

A History of Heath School

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An outline history of Heath School, with questions for further enquiry

This paper has a two-fold purpose; the first, to provide an outline of the school's history, and the second, to raise questions for further enquiry. For although there is probably enough material already in print to put together a reasonably informative narrative history, three problem areas remain. First, we have very little information about the seventeenth century. Second, the relationship between the school and town needs much more attention, and third, explanations of why particular events occurred are seldom given in the earlier sources of the school's history. These problems will re-emerge throughout the paper.

1585–1731 The birth and re-birth of the 'Free Grammar School of Queen Elizabeth, at Heath, near Halifax'

A charter for the establishing of a free grammar school was obtained by Henry Farrar of Ewood, at his own expense, from Queen Elizabeth in February, 1585. The first land was given to the school in 1597 by the same Henry Farrar. A corporate seal of the governors of the charity was then made and a subscription opened to raise the money to build a schoolhouse on the two acre gift. The school first opened in 1600 and since Dr. John Favour, Vicar of Halifax, seems to have been the chief instigator of this activity from 1597 to 1600, he is now regarded as the founder.

Why Henry Farrar acquired the charter is nowhere explained, but the following collection of facts could perhaps provide an answer. The Halifax court rolls refer to 'the grammar school' and 'the master' throughout the sixteenth century. The last entry comes in 1571 but in 1587 a more helpful reference is to 'the land on the south side of the parish church on which stood the cottage where the grammar school was housed.' Further evidence for an earlier grammar school seems to come from the list of subscribers to the new building in 1597. Three of them are described as 'former scholars.' Link the existence of the grammar school with the actions of the vicars Ashbourne, father and son, and there may be a solution. Christopher Ashbourne was appointed as the first protestant vicar of Halifax in 1560. He is said to have 'sold much of the church's property.' (What property and to whom?) His son, Francis, succeeded as vicar in 1573 and married a daughter of John Lacey, thereby also becoming a brother-in-law of Henry Farrar. Both Henry Farrar and John Lacey were in the list of twelve governors named for the charity in the 1585 charter.

The first Heath School building is also interesting in that it provides a very early link with the university at Oxford. It was built by the Akroyds of Hipperholme who achieved much greater

fame for their university buildings in Oxford, having been brought there by Sir Henry Savile, who was both the Warden of Merton College, Oxford, and a principal subscriber to the Heath building fund of 1597.

Between 1600 and 1635 two further appeals realised enough money for the governors of Heath to buy Hutt Farm, of seven acres in Ovenden, Northfieldgate Farm of some nine acres in Northowram, and the 120 acres of the Balkholme estate, near Howden in the East Riding. This last property was bought from Richard Sunderland of Coley Hall and George Vavasour in 1635. Given the difficulties of managing an estate so far from Halifax it would be interesting to know the reason for this transaction. (The property is now flourishing farm land, presently owned by the Post Office pension fund.) Various other rents and annuities were bequeathed to the Heath charity during this century and, like the Balkholme estate, were so neglected that by the mid-eighteenth century many had relapsed. When attempts were made to revive them, Heath's legal entitlement could no longer be proven. In fact the supervision of the charity's affairs had become so careless that in 1725 even the original Elizabethan Charter could not be found.

Most of the information for the seventeenth century, which is very little, comes from the Archbishop of York's archives and concerns the periodic decline of the number of governors to levels which jeopardised the charity's existence. As early as 1607 and again in 1665, 1688 and 1697 the Archbishop, who was responsible for the charity, had to nominate new governors, since their numbers had fallen so low that they could not do it themselves. This may have been because of reluctance, disinterest, or real opposition by the gentlemen of Halifax to the charity.

Since the days of vicar Dr. John Favour, the Halifax Church had been closely linked with the puritan-minded part of the Anglican church and there seems to have been strong local sympathy for puritanism. However, in 1634, reflecting developments in London, the new Vicar, March or Marsh, was an Arminian, that is to say a 'high church' adherent, and it could be that the local gentry felt less attuned to their vicars, who usually played a significant role in the life of Heath School. It seems quite likely that, except for the period of the Commonwealth, the gentlemen of Halifax remained, as puritans or non-conformists, uncommitted to their vicar, his church or Heath School.

