

1561

A Brief History of Merchant Taylors' School



Photos, clockwise from left: The great Head Master, Spencer Leeson, who moved MTS from Charterhouse Square in London to Moor Park; turn of the century Headmaster J.A. Nairn; boys from Divs in July 1879. Note the very different uniforms!, Plus Fours, regular trousers, morning coats and two cricket bats – MTS in the 1890s

School Archivist *Geoffrey Brown* looks back at key events since the founding of Merchant Taylors' in 1561

“the grammar school, founded in the Parish of St. Lawrence Pountney in London in the yere of our Lord God one thousand fyve hundred, sixty-one by this worshipfull company of the Marchaunt-Taylors of the Cytty of London, in the honor of Christ Jesu”

The Merchant Taylors' Company founded the School in 1561 and continues to have a close association with it, not least within the governing body. It was one of a number to become closely involved with the foundation or re-foundation of schools in the sixteenth century, whether under the influence of the 'New Learning' of the Renaissance or, coupled with this aim, a desire to advance and preserve the religious principles of the Protestant Reformation.

Richard Hilles and his associates in the founding of the School were decidedly representative of the latter tradition but also concerned to establish an orderly training of the mind through the study of the Greek and Latin languages and literature.

Almost from the outset there was a close link with St John's College, Oxford, founded by the Merchant Taylor, Sir Thomas White. It is interesting to note that he was a Catholic sympathiser and had been a staunch supporter of Elizabeth I's sister, Queen Mary.

Under the first Head Master, Richard Mulcaster, the School laid the foundations of academic distinction, whilst it was notable also for its size since it soon exceeding the stipulated number of 250 boys. The Statutes laid down that 100 of these scholars should be "poore mens sons" to be educated without fee and another 50 boys on half fees. Mulcaster's boy actors performed before Elizabeth (Thomas Kyd who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* was one of his pupils) and music and exercise (including football) were encouraged.

We learn much about Mulcaster's programme for education from his two works, the *Positions* and the *Elementarie*, of 1581 and 1582 respectively. The poet Edmund Spenser was another of Mulcaster's pupils as were no fewer than six of the translators of the Authorised Version of the Bible of 1611. The most distinguished of these was Lancelot Andrewes, later Bishop of Winchester. It is appropriate that these men have given their names to four of the Houses. The former boarding house is another reminder of the origins, since it is named after the original school building,

the Manor of the Rose, formerly the property of the Dukes of Suffolk. A plaque now marks the site in Suffolk Lane, and there is a reference to the place in the play Henry VIII. Mulcaster's relations with the Company were not always easy, not least concerning his salary and he left the School in 1586 becoming High Master of St Paul's ten years later.

The School survived the political troubles of the Civil War and after, although its administration seems to have suffered from neglect. Among Old Boys of this period William Juxon, the first Archbishop of Canterbury after the Restoration, would attend Charles 1st on the scaffold in 1649, although another, Bulstrode Whitlocke, was a servant of the Commonwealth and an ambassador for Oliver Cromwell. Over three centuries his name would be given to the History Society.

The School faced new difficulties in the years after the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660. The Great Plague of 1665 was followed by the total destruction of the buildings in Suffolk Lane on September 2nd 1666, the first day of the Great Fire of

Below: Maths and Science Sixth Form students in 1931



London It fell to the then Headmaster, John Goad, to rescue the books from the school library whose foundation he had instigated.

There were no admissions for several years, but by 1672 there were 155 boys on the roll. The school continued in improvised premises and rebuilding on the Suffolk Lane site was complete by 1675. The architect of the new school was Robert Hooke, whose long underestimated part in the rebuilding of the City is now emerging strongly from behind the fame of Wren. The latter's father, Bishop Matthew Wren, was an OMT.

It is a remarkable comment on the deep fear of Roman Catholicism in that period that the Head Master under whom the School had survived was dismissed in 1681 because of his Catholic sympathies. In this he may be seen as a victim of his former pupil Titus Oates, the "discoverer" of the Popish Plot. A few years later, in 1691, another Head Master (Ambrose Bonwicke) was compelled to resign because his conscience would not allow him to break his oath of allegiance to James II. During the eighteenth century the School seemed to drift into a state of stagnation with a long period when the number of boys on the roll declined quite badly. There was little support and much opposition to any change, for example the Merchant Taylors' Company blocked a proposal to introduce the teaching of mathematics. This was in 1760, and no specific arrangement for teaching this subject was made until

1829 and it was regarded as unimportant compared to the Classical studies which dominated the curriculum until well into the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century produced a national hero, Robert Clive (1738-9), who helped lay the foundations of what later became Britain's Indian Empire, yet we know nothing certain about his time here. In 1788 John Walter OMT renamed his newspaper The Times.

