

Bude County Grammar School - Brief Notes

by David J E Knight

The school began to take pupils on 1st January 1909, and its foundation was part of a movement to improve education in Cornwall, for both boys and girls, stimulated by the 1902 Education Act. It was the fourth secondary school set up by the County Council, and came before, for example, those at Camelford and Fowey.

There was a problem with the Board of Education in London, who pushed for a higher level of investment, and more free places, 25%, than the county could afford, before they would give their operating grant to the school. A "sufficient offer" of free places, at about half that amount was initially agreed.

A chief initiator on the County Education Committee was Sir Arthur Quiller Couch (1863-1944), known in his lifetime as "Q", who had risen from relatively humble origins at Fowey to become the first Professor of English at Cambridge University. He saw children across the world advancing to a better state of education: he writes in "From a Cornish Window" 1906 p261-2, November "I like recreation as much as most men, and have grown to find it in the dull but deeply absorbing business of sitting on Education Committees...", and goes on to quote from a book "The Invisible Playmate" : "The poem opens with a wonderful vision of children"... "All over the world...the children are trooping to school. ... The great globe swings round out of the dark into the sun; there is always morning somewhere..."

The school buildings were contracted to a John Stanbury of Devonport, and it was built on an attractive site with views down over the beach to the sea. It was designed for both boys and girls. The buildings were approved for human habitation by John Ellis, surveyor on 21 December 2008. The site is adjacent to lands of the medieval Blanchminster Charity, now the Blanchminster Trust, originally of Stratton parish. This also helped pay running costs in early years, and gave scholarships to supplement the free places.

Most children who came were fee-paying, and in the twenties and thirties generally more girls than boys. Was this because the middle class tended to send their sons to private schools and their daughters to the County School? The age range was initially much broader than after the "11+" of the 1944 Education Act. Initially, pupils came as young as eight, with the possibility of boarding in the headmasters' house. There were trains, but few motor vehicles then. Some came from Devon - the Holsworthy area - but the timing of transport was always a problem, and later the Holsworthy pupils went to Okehampton Grammar School instead. Even so, in the fifties, one or two used to come from the Welcombe area. In 1911 there were 4% from Devon, but by 1921, 19%.

The world wars created disruption: the first war, 1914-1918, probably more than the second. The founding Head's name was originally Rittenberg, R J Rittenberg BA BSc (Lond), but by 1921 he had changed it to Ritte. There must have been problems even in Bude with his German name. He suffered a severe illness before the war, and another after it. As Head, he was with the school for its formative period 1909 to 1922, and about 1921-2, taught my father maths. He remembered him as "old Ritty". An effect of the wars was also to remove the men teachers for the duration, leaving the school short staffed. Some of

my generation (Bill Headdon, T Lashbrook) have remarked in books how much extra freedom they felt they had to roam the town and district on account of the (second) war. This was reflected, I might add, in an account told me by a pupil of Clifton College during its stay in Bude, from 1941 to 1945. Another effect was the supply of an "army hut" to the school for expansion in 1920-1.

By 1941 Clifton College was able to call upon use of the science labs at both the Grammar School, for chemistry, and at the Secondary Modern School at Stratton, for physics, using their own apparatus, and going there when the labs were not required by the schools' own pupils.

The Grammar School had always been known as Bude County School until a new secondary modern school was opened for the area at Stratton in 1938: those who had not gone to the County School had in general remained in the junior schools to the leaving age of 14. The Bude County School had been trying to get parents to agree to pupils' staying on until 16 from 1921 on, with limited success. From 1944 the leaving age became 15. There were by then also technical colleges in the larger towns, notably at Camborne, which provided a route to further education for pupils from the secondary modern school, and quite a few took advantage of it.

As mentioned earlier, the "11+" examination came in with the 1944 Education Act, and thereafter fee paying at the Grammar School was phased out. However, the 11+ was not perfect, and a few pupils, perhaps 1 or 2 in 30, were moved either way between grammar school and secondary modern, usually at the end of the first year.

County education in North Cornwall was managed from the District Education Office in Launceston, and the District Clerk was in 1921, Mr W H Walter, and in 1948, when I was offered a place, Mr F B Jeffery. There was a board of Governors for each school, initially with appointees from Truro, at Bude including, "Q" himself. The District Clerk acted as secretary to the Governors, and must have had an influence none of us guessed.

Some other people in the district must have worked hard for our education, people we rarely if ever saw. The first chairman of the Governors was Mr W Waddon-Martyn of Tonnacombe, and on his death an appreciation appeared in the Bude County School Magazine of December 1929. He had "fought hard to get a secondary school in this part of the County", and that from laying of the Foundation Stone he had taken a fatherly interest, giving time and money to help the school. One Governor we remembered in my time, 1948 - 1956, was Mrs Constance Thynne of Penstowe, Kilkhampton. She came to the annual prizegivings accompanied by her chauffeur, even in her frail old age. She was of the land-owning family that had owned the lands north and east of the river at Bude for centuries, and which were sold in a great sale, about 1921, following the death of her husband, Lt. Col. A G Thynne in the war in Palestine, in 1917. Also the vicars of Bude were closely involved: in 1921 the use of the Parish hall was offered, and, in our time the Rev. Walter Prest was chairman of Governors from 1950 until after 1960. He we did see: he played the piano rather well.

