

## WESTMINSTER SCHOOL

*Anniversary Address given by Mr. John Carleton, at the  
Annual General Meeting held on 29th June, 1963*

My Lord President, Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen.

LET me begin by saying what a pleasure it is to see you here, and by thanking you for doing me the honour of asking me to speak to you. I say "speak" advisedly, because your Secretary has given me permission to talk rather than to read a lecture. That is what I prefer to do. It has the advantage of being less formal, and it also enables me to say more in a short time, although I am well aware that it entails on me the obligation, Mr. Secretary, of condensing it later for the purposes of your Transactions.

Now, as the President has mentioned, I cannot tell you when Westminster was founded. The school does not owe its origin to the great revival of learning in the sixteenth century, nor is it the product of a single munificent patron of learning, such as William Wykeham or Henry VI. It evolved, quite naturally, out of small beginnings as a part of the Benedictine Monastery. When we first get a glimpse of it, in the middle of the fourteenth century, it was situated in the Almonry, which stood where the junction of Victoria Street and Great Smith Street is now, and was a very small school, conducted by the Almoner as part of his charitable duties, containing from eighteen to twenty-four boys. We can guess the approximate number from the amount of cloth which was allowed for their gowns.

From 1394 the Account rolls contain payments to a "Magister Scolarum" who received a gown and 26/8d. yearly as payment for teaching the boys, who were recruited from the immediate neighbourhood, in contrast to the novices of the Monastery who were brought from the Abbey's great properties in Worcestershire and Northamptonshire and elsewhere. In 1461 the school moved from outside the precincts into a house which you have already passed, I expect, on your way here, No. 19 Dean's Yard—a house which has remained in the possession of the school ever since, and which was, until 1939, the house of the Headmaster. We know little about the history of the school in monastic days

or about its Headmasters, and it would be very interesting to know exactly what happened in 1540 when the Monastery was dissolved. The school is not expressly mentioned in the Deed of Surrender which was signed on the 17th January in that year, though it was presumably included in the very comprehensive catalogue of the "monastery, the church, the cloisters, the site, circuit and precinct" which the monks relinquished to the King. But in what is called the "Booke of the erection of the Kinge's newe Colledge", the names of two masters, the Headmaster and the Undermaster as we call them now, together with the forty scholars, follow immediately after those of the Dean and Prebendaries, and the school remained in the possession of the house I have just mentioned. The only outward change was that the boys were henceforth dignified by the title of King's Scholars. The title (unlike that of the King's Scholars of Eton) varies with the Sovereign. They are now for the fourth time Queen's Scholars—a style which I find it hard to get used to, but which older Westminsters, who were here in Victoria's reign of course, found it hard to abandon.

Henry VIII took an interest in the school, but it owed its increasing prosperity even more to Alexander Nowell, who became Headmaster in 1543 and ruled the school for twelve eventful years. Nowell was the writer of the shorter catechism and is popularly claimed as the inventor of bottled beer, but at Westminster he is chiefly remembered as the founder of the Latin Play which started in 1540 and goes on to this day—one of the oldest theatrical runs in history, although of course there have been gaps during the last war and the 1914 war, and a very long gap during the Civil War.

In Mary Tudor's reign the Benedictine Monastery was for a very short time restored, and the return of the monks coincided with the departure of Nowell who was in sympathy with the reformed religion and very prudently retired abroad. In 1560 the monastery was dissolved for the second time. The school had been a sort of connecting link between the old world and the new, and it is possible (since the Refectory had fallen into disuse) that boys and monks took their meals together in the dining hall of the Abbot's house—the present College Hall—during the

brief period of the restored monastery.

There is a story that when the Monastery was dissolved for the second time the last Abbot of Westminster, Abbot Feckenham, was planting elms in the convent garden when a messenger arrived with instructions to bring him to Queen Elizabeth. He would not consent to follow until he had finished his planting, being convinced, as his friends afterwards said, and as is related by Fuller, that "As the trees he then set should spring and sprout for many years after his death, so his new plantation of Benedictine Monks in Westminster should take rest and flourish in spite of all opposition". If they spoke the truth events disproved his hopes, but it is possible, I think, to invest the story with a different symbolism. The school, which had survived the first dissolution of the Monastery, was destined to survive the second, and to grow side by side with the elms in College garden to maturity, and the Abbot's wish that Westminster should always remain a seat of learning was amply fulfilled.

