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A History of St Peter's School circa 1557 – 1644 at the Union Terrace Site

An Insight Report

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early historians of York schools, such as AF Leach and Angelo Raine, have argued that St Peter's School has a continuous existence from the 7th century. Modern historians, such as David Palliser, take a much more sceptical view. However, there certainly was a Cathedral Grammar School that existed for most of the Middle Ages. At the Reformation, this appears to have ceased and the school was re-founded in 1557 at a new site, outside the City Walls, in a place known as The Horsefair. It was known as either 'the free shole in the horsefair' or 'the cathedral school of the church of St Peter of York'. The buildings were badly damaged during the Siege of York in 1644 and the school removed to a site within the City Walls in the Bedern.



Figure 1: A detail from John Speed's 1610 map of York, showing 'The free shole' (i.e. St Peter's) in the Horsefair, outside the northern Wall.

2. MEDIEVAL SCHOOLS

In late medieval York, there were two major grammar schools i.e. schools that taught Latin grammar and a curriculum in Latin that would enable boys to go on to a clerical or administrative career. One was run by St Leonard's Hospital and the other, a descendant of the famous School of York, once run by the great scholar Alcuin. We know in 1535 that some of the boys were boarding at St Mary's Abbey in a mansion called 'Conclave' or 'The Clee' near the outer gate of the monastery and attending the Minster Grammar School. 'Studentium arte grammatical in scola ecclesiae metropolitanae Ebor.' (Leach 1899, 31).

Also in 1535, in the will of the Reverend Robert Holme, he bequeathed

to the scolers of the Clee towards the reparations of the necessaire [i.e. the

lavatory] within the Clee xxd. Also I bequeath to the scolers for a pott with ale to drynk and say de profundis for my soule xiid. Also I wold desire the ussher to ask master Amler leve that he might come with the scolers to offer at my burial at the triniters iiiid. (Cross 1980, 19).

The scholars were only part of the foundation and there would have been fee-paying pupils as well. In 1540, St Mary's Abbey was surrendered to the king, as to where those boarding pupils went is not known.

3. REFORMATION

In Edward VI's reign, in addition to the monasteries, many chantries and hospitals were dissolved. The St Leonard's Hospital school was closed at this time. However, the Protestant reformers were not against education per se. In 1547, York Minster statutes read:

In every Cathedrall Church wher no free grammer scole is foundid all-redie within the cloase, nor haithe ony suche scole ner unto hit adjoining, foundid by ony person, the King's majesty willethe that of the common lands and renewes of the church shall be ordeyned, kept & maynteaned perpetually a free grammer scole. (York Cathedral Statutes (YCS 1900, 62).

On the 10th January of that year, Archbishop Robert Holgate founded a grammar school in the Close, by St John del Pyke in Ogleforth. Five years later, in his injunctions, Archbishop Holgate decreed '...We will and command that the Deacons, not applienge themselves to the Gramer Scole daylie... be expulsed, and other called to ther rowne and office.' (YCS 1900, 74-5). Raine and Leach have argued that the 'Gramer Scole' means the older Minster school was still functioning but others argue it is far likelier to be Holgate's own school.

4. REFOUNDATION

In 1553, the accession of Mary I meant that England's official religion reverted to Catholicism. The Catholics also had a concern for education. Cardinal Pole, the new Archbishop of Canterbury wrote that:

In every Cathedral church, a certain number of boys, a kind of seminary... shall be maintained and taught free... Other boys of the same city and diocese may

be taught grammar and letters with them, provided they be of gentle birth (honesti) and use the same clothing and mode of life. (Leach 1899, xxxi).

In 1557, the Dean and Chapter wrote:

To found a grammar school for education and instruction of a certain number of scholars and the maintenance of a schoolmaster... to the end that at the Cathedral church and elsewhere, there may be a number of ministers, now long decreasing, and Divine Worship, nearly overthrown in the time past of pernicious schism, maybe more decently set forth. (Leach 1899, 42).

The Dean and Chapter clearly saw a Latin education in terms of providing a revived Catholic priesthood that they 'may be able to ward off and put to flight the ravening wolves, the devilish men with ill understanding of the Catholic faith from the sheepfolds committed to them.' (Leach 1899, 71).