This was a period of poor, narrow teaching, brutal discipline and a form of self-rule by the senior boys which sometimes led to open rebellion at occasional efforts by the assistant masters to assert some form of authority through fierce punishments. Much the same, however, could be said of most of the leading schools at the time. Yet Head Master James Townley was keen on Drama, and wrote a successful play, "High Life Below stairs", which Garrick staged at Drury Lane.

The nineteenth century produced indications that the School must expand on a new site or face gradual extinction. There would be a slow and sometimes painful process of change, and to many it seemed fitting that the School should continue to adhere to the ideas of the founders and accustomed practice. Through the middle years of the nineteenth century the School survived in the cramped and gloomy buildings in Suffolk Lane. The 1864 Public Schools Commission recognised the School's classical curriculum but change

was slow in coming except for the move to a larger site, and it may well be the case that the decision made in 1866 to move to a site at Smithfield (bought from the governors of the Charterhouse) saved Merchant Taylors' from an irreversible decline. The School moved to Charterhouse Square in 1875, new buildings were constructed on the site and things began to change slowly especially in terms of the introduction or improvement of elements of the curriculum, not least the sciences and modern languages, whose teaching had been so often criticised.

In spite of the difficulties, the middle and late years of the nineteenth century saw the School produce some great men such as Alfred Marshall, the economist, Sir Frederick Treves, the surgeon, George (Viscount) Cave, who would become Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor, Gilbert Murray, the classical scholar, Lord Hailey, colonial administrator, and Sir James Jeans, who was perhaps the outstanding scientist of his generation. They have entrance scholarships named after them. Rugby and cricket became established and successful, and the School rowed for a time. The School produced some distinguished sportsmen, most notably the athlete and cricketer J.E.Raphael and England Rugby Union player E R.Cove-Smith. Clubs for the sports were established.

The last years of the century saw the vigorous headmastership of William Baker broaden the range of subjects taught, within the preservation of the traditions of the School. Thus although public examinations were introduced, the introduction of the proper teaching of foreign languages was a slow business. In a sense the move in 1875 had failed to cope with the implications of the rapid growth of London. The spread of suburbs, especially south of the Thames, meant that boys had even longer journeys to school and from there to the distant playing fields. The fact of the matter was that professional men no longer lived particularly close to their offices; the City had ceased to be a residential area. The early years of the twentieth century saw expansion at Charterhouse Square with new facilities such as laboratories but the site was increasingly inadequate, surrounded by noise and pollution. There was a protracted debate about whether the School should move out of London, but those who believed that the School must at all costs remain close to the City delayed a decision for almost a quarter of a century. Headmaster J.A.Nairn was among those who felt that need for change, but the

situation was complicated by the effects of the outbreak of the First World War and building plans at Charterhouse Square went ahead on the absolute assumption that there would be no move.

It was a great achievement of Spencer Leeson (Headmaster 1927-35) that he was able to convince the School Committee of the Merchant Taylors' Company that such a move was essential and to see it through. Only this could provide spacious buildings, playing fields and nearness to the homes of the 75% of boys who lived north of the Thames. For the first time there could be a proper boarding house, whilst the growth of "Metroland" would compensate for any loss of pupils unable to travel to the new site.

It is remarkable indeed that this move to Sandy Lodge, Hertfordshire was carried out during the Depression, and that the ambitious and prize-winning plans for the buildings were ever executed. W.G Newton, the architect, blended neo Georgian and Swedish Modern elements: "my eyes have seen a vision of buildings lean and clean and purposeful, a sheer wall; a glimmer of steel and glass, a bravery of singing colour". The plan of the buildings is shaped as a pair of compasses, the aspect of the cloisters, but not their scale, may evoke Suffolk Lane, and symbols of the Company are everywhere, even on the rainwater heads. Sadly all too few reminders of the past made the move to the new site, notably the statue of Sir Thomas White of 1875 (unfortunately this was placed in an outdoor location), the Goad Library, the War Memorials and commemorative tablets, some pictures and the Monitors' table and Prompters' benches. Much was left behind though and the Charterhouse Square buildings opened in 1875 were mostly victims of the Second World War.

