

ST PAUL'S SCHOOL

Read by Alderman Sir Alexander Graham GBE

26 February 2001

There was almost certainly a school at St Paul's cathedral in the eighth century when papal injunctions were issued requiring every conventual church to have a school adjoining to it. This school may well have existed for some time already. King's Canterbury dates from A.D. 600 and St Peter's York from A.D. 627. It would have been unlikely that St Paul's in London was far behind. There is evidence that the school still existed at the time of Richard III and Thomas Becket, whose father, Gilbert Becket was a mercer, was educated at the school, which was described by William Fitzstephen in 1174 as the City School par excellence. It is almost certain this was not the school we know today and that John Colet, dean of St Paul's, founded a new school which used initially the buildings of the old school in St Paul's churchyard. John Colet was the eldest son and only surviving child of the 22 children of Sir Henry Colet, master of the Mercer's company four times and Lord Mayor of London twice, and Dame Christian daughter of Sir John Knevet, Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk. John was educated either at St Anthony's Threadneedle Street where his friend Thomas More was educated, later to become a mercer, or at St Thomas of Acon which was associated with the Mercers. He was at Oxford though there are doubts as to which college. He went on a grand tour and met Erasmus who like More became a great friend. Colet became dean of St Paul's in 1505. He was an English humanist and a reformer but no protestant before his time. He lived and died a staunch Roman Catholic. Thomas More associated the school with Christian reform rather than pagan renaissance.

Colet founded the new St Paul's school in 1509 as seen from the fact that there is extant an indenture dated 1st July 1509, whereby Colet and the Mercers' company grant to one William Gerge, his heirs and assigns, a certain manor in the county of Hertford on condition that the grantee should pay to the company for ever £8 for the use of the school. The first mention of the school in the acts of court of the Mercers' company occurs on 9th April 1510 where "it was shown by master Thomas Baldry, mercer that master Dr Colet, dean of St Paul's had desired him to show unto the company that he is disposed for the foundation of his school, to mortify certain lands which he holds that the company should have, if they would be bound to maintain the said school according to the foundation". A warranty by letters patent of the King was delivered on 6th June 1510 and this may be considered as the original charter of the school. It gave permission to the Mercers' company to acquire lands in mortmain to the annual value of £53 for the better support of one master and one or two ushers in the school which Colet had founded. The school was set up in the buildings of the old school which were conveyed by the chapter to a trust of which the trustees were three mercers who in turn conveyed them to Colet. Colet as dean could not directly convey them to Colet as a private person. Colet conveyed property to the Mercers in his various wills for the upkeep of the school, the final will being dated 1514. The company did not come into the lands until 1524, five years after his death. The ordinances of the school, which may have been largely taken from those of the Banbury school, were shown by Colet to the Mercers' company in 1512. The high master and chaplain were chosen by the Mercers' company, the first high master being William Lily, a contemporary of Colet, at a salary of a mark a week or annually £34 13s 4d. The school was to number 153 scholars making it probably the largest school in the kingdom. At that time Eton and Winchester had 75 scholars each. Uniquely, unlike every

other ancient and famous school it was not a school for the poor. To enter scholars had to be able to read and write English and Latin sufficiently, a skill of the middle classes, and also on entry had to pay a fee of 4d. In addition the scholar's family or friends had to provide him with books and wax candles not tallow. Wax cost more than eight times as much as tallow. Neither Colet nor Erasmus mention the figure of 153 scholars as reflecting the miraculous draft of fishes in the bible although this theory has embedded itself in the culture of the school. The school was set up with remarkable liberality for its day, the statutes state that "there shall be taught in the school children of all nations and countries indifferently to the number of 153 according to the number of seats in the school".

