? Alan Bennett, perhaps? Sir Tom Stoppard? Seamus Heaney? For history you would probably want David Starkey or Simon Schama or Niall Ferguson. And how about science? Baroness Susan Greenfield would take some beating. Though you probably wouldn't refuse a tutorial from Professor James Lovelock, pioneer of the Gaia hypothesis, or Sir Crispin Tickell, who was warning the world about global warming when Al Gore was still in shorts. All have taken up the prince's invitation to teach a classroom full of teachers for a day.

The Prince's Teaching Institute is a charity that works in conjunction with Cambridge University and is part-funded by private sponsorship. And this year, for the first time, it's covering geography. So who would your fantasy geography teacher be? Michael Palin, of course. He is to be the star turn later today and, before he steps up to the podium, I shall meet him for a chat on a bench overlooking the lawns of

'Teaching these days seems to be all about tests and league tables. You forget that it is a noble calling'

Homerton College, Cambridge, the venue for this year's Summer School.

For now I am sitting in a classroom full of physics teachers, dodging boomerangs being thrown by Dr Hugh Hunt, a Cambridge don in a purple

shirt. That's the other thing; for every Stephen Fry, Robert Harris and Melvyn Bragg—all have taught on the course in previous years—there is a Cambridge professor. This one is demonstrating Newton's laws of motion, his belief being that visualisation is the key to understanding. There is something Pythonesque about him running across the hall with an arrow held to his chest as he demonstrates the theory of circular motion. Perhaps a better analogy is with Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Dr Hunt's demonstrations amount to magic displays.

As a way of explaining dynamics, for example, he spins himself on a home-made skateboard contraption. "Arms in, you feel lighter and spin faster," he says as he turns. "Arms out, heavier and slower." He also changes the direction of his skateboard by raising a spinning bicycle wheel above his head, then lowering it so that it is spinning the opposite way. For his next demonstration, he throws balls under a table towards a pyramid of wine glasses. They never hit. "Whenever a ball bounces off the underside of a table it will always bounce backwards rather than forwards."

Sarah Baugh, a 35-year-old physics teacher from Lincolnshire, leans over to me and says she'll try some of these things next term. "A lesson flies by if the teacher is enjoying it—and the teacher enjoys it if the pupil is enjoying it."

On my other side is Neil Drury, a

physics teacher from Birmingham who has been teaching for seven years and admits that he is now starting to feel a bit disillusioned. "This course feels like an MOT to me," he says. "Teaching these days seems to be all about tests and league tables and performance targets. You forget that it is also a noble calling that requires skill and initiative. Often you find yourself competing with PlayStations and Xboxes."

Afterwards, as Dr Hunt is packing up his props into a big suitcase, I ask him if he is disillusioned too. "I am about certain aspects of the syllabus," he says. "Did you know teachers are not supposed to refer to centrifugal force any more because it is considered too difficult? That's crazy. Children like to be challenged. But teachers' hands are so tied. I was going to patent these props but teachers aren't supposed to use them, so what's the point?"

This gets to the heart of the problem, as the Prince of Wales sees it. He believes modern teaching is often about dumbing down the curriculum at the expense of traditional and sometimes more difficult "subject knowledge". No one is allowed to fail, apparently, and everyone has to be equal, so schools opt for easier courses and vocational alternatives that are described as "more relevant and accessible" for pupils but in fact are so woolly and uninspiring they leave both teachers and pupils demoralised and unmotivated.

The Summer Schools run by the Prince's Teaching Institute are always oversubscribed and the 140 or so places



each year are awarded to teachers who have shown commitment to their field through extra-curricular activities. For the first five years the course focused on history and English. It has expanded to include science at a time when the subject is in crisis. Only one in four secondary schools in England now has a specially trained physics teacher. And falling numbers at A level, with physics entries down by half since 1982, coincide with criticism of the new science GCSE. "It is more suitable for the pub than the classroom," according to the philosopher Baroness Warnock.

