

This tablet was unveiled by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother on the 28th May 1976. It commemorates the Centenary of the decision by The Grocers' Company to divide Laxton Grammar School and establish Oundle School.



THE REV. H. ST. JOHN READE

A is for ARRIVAL

The arrival of the Rev. Henry St. John Reade as headmaster of the school at Oundle endowed in 1556 under the terms of Sir William Laxton's will marks the emergence of Oundle School in two ways; there was a division of the existing grammar school into two separate schools, and the adopting for one of these schools of customs which had become common to the existing boarding public schools of Victorian England.

In 1875 the Grocers' Company had reached a decision about the future of the school at Oundle by a margin of one vote. It was to become a Classical School of the First Grade (i.e. catering for boys up to University entrance level in classics and mathematics) and not a Modern School of the First Grade (with an emphasis on science and modern languages), which would necessarily be larger and more costly. This decision, not reversed till the appointment of Sanderson in 1892, conditioned the choice of the first three headmasters and the emphasis of the school's early academic development. When looking for a new headmaster to carry through this raising of the school's academic standard, the

Grocers' Company therefore decided that in addition to offering a much increased salary to the classicist they appointed he should be a 'gentleman who has taken high University honours and had good experience in teaching boys in large schools. He should possess energy and a good presence and address, and be between 35 and 45 years of age. We do not consider it absolutely essential that he should be married or in Holy Orders: but in the case of candidates of equal merit, we recommend preference being given to a married clergyman.'

Reade, chosen out of an initial 230 candidates, completely fitted this description: he came of a gentry family of Oxfordshire, had been educated at Tonbridge and Oxford, where he gained a first in Honour Moderations and a second in Greats and captained the University cricket XI of 1862, was a clergyman, married, an ex-housemaster of Haileybury, and had been headmaster of Beccles and of the Godolphin School— and as to his energy, those at the school in 1876 soon discovered its almost fearsome extent.



OUNDLE GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

"OPEN TO ALL WHO SHALL COME TO THE SCHOOL HOUSE TO LEARN."

In consequence of the liberality of the GROCERS' COMPANY, the charges of this School are considerably reduced, and the course of education enlarged.

In addition to Greek and Latin, the Scholars are instructed in English Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Mathematics, Land Surveying, History, Geography, and the French Language; and in lieu of 6 Guineas per Annum, the yearly sum of £2 only is payable by the Parents or Friends of the Scholars.

The hours of attendance are from 9 to 12 in the morning, and from 2 to 5 in the afternoon; thus enabling Parents, who live in the neighbourhood of Oundle, to take advantage of the School; and those who reside at a greater distance may do the same, by boarding and lodging their children in the town.

The prospectus for the school when Reade took over in 1876

There is an Exhibition every year to Oxford or Cambridge of £50 per Annum, tenable for three years, and open to all Scholars under 19 years of age, and of 3 years standing in the School.

The Head Master receives 20 Boarders in his house.

Oundle is a quiet, healthy town, 78 miles from London, and within a mile of the London and North Western Railway.

For further particulars apply to the

REV. DR. STANSBURY,
Head Master.

Even before he arrived it seems that Reade had felt the necessity for a splitting of the existing school into two, on grounds that no doubt today would be dismissed by educational theorists as snobbish and elitist, and after some discussion with the Grocers' Company he outlined his proposals at a meeting at the Talbot on 13th July, 1876—that there should be a First Grade Classical School, catering for the sons of professional and middle-class parents with a predominantly boarding element, and a Second Grade Modern School for the sons of farmers and tradesmen to give an elementary education up to sixteen, mainly for day boys. This creation of a middle-class school for the area received unanimous approval at the meeting, and by September 1876 there were two schools at Oundle, called by Reade the Laxton Modern School and the Oundle School. At once, however, a misunderstanding arose; Reade saw the Oundle School as the continuation of the original grammar school foundation, and the Laxton Modern School as the new creation, while the Grocers' Company regarded the Oundle School as their own new school, and the other as the continuation. This second view prevailed, and was finally formalised in 1883 by the official adopting of the names of Oundle School, maintained by the Company in new buildings, and Sir William Laxton's Grammar School, to receive the original Laxton endowment, and using the School built on the site of the old Guildhouse, which it still occupies.

From this original confusion came both the building-up by Reade of Oundle School into

something akin to contemporary public schools, and also finally his resignation, forced by the Grocers' Company, who had increasingly seen themselves as heavily financing Reade's ambitions, while the not inconsiderable profits from the boarding fees went to him and his housemasters.

