

HAZELWOOD ALUMNI SIR CHRISTIAN TURNER

Just before heading off to Washington to start his new role as **British Ambassador to the United States**, former Hazelwood pupil, Sir Christian Turner, kindly gave Kate Whitehead an hour of his time for a chat. We met at his home in Limpsfield Chart, where he was joined by his wife — and his beloved golden Labrador called Tchui.



What are your earliest memories of Hazelwood?

I started in Chestnut when I was five, in 1977, when Miss Swanson was Head. Then I moved into Hazelwood senior school when Mr Bawtree was Head, and I stayed until 1985, leaving at 13 as Head Boy. I was incredibly happy at Hazelwood. It was close to home, both my grandparents lived in Oxted, and there was a real sense of family at the school. Some fantastic teachers shaped me, including Head, Ronald Bawtree and his wife Christiana. Mr Claxton, who taught English, really germinated a love of reading in me. Paul Whitehurst, a legendary Latin teacher with an outrageous nickname that's probably best not repeated! Mr MacDougall taught me Geography and I had a brilliant history teacher called Mr Webb. These people were central figures in my life — a big influence on who I became.

What type of student were you?

I wasn't the most sporty kid, but we were outdoors a lot. I remember building camps in the woods near the pitches. That setting was amazing — you were in nature all the time. I was also in the chapel choir, which was a huge part of my life before 14. That's where my love of music began.



Christian Turner as Head Boy in Year 8, 1985. Mr Bawtree and his wife, Christiana, centre.

I still sing now with the Royal Choral Society, and the only formal training I've ever had was from Michael Barlow here, who was Head of Music. He was a wonderful musician and teacher — so much of my love of music comes from those days in the chapel choir.

Were there particular school subjects that lead to your choice of career?

I was more humanities than sciences. Words matter in my job — being able to digest information and work out the signal from the noise. Languages can be very important too.

But there's no single path. The key trait is curiosity. You have to be interested in the world, in other people, and in what makes them tick.

Do you have any particularly vivid childhood school memories?

I loved climbing trees. At break, we would get to play in the woods, and I once climbed very high. Miss Swanson demanded I come down. I remember thinking, 'I'm not coming down!' I have extremely fond memories of Hazelwood. If I think about who I am today, Hazelwood was foundational and has shaped who I am.

Did you always know you wanted a career in politics or diplomacy?

No, absolutely not. Life unfolds in strange and wonderful ways. I wasn't particularly political as a teenager. I should say, I'm not an elected politician — I'm a civil servant. That means I'm politically neutral and serve whichever government the British people elect. I've served Labour, Conservative and Liberal governments. My job is public service — implementing the priorities of the elected government. That sense of service runs deep within me. My grandfather was a vicar, and I think that idea of giving back is quite ingrained in me. I didn't join the Civil Service until my mid-20s, and the Diplomatic Service until my early 30s. Before that I was in academia and then made historical TV documentaries, before joining the Cabinet Office in 1997. I've done all sorts! So I would say to all Hazelwood pupils, please don't worry if you don't know what career you want yet. I'm 53 and I still don't really know what I want to be. I'm arguably in my fourth career — and it probably won't be my last. Build your skills, experiment, try different things. Very few people have a single, lifelong plan.

What does an average day look like for you?

It's hard to define, so let me explain what the Foreign Office does. Just like there's a Department for Education or Health, the Foreign Office handles relationships with other countries. We work both from London and from embassies and high commissions around the world. Our job is to advance British objectives.

That covers almost everything — climate change, security threats like terrorism, ending conflicts, promoting British business, and helping British nationals overseas who get into trouble or need assistance.

For me, my focus is to deliver through relationships. I go out into the country, get to know it beyond the capital, and build relationships with influential people so we can work together on shared goals.

When I arrive in Washington, I'll present my credentials to President Trump in the Oval Office. Then I'll meet cabinet members, Congress, business leaders, governors — building a network that allows real conversations and agreements to happen.

What are the key skills required for a job in diplomacy?

Communication, people skills and relationship-building. And the most important diplomatic skill: listening. My grandfather used to say, 'God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason.' Diplomacy is about finding compromise in a world of difference and competition. When diplomacy fails, wars start. So you have to listen, understand other perspectives, and try to see the world through their eyes.

How do you approach building a relationship with President Trump and other world leaders?

I've met many world leaders, including President Putin. At the end of the day, they're human beings. You respectfully listen, find common ground, and build a professional relationship. You don't try to please or annoy — you focus on doing the job well.

You get to know the people around them too. It's about steady business relations.

Moving countries must be challenging. How do you approach it?

Yes it is - I always say if the personal side isn't working, the professional side doesn't work. We've had amazing experiences — travelling across Africa, climbing in the Himalayas — but there's sacrifice. Time away from loved ones. Children growing up in different places. You just put one foot in front of the other: visas, passports, packing, even making sure the dog comes. We always take a bit of Limpsfield with us — photos, familiar things that make it feel like home.

What will you miss most about living in Limpsfield?

First, food. Proper English cheese. Good English breakfast tea. Marmite. Secondly, privacy. As an ambassador, a lot of life is public: events, dinners, meetings, entertaining six nights a week. You might host 32 people for dinner or 150 in a ballroom. But I'm just as happy in jeans, making a cup of tea in my own kitchen. I'll miss being anonymous in Limpsfield, going to the pub and just being another person.

Any final thoughts for students thinking about their futures?

If your goal is to make a lot of money, this probably isn't the career for you. I'm a public servant, paid by the taxpayer. What matters to me is doing something that gives something back. To all students, please remember - your path doesn't have to be straight to be successful.