From this point in the history of the School we can see an ever-closer connection with contemporary developments in the broader world of education. This was very much a result of the growth of highly successful maintained grammar schools. During the headmastership of Norman Birley (who guided the School through the difficult years of the Second World War) it was decided to introduce the Third Form made up of boys of eleven years old drawn from primary schools in Middlesex and Hertfordshire, and selected through cooperation with the local authorities concerned. That entry at 11+ remains, but pupils are admitted in a different way of course, whilst the Assisted Places Scheme has come and gone. The curriculum changed a good deal under both Leeson

and Birley: the teaching of English as a discrete subject began, Art and Music teaching expanded and the Hebrew class ended its distinguished history.

The twentieth century saw further men of distinction emerge from the School: Donald Coggan became Archbishop of Canterbury, and much more recently Sir John Sulston would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 2002. Kenneth Christofas directed the European Council of Ministers from 1973-82; Sir Vincent Evans sat on the European Council of Human Rights, and the tradition of public service at a high level by OMTs can be seen within the current governing body in the person of the Chairman, Sir Geoffrey Holland.

In common with all independent schools Merchant Taylors' has been influenced by developments in the teaching and examining of all subjects in ways that would have seemed inconceivable a hundred years ago, or even before the Second World War. The headmastership of Hugh Elder (1946-65) saw strong recovery from that war, expansion of games, the consolidation of the system of Houses into the present eight and the Quatercentenary was celebrated in 1961. A new art block was given by the Merchant Taylors' Company in honour of the event and this was to be the start of a succession of building programmes over the next forty years. These have become more ambitious as the curriculum and activities of the School have evolved, public examinations undergone transformation and wider expectations grown. Amongst major works the Design and Technology workshop has expanded threefold, and an appeal launched under the headmastership of Brian Rees (1965-73) and brought to a conclusion under Francis Davey (1974-81) financed the building of the Recital Hall, together with classrooms and Biology laboratories.

Under David Skipper (1982-91) a Sports Hall was built (1986) together with an indoor swimming pool, and the old gymnasium was converted into a studio theatre. This building now forms part of a much larger complex constructed during the headmastership of Jon Gabitass (1991-2004) when a Modern Languages building was built together with a new Art Building, a Lecture Theatre and classrooms. Outside this group of buildings stands a large sculpture donated by the artist, Lynn Chadwick OMT. During that period the governing body was reconstituted without loss of the essential elements of the bond with the Company. The last decade of the twentieth century also saw major changes in the life of the School including the

abandonment of the six day teaching week, and boarding in the Manor of the Rose came to an end with the Millennium.

In 2002, the area beneath the Great Hall together with the formerly open cloister was converted from a largely wasted space to a spacious entrance and reception area, with offices and a Sixth Form Common Room. The provision of IT facilities has expanded greatly, of course over the past two decades or so, line with modern educational practice.

During the headmastership of Stephen Wright (2004 to date) the School has continued to grow and there are currently 860 boys on the Roll. All this has taken place against a background of social, economic and political pressures that present new challenges for all independent schools. Very close links have been established with local primary schools and with Harefield Academy and ambitious plans to develop further outreach to the local and global communities are being developed. In 2011 the close relationship between the School and its Old Boys will be strengthened with the fulfilment of plans to move the Old Merchant Taylors' Society to the site at Sandy Lodge. It seems fitting to conclude this article by returning to the charitable intentions of the School's founders for they have inspired a campaign to raise £7.5 million for bursaries just as Merchant Taylors' is beginning the celebration of the 450th anniversary of its foundation.

Note: This article draws heavily on a number of sources, most notably:

"Four Centuries of Merchant Taylors' School" F.W.M. Draper O.U. P 1962

"The History of the Merchant Taylors' Company" Matthew Davies and Ann Saunders, Maney 2004

Numerous articles in past issues of the Taylorian and the OMT News Sheet.