

Dover Grammar School for Boys

(Dover County School for Boys)

— Martyn Webster —

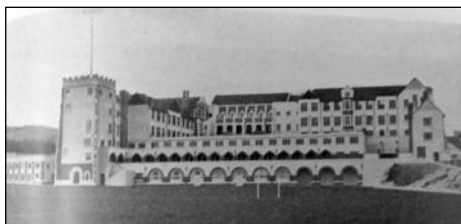
The Dover Grammar School for Boys' main building will reach its ninetieth birthday on 9th December 2021, the anniversary date of its opening on that same day in 1931 by HRH Prince George, later the Duke of Kent. The school had however already started for business for the autumn term in the September of that year. By the time this anniversary comes round however this great building, known as the School on the Hill and the Second Castle, which stands as an unmistakably iconic landmark in mock Gothic style with its crenelated tower, high arched hall and terraces standing out on Dover's landscape and skyline visible from many main vantage points, even right out at sea, the very part of it all, will alas have been demolished or be in the throes of demolition. It has been deemed to be no longer fit for purpose for the modern age, to be beyond viable use for proper education, decaying to a degree that to restore it to modern requirements would vastly out cost its replacement. So by the decision of Kent County Council Planning Applications Committee taken in Maidstone on 4th December 2019 there is to be a new replacement school built on the top playing field (an artificial mound of piled up crumbly chalk) and the original's demise.

This new school will promisedly have incorporated in it many of the heritage items from the old, in particular, the fine J.H. Walker organ in the Great Hall (this is unique to a state school and was provided by parental subscription in 1932), the memorial stained glass window on the library stairs, all honours and tribute plaques and boards and hopefully the

Turnpenny Clock of 2005 above the quadrangle and the small plinth in front of the cloisters in memory of Miss Olive Rookwood, the beloved first female member of staff from the school's earliest years.

It is vitally important at this crucial time for us to remember now for the record how this fated building first known as Dover County School for Boys and undoubtedly modelled in every possible respect on a public school (even down to the school song from Harrow "Forty Years On") actually came about.

First of all was the sheer scale of its construction on a sloping hillside between Astor Avenue at the bottom and Noah's Ark Road at the top which first began excavation in 1924 for the creation of two artificial plateaux, on the upper of which was to be the school itself. Work began on the school building proper in 1929. Progress reports appeared in the Dover Express all the while including accounts of accidents to workmen, accusations of grandiosity in the plans, also concerns for the boys having to negotiate every day a very steep hill to get to school in all the wind and rain that the elements could throw at them.



DGSB County School for Boys View from Upper Playing Field

The opening ceremony, when it came, was one of great occasion and literally of trumpet fanfare especially for its founding headmaster, Oxford classicist Fred Whitehouse M.A. (1873 - 1939) whose life and career creation the new school's building achievement was. A man deeply versed and respected in education in Kent, he had started the school back in 1905 in the old School of Art in Ladywell and in 1916 moved to purpose built facilities in Frith Road, now the Girls' Grammar School. In all this Fred Whitehouse adhered to a maxim that he attributed to Winston Churchill "Men make the buildings but it is the buildings that make the men". This building assuredly is his monument.

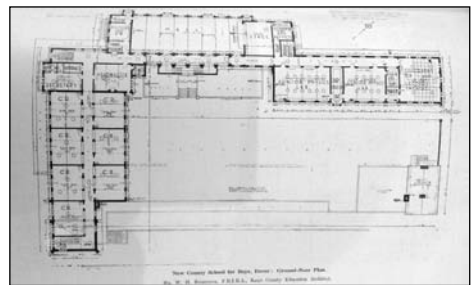
At the opening events in 1931, so fulsomely reported and photographed in the Dover Express of 11th December 1931, were present, apart, that is, from the Prince, the teachers and the boys themselves, a whole array of eminent persons and dignitaries plus many local and other worthies including local MP John Jacob Astor (who gave a rousing speech), the Town Mayor and Aldermen, the Bishop of Dover, Brigadier Sir Hereward Wake, the Chairman of Kent County Council, the Vice Chairman of Kent Education Committee and the County Director of Education. A very fine speech was given by Prince George, also by the KCC Chairman, Alderman F.W. Payne, both of which merit reproduction in a separate article in their entirety as an object lesson in understanding the ideals and aspirations of their times which should now strike a chord at our pivotal moment all these years later.

For now however the following extract of words spoken by John Jacob Astor M.P. should ring down to us: "The buildings are destined to mean far more than bricks and

mortar and are a worthy symbol to the value that the nation wisely attaches to education. Traditions of a school grow up from such events as His Royal Highness's visit today and his recognising the high place and standard which Mr Whitehouse as its first headmaster has won for the school".

