

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Newport

The English School

(or 'Royal Free English School')

This draft text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Professor Richard Hoyle. The research assistance of Dr Judith Everard, Linda Fletcher and Wendy Horton is gratefully acknowledged.

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The English School

When the college at Newport was surveyed by the crown's commissioners in 1548, they found that one of the fellows of the college, a priest called Richard Robyns, taught a grammar school.¹ There was nothing unusual about this, nor is there any way of discovering how long a fellow of the college had kept a school in the town. Grammar schools of this sort were seen as beneficial and provision had been made in the statute dissolving chantries to protect schools and ensure their continuance. For this reason the crown's receiver in Shropshire was instructed to pay an annual sum of £5 to the teacher or master of the school. (This was paid by the crown's receiver in Shropshire but he received the rent from the owners of the site of the college.) The right of appointing the teacher passed to the Lord Chancellor. For this reason the school could reasonably claim to be the 'Royal Free English School'.² But the school failed to develop beyond this. It never secured corporate status. There were no trustees or governors, and whilst it acquired a few parcels of land by gift or bequest, there was never a proper endowment and the master simply took the rents for his salary. The early abolition of the school means that there are no records and so its history has to be written from references to it contained in the records of other bodies.

The history of the school is therefore more obscure than we would like. By the end of the sixteenth century it was being taught in the Booth Hall, which, in the view of William Adams (d. 1661), the founder of the Grammar School, and he was perhaps talking from personal experience, was far from satisfactory.³ Adam's Grammar School did not supersede the English school which acted as an elementary school, teaching reading and writing, some of whose pupils went on to the Grammar School. It remained entirely separate from the new foundation although Adams asked the Haberdashers Company, to whom he entrusted the supervision of his Grammar School, to keep an eye on the English School as well.

If the English school continued alongside the Grammar School, Adams gave his support to the school by granting in his will two parcels of land in Norbroom for its support.⁴ Even

¹ A. Hamilton Thompson (ed.), 'Certificates of Shropshire Churches made under the act of 37 Henry VIII cap IV and 1 Edw, cap. XIV', *Trans SAHS* 00 (1910), pp. 409-10.

² This title is a mid-nineteenth century coinage: it was not used by the Charity Commissioners in 1821. [Fifth] *further report of the commissioners appointed [to enquire into charities]* (1821), pp. 409-12.

³ Taylor and Taylor, *Mr Adams' Free Grammar School*, pp. 19-20. Adam's turn of phrase suggests that by 1656 it was not being taught in the Booth Hall at that time: 'by experience [it was] found that the Booth Hall where the school for then said town was *formerly* kept was very ill convenient if not hurtful both for the town school master and scholars'.

⁴ Taylor and Taylor, *Mr Adams' Free Grammar School*, p. 211; *Fifth Report*, pp. 410-11.

so, compared to the grammar school, it was poorly endowed and lacked its own buildings or the means to secure them. One of the recurrent themes of the school's history is the inadequacy of its premises and attempts to find better ones.

As we noted, in Adam's time the English School was being taught in the Booth Hall and this may have continued until late in the century. The building was certainly in a poor state of repair. In 1691 a candidate for the mastership offered £10 towards the costs of repairs if he was appointed.⁵ Complaints made to the Bishop of Lichfield in 1697 suggest that the Bishop had sought to have the school moved to a large room over the church porch.⁶ A petition from the inhabitants to the Bishop complained about the Schoolmaster, a Mr Raven.⁷ Raven was evidently not the town's choice. They maintained that they had the right to nominate the master of the school where Raven had been appointed by the Lord Chancellor in a way which had been prejudicial to the rights of the town. Raven pointed out that his predecessor had been appointed by the Lord Chancellor on the town's petition. By their actions, he argued, they admitted the patronage of the crown. But the townspeople also questioned Raven's ability and commitment as a teacher and asserted that he had not prepared a single boy sufficiently to enter the grammar school. Raven contested these claims, and provided a list of boys who had gone to the Grammar School in his time. He also secured testimonials from parents for the quality of teaching of both boys and girls. Overall the issue seemed to be that Raven was a stranger to the town and was regarded as an interloper who had been imposed on them. When the Haberdashers Company asked for a report on the state of the English school in 1705, they were told that Mr Raven 'is very diligent and applies himself totally to the business'.⁸

The second and perhaps chief complaint contained in the petition was that the chamber over the vestry had been the parish clerk's and had, so to speak, gone with the job. The allocation of this room to the school had therefore overturned what may have been a settled arrangement. Again, this may have been resented as an intrusion by the Bishop into the town's affairs.