Why did Colet choose the Mercers to look after his school? You will have already noticed Mercer connections with the school were fundamental. It was the livery company of his father and he himself was a member so presumably he knew them well. In a letter to Justus Jonas, Erasmus wrote replying to a question, "He, that is John Colet, left the perpetual care and oversight of the estate and government of it - not to the clergy, not to the bishops, not to the chapter, nor to any great minister at court - but amongst married laymen, to the company of Mercers, men of probity and reputation". Colet himself when asked the reason for so committing this trust, answered to this effect, "that there was no absolute certainty in human affairs, but for his part he found less corruption in such a body of citizens than in any order or degree of mankind. Though this provision did not by any means free him from anxiety, he said that as human affairs then were, this course appeared to him the least hazardous".

And so we now have a St Paul's school well set up with a rich endowment, a sound governing body and a high master who was pre-eminent among sixteenth century school masters and highly thought of by his contemporaries. Erasmus again in reply to a question "who would be a school master that could live any other way?" said "teaching the young was a very creditable occupation and that a man could nowhere work with a better prospect of success than at St Paul's, in the heart of the city and at the centre of the nation".

Many of the early scholars were sons of mercers and many distinguished themselves. Probably the first pupil to do so was John Clement, a protégé of Thomas More, a scholar and president of the college of physicians. The first old Pauline Lord Mayor was a merchant tailor, Thomas Offley, sheriff in 1553 and Lord Mayor in 1556. The school has over the years produced many famous men but a curious fact is that no register of pupils has survived prior to 1748, a hundred years later than most schools. Winchester's register of scholars dates from 1393. It would be impossible to give a list of famous pupils who cover virtually every occupation but a tiny sample may be of interest: John Milton, Samuel Pepys, John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, Edmund Halley of the comet, bloody Judge Jeffries, Major John André shot as a spy in the American war of independence, Lord Truro a Lord Chancellor, G.K. Chesterton, Benjamin Jowett scholar and master of Balliol, Bernard Viscount Montgomery, Ernest Saunders, the only man to have recovered from Alzheimer's, Jonathan Miller and Lord Baker, former home secretary.

In its early days the school was very much in the forefront of politics and religion and at the reformation the school was in the forefront of the revival of learning in England. The school had the right to present addresses to visiting dignitaries in London. In 1522 one was addressed to Emperor Charles V and on the occasion for her coronation, Ann Boleyn, great

granddaughter of Geoffrey Boleyn, master mercer in 1453, Lord Mayor in 1457 was presented with a poem by the boys.

It was at this time that the high master Richard Jones was not liked by the Mercers and the Queen, Catherine Parr and Archbishop Cranmer all suggested replacements, an interesting reflection on the standing of the school. An oration was delivered by a Pauline Scholar at the coronation of Elizabeth I. Several High Masters in the early years came from Eton, like William Malym, high master in 1573-81. He came for a far higher salary but sadly was renowned mainly for beating boys. His successor was high master at the time of the first mention of Apposition in the accounts of the Mercers' company. Money was to be paid at the examination of the scholars at Candlemas. Originally Apposition was an examination of the high master, who stood to be sacked if his performance was considered to be below par. The ceremony continues to this day when four pupils present papers to an Apposer at Apposition. Equally the Apposition dinner, possibly the oldest of school dinners, continues at Mercers' hall.

The school continued to flourish during the late sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. Like St Paul's Cathedral, the school was destroyed in the great fire of London and rebuilt before Mercers' Hall, possibly by Inigo Jones at a cost of £6,000. Fortunately Colet's properties largely avoided the fire, the Mercers properties were severely damaged causing financial difficulties but the company was able to lend money to the Colet estate to rebuild the school. In the latter part of the seventeenth century the school was doing well with many famous sons and a full number of pupils. Moving to the eighteenth century things began to change; the number of pupils was down in common with most of the other great schools. At this time, 1745, there appears the possibility of the Mercers using the surplus funds in the Colet estate, then some £34,637, to ease their own financial problems, largely caused by a pension scheme for clergy who lived longer than expected. It should be pointed out that the Mercers continued to fulfill their statutory duty to the school. In 1748 George Thicknesse became High Master: he was the last Surmaster (deputy master) to be appointed High Master before the current incumbent Stephen Baldock. Within a year the number of pupils had increased to the statutory 153 and he drew up and maintained a register of pupils. He was followed as high master by Richard Roberts the longest serving head from 1769 - 1814. He was the last old Pauline to become head again before Stephen Baldock. It is interesting to note that of his 94 years, 72 were spent at St Paul's as boy, assistant master and high master.

