Old Swinford Hospital

A Short History



Thomas Foley and the Foundation of the School

Old Swinford Hospital was founded in 1667 by Thomas Foley of Witley Court near Kidderminster and received its first eight pupils on 20th June 1670, probably the date when the building now known as "Founder's" was completed. Foley had made his fortune in the manufacture of iron goods and by the time of the Restoration in 1660 he was reported to be earning some £5,000 a year. He was one of the outstanding entrepreneurs of the Seventeenth Century and one of its richest men.

Thomas Foley's decision to found the School was inspired by Richard Baxter a famous preacher of the time who delivered a sermon dedicated to him at Worcester Assizes. Foley not only paid for construction of the School but also attended to its day to day operation until his death in 1677.

According to Pepys' diary, Thomas Foley visited Christ's Hospital at Abingdon one morning while he was staying at Oxford. He was apparently interested to find out how its income was arranged and settled and no doubt had his own will in mind during his investigations.

Under the terms of that will, the School received the Manor of Pedmore, lands and property at Meriden (Warwickshire), Seighford (Staffordshire), Oldswinford, and Dudley along with £2,000 to be invested in further land. This was eventually purchased at Rowley Regis and Stone in Staffordshire.

The rental income from the School's estate met all the expenses of the School for the first 278 years of its existence during which time no support was received from the state and every boy was educated as a boarder without any charge to his parents.

The Feoffees

Foley's will also appointed fifteen Feoffees, including his three sons, Thomas, Paul and Phillip, to administer his estate and to look after the affairs of the School. The Feoffees of Old Swinford Hospital still comprise fifteen members, including three Hereditary Feoffees representing the three branches of the Foley family. This family involvement has been one of the cornerstones of the success of the School throughout the centuries and contributes to the unique sense of continuity and tradition of which the School is justly proud.

As well as contributing to the capital upkeep of the School, the Feoffees appoint a majority of the Governing Body of the School and make grants for the welfare of pupils, including funding Foundation Places and Bursaries to support boarders in the School. They also fund the School's Scholarship Scheme.

The First Boys

Thomas Foley had decided that his school should be for 60 boys from poor but honest homes and that the age of entry should be between the ages of seven and eleven. A document in Thomas Foley's hand states that the boys were to be taught their catechism, to read, write and to cast accounts. They therefore had a very basic education, but one that was related to the work they would do when they left the school at fourteen to be apprenticed.

Of the 60 boys, 46 were chosen from particular parishes in the area that were nominated by Thomas Foley. The other 14 were nominated by the Feoffees and were known as "Choice Boys". These boys came from all over the country and to this day the School educates boarders from a wide range of backgrounds locally, from much further afield in the United Kingdom and, more recently, from overseas.

Why Old Swinford "Hospital"?

Those connected with Old Swinford Hospital strongly deprecate the addition of the word "school" to its title. Centuries ago the word "hospital", which derived from the Latin *hospes* (a guest), was used widely by charitable foundations caring not only for the sick but also providing education for poor children or care for the elderly. It is only in more modern times that the word has taken on its principally medical connotation. The School maintains the ancient meaning of the word as part of its unique heritage.

The Uniform

The uniform worn by the boys until 1928 was the Blue Coat uniform of the apprentice. It was first altered in early Victorian times when drab corduroy trousers replaced the blue cloth breeches.

We can glimpse the probable appearance of the seventeenth century Old Swinford boy in the wooden carving of Charity and a child located over the Oak Room door at the end of the Library. It is known from the financial accounts that boys at the time wore blue stockings and had linen 'bands' attached to their stiff collars.

In the nineteenth century boys were given two suits of clothing when they entered the school, and one suit, three shirts, four pairs of stockings, three pairs of shoes and one bonnet or cap annually. When boys were apprenticed they were provided with two suits of clothes. A representation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century uniform can be seen in the Eric Moody Room. It is hardly surprising that the School is often referred to as the "Blue Coat School" by the older inhabitants of Oldswinford who remember the boys marching to church in their uniforms on Sunday mornings.

The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

During the eighteenth century the financial fortunes of the Charity prospered, surplus income had been invested, and in 1820 the Feoffees increased the numbers in the school to 70 by adding 10 more 'Choice Boys'. However, the School otherwise appears to have continued broadly unchanged until the early 1830s when the Commissioners 'for inquiring concerning charities' visited the school. In particular, they compared the annual income of £816 in 1777 with that of £24,000 in 1832, and not surprisingly called attention to 'the feeling which generally and not unreasonably prevails in the neighbourhood, that the benefits derived from this charity are much less than might be expected, from the ample means it possesses'. They felt the building would easily accommodate more boys.

The Commissioners noted that the boys were instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic with mensuration and surveying. They felt that the facilities offered for 'air and exercise' were much too limited, the boys apparently being confined to the Courtyard in front of the building.