Certainly from the beginning Reade saw Oundle as rivalling Thring's creation at Uppingham, and set about making what looks now like an instant public school. He had not the brashness of the headmaster of another and much later foundation who was reputed to have posted a notice in the first year of his newly-built school beginning 'As from to-day the following are School Traditions', but Reade's sudden realisation that no trophy existed for the house-matches he had just instituted, and the seizing of his wife's silver card-tray and presenting of it to the winning house under the instantly-coined name of the 'Detur Digniori Salver' has the same motive behind it: Oundle must have in addition to academic success all the trappings of the public school.

By the end of 1876 Oundle was supplied with a sixth form, a prefectorial system, a House system with differentiating colours (School House red and black, Dryden light and dark blue, Laxton blue and black and the Oppidans (dayboys) purple and white), compulsory games (needing the set-up of three half-days a week, with early school before breakfast to compensate for lost teaching times—the first remaining to this day, the second happily long abandoned), the replacing of soccer by rugby, games fixtures

1) The head master (of The Free Grammar School
at Beccles founded by Sir William Dantre
Knight and Alderman of the City of London)
having stated that it is his intention to
raise the school fees for the day scholars
from two guineas to nine guineas per annum

This meeting resolves that immediate steps
be taken to represent to the Worshipful Company
of Grocers the great injustice which ~~exists~~
~~exists~~ such a proceeding would. Their neglect
upon the inhabitants of the Town of Beccles

The chairman's notes of the resolution passed at the public
indignation meeting at the Town Hall.

with other schools, first games 'colours' jackets, house matches for a 'Cock House' in Football, Athletics and Cricket which would hold the 'Detur Digniori Salver', a school magazine, a choral society, the annual prize-giving turned into a public occasion with visitors and becoming Speech Day—and all within six months: no lack of energy here; and one of the boys responded by creating the first tradition of the new school by climbing the parish church spire, fixing a school ribbon on it, being soundly flogged by Reade and given a guinea for his courage (this feat is luckily now too dangerous owing to the crumbling nature of the stonework).

Other things came more gradually, but in the next seven years the academic standard went steadily up: scientific apparatus for the teaching of Mechanics, Biology, Geology, Astronomy, Physical Geography and Land Surveying was obtained, German was added to the existing French, practical work in Chemistry and Physics instituted; indeed, surprising evidence of scientific interest was the existence of a telephone link between the san. and a boarding-house in 1877, only just a year after its invention by Bell—and before it had been demonstrated to the British Government or Queen Victoria. There was an increasing number of Classical awards to Oxford and Cambridge, and an Inspection and Examination of the boys by the Oxford and Cambridge Board in 1880 produced a highly favourable report on the standards of Classics, Maths and French in the School. New buildings were started and more property in the town was bought: in 1876 the Grocers' Company had

agreed to spend £15,000 on new buildings, but rapidly they found themselves caught up in increasingly ambitious projects as the boarding numbers rose from 40 to 160.

It was these financial problems, combined with Reade's unpopularity in the town, and his own lack of tact and liaison, that led to a final breakdown of his relationship with the Grocers' Company. The unhappy and complex story is given in detail in Mr. Walker's book on the Oundle Schools, but it centres round Reade's inability to understand the financial implications of decisions he saw purely in terms of creating a great school at Oundle, and it culminated in an indignation meeting of the people of Oundle (at which Reade was refused permission to speak) against his proposal without proper reference to the Grocers' Company to raise the tuition fee. The Grocers' Company, exasperated by what they saw as Reade's intransigence, faced with rising expenditure and capital outlay on their new school, ill-founded accusations of the lining of the Company's pockets at the expense of the townspeople of Oundle, the profit from the boarding-fees going to the Headmaster and his housemasters, and a Headmaster whose ambitions for Oundle School they did not share, seeing it as primarily for the boys of parents of modest means—demanded Reade's resignation.

So sadly ended Reade's time at Oundle, but he had given the impetus to something which now had a momentum of its own, and after two other short headmasterships came Sanderson, who, if in a different way, would realise Reade's dream of



Oundle Grammar School.

The Headmaster wishing to explain his views about the Tuition Fees more fully than he was able to do at the Meeting in the Town Hall, on Monday, 13th, begs to invite all who were present at that Meeting, and all other persons interested in the success of the School, to the SCHOOL-ROOM, at 8 p.m., THIS (WEDNESDAY) EVENING, when he will give all the information in his power, and invite free expression of opinion.

H. BR. JOHN READE.

March 15th, 1882.

a school that would stand among the greatest in England.

This little book is an attempt to show something of what has happened to Oundle School and capture some of its flavour over the century since Reade's appointment. It is designedly not a history, nor a chronological record; inevitably it contains omissions and imbalances; but the compilers hope that it will do what they would wish to do in their usual job of teaching—give some information tempered with entertainment to those who share with them a fondness for the School, what it stands for, and for its people.

So here then is an Oundle School A to Z, and the A was Reade's and Oundle's Arrival.

