Alcester’s Grammar School
The First Five Hundred Years

By Cyril Johnson

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Foreword

When Cyril Johnson retired from Alcester Grammar School in 1996 after 31 years here, we lost a fine teacher and a true servant of the school. His service was of great commitment and loyalty and unwavering professionalism. However, I feared that in losing him we would also lose one of the guardians of the history of the school, for we all turned to him to know what had happened and when, at Alcester Grammar School! As a keen historian who had been chairman of the Alcester and District Local History Society and had published on various aspects of the area's past, Cyril seemed to be the right person to collect and collate such material as could be reasonably gathered about the school and to construct a history.

I approached him a little tentatively, not wishing to put pressure on him as he was about to celebrate his much deserved change of lifestyle, and, as I suppose I knew he would, he agreed to undertake the task, the fruits of which are now before you. All of us are grateful to Cyril for this lively and succinct history!

As you move through these pages, I hope you will enjoy discovering that the things which make this school such a privilege to work in, were seeded a long time ago, by the generations of pupils, parents, governors and staff, who cared for each other and for the quality of education of young people at Alcester’s Grammar School.

A.W.Shearn, Headteacher
Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to the many people who, through their kindness, direct help or support have contributed to this modest volume.

First among these must be Andrew Shearn, the headteacher of Alcester Grammar School, for suggesting that I should write this story in the first place, and for his unfailing support and guidance whilst it was in progress, to say nothing of acting as proof reader and error detector.

Next I must thank the County Archivist of Warwickshire, Mr Christopher Jeens, BA, DAA and his colleagues at the County Record Office in Warwick for their attentive help with original documents. Without them nothing could have been attempted, let alone achieved.

G. Edward Saville, Hon. Archivist of the Alcester and District Local History Society, and Mrs V. P. Rewse are owed my thanks, both for the original work which they did on the history of Alcester Grammar School, and for allowing me to quote freely from their writings, and I am indebted to Old Scholars Dr Michael Caton, and Mrs Barbara Winter (formerly Druller) for reading the proofs, detecting errors and supplying much useful information.

Finally I must thank Mr Frank McAree and Mr Geoffrey Rees of the Alcester Grammar School IT department for their help and advice, and Lawrence Thatcher, Head of Sixth Form, for casting the eye of a real historian over the whole enterprise.

Notes and References

Readers of an account such as this are entitled to know the authorities and original sources used as the basis for the statements and assertions made, but those who are less inquisitive on the other hand, should not have the narrative needlessly interrupted. I have therefore placed all the source references, together with comments, at the end of the main story. I hope that readers will find this satisfactory.
Sources and Abbreviations

Since I have referred to relatively few sources, but these references appear frequently, I thought it best to use standard abbreviations, thereby avoiding the tedium of writing out the full details each time. These abbreviations are listed below. Other references are given in full in the relevant chapter notes.

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Source reference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dugdale</td>
<td>Dugdale, Sir William: <em>The Antiquities of Warwickshire</em>, London 1730</td>
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<td>VCH</td>
<td><em>The Victoria County History for Warwickshire</em></td>
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<td>Papers of Newport Free School at Warwickshire Record Office:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>/1 Governors' Minutes 1880-1897</td>
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<td></td>
<td>/2 Ditto 1905-1911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/3/1 Ditto 1911-1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/4 Admission Register 1881-1902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/5 Governors' Account Book 1884-1888</td>
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<td></td>
<td>/8 Unnumbered papers, roughly sorted</td>
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<tr>
<td>CR680</td>
<td>Alcester Grammar School Governors' Minutes at Warwickshire County Record Office, 1912-1949</td>
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<td>HMA</td>
<td>Various papers held in the Headmaster's Archive at Alcester Grammar School</td>
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<td>Record</td>
<td><em>The Alcester Grammar School Record</em> - The Alcester Grammar School magazine. An almost complete series is to be found in the school library.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

1 The Background 7
2 "A School for Poor Mens Children" 10
3 Under the Charity Commissioners 15
4 The Last Years at Birch Abbey 22
5 A New Beginning 27
6 After The Second War 46
7 The Years of Change 53
8 Conclusion 67

Appendix 1 : Known Headmasters of Alcester's Grammar School 68
Appendix 2 : Some Personal Reminiscences 69
Notes and References 72

Illustrations

1 The location of Newport's School in Abbey Lane 9
2 Richard Henry Harbridge about 1870 12
3 Newports Free School about 1900 23
4 AGS Sports Day, 1912 28
5 The first school photograph 1913 30
6 The first edition of The Record 32
7 The staff about 1920 34
8 A cricket team of the 1920s 37
9 Mr Wells 38
10 Mr Caton 39
11 AGS from the air in the 1930s 40
12 The interior of the new Chemistry laboratory, 1940 43
13 The last Sports Day on the lower field, 1953 49
14 New building work, 1961 50
15 Building the Minibus Garage, 1974 58
16 Mr Turner at the Summer Concert, 1990 63
17 Mr Shearn at the announcer's table, Sports Day 1992 64
18 The new Art/Technology building, 1995 65
19 The three storey extension in progress, Spring 1997 66
An Author's Note

I am conscious that this is a very concise account of the school's development, and that what you have before you gives only the bare bones of the story. This is largely a result of the requirement of fitting five hundred years into eighty four pages with type of a legible size, but it may have a merit of its own, in that readers will find the information readily accessible and not be overburdened with excessive detail. One day perhaps some other author might wish to carry the story forward and will, I hope, find a suitable starting point here. To this end I have given notes and references in more detail than perhaps is usual in a work of this kind.

Readers may wonder about the title. Why call it Alcester's Grammar School instead of the (nowadays) much more familiar Alcester Grammar School? There lies the difficulty. For most of the past five hundred years the school was not known by this name. It has been variously known as Newport's School, Newport's Free School, Newport's Grammar School, Newport's Endowed School, The Alcester Endowed School, Birch Abbey School and the Abbey School during its long life. The present title seems to have come into use in the 1890s, and became the official title only in 1912, when the school came under the control of the Warwickshire Education Committee. On the other hand the school has always been firmly attached to the Alcester area - it has always been Alcester's Grammar School, and it seemed fitting to make the connection clear in the title.

Finally, while I have done my best to eliminate errors of all kinds, experience suggests that some will have slipped through the net. Any residual errors are my responsibility entirely.

C. J. Johnson, 1997
Chapter 1 : The Background

The school which we now call Alcester Grammar School has served the town of Alcester and its surrounding district for more than 500 years to the best of our knowledge, and its story is both long and interesting. Although Alcester was a very independent town until the late nineteenth century, producing most of what it needed and consuming it locally, it was not totally isolated from the changes going on in the country as a whole. It responded to these changes and shows us in its history how they affected ordinary people and their lives. Alcester's Grammar School, like the town it served, reflected the national developments, and its story illustrates how education has developed in England from the earliest times.

