



THE LAST THIRTY YEARS OF PERINS AS A GRAMMAR SCHOOL

researched by

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In our last article we left Perins Free School, after 200 years of useful service to the district, well and truly in the doldrums with only six pupils. This decay was not sudden for in 1894 the Town Trustees had realized that the school might have to close and were considering letting the school-room to the Parish and the house as a private residence.

In 1896 the County Council submitted a plan to the Town Trustees to save the school. In essence this meant future financial support and control by the County Council with immediate cash for a much needed face-lift to bring it up to Board of Education requirements as a Grammar School. Because of the scarcity of suitable boys in the locality the proposals included coeducation — something revolutionary in the field of secondary education at the time and never before attempted in Hampshire.

It took three years of argument for the various bodies concerned in this scheme to agree the details so that it was not until July, 1900 that Perins School closed with six pupils on roll and re-opened in September with 41 boys and girls as Perins Grammar School. The same headmaster, Mr. Daphne, was in charge with a newly appointed mistress, Miss Shorts, for the girls. In his report for 1900-01, the Director of Technical Education spoke favourably of the new school, "the star..... has surpassed all expectations". Co-education was proving a success!

However, even as the report was published, strange things were happening at the school. Exactly what took place cannot be determined but in September, 1901, the governors were advertising for a new headmaster, the fifty eight pupils were locked out of the school and were having their lessons in the Town Hall (now the Community Centre) under a visiting teacher 'from the Director's Office', and legal action was being taken to eject Mr. Daphne.

Mr. F.C. Britten, second master of Peter Symonds School in Winchester, was appointed and took up his duties at once as the former headmaster faded from the scene. Two months later a most successful school concert and prize giving were reported. Perins was on an even keel again. Mr. Britten was succeeded in 1903 by Mr. A.M. Stewart whose ten years as headmaster are remembered with affection for he was young and energetic and under him the school organized Town Hall concerts and sports days with displays of military drill. It was a great loss that he died at the early age of forty, for under him the general conduct and tone of the school was receiving favourable comment from H. M. Inspectors who approved an excellent system of internal discipline based on the military plan'.

However, with fifty eight pupils of both sexes the little house at the bottom of West Street was bursting at the seams. A comprehensive review of secondary education in Hampshire published in 1905 found the existing school building quaint but inadequate' and the headmaster's residence 'small with pump water and no bathroom'. The review stressed the need for a much increased and more highly qualified staff and required a new site to be found for a school of 100 pupils with a headmaster's house. The cost of this new school should not exceed £4,000 as 'the permanent interests of the school would be better served by first rate teaching in simple buildings rather than the reverse'; whatever that may mean !

And what about the teaching? It seems almost incredible to read that, apart from visiting instructors for Needlework and Woodwork, a staff of Headmaster, senior mistress and two assistants of slender qualifications (as the report delicately puts it) were coping with English, French, Latin, Maths, Science, History, Geography, Music and Drill with only two main classrooms for everybody. And the pupils were surviving ! In fact in 1906, all those who entered for Oxford Local Examinations passed, four with honours and five with first class passes.

It was at this vital moment in the development of the school that Mr. Walford of Arlebury Park offered the governors a five acre site on Pound Hill, provided that a new school was built on it within three years.

The way was now clear for the Director of Education to issue a proposal for a school on the new site to house 100 pupils and to cost no more than £3,500. By the end of 1906, the governors had submitted plans, which were immediately rejected on the grounds that water closets were too expensive and the plans must be modified and earth closets and peat moss urinals substituted.

The next hurdle was that of finance. It was proposed that the Education Authority borrow £4,000 and recoup £2,000 from the ratepayers of the parishes of the Alresford Union; nineteen of them. Letters of protest poured in and the ratepayers of Ropley petitioned the Board of Education. It had been worth protesting; the levy was reduced to £1,000 but the Board issued a sharp note to the effect that it would cease to recognise Perins as a grammar school unless considerable progress had been made by July.

However, events move slowly in Alresford and it was another eighteen months before progress was made. There was prolonged bickering between County Council and Governors as to the responsibility for work contracts and specifications. Finally, with the County Council winning the argument over the earth or water closets, the Finance committee advanced £3,879 in September 1908. Once given the go-ahead the builders wasted no time and the school was completed in just over a year. Moreover, the final bill was only £3,671.10.8 — a saving of some £200. Could they have had the water closets after all?