The report of the Commissioners was considered by the Feoffees at a special meeting in December 1834. Reforms followed swiftly. Numbers were immediately increased to 80 and then to 100. The barn behind the school (now known as the Barn Block) was converted and extended with an upstairs dormitory for 50 boys and a schoolroom downstairs. Diet, school hours and play facilities were all considered. New regulations were agreed and, as we have learned, the original uniform was modified.

There was close attention to diet:

8.00am	Breakfast	Bread and milk
12.30pm	Lunch	Meat (beef, mutton and veal only) on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday: Bread and cheese on Monday, Thursday and Saturday Puddings occasionally
6.00pm	Supper	Bread and milk

In 1837, the Feoffees ordered that at Dinner on Monday, Thursday and Saturday, baked Rice Pudding was to be added to the menu.

The boys got up at 6.00am in the summer and 6.30am in the winter. They went to bed at 8.00pm. They attended Prayers twice a day at 9.00am and 6.00pm, with two visits to Oldswinford Church every Sunday. Wednesdays and Saturdays were half holidays. There were two school holidays, a month over Christmas and five weeks in the summer. The boys were divided into four classes of 25. Since there was only a Headmaster and Under Master to instruct them, the senior boys must have been used to assist, even though two classes were engaged on the same subject at the same time.

Although there remained a concentration on reading, writing and arithmetic, History and Geography made their first appearance on the curriculum of the two senior classes. From 1848, some boys attended Drawing and Modelling classes at the Art School in Stourbridge.

From 1836, there were exams twice a year with a Christmas leaving examination for those due to be apprenticed. This latter exam helped the school to decide on the type of apprenticeship most suitable for each boy. The Feoffees gave prizes to the most successful. Many of the examination papers set have survived, printed in the Feoffees' Annual Report which was issued each year from 1836 to 1948.

Later in Victorian times there were some further modifications, but essentially the curriculum prepared the boys for apprenticeship in industry and commerce. In 1846 a testimonial on behalf of the Headmaster by the Feoffes described the school as a 'commercial school'.

In 1862 numbers in the School were again increased to 120 and then to 160 in 1883 after the appointment of Mr William Maybury as Headmaster. In order to accommodate the additional boys the boarding house now called Maybury House was built. The Sanatorium which is now Foster House had been built in the 1870s.

Discipline and Punishment

In the seventeenth century there were stocks set up in the courtyard in front of the main Founder's building. There was a serious outbreak of indiscipline in the summer of 1704 when no fewer than twelve of the sixty boys were expelled for combining together to 'beat and abuse' their Master. It took several years before the school again made up its numbers to 60.

Discipline in the Victorian era was strict. The punishment book from 1838 to 1913 has survived and records many canings or floggings.

The most frequent offence recorded in the Punishment book is 'running away'. On 21st September 1854 no fewer than 44 boys, nearly half the school, ran away. The Feoffees set up a special enquiry and harsh treatment and poor food were alleged to be the causes. Perhaps not enough was done for on 27th April 1855, the Headmaster, Mr Anderson, reported to the visiting Committee of the Feoffees that the school was 'in a state of rebellion'. He said that when the bell had been rung the previous morning only seventeen boys responded. Some boys had thrown stones at him from behind a wall and one in particular, Davies, whom he had specially summoned, had refused to come to him.

The two Feoffees present called the boys together and immediately expelled Davies. They decided not to investigate further at that time, but told the Headmaster to send for them if any boy was disobedient or impertinent. As a result of all this trouble the Feoffees eventually decreed that any boy who ran away was to be well flogged by the Headmaster in the presence of the whole school. A second offence meant automatic expulsion.

The Twentieth Century

Towards the end of the Victorian era, the Apprenticeship system began to decline and considerable difficulties in placing boys were experienced by the end of the First World War. Although they had paid for the construction of the Great Hall in 1905, by the early 1920s the Feoffees' finances were not in a healthy position and they decided to let the numbers in the School fall to 125. The School seemed unsure of its future direction even though Captain Stone, who became Headmaster in 1928, introduced some reforms including the radical of change in uniform. It was early in his time that Rugby football began to be played for the first time. Numbers were reducing further in the difficult economic times of the 1930s and during the Second World War, so that by 1945 there were only 70 boys in the school – no more than there had been in the early nineteenth century. Financial difficulties continued to occur as costs of maintaining boys rose and rent income did not match increased costs.

In 1946 the Feoffees began to look for other ways to pay for the education and upkeep of the boys. In June 1946 numbers had fallen to 63, but in September 10 boys entered the school who were paid for by Worcestershire County Council or Worcester City because of their home circumstances and boarding need. They were followed by a group from the London County Council, and Local Authorities in the Midlands and elsewhere also began to send boys to the school.

