

The Story of Ruthin School

A Broadcast by the Headmaster J. R. T. Russell, M.A., Oxon.

Reference to an unsuccessful attempt made in 1894 to alienate the endowments and include the School in the Denbighshire county scheme was made in a talk given by Mr. J. Russell T. Russell, Headmaster of the School, from the Bangor Studio last night (Thursday).

Mr. Russell was at the microphone for twenty minutes, and in the course of his remarks said : In the Itinerary of John Leland, in the 16th century, one of our earliest and most famous antiquarians, we read that a House or Celle of Bonhommes, a species of mendicant monks, had once existed in Ruthin, and that it was “in time translated into the Parish Church”.

A MS copy of Pope Nicholas ‘Taxation in 1292 printed out of the Tower Records early in the last century contains further information about such an establishment at Ruthin, the Head of which was called the Prior. Here we have the origin of Prior Street, the name of that part of the town of Ruthin adjoining St. Peter’s Church, as it is still known, and a piece of ground in the same vicinity was formerly called the Prior’s Fishpond. The Prior was probably the Superior of the White Friars, the Cistercian settlement alluded to by Thomas Tanner, Bishop of St. Asaph and eminent XVIIth Century antiquarian. From Pope Nicholas’ Taxation we also learn also that the Priory must have been considerable in value, and we know that such establishments, which were larger than most villages then, including as they did monks, novices, schoolboys, choristers, and semi-attached servants and unlettered brethren, were pre-eminently schools in which numbers of boys were being educated with a view to entering monastic or holy orders. We know, too, something of the conditions which prevailed. The great centre of life was the cloister, where the boys were obliged to sit sufficiently far apart to prevent them nudging each other; they may not make signs, nor talk to each other except when a master was present to listen. Only the Prior might smile at them, and their beds were at the foot of the masters’ beds.

The history of Ruthin itself, with which the history of the School is closely associated, begins about the year 1282, with the coming of Reginald de Grey, the First Lord de Grey de Ruthyn, Justiciar of Chester, to whom the Lordship of Dyffryn Clwyd was assigned by Edward I in that year. He built the Castle and the town quickly sprang up around it. He thought also to found a new College of

Secular Clergy, but died before its completion. His son John however, obtained the Charter of the College in 1310, his Deed declaring that “his Town of Ruthin having become populous” he had thought fit to assign to the Divine Worship the place and ground where the Chapel (an appendage of the White Friars’ Church of St. Peter) had before been built.

He previously obtained the consent of Sir Hugh, Rector of Llanrhydd, and also a grant of the Rectory, to which Sir Hugh must have consented on being made the first Principal of the College. The title of Prior seems to have been laid aside after the year 1310 for that of Rector which Sir Hugh carried on, but on 10th March, 1541, Hugo ap Evan, Presbyter, was instituted Warden at the presentation of the King, and this is the title still used. To such Colleges a School was usually attached, in the form of the mediaeval Guild School, at Ruthin probably a Tanners’ Guild.

Gabriel Goodman

The College was dissolved in 1547, but we know that shortly before the dissolution Gabriel Goodman, the founder of the School as we know it to-day, received his earlier education at Ruthin before going up to St. John’s College, Cambridge. Gabriel Goodman was the son of Edward Goodman, a Ruthin Mercer and was born in Exmewe House in 1525. The house, which existed until 1926, when it was entirely destroyed, was already notable as the birth-place of Sir Thomas Exmewe, Lord Mayor of London in 1517. At Cambridge Goodman became the intimate and life-long friend of Sir William Cecil, afterwards Lord Burghley. Having taken Holy Orders, he was appointed to a Canonry in St. Paul’s and on the conversion of Westminster Abbey into a Collegiate Church he was named as one of the first Prebendaries. In 1561, on the death of Dr. Bill he became Dean of Westminster, an office which he held until his death in 1601. In 1590 Dean Goodman redeemed the tithes of Ruthin and Llanrhydd with a large sum of money from the layhands into which they had passed on the dissolution, and re. founded the Collegiate Church, with such alteration as he deemed more consistent with the new order of things at the Reformation. His revival was the historic foundation of Christ’s Hospital in Ruthin, endowed for a Warden (a title which was probably deliberate on the part of the Dean), ten brethren and two sisters, as it exists today, and of which the School is is an organic part. There is extant a letter of the Dean’s to Queen Elizabeth relevant to this period in the School’s history, in which we read that in the six Counties of North Wales there was only one school where boys could receive a godly and virtuous education whereby they could become worthy members of God’ Church and the Commonwealth. In 1595, the Dean secured endowments in Llanelidan for the

maintenance of the School, but we know from Simwint Vychan of Llanelidan, a contemporary poet, that the School had been re-founded by the Dean in 1574, and that until the Deed of Endowment which brought it into the Hospital Scheme was secured, it had been carried on during the intervening years at his own cost. He had in fact built the School house and paid the Masters John Price and Hugh Goodman out of his private income.

