

Principal's Address Thomas Oken Feast, 2025

Mr Chair, Deputy-Mayor, Honoured Guests & Trustees.

The country stands at a crossroads.

Economic uncertainty looms large, and across the nation, there is a growing divide between those who prosper and those who struggle to make ends meet.

Political upheaval, concerns about the future of education, and questions of how we care for the most vulnerable, weigh heavily on society.

Even here, in Warwick, we see these tensions play out: the rising cost of living, the role of charity in public life, and the ever-present question of how we secure the future for the next generation.

Of course, that was England in the 1500s.

A time when institutions were dissolved overnight, when the security of one's home, faith, and livelihood could be upended by decree. When great wealth sat alongside desperate poverty, and the education of the young—particularly those not born into privilege—was far from guaranteed.

It was in this uncertain world that Thomas Oken stood as a figure of remarkable foresight. He understood that a community could not thrive without investing in its people. He saw that wealth, if hoarded, served little purpose, but if directed wisely, could transform lives for generations. And so, he acted.

Oken's generosity was not just an act of charity; it was an act of strategy.

He ensured that the income from his properties would not only provide for the less fortunate but also serve the cause of education. At a time when the dissolution of monasteries left many schools in disarray, Oken stepped in.

His endowment sustained the grammar school, preserving what would eventually become Warwick School. When the town suffered the devastating fire of 1694, the choir school he had supported had to find a new home, but his legacy ensured that education in Warwick endured.

His trustees, across the centuries, faced dilemmas familiar to us today. How best to allocate resources? How to balance support for the poorest with the evolving demands of education?

In the 19th century, Warwick School was once again struggling, its numbers dwindling. Oken's Charity stepped in again, increasing its financial commitment—though in doing so, it made a decision that, in retrospect, may have strayed from Oken's original intent to prioritize the poor. Yet, without this intervention, it would not have survived.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new pressures emerged. The shifting role of the state in education, the strain on the charity's finances, and difficult decisions about the sale of property all shaped the path of Oken's legacy.

And yet, even through financial setbacks, the guiding principle remained: the belief that education is the key to opportunity, and that the fortunes of a town are inextricably linked to the investment it makes in its people.

Today, we sit here, not as distant observers of history, but as beneficiaries and stewards of an unbroken chain.

The challenges may look different, but they are not unfamiliar. How do we ensure that education remains accessible? How do we adapt to an ever-changing society while staying true to the spirit of Oken's vision? How do we, like him, see beyond the present moment and invest in a future we will never witness?

I can't actually decide whether Oken would be delighted with his legacy or appalled that it was still needed. But I think he was quite a good reader of human nature and would have remained a strong advocate of helping local people in need.

That is of course another of his extraordinary legacies – the civic discipleship here in the town of Warwick.

Today, Oken's legacy continues to fund organisations which directly or indirectly support education:

- Bursaries with Warwickshire College
- Warwick a Singing Town and Holiday Action at the Foundation
- MIND – crucial in this time of what is essentially a mental health epidemic
- Homestart, Parenting Project, Citizens Advice, Safeline.

And for all the challenges it brought at the time and subsequently, Oken's historic action has meant that Warwick School has flourished. Indeed, the charity of Warwick Schools Foundation now educates almost 3,000 pupils – 500 who live in this postcode, and many in receipt of bursaries.

The essential spirit of equity promoted by Oken has been a driving factor in the creation of our new Multi Academy Trust – and I fervently hope that we and Oken's can once again work together on supporting some of the most vulnerable children in our town.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Oken is that his vision is being passed from generation to generation. His name is not merely etched in stone but lives in the opportunities provided, the young minds shaped, the community strengthened. He built a foundation — not of bricks, but of purpose. And it is that foundation that we are celebrating here today.

Please charge you glasses as we toast Thomas Oken, his wife Joan, and Nicolas Eyffler

Richard Nicholson
Principal, Warwick Schools Foundation
31 January 2025