The school owed much of its growing prosperity to its geographical position. Only a few hundred yards away stood the Palace of Westminster, until Henry VIII's reign actually a royal residence, and still the seat of government and justice. With Parliament and the Law Courts almost within its precincts it was impossible that it should escape notice, and gradually more and more people from further and further afield began to send their boys. A glance at the coats of arms around this room will give you an idea of the range and variety of the men educated within its walls.

In 1620-1 two future Archbishops arrived in the precincts. Neither had been educated at the school. John Williams, destined to be Archbishop of York, was appointed Dean of Westminster in 1620, and Laud followed him as a Prebendary next year. The narrow confines of the Westminster precincts could not hold two natures so bitterly opposed to one another, and in the ensuing quarrels, Lambert Osbaldeston, who had become Head Master in 1622, was foolish enough to take sides, with the result that he was accused of calling Laud "urchin, vermin, little meddling hocus-pocus". The cap fitted all too well and Laud chose to wear it. The Headmaster was summoned

before the Star Chamber and sentenced to lose his spiritualities, to pay a heavy fine, and to be nailed by the ear to the pillory in Dean's Yard, where his school might see his disgrace.

It was really an empty threat, because Lambert had judiciously disappeared and left a mocking message that he had gone "beyond Canterbury". To have interpreted it literally would have misled his pursuers, for in fact he had gone no further than Drury Lane. After Laud's downfall he reappeared, but by this time the school, suddenly left leaderless by his disappearance, had found a new Headmaster. Richard Busby was a man to whom we here in Westminster owe a great deal. He was Headmaster for no less than fifty-seven years. As the President has said, I have been here for quite a long time too, not all the time as Head Master, of course, but as a Master, and there are at least twenty-five boys now in the school whose fathers I have taught. But Busby taught not only the sons of his original pupils but the grandsons. He held his position from 1638 to 1695, throughout the troubled times of the Civil War, the Commonwealth, the Protectorate, the Restoration and the Revolution of 1688—surviving three regimes and three changes of worship. It has often been wondered how he contrived to keep his preferments throughout this stormy period. A story relates that when he himself was asked for an explanation he replied as follows:—

"The *fathers* govern the nation; the *mothers* govern the fathers; but the *boys* govern the mothers, and *I* govern the boys!"

I have here some lines which were written later on, in the eighteenth century, which suggest that he openly defied the Parliamentary Commissioners, and that he refused to sign the National Covenant in accordance with the order made in 1644 by the Committee of the Lords and Commons which had been appointed to look after the school on the suppression of the Dean and Chapter. These are the lines. I will read them, or rather declaim them, to you.

"When civil strife the public safety shook,  
And the galled nation bore a servile yoke,  
He proved his faith, and 'gainst the rising storm,  
Still bore above and kept his virtue warm;

Cooled the loud roaring of the surge's sway  
By Eloquence, and baffled ruder Rage.  
In vain they threatened various punishment,  
And Bradshaw's malice all in vain was spent.

Well, piety demands perhaps that we should picture him thus, but common sense urges that the Committee would not have allowed open defiance of their command. Perhaps the real explanation lies in a document which we possess here in the Abbey Muniment Room behind me—a paper containing notes on the members of the College, their whereabouts, and whether or not they had taken the Covenant. Against Busby's name appears the single suggestive word "Sickly". No doubt the Governors were content to ask no further questions, and if they had any real doubts as to where the school's loyalty lay, they would have been resolved by the payment in that very same year of 6/- for the "Schollers bonfire on the King's Coronation Day".

Very few people ever got the better of Busby. His Undermaster, Edward Bagshaw, was foolish enough to try conclusions with him, and was suspended from his Mastership and reduced to ineffectual pamphleteering. The Governors of the College expended money and energy in clearing the Abbey of "monuments of supersitition," and the boys were compelled to attend the services conducted in the Abbey by the Non-conformist divines. But Busby's influence remained paramount, and one of his pupils, Robert South, later recalled: "On that black and eternally infamous day of the King's murder, I myself heard, and am now a witness, that he was publicly prayed for in this school, but an hour or two at most before his sacred head was struck off." It was an action which must have required some courage.