Haphazard unplanned growth made the English (things were different in Scotland) educational system what it is today. The earliest schools were those attached to the great mediaeval monasteries and cathedrals; many of these still exist. King's School Canterbury, often described as the oldest school in England belongs to this category. Less grand, but also of mediaeval origin were the chantry schools. A chantry was a church or chapel endowed by a wealthy person with a priest employed to pray for the soul of the founder, but often also teaching at a school associated with the chantry.

The need of the church, for adults well versed in Latin, gave rise to Grammar Schools, where boys who were candidates for the priesthood studied Latin grammar. Often these began as chantry schools, and were later endowed by wealthy persons or organisations. At first no fees were charged because the master was supported by the endowment income, but inflation eroded the value of the income as time passed, so that fee paying became more common.

The larger and more prosperous grammar schools, able to attract pupils from beyond their own locality as boarders, grew into what we now call "Public Schools" of which there are about 200. Not all the public schools are ancient foundations. Malvern College for example was founded as recently as 1865.

Some schools were founded by individuals or societies of a philanthropic or religious character. The British and Foreign School Society and the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church were two such bodies. Their schools aimed at providing elementary education for the poor, but fees were payable. Alongside these were private enterprise establishments set up by individuals as businesses; dame schools and common day schools both aimed at providing simple education for those able to pay a
small fee.

Until 1870, the state took no direct part in running schools, although it did support the voluntary movements with money. The Education Act of that year set up school boards with the power to establish elementary schools where the voluntary organisations had not done so. Fees were charged by these schools at first but further acts of 1876 to 1891 made elementary education compulsory and free.

The perceived need for technical education (in which we were rapidly falling behind other leading European nations) led to the Education Act of 1889 whereby County Councils were given the power to levy a 1 penny rate for this aspect of education, and a Board of Education was set up to control and guide the use of funds and implement government policy.

Meanwhile, the idea was growing that elementary education was not enough for the nation's needs, and a number of commissions had enquired into the endowed schools (mostly the old grammar schools). They found much to criticise, but their work led to the state provision of secondary education, but not, as yet for all.

Under the Education Act of 1902, Local Education Authorities, based on the County Councils, were set up to supersede the School Boards, with the power to provide secondary education; they often did this by absorbing the less prosperous endowed schools into the state education system. The schools thus provided continued to charge fees, although there was often provision to direct the original endowment income into scholarships and bursaries. Even so, only a small proportion of the nation's children enjoyed a secondary education. The Act of 1944 provided for free secondary education for all, with selection for entrance to grammar schools.

Comprehensive education came in the 1960s, and the 1988 Education Act provided for schools to "opt out" of local authority control, and receive their funds directly from the Department of Education and Science (or DES), soon to be transmogrified into the Department for Education (DFE), and later into the Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) which would later hand the purse strings to the Funding Agency for Schools (or FAS).

This is the framework within which Alcester's grammar school has grown and developed. It began as a chantry school about 1490, became an endowed grammar school around 1592, was absorbed by Warwickshire County Council in
1912 as a co-educational maintained grammar school, and has been a grant-maintained grammar school since 1993. Who can say what the next 500 years will bring?

The location of Newport's Free School in Abbey Lane, 1903
Abbey Lane is now known as Birch Abbey, and the school stood roughly where Chantry Crescent is now, at the southern end of it. The cycle works (Speedwell Cycles) is the long building fronting on to Bleachfield Street
Chapter 2 : "A School for Poor Mens Children"

Alcester's Grammar school was known as "Newport's Free School" from about 1592 until 1912 because Walter Newport provided in his will for the endowment which, in early years, paid the schoolmaster's stipend and enabled the scholars to be educated free of charge.

Sir William Dugdale, in his Antiquities of Warwickshire, describes him as "of Holdenby in the County of Northampton, Gentleman". Newport was a nephew of Sir Christopher Hatton, Lord Chancellor in 1597, and a relative of Robert, second Earl of Warwick. He was connected with the Alcester district through his sister Ursula who had married William Fortesque of Cookhill Priory. By his will, dated 1592, Walter Newport left £400 which was eventually invested in lands in Weethley, yielding £20 per annum by a rent charge on lands.

However, there was no mention of the foundation of a school in Newport's will. It simply said that the money was to be employed to the use of a school for the teaching of poor mens children either at Awoester or Herberye, and there is good evidence that the school which his bequest was intended to support had been in existence for long before the endowment, and had its origins as a chantry school. Alcester originally had two chantries, and both were abolished by legislation of 1547. Before this however, depositions were collected from local people concerning what they knew of the foundations. In 1545 an old man, John Mayyowe, then aged about 90, told how the Lord of the Manor, Lord Beauchamp, gave land to the Rector and townspeople for the rebuilding of The Chantry of Our Lady away from the parish church in the late 15th century and that he could remember the first priest that sange in the said chuntry after it was boyldid whose name was John Whitehead and after hym the Towne did put into the seid chuntrie one Richard Norman who kept a scole there accordyng to the ffounedacyon.

This suggests that Alcester had a school with a chantry priest teaching in it from around 1490, if not earlier, and Mayyowe's deposition makes it clear that the rebuilt chantry was in what we now know as Birch Abbey, or Birch Abbey Lane, the site of Newport's Free School as it later became, until 1912.

Although the chantry was abolished in 1547, the school evidently survived, suggesting perhaps that the townspeople thought that it served a useful purpose.
We know of its survival because in 1562 Queen Elizabeth I granted to Lady Greville a 60 year lease of the former chantry property including:

- a house which was previously the priest's house and is now occupied as a school house

Only thirty years later Walter Newport provided, in his bequest, the endowment which would sustain the school for many years to come. From then until the early 19th century the documents tell us little of the school. The first master that we know of is William Traunter in 1614, but research by the Alcester and District Local History Society has revealed the names of twenty-four masters who had charge of Newport's Free School during its existence. Their names are listed in Appendix 1.

By 1808 however, things were going awry. The master, a Mr Matthew Booker, had allowed the premises to fall into decay, and the Trustees of Newport's charity were forced to raise £300 to repair and partly rebuild the school premises. It was arranged that the rent charge, which still yielded £20 per annum, as in Walter Newport's will, would be directed to paying off the debt. The rebuilding was complete in 1810, when Mr Booker resigned and John Holmes was appointed on rather strange terms. He was to rent the schoolhouse and garden at 35 shillings yearly (£1.75 in decimal) and keep them in good repair. He was to receive no salary, but would not be required to take any free scholars until the mortgage was redeemed; he could not have done so in any case as the endowment income which was needed to pay their fees was going elsewhere. This must mean that the master was intended to support himself by charging tuition fees, and possibly by taking boarders as well. Probably the masters had been doing so before this time; inflation, then as now, tends to erode the value of a fixed income.