The Deed, incorporating the Letters Patent, was sealed by Elizabeth on 23rd May in the 37th year of her reign. It is a fine specimen of Elizabethan illuminated MS work which has been carefully preserved and is to be seen by visitors to the School today. The Dean was, of course, well acquainted with the theory of Classical instruction and himself drew up an elaborate code of statutes for the regulation of School work and discipline, similar to the Ordinances of Westminster School which it is said with some probability, were his own composition. The original MS, with Dean Goodman's signature on every page is also to be seen to-day at the School.

Two Masters – 120 Pupils

After the School had been brought into the Hospital Scheme it is recorded by Wood in his "Athenae" that Robert Griffith was appointed to be the first Master. William Camden, who acknowledges, the Dean as his Patron, had just vacated the Mastership of Westminster School, and the Masterships of Westminster and Ruthin were at the option of Griffith, who chose Ruthin. The School was limited to two masters and the number of pupils to 120, which was considered the greatest number that the two Masters could manage efficiently, and they Fuller tells us, were forbidden to strike the boys on the nose and face. Twice a week the whole school was formed into a single class and examined in Greek and Latin Grammar. Every Saturday morning boys were instructed in the Catechism, and on the same day Latin and English compositions were set alternately. Writing and Arithmetic were optional, and so was dancing, which was taught for two hours each day, one in the morning and one in the evening. The School hours were in the summer from six, and in the winter from seven o'clock until nine, when half an hour was allowed for breakfast. School was resumed from 9.30 to noon, but the boys who took writing and arithmetic stayed in until one. Dinner was at 1.30, school resumed at two, and continued until five o'clock. The boys were often men rather than schoolboys and were admitted direct from School as candidates for Holy Orders. And in the days of the Parish Constable who was the sole guardian of the district, the older and stronger boys took an active part in the maintenance of local peace and order, running down ruffians

and fugitives from the law and handing them over to the authorities concerned, special leave being granted to them for the purpose.

Frequently there were skirmishes between the boys and local inhabitants, reminiscent of the Town and Gown battles at Oxford and Cambridge. One day an Old Boy returned to Ruthin as a Judge. The boys saw in this an opportunity for a holiday and wrote to him in eloquent Latin imploring him to exert his influence with the Headmaster. The precedent must have been successful for it continues to this day on the occasion of every Judge of Assize.

The endowments of the School were further increased in the XVII Century by a benefaction of Godfrey Goodman, bishop of Gloucester, the Dean's nephew, and in 1700 the School was rebuilt and enlarged by subscription. There was one classroom, a large lofty room which was both light and airy, without any division between the Lower and Upper Schools. In front were desks to hold the books, and on the other side sloping writing desks, except in the first or lowest class "which had nothing and therefore no inducement for even the idlest to remain there longer than the need". In the S.E. corner was a desk for the Headmaster, who commanded the whole School at a glance. A large fireplace stood at each end of the room which would, however, only warm a certain radius. Above each fireplace was a large tablet; on that in the Lower School was a list of benefactors to the improvement of the School buildings; that in the Upper School bore a Classic eulogy on Old Ruthinians, followed by a list of some of the more famous alumni, distinguished in Church and State and Letters. This disappeared but a copy of it, with several Subsequent additions, hangs in the present School buildings. In the year 1742, during the Headmastership of Rev'd. Thomas Hughes, dormitories were added and a House for the Headmaster built, also by subscription. Previously there was little or no accommodation for boarders at the School, who were obliged to find lodgings and board for themselves. Hughes was the grandfather of another Thomas Hughes of Rugby School, better known as Tom Brown. I might mention, too, that Bulkeley Jones Chairman of the Governing Body from 1890 to 1908, a large portrait of whom now hangs in the School Dining Hall, was the original "Slogger Williams" of "Tom Brown's Schooldays". There is also a Dr. Thomas Hughes, an Old Boy of the School and the son of a previous Headmaster, who was Preceptor of the Dukes of Cumberland, Cambridge and Sussex, Canon Residentiary of St. Paul's and Deputy Clerk of the Closet to George III, and his son John Hughes, also educated at the School, was a close friend of Sir Walter Scott, who writes about him in the Introductory Chapter to *Quentin Durward*.