And so in January, 1910, there was a grand opening ceremony which probably included a display of Drill, a subject which deserves a special mention. Up to the age of 10 all drilled with dumbbells but for the older pupils, girls as well as boys, drill meant exercising with wooden rifles. Every year on Sports Day, the pupils put on a public display of marching and weapon drill under the eye of a local colonel and year after year we find the girls' company getting special praise for their 'precision and military bearing'. However in 1914, it was considered that such drill was unsuitable for girls and that Swedish drill would be more fitting and graceful.

The actual act of declaring the school open was performed by the Earl of Northbrook (described in great detail in the Hampshire Chronicle of Jan 29th, 1910) and it is interesting to note that one of those who spoke was W.H. Hunt, the architect of several of Alresford's public buildings and himself a pupil at Perins in 1842.

For 212 years the school had occupied a corner site at the bottom of West Street. Sentiment apart, there can have been few regrets at leaving the old building. Instead of two rooms for all purposes, there were now seven classrooms, a central hall and studies for the Headmaster and staff, plus a spacious playing field. In 1939 that same building was to house over 300 children and even today (1979) 270 pupils are taught there in comfort, so there was plenty of room for the original 63. The staff was increased to six

full time, plus part-time Music and Art teachers, giving a pupil/teacher ratio of about ten to one; something unheard of in most schools. Although today 'big is beautiful' for economic and other more arguable reasons, there is no doubt that Perins owed much of its success to its high staffing ratio, its overall smallness and its line of dedicated headmasters and teachers.

A handsome headmaster's house followed within two years and the old school, now called Perin House, was adapted as a hostel for the girl boarders, who moved in 1915 from their old quarters in Beresford House with their indomitable and well-loved matron, Miss A.H. Nichols or 'old Nick', as she was known to generations of Alresford children. Margaret Blyth, one of the first boarders, remembers this 'little plump lady in grey silk' as a tartar who appreciated the value of good food for growing children and saw that her boarders got it.

In the 1920s the school achieved considerable success in tennis, mainly due to two sisters, Kathleen and Marjorie Peploe, who were outstanding players. On one occasion they lost only one game in the County Tennis Tournament that was held annually at Winchester and for several successive years the school was awarded the County Trophy for Tennis.

A small hostel for boys was started at Mitford House in Broad Street and the school settled down to steady expansion, good reports from inspectors and continued academic and sporting successes.

The untimely death of Mr. Stewart in 1913 resulted in the appointment of Mr. R.H. Cocks, an extremely able headmaster who saw the school rise above 100 in 1916 and to 118 in 1919. If all that mattered about schools was teaching the children, Perins could have gone from strength to strength; in fact it reached a peak of 146 in 1922 under Mr. F.P.C. Walker. But these additional numbers needed extra accommodation, which meant greater expense. Extensions had to be made to the girls hostel and St. Joans, on the opposite corner of West Street, was purchased for £850 for an assistant master who 'would board boys at his own financial risk'. In 1924 the master, Mr. Gallimore, took up residence with six boys.

The administrative and financial tale of this period, when teaching was so successful, is not a happy one. The governors were often short of money and their relationship with the Education committee was often strained. In 1914, they had been told to get the school repainted at once but, having a bank overdraft, couldn't afford it. Nor could they afford the architect's fee for the development of St. Joans nor the cost of the necessary surrounding fence. Grudgingly, they were given a grant of £250 but warned that the Education committee's patience was exhausted.

The governors at this time seem to have been extremely uncooperative, and unwittingly they were probably sowing the seeds of the eventual dissolution of Perins as a Grammar School. In 1916 the Education committee asked the governors to loan cookery and woodwork rooms to the local council school on Wednesday afternoons, when they were not in use. The governors refused. They would lend the rooms for adult education but would not admit pupils from the elementary school. (One wonders what Henry Perin who endowed his school 'for poor men's sons' would have thought of this decision!) The Education Committee retaliated by hiring a room in the town and reducing Perin's block grant by £25 to pay for it.

In 1918 the unrepentant governors were seeking money in order to renovate the school and house and in 1919 they requested a 60% salary rise for the headmaster. This latter was refused on the grounds that the size of the school did not warrant such an increase and three months later Mr. Cocks resigned, moving to a larger school in London.

