



In much the same way as everyone who lives in London likes to claim that his or her particular patch of the nation's capital city is "just like a village, really" – the phrase "we're one big family" is something that's heard so often from head teachers these days, it barely has any meaning at all. However, Tibshelf Community School in Derbyshire is genuinely special. As soon as you walk through the main entrance, into a high-ceilinged, carpeted atrium known affectionately as 'The Street', with its giant, student-created artworks on the walls and strong, pictorial references to the mining heritage of the area the school serves, you can feel the atmosphere. It's warm and friendly. Aspirational, certainly – but not overwhelming. It is, you sense, an easy place in which to be yourself; and the best version of yourself possible.

"The motto I inherited when I came here," points out head teacher Peter Crowe when we visit, "was Alta Pete – aim for the highest. We don't serve the most affluent area; I believe the official description would be that we are in a catchment with 'pockets of deprivation'. Our



Ever6 figure is 33% – in other words, a third of our students have claimed free school meals at some point over the past six years – and at any one time, we have around 20% claiming. And of course, as was in the news recently, it's children from white, working class, rural families – exactly the kind of families that you find living around here – that tend to struggle

most when it comes to progress and attainment. So one of the biggest things for us to do in a community like this is to try and raise aspiration. And as part of that, it's really important that we are able to create a sense of family. Our children come from well over 20 communities in more than nine villages spread widely across the area – and beyond; but as soon as they come here, they start bonding. They're nurtured. They're part of the Tibshelf Community School Family."

In every family history there are periods of calm, punctuated by turbulent episodes. With 20 years (albeit in two chunks separated by an eight-year stint at another school in South Derbyshire) at Tibshelf under his belt, Crowe is able to talk with experience and authority about both – with arguably the most challenging phase having started in 2006 and finally drawn to a close in the most rewarding way possible in 2013/14, when the school was finally able to move to a brand-new building with first rate sporting facilities and a cutting edge and creative ICT provision solution.

"I've been head here for 14 years, and had always had a nagging fear that I would be the



last head of Tibshelf,” says Crowe. “At the end of the day, Tibshelf is a small village of 4000 people; how can it possibly have a secondary school? It’s a principal village, serving several others, and we’ve been oversubscribed every year that I can remember – but still, there had been attempts to close it in the 1970s and again in 1986, during my first spell here. So, when I was summoned to a meeting at County Hall in Autumn 2006, with the Chair of Governors, I thought, this is it. They’re going to tell me they’re closing Tibshelf.”

What actually happened during that meeting, was that a stunned Crowe was informed that Tibshelf was part of BSF Phase 2 for Derbyshire – and that he would be getting a new school. “You could have knocked me over with a feather,” he recalls. “And of course, I was delighted. It felt like a vindication of our popularity; of everything we’d been doing.”

However, with every burst of sunshine comes a little rain – and 18 months after this meeting, Crowe was summoned again, this time to be told that a school needed to be closed in order for the project to continue; that the school chosen was Deincourt, on the outskirts of Chesterfield; and that it would be Crowe’s job to oversee the closure.

“I wanted it like a hole in the head,” admits Crowe. “There were 490 students left there, and 110 staff. The school was in Special Measures and the head had retired. I recognised, though, that if I didn’t take on the executive headship and manage the closure, we wouldn’t get our new school. So in 2008, despite reservations from my own staff and governors, I took it on. We got out of Special Measures within four terms, which was a real source of pride to everyone involved – a kind of ‘we’ll show them’, even though we knew it wouldn’t change the outcome. Eventually, having worked as a split site school with bases over six miles apart, we absorbed the last 70 or 80 Deincourt youngsters and more than 30 members of staff onto the Tibshelf site, integrating them completely as the Deincourt site was finally closed. It was difficult – but you wouldn’t know now who was from where.”

While all this was happening, one of the main things that kept Crowe going was planning the new school. He devoted one day a week to the project, spending two at Deincourt



and two at Tibshelf, with acting heads in charge on both sites. By 2009 the plans were completed and approved, and the building work was about to begin.