When the School was further enlarged in 1831 and again in 1867, the situation was cramped, and there was no room for further additions, In 1891 the foundation stone of the present buildings, about half-a-mile out of the Town of Ruthin on a site of inspiring beauty, was laid by Sir William Hart Dyke, President of The Board of Education.

Distinguished Men Amongst Old Boys

Amongst the names of distinguished men educated at Ruthin School you may read that of John Williams, who in spite of a tendency “to loiter and play and to much exercise of the body” went up to St. John’s College, Cambridge, became a Fellow and University Proctor, and held at the same time at least six high offices in the Church “in sublime disregard of the Canon law against pluralities”. Subsequently he became Rector of the Savoy, Chaplain to James I, Privy Councilor, Dean of Salisbury, Dean of Westminster, Bishop of Lincoln, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and Archbishop of York. Archbishop Williams is reputed to be the last man to hold important office both in Church and state at the same time. There is also John Davies, the author of a Welsh Dictionary dedicated to Charles II as Prince of Wales. The fruits of forty years labour, and a work which remained for nearly two centuries the leading Dictionary in the language. Davies was also responsible for the Welsh version of the XXXIX Articles, so following in the steps of Dean Goodman to whom it is credited the English translation as we now have it of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, with the famous Chapter on Charity. You may also read the name of Lloyd Kenyon, Attorney General, Master of the Rolls, Lord Chief Justice of England, the first Baron Kenyon of Gredington; Sir John Trevor, Master of the Rolls, Lord Commissioner of the Great Seal, Speaker of the House of Commons; Thomas Lloyd of Delobran, Master of the Rolls, President of the Council, Deputy Governor of Pennsylvania; of David Yale, whose son endowed the great University of Yale in America; and Robert Jones, the lifelong friend of the Poet Wordsworth. Distinguished Old Boys of more recent years include Surgeon Rear-Admiral Sir Arthur Reginald Bankart, K.C., V.O., Honorary Physician to King George V.

In 1925, the Craven Fellowship, the “blue riband” of Oxford Classical Scholarship, was awarded to an Old Ruthinian and five years later the Directorship of the British School at Rome. And we hold in high esteem the memory of Commander E.G.L. Robinson, the Prime Minister’s “Peace Pilot” to Munich, by whose death on 22nd November last at the early age of thirty-two, in the words of an official of British Airways, “We have lost one of Britain’s most brilliant Pilots”. There are many others, Barons of the Exchequer, Bishops,

Deans. Principals and Fellows of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, with a long list of successes at the Universities and Hospitals. In Sport – County Cricket, International Football both Association and Rugby, which indicate more forcibly than any words can the contribution which Ruthin School has made and is making to the Country's history and life.

Two hundred and thirteen Ruthinians went out to serve their Country in the Great War, and many of them gained Distinctions. Thirty-seven of them, and many of whom were recommended for the Victoria Cross, laid down their lives.

Stands to Foundation Ideals

Many eminent men have made the interests of the School their own as Governors. Conspicuous amongst these is the late Archbishop Edwards, himself the Headmaster, at twenty-seven years of age, of Llandoverly College, who either as Governor or Chairman of Governors, served the School for practically forty-eight years of his extraordinarily active life. When in 1894 an attempt was made to alienate the endowments and to include the School in the County Scheme under the Welsh Intermediate Education Act, it was in large measure due to Dr. Edwards unremitting opposition that this was defeated on appeal to the House of Lords. Dr. Edwards' successor as Chairman of the Governing Body is the Right Hon. Sir John Eldon Banks, who for the part he has played and continues to play in the welfare of the School, has the genuine gratitude of all those who venerate its long and honorable record.

Nor would it be fitting to conclude without reference to another Governor, Sir Crosland Graham, who by his generous benefactions has greatly assisted this ancient foundation in meeting the ever-increasing demands of our times. The Old School still stands appropriately to its foundation ideals under the shadow of St. Peter's and within the ancient precincts of the Cloisters. Un-broken in continuity as a Public School since the year of its re-foundation in 1574, at its new home, alone among similar foundations in North Wales, its centuries-old identity, traditions and status, in an earnest and lively endeavor to be worthy of the great men who have gone before, and still true to the ideal of "a godly and virtuous education", where boys may become all-round men and "worthy members of God's Church and the Commonwealth".

N.b.

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Richard B. Aldrich
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23 Llanrwst Road,
Colwyn Bay,
LL29 7YT.