The dates of the Archbishop's interventions strongly suggest that the governors were not active and were simply not missed until they were required to elect a new master. In 1665 the Reverend Paul Greenwood left the school to become vicar of Dewsbury and in 1688 the master, John Doughty, had died. In 1725 there was only one governor left and even the Archbishop of York could not remedy this particular situation. The lack of information for the seventeenth century is, therefore, perhaps not so surprising given the apparent lax control of the charity. It is not possible to give even a reliable chronology of the masterships, nor is there any indication of the numbers of pupils at the school or what subjects they followed.

Between 1725 and 1731, however, the school was reborn. It needed to be. A contemporary said that 'the school had been badly neglected for forty years. The few remaining pupils were being taught by a mere youth of nineteen, the master not having been to the school for many years.' The problems facing the school in 1725 were immense as only one governor remained and the Vicar, Thomas Burton, refused to have any connection with local efforts to revive the school. Discussions with the Archbishop of York and lawyers of the Chancery court showed that a new charter would have to be drawn up to legalise the continuance of the Heath Charity, and a set of statutes to define the responsibilities and duties of master and governors were a necessity to avoid a repetition of this situation. Correction, however, was not easy for the schoolmaster, Thomas Lister, still lived and his vested interest could not be changed. Lister had been appointed in 1688 and by 1725 at the very latest had stopped coming into the school. In addition, no-one knew where the Elizabethan Charter was, and there was no money. It seems fairly certain that many

of the rents had not been collected for several years.

Richard Sterne of Wood House led the campaign to revive the school and paid for it, over £100 by 1730. A great deal of the correspondence between Sterne and Dr. Thomas Haytor, the Archbishop of York's secretary and their legal agent in London has remained. It shows a clever political tussle between two groups of Halifax men. One group was led or represented by Abraham Milner and the winning group, led by Sterne, were all 'of the established church and friends to the government.' It has the appearance of a take-over bid but precisely what politics or jealousies were involved is not clear. The Archbishop of York favoured Sterne and had no sympathy with either Vicar Burton or the last of the remaining governors, Henry Graeme. These were the years when nationally the Whigs were removing the Tories as far as possible from posts in local government and in the Church. The Whigs were keen to secure the succession of the Hanoverian Kings. The Tories were still not trusted after the Revolution of 1688. They were still tainted with support for the Catholic James II and were suspected of strong sympathy with the Jacobite Rising in 1715. Do these national politics find any echo in the affairs of Heath School in 1725? I am sure they do, but the proposition needs proof.

1731–1887

Thomas Lister died in 1728 and a new charter, signed by Queen Caroline in the absence abroad of George II, along with the new statutes, was acquired by 1731. From this date information about the school improves considerably. There are records of the governors' meetings and a considerable number of documents relating to all aspects of the governors' responsibilities.

It had required strong words from the Archbishop to obtain even a minimum level of co-operation from the vicar and the governor, Henry Graeme, but by 1733 Richard Sterne's work seemed to have been successfully completed. A series of temporary appointments to the mastership were ended and the nomination of the Reverend John Holdsworth launched the school on a more stable course. He was succeeded in 1744 by the Reverend Samuel Ogden who resigned in 1753 to become Woodwardian Professor of Geology at Oxford University.

At this point another outburst of bitterness between the governors and the vicar of Halifax occurred. Exactly what the reasons were is not clear, but there were complaints to the Archbishop that better candidates to the Mastership of Heath had been turned down and Vicar Legh wrote that he would not have the new Master, West, in his chapel. The complaints may have been justified for by 1760 the governors were becoming critical of West who was refusing to enlarge and modernise the curriculum of the school. The dispute seems to have come to a head in 1769. Shortly afterwards, West retired and was followed by the Reverend Richard Hudson. His contribution, to 1782, and that of his successor, the Reverend G. W. Kempson, to 1789, were very important.

