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Thomas Bourne's Charity School

DECEMBER 16 is an interesting date in local history. It is Bourne's Day—the birthday of the founder of the Bourne Charity School—and every year for more than two centuries a special service has been held in St. Peter's Church to honour the memory and recall the gifts of one of the town's greatest benefactors.

Apart from that service, Bourne's Day is not the great occasion it was two or three generations ago. More than 60 years have passed since Thomas Bourne's Charity School, attended by boys and girls wearing picturesque 18th century style uniforms, ceased to exist as a separate institution. In more recent times another link with the past was severed when the lively banquet given to the scholars on the founder's birthday was discontinued. But Berkhamsted still has good reason to remember Thomas Bourne with affection, for his charity, though revised to suit modern conditions, continues to benefit the boys and girls for whom it was intended. Scores of Berkhamstedians, of whom the writer is one, are proud to have been Bourne scholars.

Gift No One Expected

Thomas Bourne was one of many high-minded men who poured out their wealth to establish charity schools in the early 18th century. To Berkhamsted he bequeathed £8,000—a sum then worth many times its present value—and the "windfall" created a sensation. Residents were surprised not merely by the size of the bequest but by the fact that he left anything at all to a town with which he had but slender associations.

A wealthy member of the Company of Framework Knitters, Thomas Bourne occasionally visited his married sister at Berkhamsted and was probably

a familiar figure in the town, but most of his interests were in the City of London and in Lambeth and Camberwell, where he spent most of his life. Perhaps it was because those districts already had charity schools that Thomas Bourne remembered Berkhamsted in his will. After making ample provision

for his relatives and bequeathing a sum of money to found almshouses in London for twelve poor men or their widows of the Company of Framework Knitters, he left a much larger sum for a charity school at Berkhamsted.

A Business-like Will

The will, made in 1727—two years before his death—is a most interesting document, containing elaborate and very business-like directions to the executors. Of the £8,000 earmarked for the charity school, a sum not exceeding £700 was to be used to purchase suitable land and build a school-house, with apartments for "master and mistress separate and distinct from each other." The large residue was to be invested and annual dividends applied as follows :

£30 to the schoolmaster ;
£15 to the schoolmistress ;
£5 to be distributed by the churchwardens on December 16 among poor and indigent people of the parish not receiving any settled parish allowance ;
£75 for clothing 30 scholars (50s. for each child) ;
£170 to be paid in sums of 1s. 6d. every Monday morning to the parents or guardians of each scholar ;
£24 for placing out apprentices ("four poor boys to honest trades for seven years, as the churchwardens and overseers of the parish should agree upon") ;
£5 for purchasing fuel for the school ;
£5 for books and paper ;
£5 to the trustees of the charity school at Camberwell for the benefit of the children of that school.

Surplus funds were for the repair of the school-house, etc. A codicil directed that a sermon mentioning the charities should be preached every December 16, the parson receiving one guinea and the clerk half a guinea.

The First Teachers

The executors wasted so much time before carrying out Thomas Bourne's directions that doughty John Cowper, rector and father of the poet, took legal proceedings against them. In 1735 the Attorney-General ordered that the money should be paid, and thanks to the delay and to wise investment, the sum of £8,000 had increased to £9,400. At a cost of £700 schoolrooms and apartments for the teachers were built in the High-street—the quaint red-bricked building which subsequently was the first "home" of the Berkhamsted School for Girls and has since been occupied by the local branch of the National Provincial Bank.

Edward and Eliza Eastnead, the first master and mistress, commenced their duties in 1737, apparently well content with rent-free apartments, free

"Beorcham's" Story of a Great Local Benefactor

firing, and stipends which amounted to but 11s. 6d. and 5s. 9d. a week respectively. No increases were granted for many years, and it is not surprising that some of the teachers exercised their right to take paying scholars. In 1832, for instance, the master had 24 paying boys—four more than the number of charity boys—and the mistress had two or three paying girls.

