

Tribute to Sybil Melchers MBE at her funeral on 22nd June 2015

In 1981 representatives of six British Schools in Europe met in Paris to form an association to support and promote their work. The leader of the group was Sir Dick Pantlin, founder of the British School of Brussels. He was elected the first Chairman of the association. It was called the Council of British Independent Schools in the European Communities (COBISEC).

Sybil and her husband Chris were living in Brussels at the time and knew Dick Pantlin well, because of the school. Sybil quickly became involved in the development of COBISEC as assistant to Sir Dick, and was quite soon appointed its Honorary Secretary. She kept this role in 1987 when they moved to Paris. In 1988 when they returned to England her home (Lucy's) in Hythe this became the official Secretariat of the Association.

Work had increased, as had the membership, now approaching 30 schools. Sybil provided an office in a studio apartment in the grounds of her home, and took on part time secretarial help. Sybil gave the Association twenty three years of first class voluntary service and provided it with an office for sixteen years. During that time, and only with the help of her part time assistant Anne Skilbeck, Sybil managed all the affairs of the Association. This included organising the Annual Conference in London, providing information for members and prospective members, the admission process for new members, the paperwork for committee meetings, and, for several years, the preparation, editing and publication of an annual directory. Anne, who worked with Sybil for fifteen years comments that Sybil was a genuinely nice person who was always welcoming to people. She was a good person to work for and had an excellent knowledge of British schools and British education internationally.

I was elected Chairman of COBISEC in 1996 and it was Sybil who guided me into the role and helped me develop the Association. We soon started embracing, at that time, schools outside the European Communities. The Committee decided to change the name to COBIS, Council of British International Schools, and the Association became global. It now has 250 members. The tasks that fell to Sybil increased as new schools joined and the volume of work increased. But Sybil met every challenge with cheerfulness, enthusiasm and determination. One of our strongest supporters outside Europe at the time

was the Head of the British School of Kathmandu in Nepal, Sandj Wilderspin, who was also Chair of the Association of British Schools in South & East Asia. She writes the following words:-

“I have wonderful memories of Sybil who was warm and kind with a warming smile. She worked incredibly hard and really believed in our cause of ensuring that a better education was readily available for children overseas. Whilst living in Kathmandu and reaching out to other international schools in my role as chair of BISW Sybil was always able to assist from her office in the UK knowing so many heads and sharing her knowledge. She showed extreme kindness and support to me personally and will always be fondly remembered. The world was certainly a better place because of Sybil, such a ray of bright sunshine. My sincere condolences to Chris and his family. I am only so sorry not to be with you all today.”

I received an e-mail with another testimony about Sybil. This is from Jennifer Bray, a former Head of the British School of Brussels, and for many years a COBIS Committee member. She writes:-

Although I was not involved in COBIS in the earliest days, when Dick Pantlin was chair, I remember visiting Lucy's and the garden cabin which was the first home of the secretariat. The house is on a slope and the gardens were at the height of perfection, looking towards the sea and even being open to visitors on National Gardens Society Day to raise funds for charity. There can have been few more inspirational settings for an embryonic organisation. I worked most closely with Sybil during the planning of the first residential COBIS conferences in London. She was always quietly efficient and without fuss, able to accommodate everyone's (usually last minute and often unreasonable) requests with infinite patience and humour. She knew everyone in the organisation in those days, and was a real repository of COBIS anecdotes and mischievous tales, recounted to her by people who trusted her and recognised a good listener. At the same time, she would have no truck with pomposity or people who made the mistake of patronising her and could be affably stubborn when required. Above all she was generous and kind and absolutely set the 'tone' for what COBIS is today - a

caring, outward looking organisation where individuals and their schools are at the heart of everything we do.

For my part as Chairman of COBISEC (from 1996) and subsequently of COBIS (until 2011) I had the pleasure of working with Sybil for nearly 10 years until she took retirement. Her kindness, helpfulness, dedication, knowledge and vision are the qualities that immediately spring to mind when I reflect on those years. Sybil's work for British Schools Overseas and British education internationally was unique and she has admirers all over the world. It is very fitting that HM The Queen honoured Sybil with Membership of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for her services to British International Schools.

Sir Roger Fry
22nd June 2015