

The history of the Farmington Trust

The idea of the Farmington Trust was conceived in the Second World War when the Hon Robert Wills was serving in the Grenadier Guards. He made up his mind that if he lived through the war he would do something to make the world a better place. Although he was badly wounded, he did survive, and some twenty years later was in a position to found the Farmington Trust.

Initially, the Trust concentrated on providing written materials which he felt would be helpful to develop values and standards among young people. However, with the election of a wartime friend to the Trust - Mr Johnnie Henderson, who was subsequently Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire – the Trust undertook a much more active role, helping to establish regional RE resource centres and running conferences for RE teachers.

In the late 1980s, Mr Wills decided to lead the Trust in a new direction, that of investing in RE teachers by developing a kind of 'Rhodes Scholarship'. The aim was to give RE teachers in secondary schools a term out of school to study at a university. A selected number of RE teachers would be awarded fellowships to undertake research which would be useful in their teaching, and be of help to other teachers. Mr Wills came to see that RE teachers were often in one-person departments and that RE was a 'Cinderella' subject. Through awarding teachers prestigious scholarships and enabling them to return to study in a university under a supervisor, he felt that the Trust was building up a body of expertise in Religious Education within the teaching profession and improving morale among teachers.

To this scheme was added an annual conference, where those who had held fellowships over the previous year would share the results of their research with other RE teachers, so that good practice, and new ideas, could be disseminated throughout the profession. The Trust runs induction days for the selected candidates prior to taking up their fellowships. This meeting gives the Fellows an opportunity to discuss their proposed topics of research and get feedback from other teachers. During the induction day several issues are covered, including the final report, the presentation to be done in school or at university, support from supervisors, and help from the Director and staff at Farmington.

The Trust pays for a replacement teacher for the term, all university fees, accommodation where the fellow is resident at a university, travel expenses and agreed out of pocket expenses.

In 1997 Farmington won a Millennium grant, which enabled the Trust to extend its fellowships to teachers responsible for RE in primary schools. Over a three year period the Trust awarded 76 additional fellowships to primary school teachers. The Trust won another three year Millennium grant in 2000, to provide fellowships for teachers of RE working with children who had special educational needs; on this occasion 95 teachers benefited from the scheme.

Today the Farmington Trust offers fellowships to RE teachers in secondary schools, those responsible for RE in primary schools, teachers of RE to children with special educational needs, and also to head teachers in moral, ethical and religious education. In addition, a separate scheme gives fellowships in moral and ethical leadership to members of Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

Today RE is an academically respected discipline and one of the fastest growing subjects at GCSE and A level. This is in no small part due to the foresight of Mr Wills and the work of the Trust.