

ALCESTER & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2022

www.alcesterhistory.org.uk



High Street,
Bidford on
Avon c1908
Note: The side
of meat
hanging
outside the
butcher's shop
on the right.
[ADG
Collection]

FROM THE CHAIRMAN

During the summer months there are many activities that we all can get involved in, especially: holidays, sport (watching or playing), gardening, visiting places of interest etc. However, I do hope you do not forget the monthly ADLHS meetings (on the second Wednesday). Unlike many clubs, we do not take a break during the summer months and rely on our members (and visitors) supporting us.

I am in the process of looking at speakers for next year. If you know of a speaker that you would like us to use, or there is an historical subject you would like to hear a talk on, then, please, let me know. My contact details are at the end of the newsletter.

Just a reminder:

In September every year the national **Heritage Open Day** scheme takes place. This year HOD scheme runs from 9th-18th September. However locally, Alcester Town Hall, Alcester Baptist Church, Heritage Centre and Church House will be open to the public on Saturday 10th and Sunday 11th (times vary). We are putting on an exhibition at Church House from 12.00-16.00 on these two days. For more information see:

<https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/visiting>

Alan Godfrey

LAST MONTH'S MEETING

In July, in place of our regular meeting at St Benedict's High school, we organised an outing to the historic town of Droitwich. Thirty members joined our coach trip and spent a fascinating couple of hours on a guided tour of Droitwich's town centre led by local guide, Lyn Blewitt.

The tour started outside Priory House in Friar Street, one of the first buildings in Droitwich to be tree-ring dated (to 1568-1593) and progressed along Friar Street with four important timber framed buildings dating from 14th century. Our walk continued along High Street, where many of the buildings date from the 15th and 16th centuries, although not all appear to be outwardly

timber-framed. One noticeable feature of many buildings is the effect subsidence (from the salt extraction) has had with doors and window frames at strange angles. The most spectacular building was 31 High Street which was involved in the brine processing industry since medieval times. The building is now being fully restored to show the architectural features of the c1420 structure.

I must thank the Society Treasurer, Martin Popplewell, for organising our visit to Droitwich.

Alan Godfrey



Society members
viewing the rear of
Priory House,
Droitwich with its
timber-framing and
stylised brick
chimneys.

SLACKNESS AT NEWPORT'S SCHOOL

Or: A Stranger to Ambition

In the edition of "Local Past" for Autumn 1981, an article by the present Headmaster of Alcester Grammar School, Mr J W R Turner, revealed something of the state of affairs at the school, known then as Newport's Free School, at the end of the last century. More information has recently been drawn to my attention, about the circumstances which led to the petition of the Governors, led by Mr Sisam, to have the then headmaster, the Rev John James Dyson, dismissed from his post.

Biographical details of Mr Dyson are available from the "Alumni

Cantabrigiensis". J J Dyson was born at Chesterton, Cambs. In 1851, the son of a brewer and was admitted to Caius College, Cambridge in 1870. He was awarded his BA, with First Class Honours, in the Classical Tripos in 1874 and obtained his MA in 1877. After holding a variety of appointments subsequent to his ordination in 1881, he was appointed to the headship of Newport's School in 1889, in succession to the unfortunate Mr Gegg, whose career has been outlined in the article mentioned above.

The other source of information about Mr Dyson comes from the report of the Bryce Commission of inquiry into Secondary Education which was published in 1895. The enquiry came about as a result of growing public concern over the state of secondary education in the country which was in turn a result of the sense that Great Britain was falling behind in science and technology in comparison with Germany and the United States. Part of Vol1 is devoted to Warwickshire and I cannot do better than quote the section about Alcester.

