

## CRANBROOK: THE CLASSICS CONTROVERSY

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The Schools Inquiry Commission, generally known as the Taunton Commission, was appointed in 1864 and reported in 1868. It carried out a remarkably thorough investigation of English secondary education and presented comparisons with other countries' systems.

Of the innumerable well-merited criticisms made by the Commissioners of what they found, many related to the continued dominance of Latin and Greek in the old grammar schools. 'It is more often taught to keep up a show of obedience to founders' wills than for any better reason. It is so taught in the majority of cases that it literally comes to nothing. Finally, it furnishes the pretext for the neglect of all other useful learning, and is the indirect means of keeping down the general level of education in every small town which is so unfortunate as to possess an endowment.'

One such small town was Cranbrook. Its grammar school was in fact in good hands at the time of the Taunton Commission, but at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century there had been vigorous complaints by the townspeople about the purely classical education which was offered to local boys. The story of these complaints, and the school's tardy responses to them, is told below; it is undoubtedly typical of its period, though the strength of aggressive non-conformist criticism of the establishment had always been particularly marked in Cranbrook.

Sadly, few Cranbrook School records survive from its early period. We know that building and land were bequeathed by John Blubery in 1518 to found 'a frescole house for all the poor children of the town of Cranbroke', and the school still possesses its Elizabethan charter of 1574. Like other charters of its time, the Cranbrook one says nothing specific about what is to be taught, but there is no doubt that the emphasis was on Latin grammar.

Latin grammar had been taught in medieval schools too – really as an essential vocational requirement for a clerical career in any sense – along with some Rhetoric and Logic. In the period of the New

Learning early in the sixteenth century, printed Latin grammar books appeared, of which Henry VIII ordered Lily's Grammar to be used exclusively. Now, having mastered the grammar, boys went on to read Latin authors, and to write Latin compositions and verse; we know that in many schools Latin had to be spoken all the time in class and at meals. Greek, too, became quite commonly taught in the second half of the sixteenth century though to less advanced level. Other than these classical disciplines, there might be a little writing and arithmetic offered in the grammar schools – but writing was really supposed to have been learnt before grammar school entry, and arithmetic was not generally seen as important, though 'accounts' were sometimes taught to future apprentices in particular.

How typically the early Cranbrook Masters (that is, headmasters – but we know of no assistant masters until after 1850) followed this pattern, it is very hard to say: the Governors' Minutes survive from 1623, but say far more on finance than on education. We do know that in 1666 there was one classroom only, and that the meagre inventory of school possessions included three Latin or Greek lexicons. Surviving, too, is a wearisome early school play about the Vices and Virtues, containing Latin, Greek and English sections, written by Samuel Hoadley, Master from 1668 to 1671.

For most English grammar schools, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were centuries of stagnation, and there is no reason to suppose otherwise of Cranbrook's tiny and undistinguished school. But, as elsewhere, the story becomes more interesting towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Late eighteenth-century English society was led by the landed ruling class, in many respects highly cultured, enjoying wealth and privilege, and for the most part secure in a sleepy Anglican belief, or at least acquiescence. As to the classics, Lord Chesterfield in his *Letters*, first published in 1774, had no doubts: 'Classical knowledge is absolutely necessary for everybody, because everybody has agreed to think and call it so.' But the sons of the aristocracy and gentry were not likely to acquire their classical learning in the grammar schools: unless attending one of the few best of these schools, taking on a 'public school' status, they were more likely to follow a private school or private tutoring path to Oxford or Cambridge. The grammar schools were rather more for the likes of Samuel Johnson, the bookseller's son.

Meanwhile, though it was still mainly a rural society, another England, of course, was emerging – an England where pure science was advancing quite fast, and where simple scientific principles were increasingly being applied in manufacturing, so that the 'workshop of the world' was coming about. Classical education for their sons was

not likely to attract the new entrepreneurs of the industrial revolution. Nor had it ever dominated the curricula of the Academies of the dissenters – still victims of discriminatory legislation – many of whom were prominent in the scientific, industrial and commercial advance of the period. Education at university and even grammar school could not forever be unaffected by these developments: interestingly, Joseph Cornish's *Attempt to display the Importance of Classical Learning* (1783) justifies Greek and Latin on the grounds that the technical terms in the natural sciences, as well as in the arts, originate from the classical languages.