Moving into the nineteenth century, it is worth noting that the first high master Lily's Latin grammar was still in use in 1840 after three and a half centuries. The next high master was Herbert Kynaston who was appointed at the age of 28. He served for 28 years: he inspired selected pupils but tended to ignore the rest. The mid-nineteenth century saw the setting up of the public schools Clarendon commission to inquire into the operation of the great schools of England. It produced its report in 1865. St Paul's was criticised as the only one of the nine schools examined which did not teach music or drawing. Equally the system of nomination of scholars by members of the court of the Mercers' company was criticised as being too exclusive and could lead to restricted admission. At this time the school was not at its peak, the noise in the churchyard and the lack of playing fields raised doubts about the future in the minds of the governors. Nevertheless, apposition was attended by members of

the royal family and several bishops. This was important for the boys as at St Paul's holidays are called remedies and apart from the normal school holidays only a member of the royal family, an archbishop or a bishop can ask for a remedy. In 1844 an address was presented to Queen Victoria by the school on her way to open the new Royal Exchange. (In fact it was actually presented to her at the next levee.

During Kynaston's time the surplus of the Colet estate was becoming an embarrassment. The Mercers appointed a committee in 1856 to consider the problem and after taking counsel's opinion it appeared that whilst they had the power to expand the number of boys they had no power, without an act of parliament, to move the school from St Paul's churchyard. A second committee was created which recommended the creation of a new school in the country supported and maintained out of the surplus of the Colet estate and that St Paul's should be expanded to 200 boys. By 1860 the situation was acute and Mercers took the advice of learned and discreet men, namely the bishops of London, Landaff and Manchester together with the chief Baron Pollock, the last three all Old Paulines. Their unanimous view was for the school to leave the City while retaining the character of a London school. This advice was followed by the court of assistants of the Mercers but the trigger was the Clarendon report which also so recommended. As a result of the royal commission the public schools bill was introduced in 1865 by which it was proposed to legislate for the nine great public schools. As the Mercers were in litigation about their right to the surplus of the Colet estate they succeeded in excluding St Paul's from the act, which became law in 1868 and which gave certain commissioners power to draw up constitutions for the eight schools. Ultimately it was decided Mercers were not entitled to the surplus and eventually this led to the founding of the St Paul's girls school in 1904.

Kynaston was followed in 1877 by Frederick William Walker, one of the great high masters; he came from being high master at Manchester Grammar School. He was responsible for carrying out the move from St Paul's churchyard to West Kensington and the school expanded to 600 boys and boarders were reintroduced. The new building was designed by old Pauline Alfred Waterhouse and cost £116,000. Walker was a benevolent despot, "I will have no democracy where I rule" he would say, but under his leadership the school became more successful with many more entries to universities. Walker's influence on the school still pervades to some extent today. He was, in Pauline history, a towering figure, innovative and far seeing, he encouraged sport as much as academic pursuits. At this time St Paul's reputation in athletics rested on mainly minor sports such as swimming, fives and boxing at which the school was unsurpassed. Walker's successor Albert Hillard was the last of the long stay high masters serving from 1905 - 1927. While 7 high masters had spanned 200 years, the next 7 lasted 60 years. Hillard was a sound safe pair of hands succeeded by John Bell whose main contribution was the introduction of the tutorial system, each boy having a tutor who was a master. This gave each boy and his family a close friend, ally and mediator on the staff and the system became central to the life of the modern school.