Mr Holmes resigned in turn in 1815, and in 1825, the master who was to be in charge of the school until 1878, a remarkable reign of 53 years, was appointed. We know quite a lot about Richard Henry Harbridge. We even have a photograph of him taken in later life. Born in Alcester and a son of an Alcester publican and timber merchant, he was barely twenty years old when he took over the school. What qualifications, if any, he had for the post we do not know. He took the premises rent free, but with the duty to keep them in good repair and he had to take five "free" boys (presumably the mortgage had been redeemed) who were the children of poor parishioners of Alcester or Weethley. Candidates for the free places had to be more than nine years old and they could not continue for
more than three years at the school. Because no salary was paid the master had to take as many fee paying pupils as possible and the more boarders he could take the better. Indeed one of Mr Harbridge's successors, Mr Gegg, regarded the boarders as the backbone of the business. It is possible that there were as many as thirty boarders at the school at one period in Harbridge's time, sleeping two to a bed! The 1871 census shows twenty-one scholars resident at Birch Abbey, only one of whom was from Alcester; the number of day scholars is not known. This represents a considerable increase on the 1867 roll when, according to the Victoria County History, there were six boys attending, all free and receiving only an elementary education.

We get an indirect view of life at Birch Abbey from two serial school stories published in *The Boys' Own Paper* in 1888-89. Their author was Ashmore Russon, who was a pupil at Newport's Free School. In the stories the pupils teach a jackdaw to say "Old Dicky, good old boy", and the headmaster encourages the boys to search for Roman coins in his garden, thereby getting the digging done. Also in the stories the walls of the school are covered inside with maxims such as "Whatsoever is worth doing at all is worth doing well". There is reason to believe that the school and its head were Newport's Free School and Richard Henry Harbridge, thinly disguised.

Entertaining though these snapshots of life at the end of Birch Abbey Lane may be, we need to consider what was going on in the country as a whole, at least with regard to the ancient endowed grammar schools of which Newport's school is only our special example. The Government was sufficiently concerned about
things to appoint *The Schools Enquiry Commission* to examine the Endowed Schools in 1865. Its findings were not encouraging:

Of the general decadence of the endowed grammar schools there can be no doubt; they are not popular, and do not enjoy the confidence of parents. Those above the status of the labouring poor generally prefer private schools. The old foundations with all their historical prestige and power do not attract the classes for whom they are intended. The conditions of their buildings are a handicap. Some had no playgrounds........maps and diagrams are rare and blackboards rarer still.\(^{15}\)

We do not know at present what the inspectors for the commission found at Newport's School, but things were not good at Tadcaster Grammar School in Yorkshire, founded at about the same time as Newport's School and having a similar history in some respects. When Mr (later Sir Joshua) Fitch visited Tadcaster in 1865 for the Enquiry Commission, he found the schoolroom was of moderate size but lacking in teaching equipment, and there was no playground. There were sixty pupils all in one class because the master had no assistant. It was impossible to examine the school because lax discipline resulted in a constant uproar (one feels that having 60 pupils all in one schoolroom cannot have helped). There was only one pupil who could write words of more than one syllable from dictation without a mistake, and arithmetic was very weak. In Mr Fitch's own words:

No scholar was learning Latin; but there was a tradition that a boy once learned a little because he was going to be apprenticed to a chemist.

The master paid the rents, taxes and insurance and was responsible for the repairs to the schoolroom. No fees were paid, but the master, the Rev. W. C. Bellhouse, took all the endowment income of £118 per annum. There were no boarders. Mr Fitch summed it all up very bluntly:

...It is difficult to believe that the school as presently conducted, serves any purpose other than to demoralize the town. It receives the children whose parents will not pay to send them to the National School, and thus it does harm to that institution and hinders its proper development.

Fitch went on to attribute the weakness of the school to the system of free admission (i.e. there was no entrance test) and the absence of a properly constituted governing body and any kind of supervision and examination.\(^{16}\)

No doubt things were not quite so bad at Newport's School. "Old Dicky's" photograph does not suggest that he would have tolerated a constant uproar, or
even an intermittent one. But it was clear that the endowed schools needed a
shake-up, and the first step in this direction was the Endowed Schools Act of 1869
and the formation of the Endowed Schools Commission, later merged with the
Charity Commission in 1874. The latter set about preparing new schemes for the
regulation of the endowed schools; Tadcaster got its scheme in 1878 but as late as
1884, only 595 schools had been re-organized in this way.

In 1878 Harbridge's time at the school came to an end; only the very oldest
Alcestrians would have been able to remember a time before he became the
headmaster of the Free School. He was replaced by William Sutton, of whom we
know very little, but in 1879, Francis T. Gegg joined Mr Sutton "as a partner in
the management of the school" at Michaelmas 1879 for a "pecuniary considera-
tion of £165" which was paid to Sutton at the date of Gegg's joining. This
suggests that the school was being run as a business, with the masters paying the
trustees a sort of premium for the right to run the school, rather like a "franchise"
for a fried chicken emporium. The masters would have hoped to recoup their
outlay from the tuition fees and the boarding of scholars. Possibly Harbridge had
taken the school in the same way. But the old system had had its day; the Charity
Commission was soon to issue a scheme for the reorganization of Newport's Free
School which would last until its end. As we shall see, the governors had
difficulty in remembering that they were operating under a new scheme, and Mr
Gegg and others had a hard time as a consequence.
Chapter 3: Under The Charity Commissioners

We saw in the last chapter how the poor state of the endowed grammar schools eventually led to the Charity Commissioners issuing new schemes for their regulation. Newport's Free School was issued with such a scheme in 1880 and it was controlled, more or less, by these arrangements until 1912, when the new co-educational school on the site in Birmingham Road came into use. The Free School must have been one of the first to receive the attention of the Charity Commissioners, but whether this indicates the poor nature of its circumstances we cannot say.

The scheme laid down the basic administration of the school. The headmaster was to receive an annual stipend of £50, plus a capitation fee of between £2 and £6 at the governors' discretion. No boys under 8 or over 16 were to be admitted. Tuition fees were set at not less than £4 nor more than £8 p.a. with boarding fees to be not more than £30 if in a hostel or £35 if in the master's house. A register of admissions was to be kept, and there was to be a properly constituted body of governors, suggesting that these last two points had not been a part of the former system of administration. The Commissioners then turned to the curriculum. It was to consist of:

Reading, writing, Arithmetic, Geography and History, English grammar and Composition, English literature, mathematics, Latin, one foreign language, Natural Science, drawing, drill, vocal music.

There was to be an annual examination, to be conducted by an examiner independent of the governors and headmaster. The charity income was to provide eight scholarships valued at £6 per year each, which were to be competed for (in the first place) by boys from the public elementary schools of Alcester, and Weethley. Finally, if income permitted (it must have seemed unlikely, even to the Charity Commissioners), the governors were to provide Exhibitions tenable at any place of higher education. The scheme was formally adopted by the Trustees of Newport's Charity in 1881.

In addition to these arrangements the Commissioners amalgamated Brandis's, Yarnold's, Earnshaw's and Reynold's charities with Newport's and renamed the whole as The Newport School Foundation. These additions were small Alcester charities concerned with the apprenticing or training of poor children. Dating from 1670, Reynold's charity brought with it the Fox Inn in Alcester High Street, which was to give the Newport School Foundation
Governors (who were the Newport School Governors) some trouble from time to time as we shall see.