By September 1947 only 42 boys in the school were supported by the Feoffees with 34 being paid for by Local Authorities. By the autumn of 1948 another quiet revolution had taken place. For the first time the parents of two boys were sending their sons to the school and paying the costs themselves. These were the first ever fee paying pupils. Numbers had risen to a gratifying 98 with only 27 being paid for by the Feoffees.

The School therefore came through a very difficult few years with increased numbers and being supported by both state and private funding for the first time. Once this new arrangement had been accepted the way inevitably led to increased involvement with the state, leading ultimately to the granting Voluntary Aided status in 1949. This meant that the school received sufficient finance from Worcestershire County Council to pay for the education of boys at the School whilst each boy's boarding costs were met by the Feoffees, by Local Authorities where boarding need was proven, or by those parents who could afford to pay.

Mr Peter Sheppard became Headmaster in 1950 and early in his time the school began to encourage boys to stay on to take the new GCE 'O' Level Exam. This quickly led to the need for a small Sixth Form, concentrating initially on the more practical subjects like woodwork and the first boys took 'A' Level in 1953. The academic results of the school showed steady improvement over the years and the boarding numbers rose to a peak of about 250 in the early 1970s. The school was prospering.

Local Government Reorganisation in the mid-1970s took Stourbridge out of Worcestershire and into Dudley Metropolitan Borough where the secondary education system was being reorganised on comprehensive lines. Old Swinford Hospital therefore took its first 'comprehensive' intake in 1976. The change to Dudley checked the flow of boarders from feeder schools in Worcestershire and quickly led to a further time of difficulty for the School. By 1978 when Mr. Christopher Potter took over as Headmaster, the boarding numbers had fallen to about 150 and the Sixth Form numbered fewer than 50. Day boys comprised more than half the total in a school of just over 300.

In 1979 the Feoffees and Governors, with the support of Dudley Local Education Authority and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education, decided on a bold policy of expansion of boarding provision with a commitment to raise numbers from 300 to 500. This was achieved by increasing dramatically the proportion of boys whose parents paid full boarding costs. Many of these boys came from primary schools at 11 and at this stage the school provided increasingly healthy and successful competition with local day independent schools and boarding schools all over the country. The number of boys entering at 13 from independent preparatory schools also rose rapidly throughout the 1980s.

Four new boarding houses and other facilities were built for the extra boarders and the school became ever more successful both academically and on the sports field. In 1989, the Governors and Feoffees, mindful that for most of their history they had guided their own destiny with considerable success, seized the opportunity to become one of the first Grant Maintained Schools, independent of the control of the Local Education Authority. Applications to the school increased still further and success both in and out of the classroom grew. The school set out to be a 'market-leader' in boarding provision for boys from all kinds of backgrounds and for the first time the majority of leavers went on to a degree course at universities including Oxford and Cambridge. The construction of a new Sports Centre in 2000 was a further significant step in the development of the School.

With the election of a Labour Government in 1997, Grant Maintained Schools were abolished and Old Swinford Hospital reverted to its Voluntary Aided status.

The Twenty First Century

The present Headmaster, Mr. Peter Jones took up his post after in 2007; only the sixth Headmaster since Mr. Maybury was appointed in 1883.

In 2003 the Governors took the historic decision to admit girls to the School as day students in the Sixth Form and the first 40 girls took up their places in September 2004. Boarding numbers also flourished so that by September 2005 the school roll stood at over 600 for the first time.

Old Swinford Hospital was clearly established as one of the country's most successful state schools and benefited from funding from a number of Government initiatives. As a "Beacon School", much stronger links were developed with other local state schools and Old Swinford Hospital was subsequently designated as a Business and Enterprise College – harking back to the entrepreneurial tradition of the Founder. Supported by the Institute of Directors and other business sponsors, the School developed a new Business Hub and an impressive range of business and enterprise activities for its students.

In recent years the School's Rugby teams have performed better than ever in regular fixtures and in national competitions and the advent of girls in the Sixth Form has led to success in netball and the beginnings of a new enthusiasm for dance in the School. International links have also flourished, especially a partnership with St. John's Senior Secondary School, Nandere, Uganda.

In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills announced that Old Swinford Hospital would again benefit from a significant amount of additional state funding to improve facilities and to enable it to grow still further.

Old Swinford Hospital by its history, traditions and present arrangements is unique among the boarding schools of this country. In all things it seeks also to be a model for the boarding school of the future.

The School is looking forward to celebrating its 350th anniversary in 2017.

Old Swinford Hospital ▮ A Short History

Original text by
Mr Christopher Potter OBE MA
Headmaster of Old Swinford Hospital
1978-2001



Old Swinford Hospital

Heath Lane Stourbridge DY8 1QX
Telephone : 01384 817300
Facsimile : 01384 441686
e-mail : admissions@oshsch.com
www.oshsch.com