Despite the town's objections, the school seems to have still been held in the upper room over the porch in 1705. When the Haberdashers Company made an inspection of the grammar school in 1762, the English School was being kept in a rented cottage on Salter's

⁵ SA, P207/Q/3/10.

⁶ The following account is based on a file of papers purchased by Newport and District HS in 2025. I intend to discuss them at greater length elsewhere.

⁷ William Raven d. 1708. He died intestate, but his inventory called him of Newport, schoolmaster.

⁸ Taylor and Taylor, *Mr Adams' Free Grammar School*, pp. 71-2.

Lane. By 1782 it was being kept in a cottage 'below the bar'. Suggestions made in 1730, 1771 and 1782 that it should move into the town hall were not acted on because there was no money to adapt the space there to the school's use.⁹ The Charity Commissioners who visited Newport in 1819 or 1820 do not comment on where the school was being held, except to say that it was in a house belonging to the school. This may imply the house standing on the site of 25 Upper Bar.¹⁰

The commissioners were, characteristically, much more interested in the school's income. Other than the crown's £5 (in reality £4 10s. 0d. after the deduction of fees), the school received £5 from the benefaction of William Robson, born in Newport, who in 1633 had placed £5,000 in the hands of the Haberdashers for the support of civic activities in Newport. The two closes in Norbroom which Adams bequeathed in his will now generated £24 per annum. By his will of 1642, proved 1647, William Barnfield gent. gave the school six parcels in Norbroom totalling about 3½ acres, together with some small tenements in Newport itself.¹¹ The Charity Commissioner's inspector found that the parcels were worth £12 11s. 0d. and a small house in the town £3. The other house was occupied by the school and provided no income.¹² In all the master's income was £49 1s. 0d. out of which he paid all the school's costs including the salary of an assistant. A child paid 1s. on his or her entry.¹³

This, then, was a poor foundation. There is no sign that the eighteenth-century masters were graduates: rather they seem to have been local men. In 1762 it was reported that the schoolmaster and his assistant were cobblers by trade. In 1771 and 1782 the master was the brother of the vicar of Newport but he was also a grocer.¹⁴ It is likely that the position was effectively part time (although Raven was reported to be at the school morning to night) as part of the work was delegated to a deputy.

In 1829 the position was offered to Samuel Cobb who had his own school as well as a part time post at the Grammar School. He appears to have been an effective teacher and under his direction the numbers at the English School reached about 90. His successor was John Lees - not a graduate - who initially managed a thriving school which taught both boys and girls. His success was sufficient to justify the erection of a new school paid for by

⁹ Taylor and Taylor, *Mr Adams' Free Grammar School*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Their report was published in 1821: *Fifth report*, pp. 409-12.

¹¹ This bequest is dated 1665 on the charity board in the church, and from there the date is adopted by the Charity Commissioners, *Fifth Report*, p. 411.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

¹⁴ Taylor and Taylor, *Mr Adams' Free Grammar School*, pp. 71-2.

¹⁵ In the obituary of John Lees, *Newport and MD Adv.*, 20 Sept. 1879.

subscription on the school property which stretched between Lower Bar and Wellington Road in 1843.¹⁶ The sole illustration of the building before demolition suggest that it was built with economy: for instance it has an external stair, without railings, to reach the upper floor (Figure 1). In 1850 it reportedly had 54 pupils being taught reading (and, one assumes, some writing). ‘The school was free to the children of the humbler class of society for instruction in English’.¹⁷ But by the 1860s the school seems to have been in a serious state of decay.

