

## SOME NOTES on the EARLY HISTORY

### of WIRKSWORTH GRAMMAR SCHOOL

*by Roy Pearce*

To begin at the beginning. The traditional date for the foundation of Anthony Gell School is 1576, but other dates in those early years deserve attention: 1579, 1583, 1584.

In 1976, observant to tradition, the school celebrated its four hundredth anniversary following the firm instruction of The Hon Aileen Gell, widow of Col Philip Gell, imperious Chairman of Governors from 1952 to 1970. Mrs Gell was also mother of the eponymous Anthony Gell, who chaired the Foundation Trust in the 1980s. The traditional date of foundation arises from the stone, still in place, erected above the doorway into the 1827/8 grammar school building in the Wirksworth churchyard. 1576 is however three years before Anthony Gell made his momentous will in 1579 and eight years before Letters Patent were granted by Queen Elizabeth I.

The door stone, according to C.E.B. Bowles (see below), had probably been the foundation stone in the schoolmaster's house which was built in Anthony Gell's time on land adjacent to the churchyard, and was intended as the site of the proposed school building. When the old school and the house were demolished for the 1827/8 rebuilding the stone was incorporated in the new school, but no replacement house was built.

In February 1579 Anthony Gell signed his will and on 12th November 1583 he died. Anthony was a bachelor, living at Hopton Hall and wealthy from the Gell family investments in land and their prosperous local lead mines. His brother, Thomas, who succeeded him, established the foundation to carry out Anthony's wishes in the following year.

1584 marks the year when the trust was formed for the benefit of the free grammar school and 'for the relief of six impotent men in the same almshouses'. 27th October 1584 is the date of the Letters Patent for the establishment of the school and the almshouse for poor men 'to be upheld for ever' to fulfil the will of the late Anthony Gell Esq.

A copy survives in English of the Letters Patent – almost certainly they were originally written in Latin. As well as an annual grant of £20, land and rents were assigned by the will and 'six discreet and honest men were appointed governors of The Free Grammar School of Anthony Gell Esq.' with one master or pedagogue, 'who shall be sufficiently skilled in the Latin tongue to be enabled to instruct the Youth committed to his care in that language'. I have referred interchangeably to the trustees as governors, though they mostly through the years stood back from 'governing' the school and providing close oversight of the head's work.

Amid these dates the crucial fact is that sometime in the second half of the sixteenth century a school was founded in Wirksworth and has continued (more or less) in existence until today, serving its ever-changing community through more than four hundred years, though not without some difficult moments in its history.

For over a hundred years after the foundation the record is blank