

# HISTORIANS DISCUSS THE “450<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY” OF THE FOUNDING OF BURY GRAMMAR SCHOOL \*

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*Q. The start of a new year, and a new decade, brings to fruition a major investment of time and money by the present managers and governors at Bury Grammar School to celebrate what they advertise as a major historical event, namely the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the School.*

*The usual calendar of events in the School year, such as Founders’ Day in early May and the annual meetings of the alumni associations in Bury and in London, will in 2020 be wrapped around with 450<sup>th</sup> public relations trimmings. And there will be a small number of special events throughout the year.*

*Overall, is this going to be a worthwhile effort?*

A. Well, the first thing to notice is that until now no-one has ever had the temerity to suggest that the founding date of the School is known for sure and that there is in 2020, therefore, a definite 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary to celebrate.

The one painstakingly careful piece of scholarship that examines the history of the School, and which was published by the School itself just about twenty years ago, is quite clear about this.

The founding date of the School is not known and, given the limited data from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries professional and amateur historians must work with, an exact founding date for the School is unknowable.

1570 is a guesstimate and the one that the School historian explicitly but tentatively incorporated into the title of his book. But that’s all it is. The pretense that 1570 is a firm founding date, a warranted historical fact, and that 2020 really marks the School’s 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary is false. It is an audacious claim and therefore carries some risks.

*Q. What do you think the risks are?*

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\* There is only one, major published work on the history of Bury Grammar School. It was written by Dr. Ian Fallows, formerly Vice Captain of School, Exhibitioner of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and for many years the Headmaster of Batley Grammar School. The work was published by the School itself in 2001. In 1976, Derek Hodgkiss and the late Herbert Asquith, both former Second Masters of the Boys’ School, developed and the School again published a book of essays marking the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the re-founding of the School through a bequest in 1726 from Roger Kay. That 1976 publication included an essay by Sonia James, formerly Deputy Headmistress of the Girls’ School, about the history of Bury Grammar School Girls; an essay that Fallows reproduced as an appendix to his own book. A book of reminiscences was published privately by Janet Lawley, a former Headmistress, but does not purport to be a history of the Girls’ School. There have been one or two other notable contributions to the history of the School by former masters and students, published in local newspapers or on the internet. The discussion here draws on all these various sources.

A. The biggest one, obviously, is perceptual. How will people perceive the genuineness or authenticity or integrity of the appeal that is now being made on the back of the anniversary celebration to support a school that has survived for such a long time? Perceptions can have behavioral consequences.

In this case the implication of celebrating longevity is, of course, that the School wouldn't have lasted such a long time unless it was a really good school. And the hope must be that perceived good feelings about the School's lengthy past will carry over behaviorally to support for its present and future. But what's going to happen to those good feelings if the anniversary is a fiction?

Suppose in the first instance that no-one really knows how old the School is and that the claim to be 450 in 2020 is baseless. Putting 450 on a badge, whilst it might be superficially attractive and give the impression of certainty, would actually be an empty gesture. That, as just noted, is what history tells us.

Then suppose, secondly, that the purpose of all the hoopla surrounding the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary is not to celebrate a long School history at all, or to take history seriously, but rather to tell and sell a very different story; a story that is at most two or three years old about the re-imagining - what its engineers have called the modernization - of an old school that now in important even crucial respects differs from the School that historians have chronicled and which most people who are now living, and are therefore prospective donors, can remember.

Will people give if they think they've been conned?

Keep in mind as well that this is not the first time people in and around Bury, and to some extent elsewhere, have been asked to dig into their pockets and support the School financially. Some people think appeals have become too frequent.

It ought to be said, however, that over the course of time the people of Bury have been remarkably generous. To put a finer point on it, without the largely but not exclusively local support for the School that has materialized through a series of financial appeals that have been made since the mid-1950s, chiefly to underwrite improvements to the School's facilities, or what it now likes to call its estate, the School would likely not have survived in competition with its near neighbors.

*Q. What explains that local generosity? And why might it now be in jeopardy?*

A. The key factor, and again the published history of the School is clear from several sources about this, has been trust.

Appeals have never previously been made except after careful preparation and consultation with the relevant School and external communities, sometimes accompanied by quite complex and lengthy negotiations to set the parameters of what is to be achieved, and then followed by a straightforward statement of how much is needed and for what.

People in Lancashire, it's fair to say, appreciate such an honest and straightforward way of going about things and, if they're asked to help with something, like to know exactly what they're getting themselves into. Serious fund-raisers would agree with them.

So, when people realize that the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary is an artifice, albeit perhaps in some ways and through the use of modern social media a very clever exercise in public relations, but that it isn't real - that they are being made complicit in the celebration of a birthday that is a convenient fiction rather than an established historical fact - the bond of trust that has tied the people of Bury to their School will be shaken, and for many it will be broken.

And at that point the locally positive perceptions about the School and its long history that can be tapped behaviorally to raise money could very well be dissipated.