The first meeting of the "properly constituted governors" was recorded in the new minute book on 12th of November 1880. The list of governors including as it did The Marquis of Hertford, Lord Ernest Seymour, the Rector of Alcester (Chairman), the Baptist Minister, the Churchwardens of St Nicholas Church, and other local worthies, suggests that the school cannot have been totally disreputable if such eminent and respectable persons accepted association with it. In a series of meetings the governors set the boarding fees, ordered that the headmaster was to keep the interior of the school house and premises in "good tenantable condition" and arranged to advertise for pupils in the Alcester Chronicle, Evesham Journal and Redditch Indicator. They then arranged to have 500 prospectuses printed. At this time the headmaster did not attend the governors' meetings (as modern day headteachers do) - if he wished to draw anything to the governors' attention, he wrote a letter about it to governors' clerk which that gentleman read at the meeting.

Many of the meetings were concerned with the humdrum matters which concern school governors everywhere. In April 1881 for example, they were concerned with the letting of farms and plans for buildings and in December they approved the installation of a new cooking range at a cost of £12-10-0 (£12.50) as "the one in use was entirely worn out". Of more interest is the relationship between the governors and the headmaster, Mr Gegg. Readers will recall that Mr Gegg bought a partnership with Mr William Sutton in 1879 for £165. When Mr Sutton withdrew shortly afterwards, at the beginning of 1880, Mr Gegg was given sole command. We know a little about Mr Gegg from a prospectus for the school published in 1880, (possibly one of the 500 referred to above) in which he is said to be:

Formerly Head Master of the Vere Endowed Grammar School, Jamaica

According to Mr Gegg, in a memorandum addressed to the governors just before his resignation in 1888, he was badly treated from the beginning. Certainly his salary is not mentioned in the governors' minutes until April 1881, when it is decided that it should be paid termly in arrears, and the actual sum does not appear until June 1882, when it is decided that it should be £44 per annum, even though the scheme had specified that the headmaster's salary was to be £50. Even stranger to the present-day observer was that Mr Gegg was expected to provide
for the heating and lighting of the school premises entirely at his own expense. When he applied to be allowed the costs of coals and gas in the schoolhouse, the governors refused, on the grounds that this was not provided in the foundation. Here the governors were being rather economical with the truth, for while the scheme did not provide for the headmaster to be allowed the costs of heating and lighting, it did not say that he should not be allowed them, and certainly did not say that he had to provide them himself.

Things then seem to go from bad to worse. On 1st March 1883 the clerk to the governors was asked to convene a meeting to consider:

...the present standing of the school and the efficiency or non-efficiency of the Head Master.

At the meeting Mr Allwood, a prominent needle manufacturer in the town and now a member of the governing body proposed a motion stating that:

...Mr Gegg was wanting in efficiency and should be requested to place his resignation in the hands of the Governors.

We know from other sources that Mr Gegg was over seventy years of age, deaf and short sighted, and as if that were not enough, unqualified! Lord Hertford came to the rescue by proposing an amendment supporting the headmaster which was carried by eight votes to two.

Mr Gegg's relations with the governors never improved. The minutes contain instructions for him to undertake repairs of the interior and advertise for new scholars, all at his own expense. There are refusals to refund property tax which he had paid on the premises, comments on the unusual length of the Christmas holidays, and refusals to pay for repairs to the interior of the school which Mr Gegg had ordered from local tradesmen. All these seem bad enough, but the issue which caused more trouble than anything else was tuition fees. Fees became a concern when it was realised in January 1886 that the school's account was overdrawn at the Birmingham Bank in Alcester. Mr Gegg had been instructed to keep an admission register and an account book in April 1881, but in 1886 was found to be neglecting his duties with regard to the payment of tuition fees into the school's account, and the governors warned him that the payment of his salary would depend on an improvement in this respect. On 31st July 1888 the headmaster's salary cheque for the term was withheld because of arrears of tuition fees. This must have been the last straw; Mr Gegg submitted his resignation on 20th December 1888.
We may ask where the source of all this trouble lay. Mr Gegg was sure that it lay in the governors' failure to administer the new scheme fairly. Here it is in his own words, taken from his memorandum to the governors dated October 1888:

.............the "scheme " was adopted and the nature of the old regime was worked and adapted under its auspices - but particularly adapted as regards the provision laid down in sundry particulars in favour of the master. During the eight years of the scheme I have not received any remuneration for coal, gas, water, cleaning, porterage and sanitary arrangements relating to the school and premises. From year to year I have been successful in getting a fair number of boarders, and continued as I began, unconsciously, or without giving it a thought to defray all those expenses which should have been borne by the trustees.............

Mr Gegg had taken on the school as a business in the old days, and the governors seemed to have behaved as though he continued to do so. Indeed there is no formal record in their minutes that they ever adopted the Charity Commissioners scheme, although this is stated in the prospectus referred to above and confirmed by Mr Gegg's memorandum of complaint. What happened to the £165 which Mr Gegg had paid for the partnership is not recorded.

So much for the headmaster, what of the pupils? The admission register gives us useful information, as do the headmaster's reports to the governors. In the spring term of 1881, there were seventeen fee paying pupils, three of whom were boarders, and three "exhibitioners" (i.e. those awarded a free place under Newport's charity). The boarders came from Shropshire (Cleobury Mortimer), Alcester and Hong Kong! The latter was Algernon Hance, son of our Vice-Consul there, and aged sixteen. The Alcester boarder was Hele Webber Payne, an orphan aged ten who was a Ward in Chancery. The Shropshire boarder was the son of the vicar of Cleobury Mortimer. We get some idea of the boarders' living circumstances from the 1880 prospectus:

........Care is bestowed on the cultivation of high principles and gentlemanlike bearing amongst the Pupils, whose comfort and happiness are carefully studied by Mrs Gegg and daughters, under whose personal management and supervision the household arrangements are maintained. The Pupils are treated in every respect as members of the family. The diet is unlimited, and of the best quality........ Boarders must be provided with Dessert Spoon, Six Towels, Brushes, Two Pairs of Boots, Two Pairs of Sheets, Two Table Napkins, and Slippers........ N.B. - Each pupil is supplied with a separate bed.
The last point suggests that there is some truth in the idea that pupils slept two to a bed in Harbridge's time! Numbers increased over the 1880s until there were twenty-six on roll in the spring term of 1889 (Mr Gegg's last), but apart from one pupil from Birmingham, all were local. The 1880 prospectus does refer to the curriculum, but rather obliquely:

The course of Study pursued at this School is adapted to the requirements of Professional and Commercial Life and Pupils are specially prepared for the Public Schools, Locals, Civil Service and other examinations

We get more idea of what was taught from the reports of the annual inspections required under the new scheme, by independent examiners. Usually the governors' minutes simply summarize the reports as "satisfactory"; even when Mr Gegg was accused of inefficiency the examiners seemed to be satisfied with the school. The results of the first examination, conducted by the then Rector of Binton, a former headmaster himself, were printed in the Alcester Chronicle. The inspection took three days and the subjects examined were:

- Scripture history (not satisfactory on the whole), English history from 1066 to 1485 (satisfactory, with writing and spelling good)
- Geography (not very satisfactory - bad writing and careless spelling)
- Arithmetic (as far as discount - well done throughout by no less than 7 boys)
- English Grammar (paper work fairly done, viva voce better)

The examiner's fee for three days work, including setting and marking the written papers was two guineas (£2.10). The Ofsted inspection of Alcester Grammar School in 1994 was less economical!