With her vampy nail varnish and auburn hair, Bernice McCabe cuts a glamorous figure. She is the Summer School course director, as well as the headmistress of North London Collegiate School, the highest-ranking school in the country. "For teachers who might be feeling

uninspired, this course is a shot in the arm," she says. "It doesn't help that traditional subjects are being sidelined." Last year, she explains, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority effectively dismissed the subject-based

'The Summer School makes you appreciate the pulling power of the Royal Family. They get things done'

approach in favour of what she calls "woolliness"—with "subjects" being relegated to the bottom of the priorities pile as "statutory expectations" beneath "overarching themes".

She adds that the system of SAT tests in schools has not, as ministers have claimed, driven up standards. Instead it has led to a narrow curriculum, where teachers drill children in the techniques they need to pass tests, rather than engaging them in genuine learning. This is the theme of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*, as he explained at the first-ever Summer School, held at Dartington College, Devon, in 2002. The play is about two teachers, a modern one concerned solely with passing tests, even if that means giving the children a shallow education, and a traditional teacher who tries to convey depth and encourage intellectual curiosity.

The novelist Robert Harris was also at that first session and got so much out of it he has agreed to teach at the

Summer School three times since. "It's a two-way thing," he says. "I come away inspired myself by the enthusiasm of the teachers and by the fact that they appreciate you giving up your free time to come. Teaching can be quite a thankless and melancholy occupation. I know from having four school-age children myself that it can be an examination treadmill. This course gives them a chance to recharge and reconnect. As a writer you are also meeting the

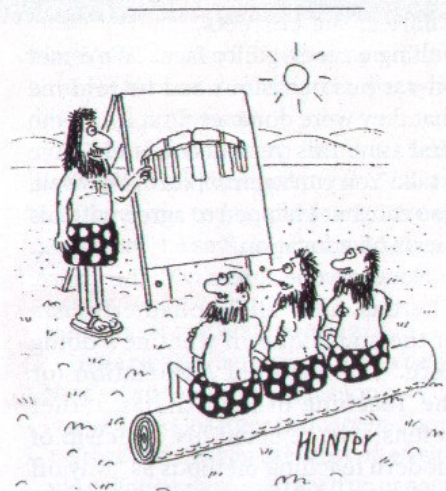
people who deliver your future readers, bring them on, nurture them."

Harris, the best-selling author of *Fatherland*, *Enigma* and *Pompeii*, became involved after the prince read an article he had written about the importance of teaching Latin and Greek in schools. "I argued that the breaking of the Enigma code showed that you never know when the classics might come in useful. Without those classicists we might have lost the war. The prince said that would be a great theme for a lecture at his Summer School. Of course I was flattered and agreed. Even for mild republicans like me, it makes you appreciate the pulling power of the Royal Family. They get things done. The first school had a subversive air. The Prince of Wales shook his fist above his head at the end of his talk and it felt as if he was leading a revolt."

Michael Palin, his fellow revolutionary, has arrived and is sauntering across the quad. He looks lean and tanned in a black suit and open-necked shirt, his

greying hair swept back. For his class he will talk about how a love of geography can inspire pupils to do what he did—explore the world. He was the fourth choice as presenter of *Around the World in 80 Days*, he says...after Noel Edmonds. I ask if he can recall any particular teacher who fired his imagination at school. "At my prep school in Sheffield it was my geography master," he says. "I liked him because he got you out of the school and you could go for a nice walk somewhere. He was a good teacher in the sense that he made you work hard. You had to make a map of your own at the end of it and show where you had been."

Palin believes there is a tendency today to patronise pupils. "In English no one has to read whole texts any more because that is considered too



"...and after the games, the new stadium will act as a catalyst for neighbourhood regeneration"

challenging. Yet being challenged encourages pupils. They enjoy difficulty and solving problems. When I was at Shrewsbury they had a fairly robust approach and we responded well to it. It was probably politically incorrect by today's standards. If they didn't like what you were doing they would tell you. But they were also inspiring. I had an English teacher there who introduced me to Hemingway and Conrad. I'd never been treated like that before, like an adult with a mind of my own."

