

## **Maidstone Grammar School for Girls Prize Giving**

The first bridge at Rochester was built by the Romans soon after the invasion of AD43. The first significant bridge built by the Romans in this country.

Once the Roman Empire fell, the maintenance of the bridge was organised by dividing the structure into sections and allocating responsibility for each pier and each length of the deck to a different Parish or manor across the county. The parishes of Maidstone were included in that responsibility.

In 1381, the River Medway froze solid and, when the thaw came, the ice and floodwaters finally swept away the old Rochester Bridge.

Two benefactors, Sir John de Cobham and Sir Robert Knolles, organised the funding and construction of a new stone bridge. In 1399, they also arranged for King Richard II to set up a charitable trust, now known as the Rochester Bridge Trust, to take care of the bridge and also to raise the funds for its upkeep.

At this time, supporting the provision of river crossings was seen as a pious act and many donors gave land or money to be used for the perpetual maintenance of Rochester Bridge. This major endowment meant that the parishes which had historically contributed to the Bridge were, in practice, relieved of their financial obligations although these remained in place in theory until 1908 should the Trust's endowment have failed at any time.

Maintaining the stone and timber bridge was an expensive business and all the resources of the Trust were fully committed to this for the next 475 years. In 1856, the Trust replaced the old stone crossing with a new cast iron bridge which, initially at least, required far less maintenance.

The Trust's lands and financial investments continued to generate income and, for the first time, the charity found itself with surplus funds beyond what was needed for the maintenance of Rochester Bridge.

How did this Trust come to be involved with Maidstone Grammar School for Girls?

In 1868 the Endowed Schools Act had been passed. This allowed charities with surplus funds to divert them for educational purposes.

The Trust decided to allocate some of its surplus funds for the foundation of grammar schools for girls in both Rochester and Maidstone.

At Maidstone, a site was found at Albion Road and local architect and builder, Mr Stephens, was appointed to prepare designs. The site cost £1,000; the building £3,000, and the furniture £500. A sum of £2,000 was set aside for the headmistress's salary and for scholarships for girls from the parishes whose parents were unable to afford the fees, which were £10 per year.

A wonderful document from the Trust's archives entitled "General Requirements" sets out what features the building was required to have.

The first line states "Accommodation – one hundred girls, readily capable of enlargement" which can be interpreted in more than one way. Perhaps the food was very good!

There were to be three large classrooms and one small one; a studio; a chemical laboratory; two small rooms for music; and a hall with gallery for "assembly, drill, recreation or dining"; a headteachers private room with lavatory and WC; and a staff room. There were to be a kitchen, scullery and two caretakers' bedrooms.

The detailed requirements for the cloakroom read: "[to be] provided with wrought iron pegs, numbered, one foot apart. Boot boxes with perforated grating. Hot water pipes running under all seats and a shelf above for galoshes. Separate umbrella stand, with numbered spaces".

Four WC's were to be provided for the whole school, with an intriguing, and very modern-sounding twist of "automatic apparatus acting at 30 seconds intervals".

Arrangements for fun were not neglected and the specification for the playground included "two sets of swings and one roundabout, with ropes to be provided".

The School was opened on 20 January 1888 at 3.30pm by Sir John Lubbock, later the first Lord Avebury. He was a remarkable man who had wide interests and he has left his mark on our lives today.

He was a friend of Charles Darwin and a Liberal MP for Maidstone. His first Parliamentary success was in 1871 when the Bank Holiday Act was passed, this granted the August Bank Holiday. Contemporary newspaper accounts suggested that it should be called St Lubbock's day – he became one of the most popular figures in England. He later played a significant role in the introduction of early closing and Sunday closing laws for shops, and founded the Electoral Reform Society.

He was a great authority at the time on the subject of archaeology and was responsible for inventing the names Palaeolithic and Neolithic to denote the Old and New Stone Ages.

Overall, he was a genuinely remarkable man.

The curriculum included Latin, French, German and English; history and geography; mathematics, science, drawing and music. There was also to be instruction in "the laws of health".

Although this seems like a reasonable range of subjects to us today, the words of Sir John Lubbock show how progressive some of the subjects were, but perhaps not in the way we might expect. Boys' public school education of the time was very much focussed on history and the classics, but the girls at Maidstone were to have a much broader range of subjects.

John Lubbock said: "Everyone now recognises that education is good for girls as well as for boys".

"[the breadth of curriculum] is much to the credit of girls, for it always appears to be assumed that they can learn much more than boys. I have never understood why it should be possible to teach science and modern languages in a girls' school and quite impossible to teach them in a boys' school. I went from the bottom to the top of a great public school and never did a sum the whole time I was there".

The first Headteacher was Miss Pope, a scholar of Girton College, a Cambridge science graduate, and former headmistress of Jersey High School.

In her speech at the opening, a copy of which also survives in the Trust's archives, she said:

"I do not like parents to bring their children to me and say "I wish my girl to be finished". I know that "finishing" a girl is supposed to be that she learns a certain amount, and then takes her place in society. But it seems to me that some parents really forget that education goes on [long] after the girl has passed into womanhood – and even into old age.

"A school like this is ... a very important institution because we can receive the children

of those who cannot afford to give them a very expensive education; and we are able to receive children of all classes; there is no bar or limitation of any kind. Provided they behave themselves, they can all enter”.

She also said “I hope [that] ... running through the whole [school there will be] a desire for honest work and the cultivation of good manners ... That our children may, in fact, learn to be gentlewomen, no matter what their position in society”.

And so the work of the school was begun, and although different words might be used today, many of the same objectives – to give girls a love of lifetime education and send them out in the world fully equipped as rounded and productive citizens – continue to the current day. I am sure that John Lubbock and Miss Pope would be both astounded and delighted at all that is being achieved 129 years on.

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