

**Speech by the Head of St Mark's College, Professor Don Markwell,
at a morning tea to mark
the 100th birthday of Dr John Skipper AM
held on Friday 15 October 2021
Ballroom, Downer House, St Mark's College, Adelaide**

Welcome to this morning tea to celebrate the 100th birthday on Wednesday of our oldest Old Collegian, Dr John Skipper AM, and to wish John a very Happy Birthday!

Thank you all for being here today to celebrate this milestone with John and his family.

John Stark Skipper was born in Adelaide on 13 October 1921 into a world still reeling in the chaotic aftermath of World War I – the so-called “war to end wars”. World War I leaders Billy Hughes in Australia and David Lloyd George in Britain were still in power, Warren Harding had not long followed Woodrow Wilson as President of the United States, and Lenin was marking just the 4th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in Soviet Russia.

In the same year, here in Adelaide, the initiative of the Headmaster of St Peter's College, the Rev'd Julian Bickersteth, and others to create a college for university students was gathering momentum. The young John Skipper was to start as a student at Saint's a little over a decade later in, I think, Canon Bickersteth's last year as Headmaster.

Fast forward to 8 June 1940, and in a world again engulfed in war, the minutes of the St Mark's College Club – which are part of our display here today – record that John Skipper was one of five “freshmen” elected to membership of the College Club.

His strong signature appears in the College Roll of Members – also in the display case - as one the students who enrolled in the College in 1940, John's signature counter-signed by the Master, signed simply “A. Grenfell Price”.

John was in fact born on exactly the same day in October 1921 as Sir Archibald Grenfell Price's son, Ken. It is so good to have Ann Price with us today.

John, whose family lived nearby in North Adelaide, came into College as a second-year medical student, but his time at St Mark's was not to be long, as the College grounds were taken over by the RAAF, and normal College activities effectively ceased in very early 1941.

In the display case are Sir Archibald Grenfell Price's notes for his speech at the Final Dinner in November 1940. Archie's notes reflect that the College was about to go into “recess”, as he called it, to make way for the RAAF. He went on to say that “what ever happens ... no temporary break can take from us” “our record ... expressed in friendship, leadership and service”. What wonderful words: “our record expressed in friendship, leadership, and service”.

Archie said that he was “grateful to all who have helped us keep going as we have” – “above all the students” who “considering [the] difficulties carried on jolly well”.

The minutes of College Club meetings in 1940 – in the minute book in the display case - reflect various light-hearted as well as serious student activities under the ever-darker shadow of the war. While many members of the College were enlisting, and the College Club contributed around £110 to the war effort through War Savings Certificates, the students were nonetheless carrying on “jolly well”.

Some months ago, John told me that at one dinner in 1940 a student who was doing experimental work on monkeys at the University brought a monkey into the dining hall and let it loose. Archie simply stood up, said “would the gentleman who has brought in the monkey please catch it?”, and sat down. The College Club Secretary later recorded in a report on 1940, which is in the minute book, and I quote –

“...the termination of the fourth year Med. examinations was the sign for an informal dinner of outstanding merit. It was noted for the strange animals and birds of prey which dominated the choice of attitude adopted by the diners, and also for the remarkable control exercised by the Master.”

John himself tried more than once to enlist in the Army, but was told to continue his medical studies. After completion of his studies, John enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps as a Captain in July 1945. He was posted to be part of the Occupation Force in Japan in February 1946, but before leaving married Elizabeth - Betsy - Holden. Their two children are here today with their father, and we are delighted to welcome son Rob, with his wife Anne, and daughter Elizabeth, known as Toffee. You are so welcome!

The Virtual War Memorial website has a superb account of John’s life, which I strongly recommend you read. It is on the pinboard alongside some photographs. It tells, amongst other things, of John’s Adelaide family background dating back to 1836, his service in Japan, his resumption in 1948 of his civilian medical career which developed in obstetrics and gynaecology, the origins in his UK and US studies of “his lifelong professional interest in gynaecological oncology”, and his leadership in bringing Pap smears to Australia, making such a difference to the early diagnosis and treatment of gynaecological cancer.

Fast forward again to June 2016, and John was honoured as a Member of the Order of Australia – in the words of the citation, also on the pinboard – “For significant service to medicine in the field of gynaecology as an advocate of women's health and the early detection of cervical cancer”.

Truly John has lived a life which, to borrow the words of Sir Archibald Grenfell Price from 1940, has been “expressed in friendship, leadership and service”.

The Virtual War Memorial biography of John also mentions John’s truly legendary skill in billiards, and his interests in golf, tennis, bridge, and painting – but strangely does not mention bowls, one of many interests he continues to pursue.

We at St Mark’s are grateful that he has over the years continued his warm connection with and support for the College. You will, for example, see on the pinboard some photos of John with College friends at the reunion lunch held in this room in November 2002 for those in College in its first 26 years, 1925 to 1951. In the early days of the current pandemic, in March-April last year, some of our current medical students were delighted to help John with some practical chores, and John has been generous in his support for our students.

But what does one give a distinguished and much-admired Collegian who was here in 1940, on his 100th birthday?

The answer is simple: just in case he doesn't have it close at hand, you give him an original print copy of the *College Record* of 1940, in which his name appears three times, including as a member of the University football XVIII, alongside many other names which are warmly remembered, and you give him an original College photo from 1940, where – as you might see on the pinboard – John appears towards the back left, again alongside many others whom we remember here.

And so, before I ask John to cut the cake and you sing Happy Birthday wishes to him, and I then ask John to respond, please allow me to present these mementos of his St Mark's days to Dr John Skipper AM.

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Ladies and gentlemen, would you please join me in a toast to John?