B is for BOARDING HOUSES

It is a truism that whatever may be the overall atmosphere of a school, or the dynamism (or otherwise) of its headmaster, the most immediate influence on a boy's life at school is his boarding house. Nevertheless at Oundle the early adoption of the 'hostel' system resulted in strongly-centralised control by the headmaster, who, apart from a few local differences and the obvious influence of the personalities of individual housemasters, could impose a unified approach and attitude within the houses.

The original boarding set-up, by which a housemaster owned his own house, controlled its entries, and received payment direct from the parents for board and lodging, was much disliked by both headmasters and governors. The headmaster's power to enforce rules of behaviour on boys depended on a consensus of agreement with virtually autonomous housemasters, and the governors, with only the tuition fees to use, had to finance capital expenditure themselves, or even see the School making a loss while housemasters grew rich. A series of acrimonious disagreements stemmed from this; after a typical quarrel with a leaving housemaster over compensation for what he clearly regarded as the goodwill and stock of

his own business, the Clerk of the Grocers' Company wrote in 1896 'Once again we see the idea that Oundle is a collection of private schools subsidised by the Grocers' Company, and a consequent claim by outgoing Housemasters to dispose of the livestock with the premises'. Later that year the governors ruled that all future houses, and two of the existing four (Laxton and Sidney) should be hostels, owned by the School, with a housemaster appointed to superintend each one—the pattern now common to all boarding schools. Of the other two houses Dryden remained a private enterprise till its rehousing in 1938, and the profits for School House continued to go to the headmaster until 1945.

From Sanderson's early days, then, all entries to the school, allocations to houses, appointment of housemasters, and major decisions relating to the housing and conduct of boys have lain completely in the hands of the headmaster and governors. Consequently the development of the house system at Oundle, while similar to what emerged in other schools, did reflect to some extent Sanderson's educational views—particularly the interest in corporate activity.

The beginnings of uniformity: Dryden 1885 and 1899.





Nevertheless some of the old housemaster autonomy was retained by the idea that houses should be completely separate physical units, and in particular that each should have its own dining room. It is significant that this expensive luxury has been retained today, despite the decision to turn the school catering over to a centrally-based

cook/freeze method. Indeed it is the focal point in the house that emphasises the idea of its being a family community within the larger one: the housemaster, his family, the tutors, the matron and the boys come together here not only to eat, but for all common domestic occasions.

In other ways, however, the ideas of 1896 which

determined the design of the houses accord very uneasily with those of 1976. What strikes one most is not those houses' spartan conditions, but that they seem to reflect a desire to impose herd conditions on the boys: unlike at many other schools of the time, there was no separate living space at any age: juniors lived in a prep-room of up to thirty boys, where each sat at a large table and had only a wall-locker for personal possessions, that being subject to constant inspection for tidiness by prefects; seniors shared studies and each had merely a desk, a chair and a share of a communal cupboard; all boys slept in dormitories, without cubicles or any division between beds; the lavatories were outside with no doors and no heating; and the only other space was in the communal changing-rooms and bathrooms. The only unusual feature came presumably from a personal whim of Sanderson—the provision of a photographic dark-room for each house.

And in these houses the boys for most of the time were confined, allowed out only for work, games, and group activities such as lectures or society meetings: only the most senior could visit other houses; the Town was out of bounds except between 2 and 2.30; after 5 o'clock 'lock-up' no-one could leave his house without a leave-card, signed and with the time entered by his housemaster, to go to a specific place, which in turn he could only leave after having it similarly signed by another master—when he had ten minutes to return to his house and hand it in.

These restrictions were slightly tempered by the inclusion within 'house precincts' of areas

around the house; indeed one housemaster, annoyed by the interfering complaint by a head of school about his boys wearing casual clothes on the house lawn, promptly extended his house precincts to include all the playing-fields, the swimming bath and the Town cricket ground. And outside each house games grew up, like yard cricket, each house with its varieties and local rules.

So the system quickly imposed an unyielding uniformity of behaviour, which is typified by the change in house photographs from the informality of the Dryden group of 1885, where the boys are differently dressed, loosely grouped, and each one with a personal possession indicating a hobby or pursuit, to the rigid rows of identikit boys from 1900 onwards.

The rigours of this confinement and imposition of standard responses were made more acceptable by the fierceness of house loyalties and patriotism. This strong sense of house identity was gained mainly through inter-house competition, initially in games: rigger shirts and 'colours' scarves were in house colours, photographs of winning house teams festooned the corridors, cock-house boards panelled the dining-room, where the mantelpiece held the cups won by the house and internal house cups; indeed apart from the work it quickly became cups with everything—corps, drill, music, singing, chess—with every boy expected to do things not for their own sake, but for the corporate glory of the house.

House identity and the submerging of individuality was also fostered by a