Busby's name appears in the Order of Procession at the funeral of Cromwell, and perhaps decency or expediency demanded his presence there. It was left to one of his pupils to express the school's feelings. Robert Uvedale, indignant at the pomp afforded to one whom he had been taught to regard as a usurper, sprang forward through the legs of the guards and snatched from the bier the little silk banner known as the Majesty Scutcheon,

darted back again before anyone could stop him, and disappeared into the crowd. The Majesty Scutcheon has been preserved by the Uvedale family, and is now in the hands of a descendant who has left it to the school. Thus eventually the trophy, preserved by the boyish indignation of a King's Scholar will return to the place of his early education.

After the Restoration Busby was rewarded for his loyalty by the offer of a prebendal stall at Westminster, and at the coronation of Charles II, he carried the ampulla of the new regalia. At the end of his long reign there was hardly a sphere in which his pupils had not gained distinction and not a few fame. The greatest architect of the age, Wren; the greatest poet, Dryden; the greatest philosopher, John Locke—all had been educated by him. He claimed to have educated no less than thirteen out of the bench of Bishops. Of these, John Dolben rose to be Archbishop of York during his Master's lifetime and Launcelot Blackburne attained the same position after Busby's death. Blackburne's career was unorthodox and would hardly have received his old Headmaster's approval. He survived to be described in his old age by Horace Walpole as "The jolly old Archbishop of York, who had all the manners of a man of quality though he had been a buccaneer and was now a clergyman; but he retained nothing from his first profession except his seraglio."

Busby's liberal views on education are attested by his project of founding at Christ Church a Lecture on Oriental languages; and in the library which he built for the school, and to which he left his books, is a number of books on Oriental languages. He also intended to found another Lecture "Of the Mathematics", and although there is no evidence that he himself was anything of a mathematician, one of his pupils was later to be the first person to expound the theory of elasticity, and to become one of the greatest scientific thinkers of his age. Even as a schoolboy, Robert Hooke's gifts were apparent. Before he left Westminster he astounded his teachers by mastering the six books of Euclid in one week, and before he left he had invented thirty different ways of flying. His interest in flying remained with him all his life, and in spite of repeated lack of success he was always ready to try any new method. His interesting diary, published

by the Oxford Press some time ago, contains a good many references to his aeronautical experiments. On one occasion, when walking in the Park with Sir Christopher Wren, they "talked of flying", and elsewhere he recalls a remarkable conversation with someone who had invented a method of flying "by means of powder". Sometimes he displays the characteristic caution of the inventor. "Told Sir Robert Southwell I could fly: not how".

Hooke was, of course, a considerable architect himself and seems to have acted as a sort of "ghost" to Wren, having a hand in designing the Monument and a good many of the City churches. One church was exclusively his work—the delightful little church in Willen in Buckinghamshire. The vicarage, which was also built by him, was destroyed during the war, and with it perished part of Busby's library. But by far the greater portion of his books fortunately survive at Westminster.

After the Restoration, Busby moved from his house in Dean's Yard to another which he built, just to the East of this room, in The Little Cloister. It was perhaps a relief to him to be away from the noise and clamour of boys, and it also enabled him to take more boarders into his original house.

With James II's attempted restoration of Roman Catholicism, it looked as if Busby's two loyalties, the Church and King, must clash. The Declaration of Indulgence was duly read in the Abbey on the 20th May, 1688, and Lord Dartmouth, who was then at the school, has described how as soon as the Dean began to read, there was such a noise of people leaving their seats that his voice could scarcely be heard, and by the time he had finished only the choir and the King's Scholars remained in the church.

In April 1695, in the eighty-ninth year of his age, and the fifty-seventh year of his Mastership, his long life came to an end. He was buried in the Abbey in the choir, and a monument was erected in the South Transept, which shows him, after the fashion of his time, reclining on his elbow, holding in the one hand a pen, and in the other an open book. Hearne states that for his epitaph he wished to have the single word "Oblivio", but instead a long Latin inscription sets forth his virtues and benefactions. For a tablet in the school a shorter epitaph would

have sufficed, that accorded later to one of the greatest of his pupils. "Si monumentum requiris, circumspeice."