While many of the eighteenth-century grammar schools declined or disappeared – or, like Cranbrook's, just saved themselves by taking on some boarders or other fee-payers to augment the Master's stipend – there were attempts by an enlightened minority to reform curricula. (There was no public examination syllabus for schools until the second half of the nineteenth century). Lively national debate began on the issue, the Edgeworths' *Practical Education* being published in 1798, and radicals including Bentham and Cobbett attacking the narrowness of what was taught. Some grammar schools dared to add some mathematics, modern languages and even other subjects to their curricula. But a famous judicial decision of 1805 by Lord Chancellor Eldon, concerning Leeds Grammar School, went against its governors, who had sought to use endowment funds to employ staff for the new subjects: while the judgment did not disallow the new subjects in an ancillary role, it emphasised that, as Dr Johnson had said, a grammar school was an institution for 'teaching grammatically the learned languages'. Eldon's judgment delayed the process of reform; not until 1840 did the Grammar Schools Act give freedom to governors to introduce new subjects – though it is true that, provided that Latin and Greek remained central, a number of the schools had managed to do so before that date.

Against that background, Cranbrook was, it seems, both typical and untypical.

Typical was the decay, or at least misuse, of the foundation – a cosy, Anglican-dominated arrangement whereby the founder's bequest provided a reasonable living for the Master, himself a cleric, and the school, mainly attended by boarders, came to be of no real use at all to the townspeople. The calibre of successive Masters was, to say the least, undistinguished: Venner (1755–65) was imprisoned for debt; Crooke (1765–69) went mad; Greenall (1792–1812) and Davies (1812–51) as will be made clear below, were by no means educational reformers.

Yet, the little town itself was untypical, in the strength both of its

industrial tradition and of the frequently non-conformist artisan or urbanised class that went with it. The town's industrial heyday had been at the time of Elizabeth's charter, when it was the centre of a major cloth industry, but, although that industry was no more, there was, thanks perhaps to road improvements, remarkable population growth and relative prosperity from 1770 to 1840; T.D.W. Dearn's 1815 account shows that, in addition to its role as an agricultural marketing centre, Cranbrook had its breweries, windmills, hat factory, rope walk, hop-sacking manufacture, tannery, braziers, printers, wig-makers and bank. And as to non-conformity, Hasted in 1798 commented on its strength, with four meeting houses; soon to be built, too, were the General Baptist Chapel (now Cramp Institute) in 1807 and the Providence Chapel behind Stone Street in 1813. It was to be non-conformists who took the lead in putting pressure on the school to reform.

The school Governors' Minute Book first alludes to the classics issue in an entry of March 1769, right at the beginning of the long mastership of the Reverend Thomas Greenall. Most unusually, this entry comprises a statement on the part of the Master himself, then a young ex-curate of Cranbrook: 'I hereby with my own voluntary consent engage myself to teach the Latin Boys to write and sum one hour in the forenoon and another in the afternoon so long as the Trustees shall think it proper.' The last nine words are striking: clearly Greenall knew that it might well be considered improper in a grammar school. And his entry is indeed followed by a firm note of protest from one of the governors, William Tempest, that such a proposal was 'illegal according to the charter.'

But headmasters have a habit of getting their own way. The Minute Book gives us no direct evidence on how the issue was settled in Greenall's early years, but it seems reasonable to infer from a 1784 governors' resolution about 'classical books' (for which no charge was to be made to the foundation boys) that there were also non-classical books in use. Firmer support for this view comes from the records of the 1817 lawsuit against the governors – discussed at great length below – in which the plaintiffs claimed that Greenall in his younger days as Master had taught English grammar, reading, writing and arithmetic to the foundation boys for over thirty years, with no charge for pens and ink.

This, then, renders puzzling the next references in the governors' Minute Book – those of 1804. Although we know that Greenall was infirm in his last few years as Master, it is by no means clear that this was the case as early as 1804. Hasted, an impeccably independent witness, commented favourably upon the school's reputation in 1798, and that the governors themselves esteemed Greenall's work seems

to be a reasonable deduction from the fact that in the inflationary years around the turn of the century they repeatedly gave him annual gratuities, of the order of £20, on top of his £40 salary.

But then in 1804 – the year that the salary was in fact officially raised from £40 to £60 – we read in the Minute Book of the governors' intention to consider 'the necessity of having writing and accounts taught to a certain number of children of the parish', with the suggestion that a master (meaning an Usher, or assistant master) be appointed for the purpose, as governors' income appeared to suffice for this. Yet, no Usher was appointed.

Why not? There seems no doubt that it was because Greenall opposed the notion. We know that by 1808 the governors' relationship with Greenall had deteriorated to one of outright confrontation: an 1808 entry says that they 'will and direct that the Rev Mr Greenall . . . shall provide a proper Assistant to teach the sons of the Inhabitants of Cranbrook to read and write English also to learn Arithmetic (and Latin when requir'd) for the space of four hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon' – on pain of immediate dismissal. A remarkable turnabout from 1769, when Greenall was wishing to teach the three Rs and a governor had opposed! But, as in the earlier case, the Master had his way, and in his defence it must be said that the teaching day as proposed by the governors could not have been recognised as that of a grammar school. There was no dismissal of Greenall, who resigned in his seventieth year in 1812.