The Bude County Grammar School spanned a period of less than a century, from 1908 to 1973, but its existence encapsulated most of the social and economic changes of the 20th century, and it must have laid down foundations for the present social and cultural life of the area.

In the 1920s and 1930s not all pupils had fees paid by their parents: I believe the free places rose to the 25%. The County Council annually reviewed the mix of pupils' parents among the different walks of life; some leavers went on to important jobs in national life, in London, the forces, and the universities, but a good many remained in the local area. Even in the 1950s, when the railway got one to London and back inside 24 hours, many remained in the west of England. When I first gathered addresses for our 1948 class for a reunion in 2002, a few were overseas, a good few were around London and in the north, but a good half were within 50 miles or so of Bude.

In our generation a 6th form was established and became a sizeable part of the school, with pupils staying for two or three years, not only to gain A-level passes, but also to get County or State Scholarships to university. Some 6th formers came in from other schools. While some had always taken the higher certificate and gone on to university or training college, the post-war numbers became a sizeable percentage of the entry classes, 20% or more. Witness the school honours boards. The post-war boards are now at the Budehaven Community School. All were there until a fire occurred in 1999. In the fire, the oldest, covering 1911- 1937, was smoke damaged, and is now in the museum at The Castle, Bude, and its successor, from c1938 - 1950, was unfortunately destroyed.

Another 16 years elapsed after my departure in 1956, during which there became so many successes at A level and in scholarships, that, after 1970, the school ceased writing its honours boards.

The continuity of teaching staff was remarkable. From the beginning, under Rittenberg and a science teacher from Manchester there was an emphasis on science and mathematics, themes that continued through and developed in the science-oriented years after the 2nd world war. Sir George Croydon Marks who lived at "Penarvor" Crooklets, and was MP for North Cornwall, was a consulting engineer. It was to mark his 19 years as MP that in 1926 a prize fund was founded, that became in 1930 the Lord Marks Prize Fund. The prize was awarded annually for the best school certificate in each school in his constituency, including at Bude. The form teachers who had the youngest pupils as form teachers until my time, were Mr C H "Cos" York and Miss Katie Trott. They had taught my father, and had joined by 1921. In 1927, when the teaching of latin came under scrutiny from London and an inspector was sent, they were the teachers. It was recommended that Cos took the older, not the younger pupils, as he had a qualification in the subject. Len Tozer, who is a little older than I, said that in his time, the mid 1940s, the "old guard" under head W W "boss" Wright, appointed in 1922, had finally given way to a new set of teachers, first under Dr Long, then under W E "Bill" Walton, c1952 to after 1960. One who came in my time, W G "Bill" Wright, finally went as deputy head with the school across to the new buildings of the Community School in 1973, before the merger with Stratton Secondary Modern School.

One of the important changes was the replacement of the school certificate by the O and A levels, starting from 1951. This avoided the requirement for passes in 5 subjects before a full certificate could be issued, which had left many school leavers of my father's generation with no qualification. The return of thinking along these lines today for secondary pupils is unfortunate, I would say.

Many of us who grew up in north Cornwall had, in spite of newspapers and the

radio, little idea of the wider world until it came to actually making a living. In the war the Americans had come, with amazing sweets and peanuts and the like, and just after it we had seen the Cossacks charge through flaming hoops at Broadclose, all a kind of spectacle to us. Only now after a lifetime does one realise the different experiences of pupils whose parents had come from overseas, and of many in the town, who especially in the war, had travelled far and come back. Nor were we much aware of people important in national life who lived in Bude, and who would have commuted to London by train, among them Professor Sir L Dudley Stamp (1895-1966), Sir Henry Gurney (1898-1951) of Reeds, Poughill, killed while High Commissioner in Malaya, Sir Henry Badeley (1874-1951), clerk of the Parliaments 1934-49 & Baron in 1948, Admiral Sir Douglas Nicholson at the Castle (-c1941), and his cousin Admiral Sir Stuart Nicholson (1855-1936) who lived in Hartland Terrace. However Professor Stamp, famous for his wartime Land Utilisation Survey of Great Britain, presented the prizes in 1951, and again in 1960. Also, the writer, playwright and farmer, Ronald Duncan (1914 -1982) of Welcombe, gave a memorable speech in 1956. What was memorable to me was a mention of a night in Stratton gaol over a disputed drum of fuel washed up on his beach during the war.

A straw in the wind was the arrival, shortly before O levels, of a temporary teacher back from war-torn Germany. Miss Margaret Garrett came to stand in, teaching French. Where we had learned many aspects of grammar from our Channel Islands - born teacher, it had not entered my mind, in rather isolated Bude, that French was a thing to be used. The new teacher sized us up, and straightaway set us to write an essay in French for homework. Nothing had prepared me for that, but she was right. Since then, working in science, I have spent much of a lifetime getting to use the language.

Bude is a pleasant place, and it was with an effort some of us started to look outwards to the wider world. Here I must apologise for saying nothing of sport, for in that, at least, our horizons in the 1950s extended to Bideford, Okehampton, Fowey and St Tudy.

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