When Mr Gegg left at the end of the spring term in 1889, after ten years at the school, things were found to be in some disarray, and the Medical Officer of Health, Mr G. H. Fosbroke, who was called in to inspect the premises, found that they were dirty and unsanitary, and ordered fumigation throughout. Even now the governors had not heard the last of Mr Gegg, for he wrote in May 1890 pleading for a gratuity because of his "reduced circumstances". Needless to say it was refused. Meanwhile the governors were concerned with the appointment of the next headmaster from a field of 213 applicants. For a start they excluded all those who were over 45, or under 28, years of age, or who were unmarried. From the remainder they selected the Reverend J. J. Dyson, a Cambridge graduate in the classical tripos with first class honours who had been vice-principal of Sheffield Collegiate School. He was appointed in March 1889 and assumed office in April of the same year. Soon after his arrival the governors decided that the school
buildings needed alterations and refurbishment at a cost of £228.50, and raised money for this by a mortgage on the property with a Friendly Society.

Despite his impeccable qualifications, Mr Dyson soon gave cause for anxiety. In June 1891 he was called in to the governors' meeting to account for irregularities in the times of opening and closing the school. His defence was that these deficiencies were a result of a leg injury and that he hoped to do better. In fact things got worse, for in October of the same year the governors received a petition from Mr Sisam of Arrow Mills, and thirty-five others, contending that:

...the present head should be replaced by someone who would bring it (the school) into its former condition

When we recall that its "former condition" was under Mr Gegg, we suspect that things must have been pretty bad! The petition was refused, but the governors requested that the petitioners should present their evidence in a re-submission. This was done in December 1891, when inefficiency, lack of teaching of various subjects, (including "manners"), were alleged, and the school was said to have "degraded" boys who had been there. After hearing Mr Dyson's version of things, the governors deemed the charges "not justified". However, we have other evidence to bear on the situation. The school was visited by the Bryce Commission of Inquiry into Secondary Education, and in its report, published in 1895, is to be found the following:

I know of no endowed school in Warwickshire to which the term decay can now be rightly applied, except perhaps the school at Alcester, and even here 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 the education is nil. The reasons given 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 capital (the income was only £120 per year) upon dormitories. The headmaster, according to arrangement, and to keep up appearances, advertised for boarders, but when any 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 the endowment £4 a head per year. 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 the tradition in Alcester that no elementary school boys were ever to
pass on to the Grammar School. When tired of sitting with his boys in the smaller and worse ventilated schoolroom, (which he preferred) he would turn the key upon them and go off for a stroll across 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 how it was he did not put more energy into the school, the headmaster 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 schoolhouse rent free and to take what was left of the endowment.

Allowing for exaggeration on the part of whoever reported to the representative of the Bryce Commission, this is a very damning picture of the Dyson regime! It is all the more surprising then, that the school again got a satisfactory report after the annual examination in 1892. The situation was saved in November 1893 when Mr Dyson resigned, somewhat to the governors' relief we may suppose, having been appointed to the living of Barnby and Mutford in north east Suffolk. By now the number of pupils had sunk to twelve, from the twenty-six in Mr Gegg's last term.

While all this was going on the governors had The Fox Inn with its problems to add to their troubles. The first awkwardness occurred in 1884 when the tenant, a Mr Fourt, was reported to be (the governors' clerk used rather Micawberish terminology) "in pecuniary difficulties" and the governors were forced to seek distraint for rent and then evict him. A new tenant, a certain Mrs Freeman, was installed in Mr Fourt's place, but before long the governors had to give her orders to quit for "conducting herself in an improper and immoral manner". In 1891 Mr Dowdeswell, a member of the famous Alcester cricketing family took the inn and things continued quietly for some years, until another Mr Fourt took charge. Soon afterwards, the governors received a complaint from the Alcester Gas Company about leakage of "liquid manure" from the wall of the Fox's pigsty, which adjoined the gas works. The governors were asked to "abate the nuisance", but what action, if any, they took is not recorded. When the inn was finally closed in 1914 the charity received a compensation payment of £572 (one third of which went to the tenant) from a government fund established to promote a reduction in the number of public houses.

The affairs of the Fox Inn and its tenants, troublesome as they were for the governors, bring a sample of life's rich tapestry into the rather humdrum minutes of the governors' proceedings, and provide the researcher with a little mild amusement to relieve the tedium of his work.
Chapter 4 : The Last Years at Birch Abbey

After the departure of Mr. Dyson, the governors again turned to the appointment of a new headmaster. From a field of fifty-four applicants they chose in December 1893 Mr A. W. Parvin FRGS, an assistant master from Ipswich Grammar school, and a Certificated Teacher of Science and Art (South Kensington). He seems to have brought a new mood to the school and numbers on the roll rose rapidly from twelve when Mr Dyson left, to twenty-seven at the end of 1896, and ultimately thirty-nine in 1902. He brought additions to the curriculum as well, as a prospectus published in his time shows:

Instruction is provided in English History, English Grammar, Geography, Drawing, Latin, one foreign European Language, Mathematics and Drill. Shorthand and Natural Science have been added to the curriculum. Pupils are prepared for the Higher Schools and Colleges, for Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations, College of Preceptors, preliminary exams of the learned professions, the Science and Art examinations (South Ken.) and the Army and Navy Clerkships. Special attention is given to dull or backward boys. A thoroughly sound commercial education is guaranteed.

In 1897 Mr Parvin appointed as assistant teacher, a Mr Cope, from Caistor in Lincolnshire and was allowed by the governors to purchase a blackboard and easel. We have an idea of how things were at Newport's Free School in the early 1900s from the reminiscences of Mr A. H. Jephcott, a pupil during Mr Parvin's headship:

Schooling was rough and ready, in reality only the three R's...... Mr Parvin was a scientist, especially on electricity .... experiments were conducted which were well ahead of their time. The staff consisted of Mr Parvin and his wife (who looked after the 5 boarders), and an assistant master. There were two classrooms, a large one and a small. The large one had long desks with lift up lids.....We played cricket and football, but there were insufficient boys for a proper team. We wore our ordinary clothes for games. Boarders were expected to dig the gardens in their spare time. This was popular because of the Roman coins they found. Boys started at 9 years of age and continued until 17 or so. They were the sons of the "better off tradesmen".