"I know of no endowed school actually in Warwickshire to which the term decay can now rightly be applied, except perhaps the school at Alcester, and even there the process of restoration has begun. Less than a year ago the school had sunk to ten boys, five of whom had given notice of leaving, and education was nil. The reasons given to me for this state of things were amply sufficient to account for it. I was informed that the then headmaster, a first-class classic and clergyman, had made it his business to do nothing. When he was first appointed, the governors, being sanguine that the new master would make Alcester into a great school, had spent part of their scanty endowment (the income was only £120 a year) upon dormitories. The headmaster, according to arrangement, and to keep up appearances, advertised for boarders, but when the time came, he declined them. Eight free scholars used at that time to be admitted from the Alcester Elementary schools, and for these the headmaster received from endowment £4 a head p.a. But they were an inconvenient addition, if not to his responsibilities, at any rate to his numbers, and by making fun of them before the school as charity boys he succeeded in driving them away, and in establishing in Alcester the tradition that no elementary school boys were ever to pass on to the grammar school. When tired of sitting idly with his boys in the smaller and worse ventilated classroom (which he preferred) he would turn the key upon them and go off for a stroll in the fields. The only work ever set was poetry to learn by heart but it was never asked for and one of the boys told me that he had never learned it or anything. When asked on one occasion by a government official how it was he did not put more energy into the school he is said to have replied: 'My dear sir, ambition and I have long been strangers'. The only duty which he seems to have satisfactorily performed was to live in the school-house rent free and take what was left of the endowment. He augmented his income by what is called in Alcester, and possibly elsewhere, "guinea-pigging" on Sundays; and I am told that he was an inspired preacher. At last, some agitator took up the matter and roused the parents, who persuaded the trustees to appoint one year an independent examiner, and at the "prize-distribution" (or its substitute), when Alcester, with the governors assembled in the school ad hoc, in the examiner's report which was handed to the headmaster to read, there occurred these words - "There is not a single pupil in this school that can parse a single English sentence".

It is clear from this that things had reached a pretty poor state under Mr Dyson and I suppose that "the agitator" referred to was Mr Sisam of Arrow Mill. The report goes on to say how Mr Dyson as eventually "advanced to a country living" (in 1893) and a new head was appointed. "Alumni

"Cantabrigiensis" shows that he became Rector of Mutford with Barnby, in Suffolk, and remained there until his death at the age of 70 in 1921.

The report ends on an optimistic note; the new Headmaster, Mr Parvin, not only secured the five boys who were on the point of leaving, but nine months later had raised the numbers from ten to nearly thirty. According to the report, the buildings were "small and old - some parts as old as Stephen and others dating from Elizabeth, but they are solid and substantial, in good sanitary condition, and well situated, with a playing field close by". This, of course, was the old Birch Abbey School of which no trace now remains, being demolished in the late 1960s. There are a number of photographs of it in the Society's possession, however, so we know what it looked like.

In a sense the optimistic predictions in the Bryce Report were fulfilled when the new school was founded on the Birmingham Road site with Mr Ernest Wells MA. in command; in a short space of time the school had 150 pupils and was achieving academic distinction in the public examinations.

I am indebted to Mr Haydn Snow of Leicester, who drew our attention both to the "Alumni" and the Bryce Report and to Mr Turner who passed the information on to me. Does anyone know what "guinea-pigging" might be? (Editor: 'A Dictionary of Slang' says the term "guinea-pigging" began to be used between 1820 and 1870 for people like vets whose fee was a guinea; for clergymen acting as deputies.)

Cyril J Johnson

[This article first appeared in Local Past – Spring 1984]



Newport's Free School – later called Alcester Grammar School, in Birch Abbey. [ADLHS Archive]

FUTURE MEETINGS IN 2022:

10th August – The South Warwickshire Coin Hoards – Dr Stanley Ireland
14th September – The Leamington & Warwick Tramway – Peter Coulls & Allan Jennings
12th October – TBA
9th November – Scratching the Surface: Medieval Graffiti in Warwickshire Churches – David Freke

NEXT MEETING:

Our next meeting to be held at the **Sixth Form Centre, St Benedict's High School, Kinwarton Road, Alcester B49 6PX** on **Wednesday 10th August 2022 at 7.30pm**. The talk is **"The South Warwickshire Coin Hoards"** and the speaker is **Dr Stanley Ireland**

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