Having now to elect a new Master, the governors received a remarkable petition, on the part of four townsmen, backed by a hundred signatories who in fact included two future governors. The governors who received it were in no strong position, on account of the fact that their late chairman, Thomas Adams, on his death in 1807 had been found to have swindled the foundation out of some £950, which was never recovered; nevertheless, the petition was respectful in tone. It was critical of Greenall, and urged upon the governors both care in making the new appointment, and the construction of new regulations concerning foundation boys' admission, the school's management and the Master's conduct. Finally, as regards syllabus, there was besought the appointment of a Master who would be 'qualified and disposed to give that USEFUL EDUCATION, necessary for the Man of Business and the useful Member of Society.' Could the Utilitarianism of the period have been more clearly expressed?

Most regrettably, though, the governors proceeded to make a disastrous appointment – that of Daniel Davies, already vicar of Cranbrook and thus himself *ex officio* a governor – to the attractive

post. There was no construction of new regulations as besought. Nevertheless, the governors did respond to the request of the petitioners (and no doubt to their own inclinations as seen in 1804) by making Davies enter into a £500 bond to teach the foundation boys reading, writing and arithmetic. £500 was a considerable sum, and the governors appeared to have acted decisively. Yet, the next relevant entry in the Minute Book is of 1815: it states that the bond has been cancelled as illegal and has been returned to Davies who 'shall strictly adhere to the Charter'! And in January 1816, there duly followed an announcement on Davies' part that foundation boys would henceforth have to pay one guinea per quarter for tuition in English grammar and the three Rs. All the day boys save two were withdrawn, apparently in protest.

Such is the background of the best-documented episode of the period which we possess: an 1817 lawsuit brought against the governors by six local inhabitants, probably all non-conformists. They were William Buss and John Wilmshurst (two of the four principals of the 1812 petition), Joseph and Jesse Dobell (Dobells were successively ministers of the General Baptist church), William Uicume and Samuel Reader. The case was heard at no less high a level than by the Master of the Rolls, Sir William Grant, and the governors briefed Sir Samuel Romilly, the former solicitor-general and eminent criminal law reformer, to speak on their behalf.

The plaintiffs sought the dismissal of both Master and governors. There was a farrago of complaints – all interconnected, and all seeming to the modern reader to have a good deal of validity: in addition to the Adams embezzlement, the fruitless 1812 bond and the new charges by Davies, there was more general protest over the way that the Tudor bequest had been subverted so that the Master, appointed in dubious circumstances, appeared now to be hand in glove with the governors, enjoying the endowment income in running a mainly boarding school where the very few local boys who did attend suffered discriminatory treatment of various sorts.

With the discipline of his profession, the Master of the Rolls, while making some well-founded criticism of Davies in various particulars, isolated the essence of the legal case, which he said was as to the validity of the bond and the permissibility of teaching the three Rs in a grammar school. The bond he said, was invalid: in a school for classics, the master could not properly teach classics and the three Rs, and it was not appropriate to pay an Usher out of the foundation's bequest to the Master. As to the lack of day pupils, Grant found no proof that this was due to the absence of three Rs teaching and consequently he saw no reason to direct that there should be any. Davies had not emerged with credit, but he and the governors had won their case.

In apparent magnanimity, Davies after the conclusion of the case wrote to the governors that he felt 'no disposition . . . to withhold from Foundation scholars the opportunity of learning writing and arithmetic at the Free Grammar School'; he said that the going rate at three out of five of the local grammar schools was equal to what he had been charging, and he offered in fact to drop his charge from a guinea to fifteen shillings a quarter for 'instruction . . . in English, History, Geography, Writing and Arithmetic.' But, whatever the local going rate may have been, the number of foundation boys at the school remained negligible in the thirty-three undistinguished further years that Davies remained Master: indeed, as often as not, from 1837 onwards, there were none at all, so that the school founded for the poor children of Cranbrook had become entirely a boarding school. The Minute Book gives us little further information, save that in 1839 there was a charge of ten shillings a quarter for 'writing and arithmetic', which Davies was now suggesting might be reduced to five shillings because it did deter local parents. The wary governors, with long memories no doubt, simply noted that they were not authorised to interfere!

