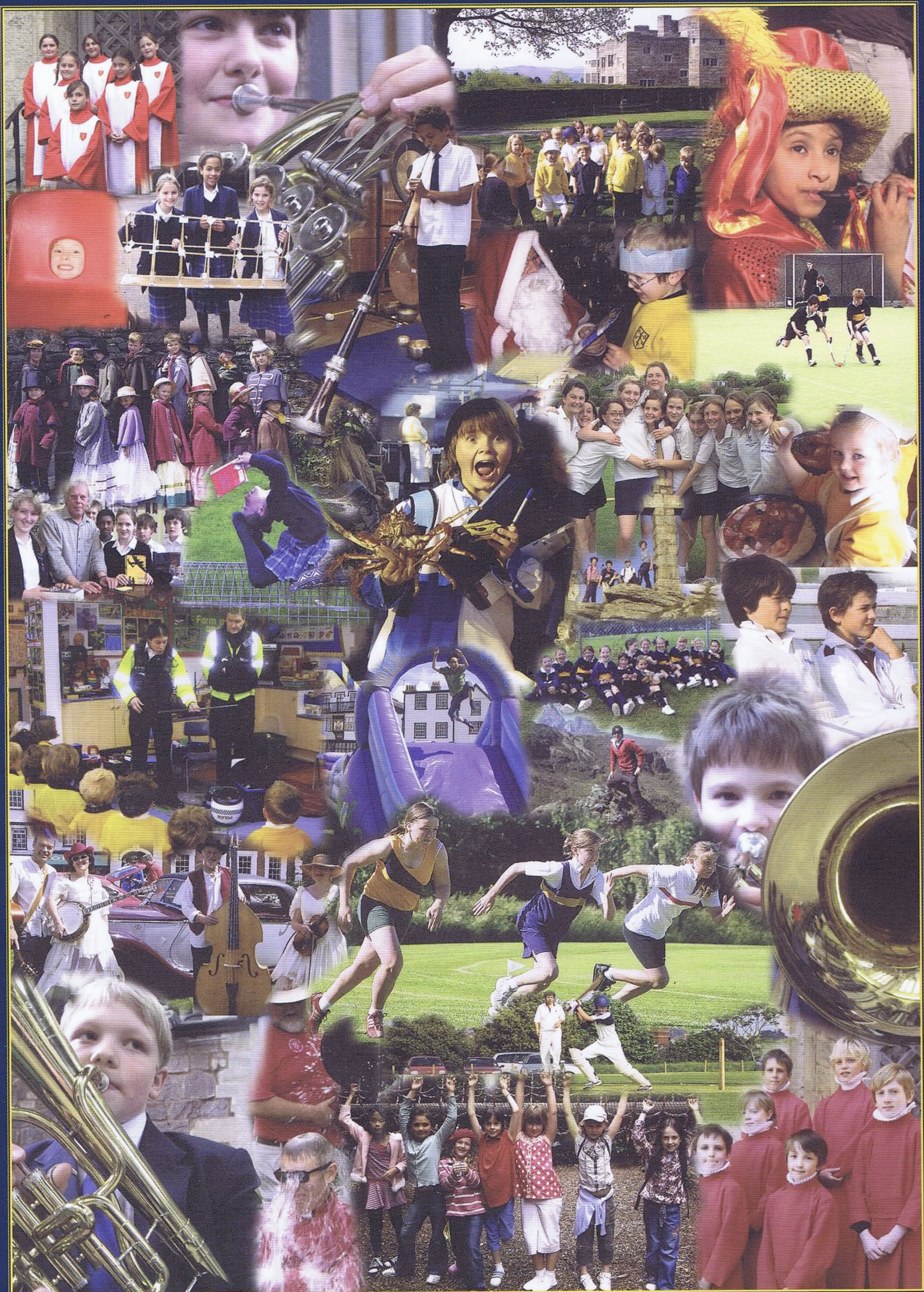


# *The Chantry*

The Magazine of Exeter Cathedral School



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# Old Boy News

## ECS - A Training Ground For Horticultural Terrorism By Richard Reynolds (1985 – 1990)

I am a guerrilla gardener - that is I cultivate land without permission – and I am self-appointed ringleader of this informal global movement. Earlier this year my book, “On Guerrilla Gardening”, was published which narrates the experiences of guerrilla gardeners from around the world and tells my part in this battle that has been waging sporadically for hundreds of years. But I missed out one important part in the genesis – the role Exeter Cathedral School played in conditioning me for a life of crime. On the first page of “On Guerrilla Gardening” I describe how it was the frustration of living in a 1970s council tower block in London’s grotty Elephant & Castle that drove me to start illegally planting the shrubbery late at night and become a guerrilla gardener. In fact the urge to “fight the filth with forks and flowers” began when I was a pupil at Exeter Cathedral School and my hunger there for beautiful gardens led to being fiercely dispatched to the headmaster’s office.