The next high master was Walter Oakshott, a fine headmaster who arrived in 1939 and saw the school through the Second World War when it was evacuated to Easthampstead Park near Crowthorne in Berkshire. In 1943 Colet court which since its founding had been the preparatory school for St Paul's was formally adopted by the Colet foundation. It had moved to Crowthorne during the war. The school at Hammersmith was damaged by bombing but

became the headquarters of 21st Army Group in 1942 and Montgomery, an old Pauline, took over the boardroom, the high master's office, as his own. The plans for the invasion of Europe were drawn up in the school. In 1945 the school had problems in getting its building back it was being used by other government agencies. Fortunately Lord Selborne, a mercer and a governor was minister for economic warfare. With his help, that of Montgomery, several old Pauline generals and MP's it was regained in August 1945 and school started on 1st October with the reduced number of 384 boys.

Now the time was right to think about the future of the school. It seemed inevitable that it would have to exist in the old buildings for 20 - 25 years. Oakshott had a broad vision for the future and was keen on the Fleming report which invited public schools to accept a substantial number of elementary school children; he also saw it helping to reduce the impact of a probable attack on independent education by a future labour government. Oakshott was followed in 1946 by Jimmy James, who was my first high master: a safe pair of hands and a very pleasant man. It was a curious coincidence that his brother was high master of Manchester Grammar School, later to become Lord James of Rusholme. James went on to Harrow in 1953 to be succeeded by Gilkes a competent head who unfortunately did not get on with governors, staff or boys (as well as his predecessor). Partly misunderstood he was keen to do his best for his staff whom he thought were not being as well treated as they deserved.

The post war era was very difficult for the school in getting the building straight and sadly the Colet estate had suffered badly. Much of it was in Stepney which was badly bombed and was eventually compulsory purchased. This period was not renowned for good relations between the school and the Mercers. The latter knew the seriousness of the financial situation but the school considered their attitude mean. An interesting episode in Gilkes times was raised by his enthusiasm for the Christian religion. The governors decided that 85% of the boys should come from Christian backgrounds. Inevitably this was turned round into a 15% Jewish quota leading to resignations including that of Isaiah Berlin from the old Pauline club. Gilkes in fact always considered the Jewish presence in the school a source of strength. By the end of his period as high master it was clear that the old buildings had outlived their usefulness and that something would have to be done. He was followed by Thomas Howarth, a protégé of Montgomery who was by then a governor. He had been Montgomery's military assistant during the latter part of the war. A revealing comment on Monty as a governor were his words to Howarth, "if you have any trouble with the other governors, ring me up and I'll bring up the heavy artillery". He was a strong and at times a ruthless high master: the first Cambridge man since 1769 and the first ever not to be a classicist. Early on he attacked and got rid of two very powerful institutions in the school, boxing and the CCF. His real mission was to implement the move of the school, upon which the governors had decided. The old buildings were unsatisfactory, expensive to maintain and the grounds were reduced by the widening of Talgarth road. It was a once only opportunity to acquire 43 acres beside the River Thames at Barnes. The buildings were designed by Bernard Fielden, and were of the clasp system, dictated by finance and the fact that the site had been the metropolitan water filter beds, not a strong foundation. The facilities were excellent but there was no assembly hall. The move was accomplished in 1968 relatively painlessly. Thankfully the school stayed essentially the same school that Colet founded. The move drew the various parts of the school together, the high master, the surmaster, the governors and the staff.

Howarth was followed by a shy and genuinely modest high master, Warwick Hele. A consolidator he valued the virtues of service, self discipline and duty. He was particularly concerned with changes to the curriculum and the assisted places scheme introduced by the government. He was followed in 1986 by canon Peter Pilkington a clever loquacious high churchman who started some new building following an appeal and was innovative in a variety of ways. He had a short time as high master going on to be chairman of the broadcasting complaints commission and a life peer. He was succeeded by the first surmaster and first old Pauline to be appointed high master since the eighteenth century, Stephen Baldock -- a classicist who is pragmatic and liked by the Mercers, the governors, staff, parents and boys. During his time the school has been consistently in the top three or four schools in the "A" level tables, it has won the Princess Elizabeth cup at Henley along with many other sporting achievements and has built a concert hall and refurbished the Walker library. It could be said that as we start the 21 century and approach its 500th anniversary the school is on a high. I am sure Colet would have approved.