With these two gentlemen, the position of Heath was considerably improved. Partially this was because all the masters since 1760 had been supported by president governors who seem to have administered the Charity's affairs in a conscientious fashion. Three of them cover the whole period, Christopher Rawson, John Edwards and John Rawson. Richard Sterne, the first president governor, had been succeeded in 1733 by James Batley, who fled the country in 1744 to avoid his creditors!

Another reason for the improvement was that, in 1774, the school and school house were enlarged, a reflection on the improving finances of the charity, thanks to the more careful management of recent president governors. It might also have been a consequence of the changes made to the statutes and the wider curriculum introduced in 1770. As the commercial activity

of the town began to expand so the demand for education, of the right sort, must have grown.

In 1782, one of the most significant changes for the future also occurred in the Charity's properties. The Balkholme estate was exchanged for the Hartley Royd estate at Cornholme. The steep slopes and fast running streams of Hartley Royd are in distinct contrast to the flatness of the lands near Howden, but, at least, Todmorden was close by. Although the White Hart and the Golden Lion were now more frequently the scene of the governors' meetings than any place in Halifax, the governors' minutes show an interest and liveliness in their duties which were not previously evident. The exchange was well timed. The machinery of the industrial revolution needed power, and factory masters would pay for the streams. Lancashire coal-mines needed pit props, so Hartley and Kitson woods became profitable. Stone quarrying for the new turnpike roads and the new mills also increased over the next forty years. Several companies tried to develop lead mining but not, apparently, with much success. When the Leeds and Manchester railway came through the valley their powers of compulsory purchase were an annoyance, but the cash lump sums, and the improvements to fencing, walling and local roads on the estate were welcome windfalls.

Dealings with the masters of the industrial revolution, however, were not only increasingly time-consuming, but also required a particular expertise. In 1796 Lewis Alexander was retained as the first clerk and solicitor to the governors, and in the same year John Crossley became the governors' first land agent. By 1812, the modernisation of the management had been taken a step further by opening a bank account. Previously all income had been kept in the 'Great Chest,' as opposed to the 'Little Chest' which contained the leases and other documents belonging to the Charity, an arrangement stipulated in the 1731 statutes.

When the Rev. Robert Wilkinson was appointed Headmaster in 1789, the school would seem therefore to have been in as good a shape as at any time in its history. The records support the view of an active and thriving charity, although they have little to say of the school itself. In 1826 a visit by the Charity Commissioners adds a little more information. They recommended the appointment of an usher and an increase in the headmaster's salary. This apparently healthy situation was, however, short lived. In 1839 an Act of Parliament had made it possible for Endowed Schools, such as Heath, to broaden their curriculum, even to change their original statutes, to meet the requirements of the rapidly changing communities in which some existed. These reforms, naturally had to be approved by all with an interest in the endowments: governors, teachers, parish church and the Charity Commissioners. Heath did not respond to the opportunity and was attacked in 1840 by a group of local people. Posters appeared, headed 'Monopoly,' accusing the governors of misusing the funds of the charity, that is, not providing free education for the youth of the parish. The governors were moved by these activities to take legal advice from a QC. and finding that they were not acting illegally, did nothing. Almost certainly, in spirit, they were not fulfilling the intentions of the Charter, but then many other endowed schools were acting similarly. They were looking towards the middle classes to provide fee-paying boys and tending to ignore the working class boys for whom they were intended.

In 1832 severe competition sprang up from the new Wesleyan School at Park House. With a broader range of subjects and its Methodist background it certainly attracted pupils who might otherwise have gone to Heath.

Unfortunately as these challenges faced the school the headmaster was no longer equal to the fight. The Rev. Robert Wilkinson had been at the school for over forty years and in the seven years before he died in 1840 he was seldom in attendance.