And then, on July 10th 2009, the new administration at Whitehall stopped 617 BSF projects – including Tibshelf. The grounds given were ‘lack of financial closure’; but the truth was, this was a mere technicality relating to the sale of one, small triangle of land that made up part of the new site, which belonged to three elderly sisters who were taking their time about how the proceeds of the sale should be divided – especially as one of them lived in Australia. “Some of the projects that weren’t stopped were literally pipe-dreams,” observes Crowe, wryly. “No work had been done at all – but we were 18 months down the line and had the diggers ready to move.”

The disappointment was profound, and no one at Tibshelf was prepared to let their promised, much needed school be taken away without a fight. In the end, it was Conservative councillor Mike Longden, then a cabinet minister while Derbyshire went through a very rare and brief blue period, who made the

WHAT DO THE STUDENTS SAY?



“AT OTHER SCHOOLS, IT’S ALL ABOUT FOLLOWING THE RULES – BUT HERE, YOU HAVE MORE FREEDOM TO DO WHAT YOU WANT. IT’S NOT THAT THERE ARE NO RULES, BUT WE’RE TRUSTED.”

MAIA TRYNER



“THERE’S A GREAT ATMOSPHERE. STAFF AND STUDENTS REALLY GET ALONG TOGETHER”

JOSEPH BESTWICK



“IF YOU NEED ANYTHING – EVEN NOT TO DO WITH LESSONS – THERE’S SUPPORT THERE. TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ARE CLOSE. IT DOES FEEL LIKE A FAMILY.”

MOLLY BREED

difference – he listened to what Crowe and his team had to say, and vowed that if he did nothing else while in administration, he would get the new school built. In July 2011, true to his word, the new school project was back on – slightly scaled down, but still using the same company of architects, and the same builders.

“The rest is history,” smiles Crowe. “We replanned the project in six months and it was completed in 15 months. It’s been hard – especially for our current Y11s, including the last of the Deincourt children. They’ve had a tough time, but they’ve worked really hard and been involved in the planning every step of the way. I know they’ll do fine this year, though. And next year, we’ll have our best results ever.”

As it happens, Crowe won’t be at Tibshelf to see whether this last prediction turns out to be accurate. At the end of the 2013/14 academic year he retired, and a new pair of hands will now be steering the family vehicle at Tibshelf. The bodywork is gleaming. The engine is sound. The passengers are all safe and comfortable; and the fear of the scrapyard is a distant memory. As legacies go, Crowe has one of which he can be truly proud.



★ GETTING IT RIGHT

A CRUCIAL PART OF THE PLANNING FOR THE NEW SCHOOL WAS SECURING THE MOST SUITABLE ICT PROVISION.

Moving away from a Victorian building with three computer suites and no wireless, the vision was to create a thoroughly modern system with maximum connectivity and flexibility; a learning environment for the future. “People needed to be able to come in and hook up, straight away, anywhere, with any device,” explains Assistant Headteacher Brian Fischer. “So we started from the end point. We decided what we wanted to achieve, and then invited companies to explain how they thought it could be delivered. In the end we went with the Stone Group. They set us up with a superb infrastructure, including whiteboards that can be used interactively thanks to ebeam technology; highly efficient print management; and above all, exactly what we wanted, in that staff and students can use their own devices, or the ones we provide, and log in to the system anywhere, at any time – including at home.”

It’s early days for Tibshelf and the new technology – Fischer is happy to agree that there is a wide range of competence and confidence levels amongst staff at the moment, but he is totally comfortable regarding the CPD that is in place already and planned for the years ahead. Collaboration is key, both with staff sharing their ideas and skills with each other, and students helping to develop new ways of working, with ICT integral to teaching and learning across the curriculum. Experimenting is actively encouraged; mobile phones are permitted in breaks and at lunchtime, as well as in lessons, with teachers’ permission; and everyone is excited to be a part of this vibrant new phase in Tibshelf Community School’s journey.

“Working with Tibshelf to plan and implement its new technology infrastructure has been a journey with a distinct upward trajectory,” comments Simon Harbridge, CEO at Stone Group. “The school is at the start of an incredible new beginning, in terms of its geographical site, ICT strategy and curricular ambition. Together, we’ve constructed IT that supports pedagogical teaching needs, pupil creativity and academic excellence, and, vitally, underpins the school’s security and communications network. The technology we’ve chosen doesn’t just solve the challenges of running a school or teaching now, it supports change further down the line by being agile and scalable. With this infrastructure in place, the school is truly ready to fly, and evolving as it sees fit.”