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Old Dormitory of the Queen's Scholars, formerly the granery of the monks, was in a state of disrepair. With good-humoured resignation the boys made fun of their misfortunes in the prologues and epilogues to the Latin Play.

"Twill cost you nothing to repair that Wall,  
You need not pull it down, but let it fall"

the audience were told in 1728, and the present Dormitory would undoubtedly have been completed long before had it not been for a controversy which had developed about its site, and which reached the Law Courts and finally the House of Lords. By the time that it was settled Wren who had prepared plans for the re-building, had died and the present Dormitory is the work of Lord Burlington, who also built the School Gateway which was long attributed to Inigo Jones. Burlington's Dormitory, which is one of the earliest Palladian buildings in England, was the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza in reverse. At Vicenza there is a mean exterior and that exquisite interior. Here at Westminster Burlington's exquisite exterior concealed a great barrack-like room, 180 feet long, which for nearly two centuries was thought good enough for the boys who lived and slept and quarrelled in it. In the eighteenth century the conditions were appalling not only in College but in all the boarding houses, and discipline was fitful and irrational. Robert Southey, who started his literary career with a school paper called the *Flagellant*, was foolish enough to criticise the methods of his Headmaster, William Vincent, and in the fifth number set out to prove that "flogging were invented solely by the malice of the devil." The article was harmless enough, but it aroused Vincent's wrath. The publisher was forced to disclose the identity of the pseudonym under which it was written and Southey's school career came to an abrupt end. The Headmaster's indignation had been shared by one of the most recent additions to his staff. "Read the fifth number of the *Flagellant*" wrote John Smith in his diary on March 29th, 1792, "which I should suppose would be the cause of expulsion of the boy who was weak and wicked enough to



write it." Smith had been captain of the school in 1784 and had returned from Trinity College, Cambridge, as an Usher in 1788, although the offer of a post at Westminster, which had come to him while he was still an undergraduate, had not at first attracted him, for he was a good scholar, and had hoped to be elected a Fellow of his College. But one September day at Cambridge, while he was "ruminating on the tedious and weary life of an Usher, a dun presented his bill. This soon made school fetters appear silken bandages." His mind was made up; he accepted Vincent's offer, and without even waiting to take his degree began work at Westminster.

His diary is of very great interest, because it shows the school from an unusual angle. Quite a number of schoolboy reminiscences of the time exist, but here is a picture of Westminster as seen by a master, and a pretty reluctant one at that. The first entry after his arrival strikes a note of cautious optimism. "From Dr. Vincent's civility, Wingfield's attention and a distant sort of intimacy with the rest of the Ushers I hope my new situation will be tolerable." But even these qualified hopes soon proved to be too sanguine. As long as he was House Usher of Severne's which was one of the smaller boarding houses, things were fairly easy and he even found time to play cricket with the boys, but in 1791 he was transferred to another House. I had better perhaps explain, that the system of school houses as we know it now, did not exist in the eighteenth century. Boys coming from far afield boarded with a hostess or dame and since an elderly lady could not be expected to control 30 or 40 unruly boys it was the custom to engage one of the younger masters to keep order. Even so, practical joking and high spirits were not to be suppressed. Frederick Reynolds, who entered Westminster at the age of eleven, was the victim of a practical joke on his very first night at school, and wrote home a letter which has always seemed to me moving in its epigrammatic appeal. "My dear, dear mother, If you don't let me come home, I die. I am all over ink and my fine clothes have been spoilt. I have been tossed in a blanket and have seen a ghost. I am, my dear, dear mother, Your dutiful and most unhappy son, Freddy. P.S. Remember me to my father."