Clothing the Children

Thomas Bourne was methodical enough to draw up lists of clothing to be given to the children. At Easter each boy was to have one coat of grey kersey woollen cloth, one woollen waistcoat, one pair of leather breeches, one black woollen cap, two linen bands, two shirts, two pairs of shoes, and two pairs of woollen stockings. Each girl was to have one grey woollen gown and petticoat, one flannel under-petticoat, two linen shifts, two blue and white aprons, two linen bands, two pairs of shoes, two pairs of stockings, and "one pair of boddice to serve each girl for the space of two years." The total cost of equipping each child was 50s.!

The founder also directed that no child was to attend school until five years of age, nor after reaching the age of 14. On Sundays and other days when there should be public worship in St. Peter's Church, the master and mistress were to attend with the scholars.

It is interesting to find that the master and mistress were liable to be discharged not only for "want of sobriety and good morals" but for "extreme severity towards any of the children" under their care—a wise precaution in an age of brutal birchings.

School hours were from seven to eleven and one to five from Lady Day to Michaelmas, and eight to eleven and one to four from Michaelmas to Lady Day. Any child absent for a month without sufficient cause, or found guilty of any crime, was to be discharged, and any child who left during school hours without permission of the master or mistress was to forfeit the weekly allowance of 1s. 6d. This allowance (reduced to one shilling by 1832) was a sop to parents who normally expected their children to become wage-earners at a very early age.

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

The governors were anxious to observe the letter as well as the spirit of the trust. The number of boys who received gratuitous education and allowances was limited to 20, and the founder specified that they were to be taught to "read English, write and cast accounts." The number of girls was limited to ten, and Bourne directed that "after being perfected in reading English" they were to "do such work as the churchwardens should think fit and proper for such girls to learn." It was not until 1761, when the second master was appointed, that the girls were taught to write as well as read, and then only in their last year at school! Knowledge of spinning was

considered a more useful asset in those days, and there are records of a spinning wheel and flax having been provided for the girls.

Later, when it was suggested that the scholars should be taught to sing psalms, the trustees were most reluctant to grant consent for the simple reason that Thomas Bourne had limited the scope of the foundation to the "three R's"! Eventually the suggestion was approved, the trustees stating : "We do think it very decent and proper for him [the master] to instruct the children in singing psalms, as is usually taught in other charity schools."

A Charity Commissioners' report of 1832 shows that generally there was a very large number of applications for admission to the Bourne School. For instance, at Easter, 1832, 20 applications were made for four vacancies. The report adds that the £5 allowed for providing a dinner for the trustees had been "expended for the last two years in giving a dinner to the boys and girls on the founder's birthday," and this jolly institution continued until 1914.

Easter Parade

That senior boys of the Bourne School were at one time the only male Sunday School teachers at the parish church is one of many interesting details mentioned by Nash in "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted." He says :

"The dress of these children once formed a picturesque feature in Berkhamsted . . . Many mothers felt proud of their little sons on Easter Sunday, when it was the custom to clothe them from head to foot in new garments. The boys were dressed in blue coats and waistcoats, with bright buttons, leather breeches, coloured stockings, and low shoes, and blue caps with red tassels. The girls also were clad in the fashion of the period, when the school was founded, with cloth gowns, white aprons, and mob caps, cut to the same pattern from year to year."

Like many other charity schools, Bourne School had to be reorganised after the Education Act of 1871. In 1880 a new scheme for administering

Concluded on page 7.

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'BEORCHAM' *Concluded from page 5*

the charity came into operation, and the school ceased to have a separate existence. The traditional uniform was discontinued, although until 1914 the children wore distinctive bonnets and caps. Only minor provisions of the will, such as the annual service at St. Peter's, were retained, the most important departure being the creation of scholarships, worth £5 per annum, for a limited number of boys and girls attending the Church schools in Berkhamsted and Potten End. More important at the present day, however, are the Exhibitions assisting scholars who go to secondary schools, places of further education, and even to the universities.

After a century and a half, the Bourne School had outlived its age, but the charity continues to benefit the children for whom it was intended. Great-hearted Thomas Bourne would have approved the change.