By 1923 all secondary schools in the county, except Perins, had transferred their finances to the care of the County Treasurer. Perins continued its hand-to-mouth existence until 1926, when the County Auditor was asked to check the books. He found that school fees, due in advance, were sometimes as much as a year in arrears, and recommended that the County Treasurer take charge of all money matters.

The long downward slide which was to affect far greater British institutions than Perins had started. In 1923, the Cadet Corps was failing due to lack of Government support and the girls' hostel numbers were

dropping 'due to the increasing number of day schools'. In 1924, when Mr. G.T. McKay was appointed as headmaster, the education economy known as Geddes Axe cost the school one member of the staff, while the actual school numbers were failing because of higher scholarship standards and the economic decline of the country.

All of which was very bad luck for Mr. McKay who is well remembered by many ex-pupils still living in the district. He was a controversial figure, energetic, outspoken, a strict disciplinarian and rather aloof from both staff and pupils. In his first address to parents on Speech Day, he made it clear that there would be many changes. He deplored the fact that the school 'ceased to exist nightly at 4.15 p.m.' and formed the Perinean Association, bringing in speakers and organizing slide and cinema shows in the evenings. He considered it wrong that pupils had to cycle up to five miles in all weathers to attend classes and made a strong plea for more boarding grants. He spoke out strongly against University regulations that compelled him to teach pure chemistry when rural Perins was made for natural science. He instituted hot dinners for day pupils at a very economic price; a most popular move. An Old Perinean Association was formed and survived until the school closed. Every Prize Giving Day he spoke optimistically of the school's affairs but always had to conclude with the depressing fact that numbers had dropped another ten per cent.

This man of energy and vision, whose ideas were ahead of his time in education, has been criticized rather harshly in another publication as being primarily responsible for the end of Perins Grammar School but it is clear that its fate had been sealed before he came on the scene. Back in 1921, as an aftermath of a financially crippling war, the Education committee was instructed to 'effect a considerable reduction in expenditure' and in 1923 it was decided to raise the pupil/teacher ratio to 25 to 1. But at Perins with its intransigent and independent governors the ratio was never higher than 12 to 1. It was further considered preferable to have fewer and larger central schools rather than the existing scattering of small ones. In 1927 it was announced that the future policy of the county was to have single sex grammar schools. These were body blows to Perins.

Apart from Education committee decisions, the state of the country as a whole militated against the school. The lowered birthrate of the war years hit Perins in 1928; rural areas such as the Alresford district were in a depressed state; families moved into the cities taking potential pupils with them; and fees increased sharply. By 1928 the boarding hostels had closed through lack of support and although numbers had dwindled to 75 by 1930 the school still had six full-time and other visiting teachers.

Stringent economies were needed in education and Perins was a clear target. The school was unable to function efficiently with fewer teachers and it needed twice as many pupils to justify its continuation.

News of impending closure became public in late 1931 and opposition built up quickly. The Education Committee was swamped with petitions and letters but the arguments for closure were too strong. Perins was the most expensive school in the county. Numbers had declined steadily since 1922. Currently there were only five pupils over the age of sixteen and the number was not likely to increase. It became apparent that closure had been discussed since 1927 and only sentiment for such an old school had delayed a decision. But sentiment could not over-ride hard facts for ever and closure was approved by eleven votes to four. The Board of Education was petitioned but refused to intervene. The battle continued in the local press with reasoned, emotional and accusatory letters. It was all too late. The County Council approved the decision of the Education committee on 9th May 1932.

In early July 1932 pupils were given notice of closure at the end of the term. 25 were to transfer to Peter Symmonds, 6 to Eggars and 19 to the County High School, Winchester. The Old Perineans Association had its final gathering on July 9th and the school closed on the 27th with a simple ceremony at which presentations were made and, as the school gathered round the flagstaff, Mr. Lumb, the school caretaker in his uniform and medals hauled down the flag. Perins had closed after two hundred and thirty four years. It had been founded as 'a free school for educating nineteen poor men's sons' and had moved a long way from that over the years. Today we have Perins Comprehensive School on a hugely developed

site handling over 800 pupils and still expanding, while the Henry Perins Educational Trust disburses over £200 annually for the benefit of the school and its ex-pupils.

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