

Eton College

Two weeks ago I attended meetings of the International Boys Schools Coalition held at Eton College in the United Kingdom. Eton College is located in the town of Windsor approximately 30 kilometres to the west of London and very close to Heathrow airport. Indeed you can sometimes see Eton out the window as your plane makes its final approach into London airport. The flight path goes directly over the College chapel with one aeroplane passing overhead every 90 seconds during busy times of the day!

Eton College was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI making it four hundred years older than St. Paul's. The College is one of only four fully-boarding, all-boys schools left in the United Kingdom and is often referred to as the most famous school in the world. The list of distinguished alumni is long. Eton has educated no fewer than nineteen British Prime-Ministers including the current leader, David Cameron. It has also educated many members of the British royal family, including Queen Elizabeth's grandsons, Prince William and Prince Harry, as well as royalty from around the world.

For many centuries the school was quite small with only 200-300 boys. Today it has over 1300 boys and 160 teachers and boarding house masters, all of whom live on the school grounds. Eton is an old institution with many customs and traditions. The boys and teachers wear formal dress to class, clothes that you might well wear to a wedding in Hong Kong. Life around the school is formal with rituals and rules that must be followed. The prefects play an important role in enforcing the rules and making sure that good discipline is maintained by all the boys. In years past the prefects were empowered to punish younger boys usually by beating them with a cane. They were also allowed to send younger boys on errands, for example, buying their lunch at the canteen or cleaning their bedrooms or polishing their shoes. Such practices no longer take place at Eton although the prefects still ensure that the boys are well-behaved and follow the school rules. The prefects are also allowed to wear white bow ties, a vest under their blazer of their own design and colour and silver coloured buttons on their jackets. The prefect body is highly regarded at Eton and it is a great honour indeed to be chosen to serve the College as prefect.

The meetings I attended last week were held in the Governors meeting room rather like the College Council room on the top floor of the Wong Ming Him hall. Adorning the walls are many oil paintings of students painted during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was fashionable at that time for a family to arrange for an artist to paint their son's portrait when he graduated from the school. The oil painting would then be donated to Eton as a token of the family's appreciation for the years spent educating their son. Many of those oil paintings were of prefects. Although this tradition ended with the arrival of the photograph the College acquired a vast collection over the years of many hundreds of oil paintings. Today, some of these paintings are worth a considerable amount of money because they were painted by young artists who went on to become famous English painters.

Tradition lies at the heart of Eton College. In a more modest fashion it also lies at the heart of St. Paul's. We have customs and rituals at SPC that are unique to our school. Some relate specifically to the prefects, for example, the right to read the Bible at assembly and to wear the prefect tie. Maybe a school of our age ought to have more customs and rituals that set us apart from others in Hong Kong of similar age, for example, DBS or Queen's College. Traditions are important and make us proud and honoured to be a student or teacher at this school.

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