After his Monty Python days, Palin did a series called *Ripping Yarns*, one of them about a draconian public school. Was it based on his? "Partly yes, but also I was recalling the old stories that had entered the folklore of the school, the military traditions, the idea that everyone knew their place. For all its old-fashioned traditions, Shrewsbury was quite a liberal school in a way. We could meet our teachers on a non-academic basis, on the playing field or on the stage. It's not a coincidence that all the people who ran *Private Eye*—Richard Ingrams, Chris Booker, Willie Rushton—were at Shrewsbury and their way of dealing with the very conservative traditional side was to make jokes about it, while at the same time learning to write well, learning to argue. The school allowed you to be subversive in an intelligent way."

He never toyed with the idea of being a teacher himself. "My wife trained to be a teacher at Froebel College, London, but I don't think I could have ever done it. I'd be hopeless. I'd be talking

about feet and inches. But I certainly enjoy getting people enthused about the things I am enthused by. I mean, Python was great, but with the travel and arts documentaries I've been doing lately I'm discovering for myself the thing that I now realise my teachers were trying to push me towards 40 or 50 years ago. Back then I was more interested in pop music and girls."

His travel documentaries have made geography a more entertaining subject than it had a reputation for being. "I just don't see why geography should be a dull subject. It's so relevant to everyone's life, in terms of the environment, transport, global warming. I would have studied it at Oxford, only I discovered there were more places available to study history, so I had a better chance of getting in with that. Michael Heart at Shrewsbury virtually got me into Oxford by working through a list until he found a college that would take me. My father was pushing me to do it too."

It's false modesty of course. Earlier in the day a teacher had told me that she believed the environment at home was crucial in determining academic success at school. "Middle-class parents are more encouraging and more likely to help with homework." Was Palin a hands-on parent? "Not particularly. I relied on the school to do the hard work. I was away a lot of the time filming, so it was sometimes quite difficult. I was a great believer in talking and having family meals together, though. I wanted them to do what I had done, read rather than watch telly. I was that kind of parent. Nowadays I

think children watch far too much telly."

I know, I say, all those Michael Palin documentaries. "Yes, well, that is a problem. At least I'm only on for an hour!"

When I ask him how he became involved in the Summer School, he says, "Charles just wrote out of the blue."

Oh, it's "Charles" is it? "Prince Charles, Prince Charles," he corrects, pulling a mock-guilty face. "We'd met on various occasions and he told me that they were doing geography for the first time this year and would I give a talk. You can't refuse, can you? Well, you can, but I happen to agree with his views on education."

Not everyone agrees with the prince. There is, after all, implied criticism of the status quo in what he's doing here. The National Association for the Teaching of English has, rather defensively, rejected his criticism of modern teaching methods as "way off the mark", while Jerry Brotton, lecturer in Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary, University of London, has said Prince Charles was working from a version of

A wizard teacher: Michael Palin at Homerton College, Cambridge



history he learned 35 years ago. But I have yet to meet a working teacher who disagrees with him.

It is time for Palin to face his classroom full of middle-aged pupils. "I want to talk to you today about my love of geography," he says. It gets a wild cheer.

It's hard to think of any other context where that would happen—where a declaration of love for geography would be cheered to the rafters.

■ Nigel Farnsdale is a writer for *The Sunday Telegraph*.

How to exercise while cooking:

Use a cleaver. It's heavier than a basic cooking knife, giving your arms and hands a workout while you chop.

Buy drinks in larger containers. Pouring them becomes an exercise.

Store utensils you use most often either very high or very low. Stretch slowly and deliberately as you reach up or squat down for them.

Toss food. It takes more effort than mixing and looks impressive.

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