

THE OLDEST EXTANT MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
GOVERNORS OF SHERBORNE SCHOOL

By JOSEPH FOWLER

In the *Archaeological Journal* of December, 1898,¹ there is an article, under the above title, communicated by Mr. W. B. Wildman, in which he gives what he believed to be conclusive evidence of the continuity of the pre-Reformation Grammar School in Sherborne with the Edwardian Foundation of 1550. This evidence he found in his reading and interpretation of certain passages in an old Steward's Book belonging to the School. As the value of his conclusions depends entirely upon the correctness of the date he assigns to a certain memorandum in the Steward's Book, and as this memorandum appears to be of a later date than that attributed to it by Wildman, it seems right, for the sake of historical accuracy, that the evidence for his conclusions should be re-examined. This is the more important since Leach,² ever ready to push things back into the blue, while disagreeing with Wildman as to the original nature and use of the monastic School Room within the precincts, requisitioned later for the use of their boys by the Edwardian Governors, seems to support Wildman's extravagant claims for both the continuity and extreme antiquity of the existing Sherborne School. Even King Alfred and Stephen Harding are quite seriously claimed by them as probable *alumni*, not of some School in medieval Sherborne, the existence of which no one seriously doubts, but of 'Sherborne School', two very different things.³

The Steward's Book consists of 28 paper pages, 12 in. by 8 in., in manuscript, most of it in Latin, being transcripts from some of the old Court Rolls of the Chantry Estates with which Edward VI endowed his new Grammar School. From these

¹ *Arch. Journ.*, lv, 350-2.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ That King Alfred, when a boy, went to School in Sherborne is wishful thinking, or, at best, mere inference. There is not a shred of historical evidence for it.

Stephen Harding was presumably a novice at Sherborne Monastery, and, as such, would not attend a public Grammar School in the town, even if such existed in Sherborne then. He would be under the novice-master, probably one of the older

monks, who generally had his school within the cloisters.

The Room which the Edwardian Governors rented in 1550 from Sir John Horsey, the lay Impropriator of the Monastic site and buildings, for the use of the newly founded Grammar School, was probably the Almonry, or Choir School of the Monastery, and not, as has been generally supposed, the old School House of the pre-Reformation Grammar School. Where that was in the town we do not at present know—but certainly not, like the other Room, within the precincts of the Monastery.

Rolls the Steward has copied such entries relating to customs, rents, and tenancies, obtaining when the Chantries were still Church Property in Henry VIII's time, as were likely to be needed by him in the discharge of his duties. With these, but in no strict order, are Minutes of Courts held by the newly appointed Governors after the Chantry Estates had passed into their hands. It is a sort of a Steward's Common Place Book, in which are entered extracts, records, and memoranda, written often in almost undecipherable scribble, intended for his own use, and quite possibly with a view to expedite business on the first Audit Day of the new School.

From this Book, Wildman has given in his Article the two extracts upon which his argument is based. They consist of certain Ordinances passed by the original Governors of the Edwardian School at a meeting held 8th October, 1550; and certain entries taken from an undated memorandum that appears at the foot of a later page in the Steward's Book. Only two of the Ordinances concern us, and they are as follows:

It'm yt ys ordeyned and graunted by the said governors that Master Gybson now beyng Scolemaster of the said Scole shauve [shall have] yerely for his salary & wages xvj li. to be payde att the iiij usuall termes of the yere.

It'm yt ys graunted & ordeyned by the said Governors that Thomas Wynnyffe for terme of hys lyffe NOW BEYNG APPOYNTEDE (the capitals are mine) by them to be stewerd of the said lands shall have yerely for his fee xiijs iiij^d to be payde by the wardens.

The entries from the important memorandum are given by Wildman as follows:

'xxx^{mo} Die Octobris Anno Regni Dicti Domini quarto:' Itm paid to the Skolemaster for iiij quarters wages endyd at Mich'as xvj li. Itm to the Usher for iiij quarters wages ended at the said feaste v li. Itm paid for the Seall xx^s.¹

This memorandum, as it appears in the Steward's Book, bears no date, and Wildman has borrowed the date he gives from the heading of a Court Meeting held by the Governors at Bradford Bryan recorded on the next page. I will show his reason for having done this, and no doubt he acted in good faith, but it begs the whole question as to the date of these entries, and was, as I think I can show, an error on his part. His justification evidently seemed to be that, as the memorandum appears in the Steward's Book between the reports of two dated Court Meetings held, one at Gillingham on 29th October, 1550, and the other on the following day at Bradford Bryan, it must have been entered at the same time,—though why he chose the date of the second of the two Court Meetings

¹ The last item, though interesting, does not concern us.

I cannot tell. But he does not seem to have considered the possibility of the Steward having interpolated this memorandum, at a later date, in the space left vacant at the foot of the page upon which the minutes of the Gillingham Court had been entered. Yet such I believe was the case, as I shall presently show. And though in itself a small matter, it is a point worth mentioning that the memorandum though written in the same hand, was, to judge from an apparent difference in the ink, not written at the same time as were the minutes which occupy the upper two-thirds of the same page.

Assuming for a moment with Wildman that the date of the memorandum is 30th October, 1550, and seeing that the Headmaster is paid, not a six months' but a whole year's salary, in spite of the fact that the new School had only been running for two quarters, if indeed as long as that, it might be argued that the rational explanation of the Governors' action was to conclude that they were paying the Head for part time service in the old Grammar School, and part time service in the new: and that 'Master Gybson' was the link between the two Institutions, and therefore a proof of the continuity between them.