In 1906 Mr Parvin was succeeded by the Reverend R. Clarke, from Cumberland House School, at Gravesend in Kent. The new headmaster's stipend was set at £50 per year plus capitation at two guineas (£2.10) per head up to twenty-five pupils and three guineas (£3.15) from twenty-five to fifty and he was told to appoint an assistant who was to be paid directly by the governors. Soon after his
Newport's School in the early 1900s

The figure to the left, in the top hat, is believed to be Mr Parvin, headmaster from 1893 to 1906.

arrival the governors arranged to have the premises re-decorated, and we thereby gain a picture of the layout of the school\(^5\), which consisted of:

- a dining room, drawing room, study, classroom, hall, staircase, landing, water closet, five bedrooms, dormitory, bathroom and boy's washing room,
- three attics, three staircases, hall leading from house to school, kitchen and scullery, wash house and two closets, cellars and attics.

From the early 1900s, the governors become more and more concerned with the future of the school, stimulated partly by the passage of the Balfour Education Act in 1902 which empowered Local Authorities to support secondary schools and partly by awareness of the deficiencies of their own school. They went so far as to apply to the Board of Education for a "School for Secondary or Higher Education for Alcester". It was refused. By this time the governors had been reinforced by Dr Richard Spencer, a medical practitioner in the town, who was to play a major role in the future of the school. He was soon the Vice-Chairman of the governors.

Although things had improved in general since Mr Parvin's arrival, the financial state of the school was giving concern, and a governors' sub-committee
was appointed to consider it in 1906, apparently because numbers on roll had declined in recent years. Some hope came with the headmaster's report of an increase in numbers in November 1906, but by now the governors were concerned with plans for the future. In June 1907 they decided to ask Warwickshire County Council to help them in providing and carrying on the school as a "dual (presumably this means co-educational) grammar school" in the town, and were prepared to surrender the existing endowments if necessary. In July of the same year Lord Hertford agreed to arrange for a deputation to attend a meeting of the Education Committee in Warwick, and in September the Direction of Education indicated that a sub-committee of the Education Committee was to visit the school. Things were moving fast.

In November of 1907 the Education Sub-committee gave its decision. It thought that it was desirable to preserve the school, but that unless the locality was prepared to contribute it would be difficult to reorganize and maintain the school without an increase in the higher education rate. The governors replied that they would surrender the existing school site and buildings and all the endowment, but that it was not likely that the locality would offer more. On 16th of January 1908, the new school moved a step closer when the report of the Secondary and Technical Education Finance Committee was adopted as a resolution by the County Council as follows:

Subject to the parish of Alcester providing a suitable site or its equivalent in money, and the whole of the present endowment, the Council will provide and maintain a secondary school on such a site in Alcester. The expenses in so doing not to exceed a halfpenny in the pound on the parishes which are served by such a scheme.

Meanwhile the governors had their property valued by Edward Deer of Stratford on Avon and found that its total capital value was £3075; curiously enough the lands in Weethley valued at £400 in Walter Newport's time were only held to be worth £500 after 400 years of inflation, although they still yielded £20 per year. As well as receiving this valuation, the governors proposed at the same meeting, a cordial vote of thanks to Lord Hertford and Dr Spencer for the work they had done towards obtaining the new school. On 13th February 1908 the governors received the news that the Education Committee in Warwick had passed the resolution adopted on 16th January. From this date on the new school, that is the one we now know as Alcester Grammar School, became a certainty. There seems to be little doubt that the two men largely responsible for this achievement were
The Marquess of Hertford and Dr Richard Spencer.

It merely remained to fill in the details. Where was the new school to go? Field House in Cold Comfort Lane was suggested, and negotiations were opened for its purchase, but they fell through because the owner wanted £2100 for it while the County Council was only prepared to pay £2000. Putting aside the question of whether the site was suitable, the Council would have saved a good deal of money by accepting the offer at £2100, as it paid £719 for the site eventually chosen, and £5,516 in building the new school. On 13th July 1908 we hear for the first time of the present school's site, when the governors consider two sites "on the Birmingham Road". Lord Hertford owned both these properties and was prepared to sell either to the County Council. In October the governors of Newport's Free School resolved to assign the whole of their endowment to the Warwickshire County Council in support of what they still called "the dual secondary grammar school". They were also active in raising a public subscription in aid of the new school and in July 1910 sent to Warwick the sum of £196 which had been raised in this way.

We must now return to the school itself which had been continuing as usual while all these exciting events were going on. The headmaster, the Reverend Mr Clarke submitted his resignation in July 1909 and on 2nd September Mr F. H. McRobin of Newbold on Stour was appointed in his place; he was to be the last headmaster of the old school. By now it had certainly dwindled down; the minutes for 14th April 1910 state that there were only 14 pupils at the school. One extraordinary event noted in these last years of the old school was the abolition of homework! The governors' minutes record this on 16th December 1910, together with the extension of the school day from 4.00pm until 4.30 pm. But this freedom did not last long; the day was shortened again in the following July.

Mr McRobin must have realised that his post was not permanent when he took it up, and less than two years later the headmastership of the new school was advertised. Mr McRobin announced his intention to apply, and asked the governors for a testimonial; the new appointment was in the hands of the Warwickshire County Council of course, although no doubt the Newport Free School governors were represented on the appointing committee. It had already been decided that the salary for the new post was to be £200 per annum, with capitation of £2 per head with a guarantee of £300 for three years. The man appointed to the post, in September 1911, was Mr Ernest Wells of Wotton under
Edge, but his story belongs in the next chapter with the new school. The governors allowed Mr McRobin to remain in the schoolhouse until the middle of January 1912, by which time the new school had opened in its brand new building on the Birmingham Road where it stands to this day.

The work of Newport's Free School governors as such was over, although they still regulated the affairs of the Newport School Foundation which continued to support the school financially, while the school, now termed Alcester Grammar School, had its own governors under rules drafted by Warwickshire County Council. This is a real turning point however, and it is fitting to take stock of what the governors of Newport's school had achieved, and how their difficulties arose. Their chief problem was simply lack of money. The value of their endowment income, which had been large, no doubt, in the 1590s, had been eroded by the passage of 400 years until it would not provide good education in the late nineteenth century. The school was caught in a trap from which it could not escape. Its only way of increasing its income was to attract more fee-paying scholars, but to do that it needed modern facilities and a broad curriculum, and without an increased income there was no way of obtaining these things, short of a modern benefactor like Walter Newport coming to the rescue.

It seems clear that the governors did their best with the limited resources at their disposal. Some figures will illustrate the point. In 1884 the governors' total income was only £172, and the master's salary absorbed most of that. There was no chance to build up a capital fund for new developments; the governors carried on in a hand to mouth way. No doubt this explains at least partly the meanness with which Mr Gegg was treated; they lacked the means to do any better. Even so, they did achieve something worthwhile. They ensured that Newport's School survived until help came in the form of Warwickshire County Council's Education Department, and since then the school has never looked back. Modern scholars should remember them with gratitude.
Chapter 5 : A New Beginning

The new school opened its doors on 5th January 1912, and we have an account of the event, given by Mrs Clarke, a pupil who was present on the day:

There was no ceremony; the door was opened by the headmaster, with a certain amount of jostling to see who would get through the door first. There was no school uniform, and more boys than girls present.

