



What do Bill Clinton, Bob Hawke and Wesley Clark all have in common? Sure, they're high achievers. A couple - Clinton and Hawke - have led their respective countries (the US, Australia). And Clark was Supreme Allied Commander during the Kosovo conflict.

They have something else in common too: they're alumni of Britain's best-funded if perhaps least understood (at least on this side of the Atlantic) scholarship scheme, set up 100 years ago by a £4m endowment from the imperialist Cecil Rhodes just before he died. They're Rhodes Scholars.

The scholarships might have a deceptively low profile in the UK. But such is their prestige in the States that about 10,000 people a year chase the 32 places reserved for American applicants. The winners are duly announced in no less august a publication than The New York Times.

Thousands more young hopefuls apply from 18 other "jurisdictions" worldwide for the chance to spend up to three years

studying among Oxford's elite, all expenses paid by the Rhodes Trust.

A list of Rhodes Scholars reads like a who's who of the high and mighty. Besides Clinton (whose daughter Chelsea is now studying at Oxford, albeit not as a Rhodes Scholar) and Hawke, their number includes such former world leaders as John Turner (Canada), Norman Manley (Jamaica) and Dom Mintoff (Malta).

Yet for all its success, the question remains: how can a scholarship scheme devised a century ago to influence future leaders of the Anglo-Saxon world be relevant now, when the days of Pax Britannica are but a memory?

You only have to see Rhodes Scholars arriving at Oxford University to know that they are a little bit special, and fully aware of the fact. They even

A century after their benefactor's death, Rhodes Scholars live in a very different world - but still enjoy the perks of being part of a special club Illustrations by Nick Dewar

**Springboard
to success**

seem to wear an air of authority that belies their years.

Each year 94 new students are found places at an appropriate Oxford college. Most take postgraduate courses in a subject of their choice, be it politics, history or medicine – but are also expected to participate in a programme of talks, dinners and debates at Rhodes House, a Cotswold-style mansion set amid a beautiful private garden in the heart of the city.

Later, they are expected to return home, their eyes opened by their time at Oxford, and make their mark on the world – as so many of their number have done before them.

The selection process is rigorous, involving numerous rounds of interviews with high-powered panels at which they must make their case for becoming a scholar. One current student, American William Polkinghorn, describes it as “the most nerve-racking experience of my life”. Still, it is not as tough as it was in 1903, the scheme’s inaugural year, when as much emphasis was placed on the applicants’ “fondness for manly outdoor pursuits such as cricket and football” as on their academic prowess.

“The starting point is still academic excellence, but the core element needs to be a concern for something beyond one’s own individual advancement,” says the warden of

Retired general Wesley Clark has no doubt that being a Rhodes scholar helped prepare him for his leadership role in Kosovo and elsewhere. “For a military officer, understanding another culture and developing stronger analytical and communications skills was invaluable,” he says. “These were skills I used again and again in jobs ranging from battalion operations officer to supreme allied commander.”

Above all, though, being a Rhodes scholar enables students to plug into what is perhaps the world’s best-connected club. It’s the networker’s network. After all, what other old boys’ club (though the scheme has actually been open to women since 1976) can offer you access to the likes of Clark and Bill Clinton, plus a host of senators, congressmen and Commonwealth leaders?

Today’s students are every bit as aware as Clark was that they are embarking on what Merridy Wilson, from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, calls “a life-changing experience”. She adds: “I see my life in pre-Rhodes and post-Rhodes terms.”

And for all the changes that have taken place since Cecil Rhodes’ day, Rowett insists the scheme is as relevant as ever. “If anything, the scholarships are more relevant because we live in a world in which cultural differences are often the most significant markers and give rise

the scholarships,” says Rowett. “The founding vision of the scholarships was that it would be of major benefit to the British Empire and what might be thought of as the Anglo-Saxon peoples – and the benefits to the UK remain profound. “Scholars leave with a better understanding of Britain and its people and a fund of goodwill towards this country – something that cannot be quantified.

“As John Turner once said to me, government ministers here sometimes don’t appreciate the fact that when difficulties come up, there is subsequently a willingness to give the benefit of the doubt to Britain among Rhodes Scholars. He’d made the point to ministers in both the main political parties that this was a tremendous gain

will include a special service at St Paul’s Cathedral; a garden party to which the Queen will be invited; several high-profile reunion parties, and a number of keynote lectures to be delivered by former scholars. Beyond this, there is talk of perhaps opening up the scholarships to yet more countries.

Nonetheless, funding the Rhodes Scholarships is immensely expensive. The cost of putting each scholar though Oxford works out at about £22,000 a year – no mean sum when you consider that up to 250 such scholars attend the university at any one time, and nearly 5,500 scholarships in all have been awarded. Yet Rowett insists: “The future is secure. The scholarship fund is worth about £200m and the money is managed on behalf of the trust by investment managers.”

One possible threat to the scholarships is Bill Gates’s decision to donate £130m to Cambridge University in order to set up a rival scheme with the aim of creating “a premier global scholarship programme which will attract the most talented graduate students from every country” – in other words, not just those eligible for Rhodes

Scholarships. Rowett is not alarmed, saying: “I’ve met with the provost of Gates House to discuss collaboration. It seems to me that to have more high-quality international students coming to study in the UK can only be to everyone’s advantage.”

In fact, despite the fact that so much of Cecil Rhodes’s legacy – the country to which he gave his name, for instance – has disappeared, the scholarship scheme he set up appears to be well-equipped still to be flourishing a century from now.

Lord Healey, the former defence secretary and shadow foreign secretary, certainly hopes so. “I’ve always been a fan of the Rhodes Scholarships,” he says. “The type of contact it fosters between people in the English-speaking world who are liable to get into key positions in politics, the diplomatic service and the armed forces is absolutely invaluable.” **FT**



Students believe the experience is “life-changing”. “I see things in pre- and post-Rhodes terms,” says one

Rhodes House, John Rowett, the former history fellow who effectively runs the scheme. “We’re looking for those who see public life as a calling, have a sense of social commitment and want to play a leadership role in a variety of ways.”

Not everyone goes on to achieve fame on the world stage but that doesn’t matter, insists Rowett: “The person who spends their career working in medicine in South Africa will be making as significant a contribution as someone who moves into high-level politics.”

to some of the most profound conflicts,” he says.

“The scholarships bring together people from 19 different countries with varied cultural backgrounds who are likely to go on to be leaders in their own societies. For three years they come together and learn to appreciate each others’ strengths and weaknesses – something that will make it easier to engage in profound discussions later in life.”

But, ask critics of the scheme, what does Britain gain from it, now that we very much play second fiddle to the US on the world stage? “A lot of people in this country have never realised the true significance of

for Britain – something that they often hadn’t realised.”

What of the future, though? The scheme will no doubt continue to enjoy the support of alumni such as Bill Clinton, who returned to Oxford last year to open the Rothermere American Institute, a £15m research facility jointly funded by the Rhodes Trust and the Rothermere family.

Sophisticated websites are being developed to encourage still more people to apply for the scholarship. A series of high-profile events is planned for this year and next, which is the centenary of scheme’s first intake. The highlights