Obscured from all this triumph although present at the opening was one man who got only a passing mention in any account, namely that of the school's architect, a former Territorial Army Major, Wilfrid Harold Robinson F.R.I.B.A. (1876-1950) who was the KCC's own chief architect. He had designed a number of public buildings in Kent, especially schools, most notably Maidstone Boys Grammar School extension and the Beckenham & Penge Grammar School. Little is on record of him, in particular any surviving archives of his plans and drawings. Also more than worthy of mention was the actual building contractor himself John James Clayson of Lyminge whose firm was well known in east Kent, well recorded in his village with local family still reminiscent.

The original plans for the DGSB were long thought to have been lost but I am pleased to announce that after an exhaustive search copies have been found in the British Library in an edition of the publication "The Builder" (a weekly



DGSB County School for Boys Ground Floor Plan

journal for the building and architectural trades) of 12th February 1932. The accompanying report gives the best possible description, with photographs, of the school's construction and is reproduced herewith verbatim:

"The site of this newly erected school is a hillside, approximately 25 acres in area. In order to provide satisfactory playing field accommodation three plateaux were formed. On the top one the school has been erected, while the two lower plateaux, have been made into playing fields of approximately four acres each, divided by a terraced bank.

The external treatment of the school (which accommodates approximately 500 pupils) is of brick and stone, with pitched tile roofs. Generally sand lime bricks have been used finished with "Snowcrete" cement rendering, but the arches buttresses and certain other special features, such as the hall and library, are built in High Brooms facing bricks, with reconstructed stone plinths, copings battlements, etc. Some of the gables have been picked out in alternate squares of cast stone and knapped flints set in concrete.

Internally, except for the more important rooms, sand-lime bricks have been used, their soft colour toning well with the dark stained woodwork. The flooring is of boards, or wood-blocks, on concrete, except in the corridors where granolithic has been used. Columbian pine is used for joinery work.

The hall has tiled cloisters and porches. The walls are lime plastered, except beneath the gallery, where they are panelled as an appropriate background for the honours lists.

The building was carried out under the supervision of County Architect, Mr W.H. Robinson, F.R.B.A., and Mr J.J. Clayson, of Lyminge, was the general contractor.

The following firms were sub-contractors:- Shelford (Canterbury) Brickworks Ltd., sand-lime bricks for internal work; High Brooms Brick and Tile Co., Ltd., Tunbridge Wells, facing bricks; Southwater Mastine Brick Co., Ltd., Horsham, Sussex, brick dados; John Egerton Quested, Cheriton, Kent, roofing tiles; H. Feather, Folkestone, electrical installation; F. Hayden, Ltd., Tunbridge Wells, heating installation; Dover Gas Co., gas installation; Brunswick Metal Casement and Engineering Co., metal windows; London and Wales Steel Construction Co., steelwork; Concrete Ltd., concrete floors; Patent Victoria Stone Co., cast stone; W.C. Kemsley, Cheriton, Kent, wrought ironwork; W.E. Farrer Ltd., and Doulton and Co., sanitary fittings; North of England School Furnishing Co., and G. Browning, Canterbury, joinery fittings; Falkirk Iron Co., gas cookers; Stevens and Adams, wood block and maple floors; L. Terry and Co., W. Malling, tarpaving; Thomas Elsley, Ltd., and MacFarlane and Co., rainwater heads."

The plan to demolish the school building and replace it was unexpectedly



DGSB Assembly Hall

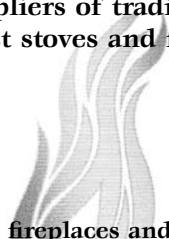
announced in January 2019 by the limited leafletting of 215 local households. An item ensued in the local press. A consultation event was then held at the school in February and again in July but to an invited audience. There has been no wider general public consultation to display pictures etc. of the replacement buildings let alone any press publication of such images. For an outstanding building such as this more might have been expected in the opinion of this writer. The final decision on the demolition and planning application was made in Maidstone by county councillors none of whom were local representatives nor, so far as can be ascertained, had actually visited the site. This final decision was subject to referral to Historic England for a determination upon any listable qualities the building might have. It is understood that the result was negative together with that of a declined separate private listing

application. An online petition to save the building has however been in place. It must now therefore be left to the people of Dover to agree or otherwise with one county councillor's desultorily supercilious remarks at the planning application hearing "It is time to pull a shroud over its face".

This school building is the Alma Mater to countless thousands of pupils who over time have scattered across the country and the world to a diversity of lives and circumstances enriched by their education there and the masters who taught them. Let it be said that we in our present time have done our very best for the school as a school and not only as a building at its moment of challenge in a way that Fred Whitehouse might have approved in accordance with its emblem and motto, the Roman Pharos, "Fiat Lux" - Let there be light.

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