If that happens it would, of course, be unfortunate.

But the risk involved in the School not being careful to tell the truth about its history when it knows what it is seems clear enough.

*Q. Are you trying to say that a celebration of the School's long history is inappropriate?*

**A. Not at all.**

Historians like to celebrate the past. The School visits made in recent years under Mark Hone's leadership to the battlefields of the First World War, for example, are based on meticulous historical research. And those experiences have now been ongoing for so many years that they have become integral to the life of the School. They show that history can bring answers to perennial questions about service and sacrifice that have long gone unanswered. The Henry Dunster Society is another example of celebrating a small but quite remarkable part of Bury Grammar School's past, although in that case the fascination stems from having to confront questions about service and sacrifice that history will never be able to answer.

So, there are ways of celebrating parts of the School's past that don't involve making up things about history that aren't true or making historical claims that have a shaky foundation.

*Q. You seem to be saying that the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary has approached history cavalierly. Perhaps some specific examples would be helpful?*

A. Well, take for example the claim that Sir Robert Peel, a former British prime minister, is a distinguished alumnus of the School.

*Q. Fine. Tell us about Peel.*

A. Peel, who was born in 1788, likely spent a brief time when he was a very small boy, a petty, being taught by a clergyman in Bury and later in Tamworth, when the family moved to Tamworth in 1798. He may have been a pupil, but again only for a very brief time, at Bury Grammar and later at Hipperholme Grammar, near Halifax. But the evidence for both of those early schooling claims is anecdotal rather than textual. And neither school experience, if it happened, would likely have been formative.

By the time he was twelve Peel was for sure at Harrow School, which would most assuredly have been formative, and it is from Harrow that he went up in 1805 to Christ Church, Oxford, and made a brilliant showing. In 1808 he became the first Oxford student ever to take a double first in Classics and Mathematics. But it's a stretch for Bury Grammar to claim much credit for that academic success or for the political success that followed.

Make no mistake. Peel was for a time a widely admired and respected Conservative politician, and all sorts of places in Britain and elsewhere in what was then the Empire have tried to bask in the glow of his reputation by putting his name on streets and buildings, for example, and by erecting statues. One of those statues stands outside the entrance to St. Mary's Parish Church in Bury, where the School celebrates Founders' Day every May.

But a careful reading of history will show that neither Peel nor his father had much serious regard for Bury Grammar, or for Bury, or for the people of Bury. "Socially and politically," one historian records, "Bury ceased to be part of (Peel) family life after 1798." The father, for example, was for some years and on paper at least a governor of the School. But this was a sinecure afforded to a wealthy local manufacturer and there is scant evidence that he attended meetings or otherwise took his gubernatorial responsibilities seriously.

*Q. Are there other examples that stand out?*

A. We might briefly mention three.

The timeline of School history that has been invented to decorate the website for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary includes references to the School crest, to the headmastership of William Howlett, and to the existence of a Girls' School.

*Q. Let's take the crest first?*

A. Readers of the anniversary timeline are told that the School crest dates from 1832 and that it was "updated in 2014 to its current format." The history of School badges is more complex than that.

In fact, although it's likely that Henry Boutflower, who was appointed Headmaster in 1832, and his assistant John Just, devised a distinctive emblem for the School that began to appear as a bookplate on School prizes in 1840, history does not record exactly when Boutflower and Just invented their design. For historians, however, 1840

would be a better date to use for the origination of the emblem than 1832, the initial date of Boutflower's appointment.

What has come to be called the School crest was never part of a School coat of arms. It's clear, in fact, that the School has never been armigerous.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the School, like many other grammar schools at the time, wanted a coat of arms. And in 1903 put on record its interest in a grant that might be a combination of the arms previously granted to the Hulme and Kay families, both with strong associations with the School. But, after tasking one of their members to take the matter up with the College of Heralds, the School governors for whatever reason dropped the ball, and no grant of arms was ever made to the School.

This did not prevent the governors from carving what look like arms on the entrances to the new School building that began to house the Boys' School and the Girls' School in 1906. But those devices are the arms of the Kay family, informally differenced with the addition of a crescent and the Boutflower motto: *Sanctas clavis fores aperit*. A School historian reproduces that unofficial and unregistered 1906 design as it appeared on the pocket of a School blazer in 1913.

So, in heraldic terms the School has used several different visual images over the course of time but never a crest with an approved or official form dating from 1832. And never a coat of arms with a crest sanctioned by the College of Heralds.

The 2014 update of the School badge is principally of interest, therefore, for what it tells us about the School's present quest for modernity, not for what it tells us about the history of the School's repeated and creative efforts to settle on a visual image to represent itself, its history, and its aspirations.

*Q. But there's nothing wrong with using a swan as the School's distinctive symbol, is there?*

A. Nothing at all, so long as it's clearly understood that the relationship between Henry Bury, the School's seventeenth century benefactor, and the Duc de Berry, a fourteenth century son of the King of France, is a figment of Boutflower and Just's imagination.