At first sight this inference appears reasonable, provided we are prepared to accept the 1550 date for the steward's memorandum, although, even then, it is not obvious why the newly constituted body of Governors should have held themselves responsible for any part of the salary of a master who served a Grammar School that existed prior to their own appointment, and six months previous to the date at which the School for which they were responsible was founded.

But what is really serious is that Wildman has selected only three items from the memorandum, and omitted others, two or three of which ought certainly to have been given as well, for they not only bear very directly upon the vital question of the date, but seem quite impossible to reconcile with that which he has assigned to it.

Here is the full text:

It' geven to o ^r heward (our hayward) at Bradforde	xx ^d
It' paid for o ^r dyners at Blanford	ij ^s
It' paid to Mr Hannam (one of the Charity Commissioners appointed in 1548 to deal with the Suppression of the Chantries) for half yeres rent dew to the Kyngs Myte (majesty) at the feast of thannuncyacon of o ^r lady the Virgin anno iiij for Mahnehull	xxvj ^s
It' paid to the skolemaster for iiij qts. wages endyd Micheale	xvj li
It' to the Usher for iiij qts. wages ended at the same feaste	v li
It' paid to Thomas Wynneff for his hole yeres fee	xiijs iiij ^d

It' paid for the seall	xx ^s
It' paid to the Kyngs Magites audytors for ye chyffe rent of the skole for ij yeres rente	xxvj ^s viij ^d

The two significant items, both of them omitted by Wildman in his article in the *Archaeological Journal*, are (1) the payment of Winniffe, the Steward, 'for his hole yeres fee', who, it will be remembered, is mentioned as 'now beyng appoynted' in the Governors' Orders of 8th October, 1550; and (2) the payment of the two years' chief-rent to the Crown.

By the Charter of 1550, the various Chantry lands which formed the Edwardian School endowment were united into one holding, for which the nominal chief-rent of 13s. 4d. was to be paid annually to the Crown at Michaelmas, it being specially stated that this grant was to be reckoned as taking effect from the Feast of the Annunciation, 25th March, 1550. So two years' chief-rent for the School Estate could not have fallen due earlier than 25th March, 1552, or be payable before Michaelmas of that year—and a 1552 date appears to me the earliest at which we can put the account without introducing fresh and I think insuperable difficulties. Why the rent was not paid in 1551 does not appear, but possibly there was no audit with the Crown until the following year, or, if there was, we have no record of it. There are other instances in the early accounts of the School where the chief-rent was allowed to run on for two or more years without payment.

Lest there appear in the reader's mind a misgiving as to whether the *Anno iiij* (i.e. 4 Edward VI, or 1550), appended to the entry recording the payment of the half-year's rent for Marnhull, does not, after all, favour a 1550 date for the whole memorandum, a little further explanation is needed. On page 17 of the Steward's Book, Richard Chetmyll, or Chetnoll, one of the original twenty Governors of the new Grammar School appointed by the Crown, presents a condensed statement of accounts for the period 25th March-24th June of that year, i.e. for the first quarter of the School's life; and he begs to be allowed £25 for *dyurs thyngs paide and layd owte for the same skole* during that period. Evidently Richard Chetmyll was acting *pro tem*. Steward of the School Estates pending the appointment of the regular officer, Thomas Winniffe, which as we have seen took place the following October. And at the foot of page 23 of the Steward's Book, he has entered a short note acknowledging Chetmyll's receipt of the half-year's rent from the tenant farmer at Marnhull, due 25th March, 1550, whose lease was running at the time of the suppression of the Chantry. It seems very probable that Chetmyll handed over this rent to

Winniffe when the latter took over the Stewardship in October, and that Winniffe in turn paid it to the Crown Commissioners later ; and that he was careful to write the date against the entry in his memorandum as the payment belonged to a back year, and had come into his hands indirectly ; for, by 1552, the Marnhull affairs had been amalgamated with those of the other Chantries in the one new Estate. From the way in which the *anno iiij for Mahnehull* is entered in the original manuscript it may well have been added as an after-thought, for it is not in line with the first part of the entry which merely records the payment of the half-year's rent. And a further interesting point in connection with the Steward's record of the transaction is that (1) it is undated, and without heading, and (2) it has quite evidently been inserted in a blank space left available at the foot of a page which otherwise records nothing but extracts from Chantry Rolls of the year 1520, i.e. it has been interpolated, as I believe his memorandum was interpolated, and, like that memorandum, introduced amongst irrelevant matter, without heading and without date beyond that of the day and month, *vij die Juij*.

Directly we are free to accept the 1552 date for Winniffe's memorandum, all the internal difficulties in reconciling its statements with the otherwise contradictory minutes of the October Governors' Meeting, disappear ; the Master and Usher receive only what is due to them for a year's service ; the Steward is paid his proper fee ; and the chief-rent due to the Crown exactly tallies with what it ought to have been at Michaelmas of that year. But if the difficulties disappear, so does the ground on which Wildman based what he believed to be a proof of the continuity of Sherborne School with the pre-Reformation Grammar School of that town. And, for the moment, we must give up, rather sadly, all certainty in regard to Master Gybson's history previous to October, 1550. There is no doubt as to the existence of a medieval Grammar School in Sherborne, for we have documentary proof of it ; but a School in Sherborne is, as I have said before, not at all necessarily the same thing as 'Sherborne School', and any continuity between the two has yet to be proven.

But the present Edwardian School has made its own name, and history ; it stands secure in its own fine record, one of our great English Public Schools. Let us remember what William of Malmesbury wrote of Sherborne's first bishop, St. Aldhelm, 'non enim eget Aldelmus ut mendaciis asseratur'.