All the girls present would have been new pupils; the old school did not admit girls. But it appears that all those who had been pupils at Birch Abbey passed on to the new school if they wished. Mrs Clarke described her feelings of awe at so huge a building. The extent of the buildings can be judged from the Preliminary Prospectus for the school:

The School Buildings are entirely new, and have been erected in accordance with the best modern ideas. They include the Head Master's House, Assembly Hall, Dining Room, Art Room, Laboratory, Library, Seven large Classrooms, Staff Rooms, Cloak Rooms, and Lavatories. There are separate entrances for boys and girls.

The new headmaster, Mr Ernest Wells, was well qualified for the post. He was a graduate of both London and Cambridge Universities, holding an MA in mathematics from the latter, and before coming to Alcester he was headmaster of Katharine, Lady Berkeley's School at Wotton under Edge. Other members of the staff had been appointed, as recorded in the preliminary prospectus:

Mr S. Hall BSc (Vict), Mr J. H. Gibbons (BA Oxon), Miss E. Deans (Diploma of the International Guild, Paris) and Miss E. E. Evans (BA).

Several of these teachers remained with the school for many years. Miss Deans was Senior Mistress until her death in 1940, and Miss Evans taught History and Economics until her retirement in 1947. Both are remembered with respect and affection by numerous Old Scholars. Mr Hall was Senior Master until his retirement in 1942.

Remarkable as it seems, the total salary of all the assistant teachers was only £860 p.a. Mr Ankcom was appointed as caretaker, a post he was to hold for nearly forty years. The prospectus also gives details of the curriculum:

The School Course will include the following subjects: - Scripture, English, French, Latin, Mathematics (Arithmetic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, etc.), Geography, English History and Literature, Shorthand, Science (Chemistry, Physics, Botany), Drawing, Singing, Cookery and Needlework (for girls), Woodwork (for boys), Drill, Piano (extra).
It will be arranged for the pupils in the upper part of the school to specialize in their work so as to prepare them for entering commercial life or the Universities; and a rural bias will be given to the work of those boys who are likely to become farmers. There is an excellent Workshop, and the Woodcraft will be taught by a thoroughly qualified instructor. The Domestic Science will be in the hands of a mistress, who is a specialist in that subject. It is intended that the course of work for the girls in Science shall consist of a preliminary course in General Science, after which their work will be so arranged as to have a particular bearing on domestic matters.

Sports Day at the new school on the Birmingham Road, summer 1912
The gentleman on the left is Mr Hall. Note the "Eton" collar worn by the boy on the right, and the "boaters" worn by the officials. The jumping pit was roughly where the 1962 building stands today.

There was a Preparatory School ("on Kindergarten lines") of which parents were strongly recommended to take advantage. Reports were to be issued once each term, and fees were £7.35 (in decimal) per annum for pupils from Warwickshire, and £9.45 per annum for pupils from other counties, with lower fees for pupils attending the preparatory school. Each pupil had to provide his or her own printed
books and mathematical instruments. Dinners were available at the school at a charge of 6d, (2.5p).

The new school started well, but pupils were slow to arrive at first; there were only twenty-eight by 31st January 1912, but one year later the roll had risen to eighty-three, and thereafter a steady growth in numbers was seen. The school had a new board of governors, under the County Education Authority's rules, with the Marquess of Hertford as the first Chairman. It met for the first time on 6th February 1912, and adopted black and crimson as the school colours at the meeting on 22nd of February. The school badge, incorporating a Roman soldier bearing a standard, with the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ, was apparently the work of Mr Wells himself, and was based on a Roman coin found during excavations in Alcester.

Although the school was in action, things were still going on behind the scenes. An Order in Council dated May 1912 approved the new arrangements, particularly with regard to Newport's Charity, the income from which was to be used to pay the fees of at least three pupils from Alcester or Weethley. The residue was to be used by Warwickshire County Council in aid of general maintenance of the school. At about the same time, it became clear that the school was not everywhere regarded with favour. A report appeared in The Alcester Chronicle of "indignation" at a statement attacking the new school made by a Councillor Slack at a meeting of the Warwickshire County Council:

The cost of the new grammar school was £6812 with teacher's salaries costing £825. There were only 36 scholars; it was a waste of public money. Councillor Bladdam stated that without the Marquis of Hertford there would have been no school. There was a reply by a Councillor Glover stating that the school had opened with 30 pupils in February 1912, and had since doubled.

Despite these local difficulties, the school was launched on a new course, and we have comments from Old Scholars to give us a flavour of what life was like around 1912.

Right from the beginning of the new grammar school, a tradition was built up whereby pupils were taken to the theatre at Stratford on Avon. They used to cycle to the theatre. Competition between houses on Sports Day was in conjunction with a handicraft competition.
Visits to the theatre are a strong feature of school life in the 1990s, and we still have competition between the houses on Sports Day; the handicraft competition was abandoned in the early 1970s. The resounding successes achieved in stage presentations which are feature of Alcester Grammar School life today also have their origins in the early days, to judge from the report of the school's first concert, held at Christmas 1912. *The Alcester Chronicle* described it as:

...undoubtedly the most enjoyable entertainment of its kind that an Alcester audience has witnessed for many years.

The arrangements of the school day depended on transport in 1912, much as they do in the 1990s:

The school hours were from 9-4, with homework done in school as many pupils were from Wixford, Broom and Bidford, and the train home was not until 5.00. There was no Saturday morning school (as stated in the prospectus). All Saturday was a holiday instead of Wednesday and Saturday afternoons.
Appeals from Mr Wells and the governors to The Midland Railway Company, requesting alterations to the timetable to fit the school day were rejected!

The school had been running for only a short time when it received the attentions of His Majesty's Inspectors, in an inspection held near the end of 1913. The inspectors start by listing the subjects taught, which are the same as those in the preliminary prospectus quoted above, except for the absence of shorthand. They go on to report the numbers on the school roll (83 on 31st January 1913), and found that 39% were from Alcester, 56% from the rest of Warwickshire, and 5% from Worcestershire. Most of the pupils came from Alcester, Bidford and Studley parishes, with other neighbouring parishes sending most of the rest, although six came from Inkberrow, across the Worcestershire border. They also analysed the intake in terms of "Class in life from which pupils are drawn", not the sort of terminology used by inspectors nowadays:

Professional 15, Farmers 18, Wholesale traders 11, Retail traders and contractors 30, Clerks and commercial agents 7, Public service 13, Artisans 5, Labourers 1

They approved of the buildings, finding them on the whole "well-ventilated, well-lighted and attractive", but their comments on Science suggest that sexism was not unknown:

Physics and Chemistry are taught to both the boys and the girls of forms III and IV. The same subjects are taken by the boys of form V but the girls of that form do botany instead of physics.