It was at this period too when similar endowed schools throughout the country were becoming 'Public Schools,' for example Repton, Rugby, Oakham. They were responding to a variety of pressures and opportunities — a demand for more places from a growing number of successful

industrial entrepreneurs, easier and safer travelling provided by the new railways, and the inadequacy of many school incomes based often on rents and annuities whose value had not kept pace with the wealth of the country.

Edward Heap was elected to succeed Wilkinson but, on seeing the inadequate provision for boarders, resigned before he actually assumed the headship. Both his eventual successor, the Rev. J. Henry Gooch (1840–1860) and the Rev. Thomas Cox (1860–1883) had ambitions to make Heath into a public school; both were thwarted.

Gooch's headship coincided with a general economic depression locally, which saw the number of boys in school decline from 70 to 27 by 1859. The Charity's finances suffered quite badly through rent arrears and the discovery that many land leases for building, in Cornholme, were illegal. Costs in Chancery Court to remedy these illegalities were very high. Plans to sell some land in order to improve the school buildings were also postponed on the advice of their land agent since prices were depressed because of the cut-back in the cotton industry during the American Civil War.

Nevertheless the competition for the headmaster's post in 1860 was very healthy. There were over forty applicants, including, for example, the headmaster of Lancing College, Sussex. There can be little doubt that the successful headmaster, Cox, also hoped to make Heath a public school and the sale of land to enable the school's expansion to take place began in 1865. The area adjacent to the school, now known as Linden Road and Clifton Road, was sold at auction. The barrier to success this time was the 1869 Endowed Schools Act. Commissioners were appointed by the government to inspect endowed schools and, within areas of competing schools, to then rationalise the secondary education available. The Heath governors and Cox fought long, hard and at some cost to be exempted from the Act, by claiming to be a Church of England school. Two telegrams from the Houses of Parliament to the Heath governors, still in the school's possession, record the final defeat of their plans. The first, dated July 16, 1873 reads, 'Lord Salisbury last night gave notice of moving rejection of Heath School scheme on Friday night in the House of Lords.' The second telegram, on July 18th reads, 'Heath scheme confirmed by House of Lords ...'

Not only had Heath not escaped the net and future re-organisation, but it had certainly lost some local sympathy by wanting to avoid such re-organisation and by so strongly claiming to be a Church of England school.

The re-organisation scheme which was imposed on Heath in 1873 involved the appointment to the governing body of local councillors and a widening of the curriculum to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding commercial centre. The timing of this re-organisation prevented Heath from reaping any benefits.

First the governors decided to build an entirely new school, the one now fronting Free School Lane. Of the many designs submitted 'Pecksniff' was chosen. The architects were then revealed as Leeming and Leeming of Halifax. The eventual cost reached £10,000.

The new school had to be a success to fill the huge hole created in the Charity's finances. It was not so. Customers found alternative places either more cheaply in the Higher Elementary School recently built by the Borough and offering a more relevant syllabus than Heath, or, more prestigiously, at Bradford Grammar School, now more easily accessible through the building of the High Level railway. In 1883 only thirteen boys remained on the register. This plight caused acrid debate in both the council chamber and the columns of the *Courier*. The governors called in the Charity Commissioners, who since 1819 had replaced the Archbishop of York as the body responsible for the school's well-being. The Rev. Thomas Cox subsequently left the school with a substantial pension. The relationship between the headmaster and the governors had not been good for some years. Cox's parting gesture was to present the governors with a bill for furnishings

to the house and for trees and bushes bought for the school-house garden.

Cox had made many improvements about the school, especially by introducing a whole range of new subjects which had disappeared during Wilkinson's mastership — Geography, History, French, Art and even Drill and Book-Keeping were taught. Competition from other schools was, however, intense. As many as thirty private schools, from as far away as Blackpool, advertised in the *Courier* on a single day.

With Cox's retirement in July 1883, the school closed. Since 1879 the annual deficit had been over £300 per year and was increasing. A more secure financial future had to be assured before Heath School breathed again.

