



# Ambassador's Activities

2014

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia of  
*Chevalier des Palmes Académiques*  
to Dr Christopher Barnett,  
Headmaster of Whitgift School

12 May 2014

*Cher* Sir Richard,

Dr Barnett,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be among you tonight and a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to come to this prestigious school. I am particularly delighted to come to Whitgift School to give Dr Barnett the insignia of *Chevalier des Palmes académiques*.

This ministerial order was created – dare I say it? – by Napoleon in 1808 in the wake of his great reforms instituting what we then called *l'Université Impériale*, laying the foundations of the present-day French higher-education system. It is one of the oldest orders of the French republic and was created to honour those who had rendered services to French science and education. Nowadays the order allows the French government to reward and recognize the achievements of those who have promoted excellence in education in France and abroad and have helped promote French education overseas.

So it is only apt that I should be here today to honour your achievements as Headmaster of Whitgift School. If I am not mistaken, you are the 26<sup>th</sup> headmaster of the school. Researching the school's history, I could not but be impressed when I realized that it was founded by John Whitgift, then Archbishop of Canterbury, in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, and opened by him in 1600.

For almost a quarter of a century you have shaped the modern Whitgift to give your boys an education fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – you were among the first to introduce the International

Baccalaureate – while at the same time you have succeeded in maintaining Whitgift's traditions, one of them being rugby.

Dr Barnett, you read History at Oxford for an M.A. and then a PhD and subsequently held various positions, among them Head of History at Bradfield College and Second Master at Dauntsey's School, before becoming Headmaster here at Whitgift in 1991. You are an experienced educationalist with an interest in international cooperation. As an education consultant you directed various projects and conferences involving a variety of countries in the Arab world and elsewhere. You are a champion of modern languages as well in a country that does not always recognize the value of their teaching. I was delighted to hear that modern languages are still compulsory at Whitgift, and that French still has a prominent place. Not only have you maintained and modernized language teaching, you have also demonstrated a particular commitment to bilingual education and, during the French presidency of the European Union, you organized a conference entitled “Bilingual Education – Pathway to Multilingualism”. I wish more school leaders had your vision.

In 2009, you opened a French section at Whitgift with the support of the French Embassy and my predecessor, Maurice Gourdaut-Montagne. The creation of that particular section was, and still is, a very pioneering move, because, alongside the English curriculum, your school teaches some pupils French following the French curriculum. It is a rare thing when two national curricula are taught side by side. It allows French-speaking pupils to benefit from Whitgift's excellence while at the same time retaining their mother tongue. Thanks to the generosity of the Whitgift Foundation, scholarships are being granted to some of those pupils. It is a unique experience in the UK, and my presence here tonight is an expression of my government's gratitude.

But beyond education you are probably the number one supporter of your boys' teams. I mentioned rugby earlier, and you can be proud of Whitgift's reputation in that particular sport, as well as your cricket team. As a Frenchman I couldn't possibly comment on your cricket team's performance, for this is beyond our understanding. As for rugby... this might be stretching the limits of the *Entente Cordiale* as we know it!

You are a great supporter of the arts, including music and theatre. You have proved that embracing modernity can go hand in hand with educating our young people to enable them to be enlightened citizens.

Dr Barnett, once again I would like to express the gratitude of the French government and my personal admiration for all your achievements, and particularly your support for the teaching of the French language. For those reasons, it is my privilege to now give you your insignia.

*Dr Christopher Barnett, au nom du Ministre de l'Education nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, nous vous remettons les insignes de Chevalier des Palmes académiques./.*