It's not even likely that there was any connection between the Henry de Bury who was the School benefactor's fourteenth century ancestor and a fourteenth century French duke who used the swan as one of his favorite devices.

So, when the anniversary timeline says that "the swan was the symbol of the medieval French Duc de Berry (Henry Bury)" it's playing fast and loose with history. And that strikes us as a strange thing for an independent grammar school to do as part of a campaign that ostensibly celebrates history.

*Q. What about William Howlett?*

A. The anniversary appeal describes Howlett as a legendary figure because “he died of a broken heart following the loss of 98 old boys in the Great War, all but one of whom had attended the School while he was Headmaster.”

Presumably, this sentimentality is meant to make Howlett appealing and relevant to a modern pool of prospective parents and donors to the School, who might otherwise have trouble identifying with Howlett or understanding why he deserves special mention for his role in the School’s long history.

But it is hardly remarkable that Howlett was heart broken by the deaths of so many of his former students in the First World War. *Of course he was!*

We can and should contrast this sentimental appraisal of Howlett with what School historians have to say about him.

One writes, for example, that “In his long Headmastership, spanning forty years, ...Howlett presided over the transformation of Bury Grammar School. It trebled in size, acquired new buildings and a new constitution, gained the financial support of the Hulme trustees and joined with the Girls’ High School which had been set up in 1884 (and then became Bury Grammar School Girls). (Howlett was) in a very real sense (after Henry Bury and Roger Kay) the third founder of the School.”

And another writes that “Howlett was one of a group of Grammar School Headmasters in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century whose influence on the course of secondary education in (the country as a whole) has been less trumpeted but is every bit as important as that of their colleagues in boarding schools. They were men who taught in rapidly growing towns and cities that were often at the time ugly and unfashionable and where the industrial revolution had bitten hard. But to boys of all classes they brought rich educational gifts and in the sheer number of lives they influenced must be regarded as among the most potent forces in the development of nineteenth century education... W.H. Howlett...deserves to be numbered...as one of the great headmasters of his day.”

### *Q. And the Girls’ School?*

A. When the book length history of the School was written its author observed that from January 1906 “there were two grammar schools in Bury, in the same large (new) building administered under a Joint Foundation but *going their separate ways under their separate Heads.*”

This arrangement for educational governance of boys and girls at Bury Grammar came to an end recently when, as the Department for Education’s database on independent schools in Britain dryly observes about Bury Grammar School Girls, “this school closed on 23/05/2018.”

The arrangement whereby the Boys’ School and the Girls’ School shared the same building had come to an end earlier, when a new building for the Boys’ School was constructed on the other side of Bridge Road from where the 1906 building stands.

Between 1900, however, when the governors formally took over the Bury High School for Girls on Bolton Street, which had opened in 1884, and May 2018, when Bury Grammar School Girls disappeared from the independent grammar school record books, the Girls' School led an essentially independent existence for 118 years and established for itself during that time a distinguished academic reputation.

One would have thought, then, that the disappearance of the Girls' School after 118 years deserved some attention in a timeline that purports to identify the major highlights of 450 years of educational history. The creation of a girls' school in Bury is noted. Its move in 1906 as Bury Grammar School Girls to premises on Bridge Road is noted. And its sole occupancy of those premises after a new Boys' School building opened across the street is also noted. So, the timeline lets us track the comings and goings of the Girls' School as it moved from one building to another.

But is that what should pass for its history?

Why is nothing said about why a girls' school was needed in Bury? Or what it achieved? Or how its disappearance was justified and by whom, and whether that disappearance ought to be properly commemorated? Is it in any sense a cause for regret or disappointment? Or should we rejoice that the Girls' School is gone? Perhaps no-one cares, although historians would find that strange, given what we know about what the Girls' School accomplished.

The impression is conveyed, quite falsely, both by the anniversary timeline and by the larger School website in which it is embedded that Bury still has a grammar school for girls. In fact, Bury Grammar is now a single school in which segregation of boys and girls is maintained in the Junior and Senior years, but not in the Kindergarten or Sixth Form, because that "is a structure (a so-called diamond structure) which allows pupils to develop into confident, happy learners in environments which are perfect for their age (*sic*) and conducive to a high quality education. Our junior and senior pupils thrive in their single sex teaching groups, making spectacular progress (*sic*) at every level."

The logic of that tendentious claim is, of course, that the Girls' School should never have closed. And one is left to wonder, therefore, whether the disappearance of an independent Girls' School in Bury has some other explanation - a concession to administrative economy and efficiency, perhaps, that has been papered over for fee-paying parents by telling them they can have their cake and eat it too; segregation by sex but with single school running costs.

Our point is not that the disappearance of the Girls' School hasn't been satisfactorily explained but that it hasn't been mentioned at all in the celebration of a history in which the independent existence of a Girls' School was key both to Bury Grammar's identity and its *raison d'être*.

[ To be continued ].