1887–1986

The records do not make it clear who in particular was responsible for the financial schemes which led to the re-opening of the school in April 1887, but the selection of the new headmaster was clearly to be crucial. A. W. Reith led the school over the next twenty one years with notable success. Advantage was taken of both government and county schemes to earn additional revenue. Heath became a government sponsored Science School and also received aid from the West Riding C.C. In 1897 both Hutt Farm and Northfieldgate Farm were sold. The cash gained was helpful, but it was more important to sell property which was likely to be a drain on resources as such marginal land became less and less profitable.

Tercentary celebrations were held in 1897 too. They commemorated the school's first acquisition of property and the striking of a corporate seal, not the granting of the charter. They were very professionally organised, according to contemporary accounts, even hiring theatrical scenery designers from Liverpool to provide the scenery for a week of bazaars and events held in the Drill Hall, Halifax.

Subscriptions and financial guarantees from Halifax families had been the basis of the 1887 re-opening. With more than £2000 raised in the Tercentary celebrations Heath's future brightened, (the headmaster's salary at the time was £400), although there were still only some 125 boys in a school designed for 250. However, the support must have been heartening. The school had ceased to be a church school in any direct sense and this may have encouraged more support. Halifax, too, was still growing and was prosperous. An increasing number of middle-class families certainly 'adopted' Heath over the next 60 or 70 years.

By 1900, the organisation and curriculum of the school were also relatively modern. Classics remained a strong department, and was now alongside an equally strong Science department. There were also between seven and ten masters who taught English, History, French, Geography, Mathematics and Art. Although Saturday morning school until 12.30 pm was operated, and was to last into the 1960s, gone were the 6 am starts of the eighteenth century and the Parish Church Services, which brought each school week to an end, at 1 pm on Saturday. These services had been held right up to the re-organisation of 1873. The statutes of 1727 had allowed the masters 20 days holiday each year and the boys 46 days. For the boys the holiday pattern until the mid nineteenth century had been to have 15 days at Easter, 10 days at Whitsuntide and 21 days at Christmas. Between 1840 and 1860, this holiday pattern was changed to a distribution similar to that of today. The beginning of the school day was also gradually adjusted from 6 am to 8 am, but a 5 pm end of session persisted from 1727 until the 20th century. There was some compensation for these long hours in that school closed at 11 am on Thursday.

Between 1905 and 1908 the sports field known as Kensington was also bought, levelled and provided with a secondhand pavilion. A committee of old boys and staff organised a series of

concerts and competitions to raise the necessary £125.

Archibald Reith was succeeded for eight years by William Edwards who then moved on to become the headmaster of Bradford Grammar School.

The school numbers gradually increased to 195, partly the consequence of the outstanding academic success being achieved at the school. 1915 was not an untypical year but it was the best whilst Edwards was headmaster. In the summer examinations for the Oxford Locals Examination Board there were 8,668 candidates from England and Wales. The vast majority of candidates came from the established Public Schools. In the first 30 most successful candidates there were 7 Heath boys. No other school had more than 2. In individual subjects Heath boys gained 1st place in Classics, 2nd in Political Economy and 12th in French. The number of boys winning scholarships to the universities was also rising significantly. By 1930 there was a well-established Heath Society at Oxford University which usually attracted 12 or so old boys to its functions.

O. R. A. Byrde succeeded as headmaster in 1916 and the whole ethos of the school under him was now distinctly middle-class. His speech-day reports are full of interest. Hard work, he tells the boys, is their duty in order to uphold the honour and dignity of the nation. He asks his audience in 1919 'to give thanks for the successful outcome of the war and the avoidance of revolution.' In 1921 he leads the audience in prayer to 'overcome the hostility and ill-discipline shown by the striking railway workers.' Byrde's example and teaching did have its critics but his success in academic training was even greater than Edward's. 1921, however, was to be the last year of independence. The playing field opposite the school, Conways, had been restored after its war-time conversion into allotments, tilled by the boys. Sir Edward Whitley had unveiled the fine war memorial to commemorate the 60 old boys who had died in the war and another school governor J. H. Whitley had become Speaker of the House of Commons. This exciting year drew to a close with the prospect of further considerable change. The country and the government were in financial difficulties. Public expenditure cuts eventually came in 1922 along with the government document '1259.' Compelled to choose between either continuing the government grant or the county council grant, as both it could no longer have, the Heath governors elected to develop closer ties with the local community. The loss of the government grant meant that Heath could no longer remain independent. Other financial support had to be found and after long negotiations Heath became a state grammar school in 1926, maintained by Halifax Borough Council. All its assets, property and income now passed to the Borough and although the Labour councillors wanted to see significant changes in the social intake of the school, except for the addition of a few more scholarship boys, nothing of the pre-1926 ethos was changed.