In 1865 the Charity Commission sent its inspector to review the Newport charities. In advance of his arrival in October 1865, a meeting of a local committee established to gather evidence to place before him declared its dissatisfaction with what it called the ‘Royal Free English School’. Its working was unsatisfactory. The number of boys on the register was only 36 and the average attendance was only 23. The committee recommended that the school be converted into a school on the lines of a National School, and that a girls’ school and an infant’s school be established in the town. The appointment of the master, it urged, should be taken out of the hands of the Lord Chancellor and made locally.¹⁸

The Commission’s Inspector, F. O. Martin, was charged with gathering evidence and making recommendations, and so nothing immediately came of his visit. When a second inspector, James Bryce, visited Newport on behalf of the Schools Enquiry Commission later in the decade, his chief concern was with Newport Grammar School. But he commented that the English School was ‘virtually the public elementary school of Newport’. The master, he found, had an income of £62 but only 33 pupils. As the school was free, attendance was irregular. Bryce acknowledged proposals to turn the school into a national school. An alternative, he thought, would be to make it into a preparatory school under the control of the headmaster of the Grammar School.¹⁹

It seems that the Charity Commissioners brought forwards a scheme for the school in 1867, but no details have been found and it was not proceeded with. In 1869 the Vicar of Newport, Revd David Mountfield visited the Commission and urged the need for better educational provision in the town. The English school, he said,

¹⁶ The date is given by Bagshaw in 1850 and other directories and in Lees’ obituary. The details of this are obscure as there seem to be no newspaper reports. It may be suggested that this was an Anglican response to the opening of the (nonconformist) British School adjacent to the Independent chapel on Wellington Road in 1842.

A memo by Picken states that Lees took boarders at his house: the free scholars were taught on the ground floor and the fee-paying boarders on the upper floor. NHS01602.

¹⁷ Bagshaw, p. 403.

¹⁸ *Staffordshire Adv.* 21 Oct. 1865

¹⁹ *Schools Inquiry Commission*, XV (1869), p. 301.

is a miserable affair with some 20 boys – no discipline – master worthy but old and incompetent, No trustees at all. Master manages the property. He would retire if then whole present income (about £60) were guaranteed to him.²⁰

The chances of the School's survival diminished when local aspirations were answered with a new Board school which opened on Avenue Road in 1872. The proposals from the Charity Commission which led to anew scheme for the grammar school (approved on 27 November 1878) assumed that the English School would disappear. There was a feeling that the abolition of the English school and the direction of its assets towards the Grammar School was to subtract from the town, and the resentment that this created still rankled in the 1880s.²¹ Whilst local opinion was hostile towards the proposals, the practical difficulty was that they would deprive John Lees of his livelihood. Whilst he was promised a pension under the new arrangements, the impasse was broken by a public collection which was used to buy an annuity for his support in his retirement.²² In fact Lees did not survive the closure of the school for long and died in September 1879.²³

The Charity Commission quickly took steps to sell the school's endowment. The Newport Surveyor George Hammond was commissioned to survey the lands of the school and prepare them for sale. He reported that they consisted if five fields or arable and one of pasture in Norbroom, the cottage in Middle Row and the cottage facing on to Upper Bar with the schoolroom behind. Together they yielded an income of £48 16s. 6d. Some of the property was in poor repair and required an investment of £200. The whole was thought to be worth £1702 at auction. Hammond's summary shows that the crown's payment of £5 per annum (less fees) was still being paid. When all sources of income were taken into account, and deductions made, the total income was £57 1s. 1d.²⁴

It seems that the larger properties were sold to their tenants over the following months. The remainder – the house and school site, the cottage in Middle Row and five small parcels in Norbroom, were sold at auction on 1 June 1880. The receipts were vested in a trust ('The Governors of the Newport Exhibition Fund') to provide scholarships for Newport children to the Grammar School.

²⁰ TNA, ED 27/3988.