The site chosen for the re-founded school was in the Horsefair, at the end of Gillygate, a site now occupied by the Union Terrace car park. It was the site of a number of religious buildings:

Saint Annes Chappell neighe the Hospitall of our Ladye and al-mose [alms] house of St Anthonye in the Horsefaire besyde the walles of the city of Yorke.' (Raine 1955, 275). St Mary's hospital (founded 1330) had been closed during the Edwardian Reformation and the buildings were 'now so spoiled and ruiness in walls, roof and stonework that not easily can it be repaired.' (Leach 1899, xxxiv, 56). St Mary's had been mainly funded from the rents of the Stillingfleet rectory and that funding was transferred to the school. The patrons of the hospital were allowed to appoint 8 scholars out of 50. Thus the school gained new premises and endowments with the same number of scholars as were lost through the surrender of St Mary's Abbey and a new governing authority. There was also appointed "One well learned scole maister and one sufficient usher." (Leach 1899, 63).

5. SCHOOLMASTERS

We do not know who the first headmaster was, the first master who we have knowledge of was called John Fletcher. He attended St John's College, Cambridge but did not take a degree. He taught in a school in Bishophill and in 1564 was made headmaster of Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School, despite objections. Shortly after, he became headmaster of the

free school in the Horsefair but was deprived of that position in 1575. In 1558, the accession of Elizabeth meant that the official religion was Protestantism. In 1569, the Catholic rebellion of the Northern Earls failed and prompted a repressive suppression not only of political activity but also popular culture such as the Corpus Christi plays. Fletcher was a Catholic, who after his removal spent nearly twenty years imprisoned in York, Hull and Ripon for recusancy (one who refused to conform to the official religion). The Free School soon achieved a good reputation for the soundness of its education and attracted boys from the county as well as the city. In 1589, Archbishop John Piers wrote that the school had 'Two hundred scholars or thereabouts' and that it was 'The only good schole in this great Cytie.' (Drysdale 2007, 16). However, it also had the character of an establishment that was far too favourable to Catholicism. John Pullen, a former rector of Mary Bishophill Junior was appointed in 1575. He was required to subscribe to the 1562 Synod order that required obedience to the Queen and renunciation of all foreign powers, i.e. including the Pope. When he retired in 1590/1, it may have been to join a religious order. Many of his pupils became Catholics. The most famous were four members of the Gunpowder Plot.

6. NOTABLE PUPILS

Guy Fawkes of Stonegate attended the school in the company of John and Christopher Wright of Plowland Hall near Patrington (so the school had both day boys and boarders.) Fawkes, whose father died in 1578/9, appears to have converted to Catholicism after his widowed mother remarried Dionis (Denis) Bainbridge of Scotten, a residence of Thomas Percy another conspirator who married the Wrights' sister. Oswald Tessimond, was also a member of the school and of the Plot, he escaped to exile. Fawkes was executed and the Wrights were killed while being captured. Other notable Catholic former pupils of this period include the Jesuit William Wright, professor of geography in Austria; Miles Dawson, who returned to the school as usher before becoming a seminary priest; and possibly the Jesuit Robert Middleton, executed in Lancaster in 1601 and Edward Oldcorne, of the English College in Rome, executed in Worcester in 1606. Perhaps aware of this culture of crypto-Catholicism, the Dean and Chapter appointed Pullen's successor 'For as long as he shall behave himself.' (Raine 1926, 199). In 1597/6, they appointed William Thomas MA as headmaster, he was one of the Chapter himself as prebendary of Bilton.

Some former pupils were Protestants, including Thomas Moreton, Bishop of Durham for 44 years. Later notables included Sir Thomas Herbert, who attended Charles I on the scaffold and the Hebrew scholar, Thomas Calvert who became one of the four ministers at York Minster in the Interregnum.