This story has two parts. In the first I wish to pay tribute to the fertile environment of the cathedral school that equipped me so well for guerrilla gardening, in the second I will explain the moment I went criminal. Unwittingly, you see, The Chantry playground was a training ground for horticultural terrorism. In a corner of the tarmac space, tucked behind nets and a low breeze blocked wall was a hillock of dirt, dumped there after Helyer’s 1987 playground re-landscaping project. A tired old fig tree and straggly weigela soldiered on around the edge but the rest of the space was a blank canvas for us boys to muck around on. I eagerly seized a plot of about 2 metres square in partnership with my brother Kit and Alexander Brazier. There was space for about six of these gardens and the potential was enormous but working there was a battle on many fronts. Although our gardening was with permission (this, please note, was not guerrilla gardening) little was done to make it a fruitful experience. Gardening there was a military operation. Getting onto the territory required clambering over a wall, watering the plots required lugging cans filled from a tap on the other side of the playground and worst of all was the regular barrage of stray footballs which came flying over the nets, bombing our plants and igniting my temper. Nevertheless I persevered and filled the plot with colourful bedding plants from the stalls of St George’s market, created a little herb garden and even installed an underground watering system made from an orange juice bottle and punctured plastic piping. I remember the pride of



Gardening enthusiasts Andrew Swan, Kit and Richard Reynolds and Alexander Brazier



Sunflowers on The Thames

showing the garden to teachers on playground duty and picking their brains for tips. Mr Tanner gave us some tomato plants and introduced me to the miracles of chemical fertilisers (a habit I’ve since given up) and Mr Tenby offered bundles of enthusiasm and funded a competition (which I won of course). Over the months most of the other boys lost interest in their plots and, (as a keen player of Monopoly as well as gardening), I struck deals to take over the land rights and expand my territory. On one side Crispin and I sowed a lawn area but misread the packaging and planted the grass 20cm (rather than 20mm) deep and I took a share in my brother’s wildlife garden that he and Tom Broom planted with weeds imported from Tiverton. Gardening here was not just fun it also gave me confidence with growing plants, something that so many of my generation lacks. It taught me that there is beauty to be found in a bleak space and working in the inhospitable environment trained me well for the stoicism you need when gardening public flowerbeds in grotty urban areas. The stray footballs of Exeter Cathedral School are now discarded vodka bottles and hypodermic needles and the appreciative staff on playground duty are now the world’s international media who are fascinated and supportive of my guerrilla gardening.

But why, you might ask, was I sent to the headmaster?

It was the urge to enjoy another beautiful garden that got me in trouble. At that time our dormitories were in a basement annex of the Deanery (both since turned into offices). The windows looked out onto a stunning walled garden of herbaceous borders, rose beds and rolling lawns. This was strictly out of bounds and only for the enjoyment of the Dean and his dalmatian. But to me this garden was a tantalising sweet shop of horticultural delights and I was very hungry. Chapman Boarding House only had a small tarmac courtyard outside and I wanted a piece of the big garden next door. Edward Clark also shared my eagerness and so we devised a plot (codename: “The Mad Hatter’s Tea Party”). The ‘dare’ was to climb out of the dormitory window, into the garden and to pick a daffodil. Edward’s alarm clock rang at an ungodly hour and dressed in pyjamas and dressing gowns we escaped into the Dean’s oasis where crisp moonlight vividly illuminated our path. With only the noise of frost crunching under slippers we swiftly collected our floral trophies and triumphantly returned to our bunks.

It was on the third mission that things went wrong. The noise of us climbing through the sash window unfortunately disturbed dorm mate Andrew Benedict, who then quite uncharitably reported us to Mr Burt the housemaster. He in turn sent me to the headmaster. A shameful showdown and slippering from Mr Helyer would have probably nipped my guerrilla gardening activity in the bud but



fortunately the meeting never happened. To this day I am not sure why it was cancelled but maybe it had something to do with my baffling explanation to Mr Burt: "My mother told me to be more naughty sir." Yes it's true - I have a mischievous mother. And as naughtiness goes I think the staff were relieved it was only expressed in an obsession for gardens. Nothing more was said. Getting away with it emboldened me and although my criminal activity at the cathedral school stopped here (there were plenty of other characters in the Cathedral Close at the time to continue the crime wave, notably an embezzling head verger), it left me with a confidence that I still have today.

I believe that the negligent local authorities, like the staff of Exeter Cathedral School, look upon the naughtiness of guerrilla gardening with sympathetic tolerance. While it is hard for them to give guerrilla gardeners permission, stopping us is not in their interest. Fights with them are rare but like my schoolboy battles in the muddy corner of The Chantry playground, the fight with filth continues.

*Richard's book, "On Guerrilla Gardening" is out now in all good book shops.*

## THE LONGEST TRAIN JOURNEY IN THE WORLD (Edward Greig 1993-98 )

Under the sofa, across the rug and round the legs of the table. That was as far as my trains used to go, but now, a few years later, I am mapping out a route that will take me 12,000 miles, half way around the world. Between the stations of Vila Real de Santa Antonio in Portugal and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, I'll be recording interviews with my fellow passengers, on 42 trains, in seven time zones, through 13 countries.

So I set off. There was a wild party in the streets the night before I set off, complete with a fire-breathing, unicycling and juggling. I suspect it had little to do with the beginning of my momentous journey even though it was called the Festival of the Crazy People. Port in Porto, Portugal in the sunshine was an experience to savour but I had little time, Europe needed to be covered at a blistering pace. I acquired blisters in La Rochelle after taking a velo jaune round the Ile de Re one afternoon, I flouted Health and Safety regulations in Brussels, dancing through a crowd wearing a precariously gigantic wicker doll, I touched the centre of Europe in Lithuania, before taking a deep breath and diving into Russia.

From the unbelievable architecture of St Petersburg to the unbelievable price tags of Moscow, my trains then trundled Eastwards. Eventually, after miles of swirling snowy Siberian forest outside and generous helpings of cucumbers, conversation and very, vile vodka inside, the train reached Lake Baikal. In the winter months this frozen expanse is covered in ice thick enough that you cross it on skis, dog sled, hovercraft, snowkite or even your car, though one unfortunate lorry that had been sitting on the bottom for a few days showed the need for caution. There's enough fresh water in the lake to supply the whole world for 50 years, as long as they don't want the hot tap. I jump in for a quick splash. It is very, very cold.



*Mongolians outside their ger*