When Davies at last died in 1850, the governors did respond to the opportunity for reform, in many respects with surprising vigour. A quite impressive new school constitution was adopted, with a particular eye to local interests and a fair deal for the foundation boys. But in the matter of the syllabus very little concession was made: the master was 'to be careful to inculcate sound religious principles throughout the school, and to instruct all the Foundation boys in the Latin and Greek tongues, freely, for which the stipend is his compensation; and, in order to encourage the Inhabitants to avail themselves of the advantages of a learned education, he is to afford instruction in Arithmetic, Writing, Modern History and Geography to such of the Foundation boys whose parents or guardians may be desirous thereof, and willing to pay for the same one guinea per quarter; he is in like manner to afford instruction in the elements of Mathematics for one guinea per quarter; but these two latter branches of education are optional on the part of parents or guardians'. And elsewhere in the new constitution the foundation boy is told to 'devote himself assiduously to the attainment of the Latin and Greek languages, as the primary and characteristic object of his Education,' though he also has the 'privilege of being instructed in the elementary branches and in Mathematics'. Such was the pace of educational advance in Cranbrook at the time when the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was being opened in the Crystal Palace.

Fortunately, the newly appointed Master, John Allan (1851–66),

was energetic and progressive. The Minute Book in August 1852, reports for the first time an annual examination, with an external examiner, the Rev. Thomas Crick, late Fellow and Tutor of St. John's College, Cambridge: the First (that is, senior) class, a quartet with ages ranging from 13 to 16, were tested on works of Euripides and Horace, and on St. Matthew's Gospel and scripture history, while the lower three classes (ages ranging from 8 to 15 and numbering a further twenty-three) were tested on Latin but no Greek. Subsequent entries show a gradual widening of the subjects examined: by 1857 all four classes faced mathematics papers, while the top three also did French and there was a test in the optional subject of Natural Philosophy. By 1861, English History was included.

Yet, there was one more substantial battle to be fought on the principle as to whether this non-classical education should be paid for by parents of the local boys, and, if so, how much. Back in 1850-51, at the time of the school's new constitution, the redoubtable independent non-conformist minister, Thomas Beeman, had sparred with the governors with regard to the charges which they were proposing to make for the non-classical subjects; we know that there was in consequence debate and some disagreement between the governors, and that the originally proposed guinea and a half per quarter for basic subjects was reduced to a guinea – but that was not much of a concession to Beeman's viewpoint. Now, in 1866, he launched a formidable onslaught.

In three separate, but successive, printed sheets he denounced an advertisement which the governors had issued for a new Master, on the grounds that separate quarterly charges, of a guinea each, were now to be authorised for English, Mathematics and French. He resuscitated all the old charges about misuse of the funds upon boarders, demanded a revision of the school's constitution, pointed out that there were now national public examinations over a wide range of subjects, and memorably expressed the way that he believed the founder, if still alive, would have seen the issue now: 'I believe he would say "Gentlemen, with the best possible intentions, for which I give you full credit, you have made a mistake. My purpose was to give the Inhabitants of Cranbrook a superior education *without cost*. It was for this reason I gave my property. *Knowledge, gentlemen, is power, but it is the knowledge of to-day which is power*. The Match-lock of my day was power: the Enfield Rifle of your day is power. Had I left my money to arm a Volunteer-band in my day with Match-locks to fit them to resist an invading foe, you now would be carrying out my intentions in expending my money in the purchase of Enfield rifles. I should no more think of merely giving instruction



freely in Latin and Greek to the sons of the Inhabitants of Cranbrook, to fit them for this life's struggle in the nineteenth century, than I should of presenting your Volunteers with cross-bows or match-locks.”

As Beeman also pointed out, Allan had made no such charges as were proposed. The same point was made in a ‘memorial’ on the part of 26 signatories including the painter F.D. Hardy, which the governors were considering in their meeting of June 5th, 1866. Prudently, they decided to recommend to the incoming Master, the Reverend Charles Crowden, to accede, and he duly agreed to ask only one guinea per term of each foundation boy.

It was no longer a Free Grammar School, but under Crowden's wise headmastership (1866–88) the pace of curriculum reform quickened. New prizes awarded in 1867 included a Shakespeare one and a Natural Science one ‘to encourage those boys who have no special aptitude for the regular studies of the school to cultivate their talents in another direction.’ In the 1872 amendment of the school's constitution, the words ‘or one of them’ were inserted after the requirement upon the foundation boys to study both the Latin and Greek languages, and in 1877 came the school's first winner, R. Peck, of a Natural Science scholarship into Oxford. In 1880, as part of an agreement whereby a generous governor donated £1,200, it was undertaken that there should always in future be a class or classes in which Latin was optional and an education provided which was ‘intermediate between the high education of the grammar school and that given in the public elementary schools.’

There were to be innumerable further changes of curriculum, of course, and the school's academic status more than recovered from a late nineteenth-century decline. Today, as elsewhere, the Latin department is dwarfed by the Science one, but the subject thrives, and indeed is studied by all pupils in their first year; classical Greek, however, finds no regular place in the timetable.

