



Cranbrook School History

Cranbrook was one of the small number of Kent grammar schools founded in the Tudor period.

In 1518, John Blubery (a local man who acquired considerable wealth as Yeoman to the King's Armoury under Henry VIII) bequeathed house and lands *'to found a frescole house for all the poure children of Cranbroke'* - but only if his pregnant daughter failed to produce a boy. She did fail, and the limited evidence indicates that some sort of a grammar school was in existence by the mid-16th century and perhaps earlier.

Survival was threatened, however, by the attempts of Simon Lynche, MP, son of Blubery's executor, to acquire the property which had been bequeathed. The parish contested his efforts with a surprising degree of success and finally, following Queen Elizabeth's visit to the important cloth manufacturing town of Cranbrook in 1573, a royal charter, still in the school's possession, firmly established the 'free and perpetual grammar school' - meaning Latin and Greek grammar, of course. The first Governors are named in the charter: they included the vicar (and each subsequent vicar of Cranbrook has been a Governor), the two leading local gentlemen and ten wealthy Cranbrook clothiers.

For some three centuries, the Master of the little grammar school, living and teaching in what we take to be Blubery's house, drew his modest salary, paid by the Governors from sale of timber and other produce of the lands bequeathed. Though the will had referred to 'all the poure children', grammar schools generally took in the sons of such as yeoman farmers, town professionals and tradespeople who would in Cranbrook's case include clothiers. We know regrettably little about either the teaching or even the names of pupils at Cranbrook before the 19th century, although the Governors' minute books survive from 1623.

The school's late 18th century reputation seems to have been good, but by Napoleonic times many Cranbrook townsmen were protesting strongly, though with little success, against the old grammar school curriculum, dominated by Latin teaching. The first half of the 19th century was a dire period for the school, during parts of which no local boys at all attended. The Master nonetheless continued to enjoy his endowment income and use of the school house for a number of unfortunate boarder boys.

Happily, two very able clerics, John Allan (now 'Headmaster', 1851-66) and Charles Crowden (1866-88), greatly raised standards and numbers. Allan was an excellent townsman who attracted respectable numbers of local boys again, partly by broadening the curriculum. Crowden was the more dynamic and ambitious: somewhat in the mould of Rugby's Dr Arnold, he aimed to make his pupils Christian Gentlemen, and, aided by Victorian railways, he built up the boarding side of the school extraordinarily fast. The present Big School and School Lodge, notable features of Cranbrook's conservation area, owe their construction to his drive and energy.

Individual charismatic headmasters attracted pupils in the 19th century. When Crowden chose to move to Eastbourne in 1888, over half the boarders, to say nothing of his Vicemaster and some other staff, went with him. There had always been something of the miraculous about the school's recent expansion in the absence of a substantial capital base, and shrinkage now followed, until actual survival was in question in the very early 20th century. Some devoted Governors, and some less than enthusiastic cooperation with the Kent education authorities, who obtained a measure of control, saved it.

By the 1920s there were signs of revival. But the fame and popularity subsequently enjoyed dates mainly from the appointment of Charles Russell Scott as Headmaster in 1929. He managed to combine Crowden's old Public School aspirations with a genuinely warm relationship with the Kent education authority and a personal concern for and sympathy with the local grammar school boys. He was Headmaster until 1961.

Since that date, the school's biggest change has been that to coeducation and 13+ entry in the early 1970s, together with more than doubling of size. The combination of serious academic teaching of local pupils, with the additional stimulus, and extra facilities, which a substantial boarding section brings, has made the school's name very familiar in the numerous press articles about 'best state schools'.

Although its precise constitutional status has varied - somewhat bewilderingly - as shifts in government policy have caused one designation to replace another, it has for the past 30 years been a coeducational grammar school, within the Kent County Council system of education. Its substantial boarder element, including many from outside Kent, like the local students, pay no tuition fees, but pay for their boarding arrangements.