



### From the Headmaster

*"Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."* Quotations on this theme abound as the cyclical nature of history is regarded as both alarming and yet, at the same time, strangely reassuring. Schools are, of course, full of teachers all too ready to find historical parallels and prove that far from empty rhetoric this claim is in fact unequivocal. The RGS is certainly no different and our Classics Department is particularly invaluable in this regard!

Almost 2,500 years ago the city of Athens was battered by a great plague. The historian Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* described in some detail this natural disaster, the disease which ravaged the city in 430 BC. Interestingly, he focused especially on the human story and the people's reaction to a plague which, it is estimated, killed approximately one third of the citizens of Athens at the time; politically you can just imagine how challenging a daily briefing would have proved in those days! The points of comparison are fascinating. Symptoms of the plague included sickness, retching, hoarseness, coughing, as well as high temperatures and tenderness. As the disease took hold, healthcare workers and medics were particularly at risk and the poor endured dreadful conditions and were particularly susceptible. Social order broke down, and people stopped respecting the gods. After all, in the Athenians' minds, the gods seemed to have abandoned the people to their fate: parallels, perhaps, with people's faith – or otherwise – in the handling of the crisis by respective governments across the world today. The historian himself, like our own Prime Minister, had experience of the disease first-hand: he contracted the plague and, after a tortuous illness, finally recovered. The plague started possibly in Ethiopia, Thucydides' narrative tells us, and seemed to spread inland from the port. Conspiracy theories were prevalent with the Athenians blaming foreigners, even conjecturing that it was an enemy attack. The parallels and points of comparison are extraordinary.

Thucydides concluded by commenting, *"One of the worst aspects of the plague was the despair into which people fell on finding they had the disease. Those who were convinced they had no hope were much quicker to give up and die."* Two and a half thousand years later, just last weekend, the Queen marked the 75th anniversary of VE Day with an address to the public, a message of stoicism and hope for a time of adversity as she urged Britain *"to never give up, never despair."* The echoes of the messaging clearly resonate. As one of the major English Romantic poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley said, *"History is a cyclic poem written by time upon the memories of man."* History can, therefore, provide enduring lessons and parallels but, equally importantly, reassure us that normal life will one day return. And that day cannot come soon enough when we welcome our students and staff back to the RGS.

I wish you all a relaxing and restful weekend #RGSTogether.