

A TRIBUTE TO MISS PHILLIPS

Remembering our lessons with Miss Phillips, I think of the unfailing patience and enthusiasm with which she has steered us through our work. Carefully she points out our mistakes and instils a meticulous concern for detail; yet those for whom latin means boredom - and after all, they argue, when can you talk to an ancient Roman? - would be surprised at the life which she infuses into our lessons. "Can you see it?" she asks eagerly, and whether "it" is one of the obscurer uses of the subjunctive, an ingenious manoeuvre on the part of Caesar, or King Alcinous' vegetable garden, it would be fair to say that we can.

During her years at South Hampstead, Miss Phillips has taught people who have enjoyed their work - for her, an element absolutely essential - and shared her enthusiasm for the ancient world. To talk of the debt which European culture owes to the civilisations of Greece and Rome may be commonplace, yet many people do not fully realise the extent to which a knowledge of classics can add an extra dimension to everything which one meets. While a holiday to Greece, far from being merely blue sky and piles of stone, recalls the driving inspiration and energy of the ancient Greeks, and Milton is clearly steeped in classical literature, one begins to realise how deep has been the impact of the classical world on every branch of Western thought. Moreover, an understanding of two of the finest languages evolved, latin - marmoreal and precise, and Greek, with its lucid subtlety - is worth the initial struggle with what at one stage may seem the insuperable complexities of their grammar.

It is in fact one of Miss Phillips' greatest regrets that she has not had longer teaching with the new Cambridge latin course, which has made that struggle so much less arduous. Here the apparently inexhaustible variations on "whither is he hastening?" or "The sailor gives a rose to the girl" interspersed with the occasional apt proverb - "labor omni a vincit" has been replaced by the domestic life of Caecilius and Metella, more familiar figures in the school curriculum. The effects of this change are reflected in the words of an incredulous parent who greeted Miss Phillips with the revelation "My daughter LIKES latin!". In addition, Miss Phillips herself helped to make up the syllabus for the recent alternative 'A' level paper, which gives a broader knowledge and appreciation of Greek and Latin literature than the more technical prose composition paper, suited rather to the devoted linguist.

This, however, is to give a somewhat narrow view of Miss Phillips' teaching. She remembers with amusement the annual Upper IV visits to Bignor and Fishbourne, including lunch near the Saxon church of Bosham, and the drying off of various wayward pupils who had fallen into the sea from the jetties. With her, members of South Hampstead



went on the first schools' cruise, organised by British India incorporating lectures and visits to the major Greek cities. This was not without its difficulties as the French train drivers were on strike and it was highly probable that, having been seen off with great aplomb, the intrepid party might go no further than Dover. Nevertheless, after a night spent on the floor of a cross channel ferry (no provision had been made for those schools at the end of the alphabet) a slightly worrying progression was made on to Venice with the drivers at each stage, much to their credit, returning to work "for the children".

Such was the overall success of this first enterprise that Miss Phillips has subsequently taken several other parties on cruises to Greece. She also accompanied a group on a trip to West Africa in 1969 organised by the Commonwealth Institute to study colonial administration and the developing countries. On learning of the project, Miss Bodington had gasped "But there will be sharks and yellow fever!!!". Miss Phillips was undeterred. They went on an expedition to the Volka Dam, visited a cocoa farm and were present at a meeting of tribal chieftains. At one of the missionary schools which they visited Miss Phillips found the pupils being prepared for the familiar London University 'O'level. The headmaster replied to her surprised inquiry "Why latin?" that this was of the greatest importance in setting the developing countries on an equal basis with Europe.

She speaks laughingly of the astonishment of people she meets: "Still teaching latin?" as if the dreariness of such a life were unspeakable - far from it. She has found her work immensely satisfying and has enjoyed meeting so many people through it. Indeed, the regularity with which people from the vast number whom she has taught would turn up again led a friend to comment "If you were in Timbuctoo one of your pupils would drop out of a palm tree".

Jocelyn Whyte