There are still many men in Halifax who recall their days at Heath in the inter-war years with considerable affection. Many of them delighted to see their sons and grandsons continuing the association. There was a long line of successful teachers. Many spent years at the school; others moved more quickly. As O. R. A. Byrde, who succeeded Edwards in 1916, once told his speech day audience, teachers will continue to leave as they are 'underrated and underpaid!' Two who achieved recognition much wider than the local stage were the Art teacher, Alex Comfort, and a temporary English teacher, Phyllis Bentley.

For nearly 30 years after the Second World War the school remained highly successful by its own high traditional standards. Academic excellence, measured by success in examinations and scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge, flourished. Heath rugby became equally renowned throughout the north of England and in Wales. Few years passed without there being a Heath presence in the Oxford or Cambridge University teams, or the Yorkshire and even England XV. The Music Society and the Dramatic Society especially also established reputations for exciting productions of a very high standard. Many of the teaching staff associated with these 30 years still offer their memories in profusion to the researcher. The headmasters responsible for maintaining

this successful tradition were D. J. D. Smith from 1935–1946 and W. R. Swale until reluctant retirement in 1971.

From the early 1970s a gradual change in the ethos and style becomes evident. Various reasons have been suggested for this, prominent among them a preference by parents for mixed rather than single-sex schools. There were also frequent local government plans to merge Heath with a variety of other schools to create a comprehensive school.

Uncertainty about the future and the changing nature of the school was finally brought to an end by the decision of the Secretary of State for Education, announced in the third week of December 1984. Heath School was to close in August 1985. Its pupils would then join the newly created Crossley Heath School. Plans to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the School in February 1985 had long been discussed by a committee of old boys and teachers. Just, but only just had the school reached its quatercentenary.

The last ten years of the school's life had by the changing nature of the intake created considerable challenges. Memories of former glories were still sufficiently fresh for there to be criticism and even resentment of the new style which the Heath School was adapting. It says much for the qualities of the last two headmasters, Albert Crosby (1971–1984) and J. T. Bunch that they persevered to provide an education relevant to the needs of all Heath boys.

The sources

The Reverend Thomas Cox, headmaster of Heath, published his history of the school in 1880. This is both interesting and factually informative, though there are some errors, and it also attempts some explanation of events. One particular idea repeatedly stated is that Heath would have been more successful had it been given the more generous and wholehearted local support which it deserved. The book may well have been written as a public relations exercise for the new school building was just being opened and a big increase in the number of pupils was needed.

In the 20th Century, there have been several good articles published by the Halifax Antiquarian Society and in the last three years the school itself, in the magazine, *The Heathen*, and in its quatercentenary brochure has produced histories of the school.

In the several histories of Halifax by Watson, Crabtree and Hanson there are usually small sections on Heath, but they should not be accepted as entirely accurate. Much more reliable detail is in the Charity Commission Report of 1826, the Endowed Schools Commission Reports of 1872 and the Bryce Commission Report of 1895. All these are available in the Brotherton Library of Leeds University.

The primary sources are the most rewarding. They are to be found in the Public Records Office, London, the Library of the Borthwick Institute, York, the Calderdale Archives and the largest collection is in the possession of Crossley Heath School. A thorough search of the Parish Church's records and the Halifax Court rolls of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might also be revealing.