

## WIRKSWORTH GRAMMAR SCHOOL

### PREFACE

This account records, rather patchily, some of the story of the grammar school founded by Anthony Gell in 1576 as it entered the twentieth century. It is not an academic history and most of the details lack references; mainly the information comes from my occasional reading and snippets garnered from various sources over the last twenty years with a major contribution from the Hansen Bay family with whom I made contact in 2012. Some of the writing is interpretation. I hope this brief contribution may serve as a starter for a more detailed history.

### THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

We have no history of the school through the nineteenth century, but I have picked up details from various sources. There are a few references in the Derby Mercury. The first half of the century was dominated by the headships of Hubbersty and son. Abraham Bennett, a distinguished scientist, had been the head in the 1780s, but regarded the post as a sinecure and devoted his efforts successfully to scientific research. Rev Nathan Hubbersty became the head in 1799 and served till 1828. His son, also Nathan (I think) succeeded him and was in post till 1863, a remarkable span of family service. I learn that the first Hubbersty increased the numbers to about 100 boys and employed two additional masters. I am sure that success led to the rebuilding of the school in the churchyard in 1827. I have a record of Mr Harris 1863-1887 having 100 pupils, but by the time of Berridge (1893-1906) there are only 45 boys with 13 of them boarders.

When I read about Wirksworth Grammar School in the nineteenth century I get the impression of struggle. Although the school had been rebuilt on its ancient site in 1827 it was difficult to maintain the academic standards of the classical curriculum, which was the tradition of the grammar school. From 1870 onwards in this hard working town dominated by quarrying, elementary education was an acceptable provision in preference to an uninspiring grammar school with a rigid traditional curriculum for which in addition you had to pay school fees. In 1800 these were two guineas a year for instruction in English subjects with a fee of thirty guineas a year to be a private pupil of Hubbersty. One of the Smedley family seems to have attended the school at this time, but received a 'scanty' education. I assume Hubbersty taught the traditional latin and greek curriculum to a select group with the ordinary boys having a less demanding programme. There is some indication that selected pupils of the headmaster were taught in a large house in the town and were not on the official school roll. Bluntly by the end of the century there were too few middle class parents in the town willing to pay for a grammar education and after the trains arrived in 1876 there were opportunities at Derby Grammar School for ambitious students, certainly anyone seeking a university education.

There had been a financial scandal in 1828 when the Charity Commissioners condemned Mr Philip Gell for mishandling the funds of the endowment.

There was a big row in the 1860s when Mr Harris, the headmaster, had a strong disagreement with his assistant, Beeson, who was dismissed. Beeson, who was highly regarded by the parents, left and established his own school nearby in what we now know as Greengates on Coldwell Street. The story is that the headmaster found his assistant asleep in front of the roaring fire one afternoon when he should have been

teaching the boys in the lower class, who were still playing in the playground outside. Was there even a whisky bottle in view? The young teacher was popular (too popular?) with pupils and parents and Beeston's Academy attracted pupils away from the grammar school by offering a less formal curriculum and preparing boys for 'business'. I recall seeing the boys' coat pegs in Greengates. I am sadly not sure of the source of this magnificent story, but I suspect it was the beginning of the decline in numbers at the grammar school. There was an adverse report on the work of the school in 1869.

The School House was built in 1886, not only to accommodate the headmaster, but also, in the pre-bus era, to encourage boarders, who came from the local villages. We have a photo in the 1890s of the head, Mr Berridge elegant on the lawn with his family and, at a distance, about ten young boarders, scattered and separated discreetly from the family group. Berridge was the head on the 1891 census. It is said he was member of an extreme religious sect; that puzzles me because for most of the nineteenth century (and no doubt before) the head was a clergyman of the Church of England, sometimes combining the post with clerical duties in the parish. Berridge was not a success, though he stayed until 1906. Oddly though a Cambridge graduate he taught the younger boys, some as young as eight.

### SAVE THE SCHOOL

The key event, as the twentieth century arrived, was the Balfour education act of 1902, the inspiration of a gifted civil servant, Sir Robert Morant, who set himself to bring some order to the organisation of secondary education. The 1902 act endeavoured to tidy up the variegated provision which had developed, especially in secondary education, and for the first time gave the newly established local authorities responsibility for the organisation of schools, in this case Derbyshire County Council. A major influence in the re-organisation was Sir Michael Sadler, professor of education at Manchester University and previously an inspector of schools. As Derbyshire began to review their schools Sadler visited Wirksworth. He produced a dispiriting report and concluded that the school should be closed and the small number of grammar school boys transferred to the growing community of Duffield. They could travel by train. There were only about thirty boys on roll and, with the town dirty and depressed, relying on poorly paid work in textiles and quarries as sources of employment in the dust bowl at the top of the valley, Sadler saw little hope that the school would be able to entice enough boys with parents willing to pay for grammar school education. The buildings were poor, the numbers persistently low and the standards dreadful. The main career route was to work as clerks on the Midland Railway, and nobody stayed beyond sixteen.

The town was, of course, outraged that closure should be suggested and a committee was formed to save the school. The target was one third of the £4,500 estimated cost with Derbyshire County Council contributing the balance. Money was contributed by local worthies and £1,037.5s was raised. To me as a supporter of the cricket club the names are familiar! The affluent town establishment rallied. The chairman and chief donor was H Walthall Wathall from Alton Manor. Other famous names were two Wheatcrofts from Harlem Mill, Marsden, Arkwright, Dr Broster, even the Duke of Devonshire. Charles Wright from the Vaults, the fantastically profitable wines and spirits business on Coldwell Street contributed £25. They, in co-operation with the county council, built the new school, which we now know as Gell block, faced with Wirksworth bricks and Black Rock gritstone.

The building was designed by the distinguished county architect George H Widows, who also designed the junior school and many other fine school buildings in the county.

Until the 1902 act Wirksworth Grammar School operated as an entirely independent organisation. It was not, like many grammar schools, a church foundation, so its financial situation was precarious with its small income arising from the fees paid by pupils and from the not very wealthy original trust established and run by the Gell family.

There had been various additions from bequests, usually of land, which was rented out and produced some income over the years, but it was clear in Wirksworth, and in many other towns through the country that, if a strong system of education was to be established as national policy to sustain a great empire, there must in some way be state support. This was channelled through the local authorities which were now authorised to raise money through the rates for education. Henceforth there was financial support for the school from the county and a number of competitive scholarships were established, which made places available to those who could not afford the fees and could now move from the elementary school into the grammar school at eleven, though some fee-paying pupils were still admitted. This re-organisation, almost re-founding, raised the standard to the benefit of the whole community. The school maintained its independent governing body and made its own decisions until the Butler act at the end of the second war.

I reflect how the three major education acts of the twentieth century were pivotal in the history of our school: 1902 Balfour, 1944 Butler, which abolished fee paying in the grammar school and the 1965 Crosland comprehensive education act.

The governors, in wisdom, but no doubt in consultation with the county, made two crucial decisions regarding the new school. They decided that the school should become mixed and girls should henceforth be admitted, a remarkably progressive policy in the 1900s.

It is always important to appoint the right headteacher. Rev Lauritz Hansen Bay was recruited and took up post with the support of his wife Celia in 1907 living in school house and serving notably till 1929.