7. SCHOOL LIFE

What was the education like at the school? There were only two masters; an usher to teach the junior forms and the master to teach the senior. All forms would probably have been taught in the same room, possibly with the assistance of senior boys. St Peter's statutes do not survive but its Protestant counter-part Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School's foundation deed does. It says the master should have 'understanding in the Hebrew, Greek and Latin tongues.' (Dickens 1955, 22). That marks it out as a Reformation school, teaching the original tongues of the Bible rather than the use of the Latin vulgate translation. The master and the usher are ordered to teach written Latin and are excused from having to teach any scholar who cannot already read. Between 23rd March and the 29th September, school is to begin at 6:30 to continue until 11, recommence at 1 and close at 6. For the remainder of the year it ran, with a similar break for dinner, from 7 until 5. On Sunday in the Minster or parish church, the master shall 'cause his said scholars (except such that shall sing in the choir) two and two of them devoutly to say their matins together and seven psalms or to be reading of scriptures in the said church.' (Dickens 1955, 22-3). Archbishop Edmund Grindal's injunctions of 1571 say that the schoolmaster should be of good and sincere religion, should use no vain books and shall not teach anything contrary to the order of religion now set forth by public authority. He should 'teache his schollers the catechisme in latine lateleye sett further and such sentences of Scripture (besydes prophane chaste authours) as shalbe moste mete...' (Raine 1926, 76). 'Profane, chaste authors' mean pagan i.e. Classical authors who teach morality but who are not Christian. Such authors used in schools at this time include Latin authors such as Terence, Ovid, Cicero and Cato, and Greek writers like Demosthenes and Aesop.

Apart from the long hours of Classical and Christian instruction, we know that the boys performed plays or orations. In the Minster Chamberlains' accounts of 1573, there is a payment of 30 shillings to Mr Fletcher and his scholars and in 1576, 20 shillings was 'given to the scollers of the Horsfaire players.' While in 1584 the city paid the sum of 40 shillings 'geven in Reward to Iohn pullen skollers which played in the common hall in Ianuary.' (Johnston 1979, 382-418). A Jew's harp (SF825) was found on the site during excavations, this may have been part of the boys' leisure activities. On the 13th February 1566, Christopher Dobson, Oswald Atkinson and other boys were found to 'have plaid at foote ball within the cathedral church of Yorke.' (Raine 1926, 85). The 13th was unlucky for Atkinson because he was placed in the stocks, and both given six strokes of the birch. Discipline at the school was often harsh and painful, with only two masters for between a hundred and two hundred boys, crowd control may well have been the uppermost issue. The site also yielded shoe buckles and lace tag ends, which may have come from the clothing of the boys and masters. A Pitkin pot (SF1008) was also recovered which may have been in use at the school. (Rogers 2016, 2).

8. CIVIL WAR

From 1614 to 1638, the headmaster was the Reverend John Johnson MA who was also vicar of St Martin's Coney Street. He edited Pre-Conquest Latin texts in his leisure time. He was succeeded by the Reverend Christopher Wallis of St John's, Cambridge who had previously been a teacher in Bridlington. He was to be the last headmaster of the school on the Horsefair site. In 1644, during the Civil War, the Siege of York occurred for 10 weeks. The city surrendered to the Parliamentarians after the defeat at Marston Moor. The surrounding suburban area had been under the rule of the besieging Parliamentary Army, commanded by the Earl of Manchester. Various batteries were set up which bombarded the city and appear to have badly damaged the school as well. Five lead alloy musket balls were recovered from the site during excavations. (SFs 34, 47, 95, 94, 414, 530) Some of the boys seem to have taken the dangers lightly. We hear of Christopher Wandesford 'riding out of the towne to see the fight.' (Raine 1926, 96). His brother George, newly returned from France, met him going 'towards the [Marston] moore with other boys, which was goeing in their simplicity to see the bataile.' George dissuaded him and took him back to their home at Kirklington 'pursued by a party of horse of Scotts.' (Wenham 1970, 117).

In 1648, a schoolboy Henry Dodwell was described as being 'in grammar learning at the free school situate in Bederew (Bedern) within the City of York.' (Raine 1926, 98). A year later when the Dean and Chapter was abolished, the school's revenue was maintained. After the Restoration, Archbishop Sterne's injunctions state 'that the schoolhouse in the Horse Fair demolished in the late warre be re-edified.' (Wenham 1970, 111). However, this was not done and the school remained in the Bedern. In 1660, the Reverend William Langley MA of Pembroke College, Oxford was appointed headmaster. Although the school was in the Bedern, it was still called 'the Free School of the Horse Fair.' In later years, the school moved from the Bedern to St Andrew's church, then to a building in the Close, now occupied by the Minster School. In 1844, it moved to its present site in Clifton, ironically, on the site of land once owned by Guy Fawkes.

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