In 1791, as I have said, Smith went to one of the larger houses, and it must have seemed to him a piece of good fortune that its Dame should have chosen so junior a master to look after her boys. It meant increased prestige, and also it meant an increased income, but neither prestige nor income were adequate compensation for the indiscipline which he found existing when he took over his duties, and which continued, with intervals, until he laid them down. His diary affords a very good picture of his difficulties. "Opposition and discontent on all sides", he wrote. "Such are the pleasures of a boarding house." That was on 23rd October, 1792. Again on 27th March: "When I came home to take call-over I found the house in everything but open rebellion. Talked to Mrs. Clapham and the boys, and made some miserable temporising shift as to order." A month later, things were as bad again. 27th April, 1792: "Miserably low. At home all the evening, and in the midst of destruction, noise, tumult, and everything but rebellion." "Haunted with this damned house", he adds on 6th May, "In which I think there must inevitably be a riot before the holidays"; and so the tale goes on. Sometimes the house was "Sullen and silent", or "In gloomy calm at dinner", and at other times it was "wildly uproarious". On his return from cards one evening he was met by "a solemn march and procession of the boys", a masquerade about which he thought proper to inform Dr. Vincent. And on another evening, on his return "Found the boys and servants dancing together in the hall". There was a riot because the boys did not get enough supper, and another because they did not get enough coal. Mrs. Clapham's parlour windows were broken, and there was "sneezing by platoons" in the hall; and whilst all this was going on, there were needless to say, innumerable vexatious and time-wasting incidents concerning individual boys. Lawson swallowed a button. Allen kicked down the pantry door in a temper. Dickens got a severe cut from a brickbat thrown from Mrs. Grant's yard. Reynolds was concussed by being tossed in a blanket. Corry was found drunk in bed at locking-up time, and Montgomery came home drunk at 12 o'clock. Lord Dupplin, on being reprimanded, was "not deficient in arrogance."

By 1841 the numbers which had been 350 or so twenty years

earlier, had fallen to sixty-seven and it looked as if the school must collapse. This state of affairs was partly due to inefficient Headmasters, and partly to the sudden growth of London. As late as 1800 it was possible to look out from Westminster and see Chelsea Hospital across the fields in the distance, but the scene had completely changed by 1850. It is difficult, I think, for the present generation of boys to recapture the atmosphere of the school a century ago. This term's new boys, who look out across the roofs of Ashburnham House towards the Abbey from their dormitory windows, see substantially the same view as their predecessors, but a century ago the sub-Dean, Lord John Thynne, who had officiated at Queen Victoria's coronation, occupied Ashburnham House, and the wall, with the little classical gatehouse dividing his garden from Little Dean's Yard was a barrier across which no master or boy was likely to pass. The whole school was taught in the room where we are now. Instead of Sir Gilbert Scott's gothic fantasy which you saw when you came into Dean's Yard there was a row of eighteenth century houses, containing parts of the medieval Gatehouse. Beyond, to the North, was the world of elegance, Whitehall, the Park, and a ribbon of Nash's stucco running up to Regent's Park. To the West, Victoria Street had just been driven through the squalor of medieval Westminster. To the South, with the exception of College Street and Barton Street, which were shabby genteel, the squalor remained, and right down to the end of the last century no boy was to venture to go by the direct way to Vincent Square. To the East the new Palace of Westminster was rising from the ashes of the fire of 1834, and had not yet been formally opened by the Queen, nor had the Victoria Tower, of course, risen to dominate the view from the entrance of Little Dean's Yard. But Big Ben was already half built and the Abbey clock, which since the destruction of the old clock tower and the Palace of Westminster had lorded it erratically around the district was soon to be eclipsed by the mighty chime which today rings round the world.

The appalling condition of the surrounding districts meant that no one was likely to send their boys here, and the condition of the school was the subject of unfavourable comment by the

Public Schools Commission of 1864. There are nine "official" public schools in this country, and I often hear Westminsters, and for that matter Etonians and Wykehamists, say how proud they are to be one of the public schools established by Act of Parliament. In actual fact the reason why they were established by Act of Parliament is that they were so bad that their condition had to be enquired into, and needless to say at Westminster recovery was slow. There was the major setback of the war when our buildings were severely damaged and this room which had a fine fifteenth century roof, was left a smoking ruin. College Dormitory was gutted, and when the school returned after the war it had to compress itself into very little space; but as we go round the school I hope you will agree that we are extremely fortunate in possessing such beautiful buildings, and that considering that we were in the centre of the target, we are extremely fortunate to have suffered so lightly.



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WESTMINSTER SCHOOL

showing Ashburton House and Inigo Jones's entrance to "School"  
with the Abbey in the background