²¹ See the comments of T. W. Picken at a public meeting in 1889: *Newport and MD Adv.*, 2 Mar. 1889. A committee met later that year to discuss what could be done to reverse the 'wrongful diversion of the funds of the Royal Free English School by their being used for Exhibitions tenable at the Grammar School'. It dispersed without coming to a conclusion. *Ibid.*, 14 Sept. 1889.

²² NHS01786 is a circular calling for subscriptions dated June 1877. It says that Lees was in failing health but also had to support an aged aunt.

²³ Obituary, *Newport and MD Adv.* 20 Sept. 1879.

²⁴ TNA, ED 27/3989, 'Income and revenue of the Royal Free English School, Newport, Salop'.

The schoolhouse may have survived until after 1969. It is shown on the plan attached to a conveyance of that date.²⁵ It was subsequently demolished.

²⁵ NHS01679d, notes on a conveyance of 25 Station Road, 20 Mar. 1969.

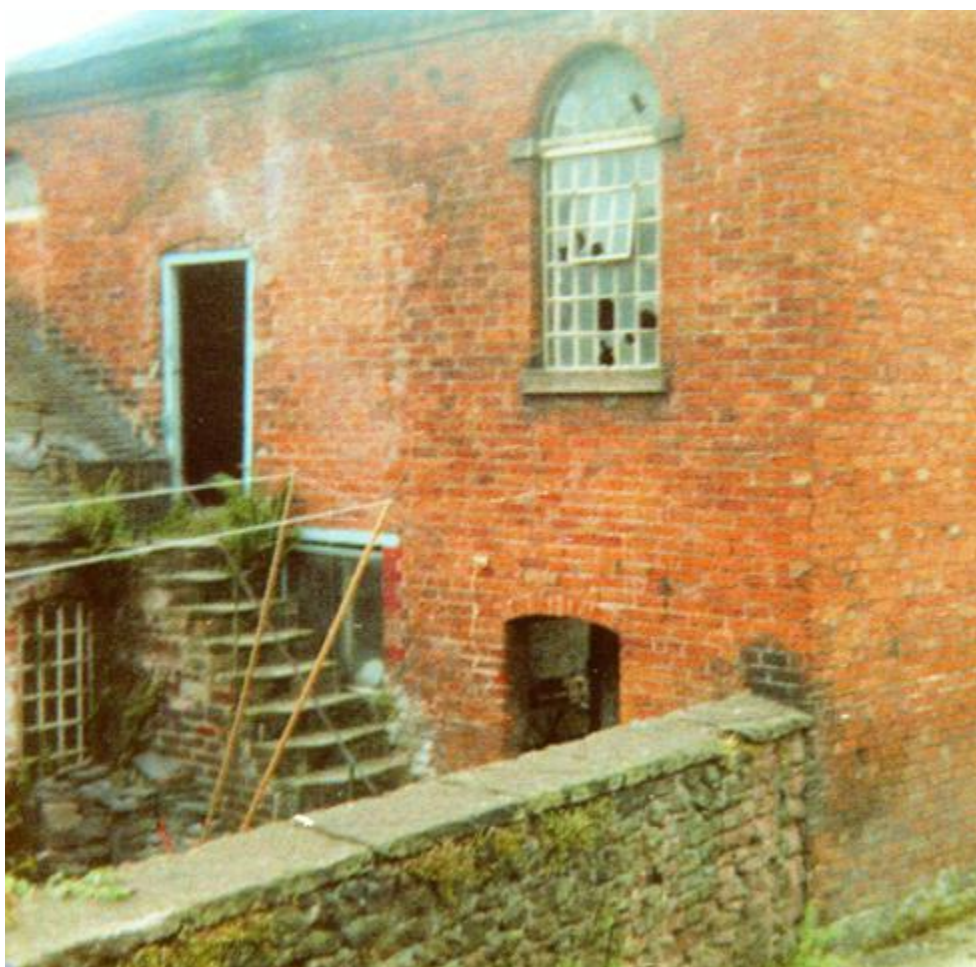


Figure 1. The English school (undated photograph).
Newport History Society, <https://snap.newporthistorysociety.org/n000436/>