It appears that the Science Master also worked in the Art Department:

There was no opportunity of seeing anything of the teaching of drawing. The subject is in the hands of the Science Master.

Part of the comment on "Physical exercise", might amuse present day readers:

It is desirable that all the boys should be suitably dressed for their lessons in Physical Exercises. **Belts should in any case replace braces.** There are three houses; the girls and boys together form one house and the successes of the boys added to the successes of the girls form a total which is placed to the credit of that house. There is differentiation and there is unity.

We will return to the "three houses" later. The subject of "Manual Instruction" (we might call it "Craftwork" today) included the suggestion that "some provision for simple metalwork" would be desirable; another 50 years would elapse before it came about! Nevertheless the "General Conclusions" of the Inspectors were quite favourable:
The School has begun very well and shows every promise of satisfactory development.

Meanwhile, the governors of the school had other problems on their hands. The growth in numbers was putting pressure on the accommodation, so that early in 1914 the governors were considering "a temporary classroom" (an experience shared by many of their successors), but contented themselves with converting the "manual room" (i.e. the woodwork room) into a classroom at the cost of £9.95. This must have proved an incomplete solution, for on 28th July of the same year, the installation of the first temporary classroom was recorded in the governors' minutes. It was to be the first of many.

A few days later the country was plunged into the Great War. The war does not feature largely in the governors' minutes, nor in The Record, which did not appear regularly until 1923, although founded by Mr. Wells in 1915, but it must have been a trying time in many ways. Mr. Wells recalled this period in his farewell letter in the school magazine shortly before his retirement in 1933.

Naturally my mind travels back over the years that have elapsed since the school opened in 1912. The first two years of almost inconveniently rapid growth; then the war time full of strange difficulties and strange anxieties, but brightened by the recollection of much help given by the older boys and girls. 

The first edition of the School Magazine, 1915
Eventually the war came to an end and the school set itself to face the years of peace. Members of staff who had been serving in the forces returned, and new members were appointed. Among the latter was Mr V. V. Druller, appointed in 1919 to teach classics, who was to remain on the staff until his retirement in 1959.

One visible memorial of those days remains with the school at present. The whole story was told in *The Record* and is worth quoting here:

> At the end of the first world war Mr Wells wanted to commemorate in some way the Old Boys who had served with the forces. More trees had long been wanted and the governors readily granted Mr Wells's request that they should be bought, one for each Old Boy who had entered the forces. The trees were obtained. The trees were planted by Mr Ankcorn, assisted by Mr Banner. No formal ceremony was held when the planting was completed, but the boys and girls of that time were told about them and why they had been put in. Almost all these trees remain and have fulfilled Mr Wells's idea of providing pleasant shade for hot summer days.

In 1918, Mr Wells founded the Old Scholars' Guild, becoming its first President, an office which he retained for a number of years. At this point it will be convenient to mention another structure which has stayed with the school from the early days. The three "houses", known to present scholars as Newport, Spencer and Wells, were originally called "sides" (some might think this a more fitting name). Before they were renamed in 1963, they were known respectively as the "Brownies, the Jackals and the Tomtits". It is clear from *The Record* that these "sides" inspired a loyalty every bit as fierce as their modern counterparts, but the origins of the names became forgotten as the years passed, apart from a general idea that they came from the names of the original Captains of the sides. Definite information on this point came from far away, in a letter from Old Scholar Paul Downes, to the headmaster, in 1986. Mr Downes was a scholar in 1912 and emigrated with his parents to New Zealand in 1913. He confirmed that the names were indeed derived from three scholars. One was named Brown, one was Kenneth Hall, and the third was Tom Gostling, and Mr Downes was able to explain how they could be located on the 1913 school photograph which still hangs in the main corridor.

Once things had returned to normal after the Great War, the school entered into a period of tranquillity which was to last until 1939. Numbers grew steadily and students began to achieve academic success, although the numbers taking
what would now be described as advanced level studies remained small. In 1924 four Old Scholars were at university. The pupils were, for the most part, the children of farmers, tradesmen and the professional classes, and the education they sought was intended to equip them for working in the family business.

In terms of what are nowadays called "extra-curricular activities", the school did quite well in the 1920s, with a Musical Society, Debating Society, Wireless Society, Stamp Club and a flourishing scout troop. The scouts usually put on an annual concert. All these are reported in *The Record*, as are numerous visits to the Memorial Theatre in Stratford\(^\text{12}\). We have a picture of the school in the middle of the 1920s, from the report of the inspection carried out in October 1924. The inspectors commented on the buildings, including "two ranges of wooden buildings" which "provide 5 classrooms and a workshop". These were army huts which the school acquired after the Great War; one remained in use until the

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*AGS Staff, about 1920*

From the left, back row: Miss Wilkinson, Miss Weatherup, Mr Druller, Mr Walker, Miss Dobson.

Front row: Miss Weir, Mr Hall, Mrs Wells, Mr Wells, Miss Deans, Miss Wells, Miss Evans.
1960s. Even in 1924 they were described as "in very bad repair". The hall (the upper part of the present library) was said to permit "neither the comfortable assembly of the whole school, nor the taking of a reasonably large class in Physical Exercise". Nor was that all as *The Record* shows:

Speech Day, Dec 13th, 1923. This year the ceremony is to be held in the Picture House, as the school hall has of late proved too small to accommodate all the visitors.

As it turned out, Speech Day was held at the Alcester Cinema (as it became known) until the 1960s. The overall summary of the inspectors was quite encouraging however:

The discipline of the school and the manners and general behaviour of the boys and girls made an excellent impression. Work is done conscientiously and although the inspectors felt that in some directions more effort on the part of the pupils might be called for, yet it must be noted that the few who have done higher work in the past few years have given an excellent account of themselves. Altogether the school is one which deserves the confidence and support of the town and district.

The rest of the 1920s were unmarked by dramatic events, no doubt to the satisfaction of the headmaster and staff. The school had got a good system running, and just kept it ticking over. This is reflected in *The Record*, which in those days, under the supervision of the indefatigable Mr Druller, appeared each term. As well as the customary reports on Speech Day and Sports Day, there were copious notes on the doings of the Old Scholars' Guild, and general news of Old Scholars.

There was also a section entitled "Sports Day Indoors", devoted to an account of the Arts and Craft competition, a feature of Sports Day which lasted into the 1970s. The headmaster contributed a letter to each edition of the magazine. Sometimes these were brief notes on the history of the school, at others they were more exhortatory, as in *The Record* No.19, of December 1924:

I hope that you realise that the aim and object of the school is to help you to grow into the very best of which you are capable - to make you fine athletes, fine scholars, fine men and women, straight and strong in every sense.

Most of the content of the magazine was made up of contributions by the pupils themselves, often at some length, and (to a modern reader at any rate) surprisingly sophisticated. For example consider the following:
Lines on Choosing a Subject for a Magazine Article
To write and what to write, that is the question
For to my vacuous brain no thoughts will come
Much less the words wherewith to picture them...............
which is only a brief extract of the whole poem which appeared in *The Record*
No. 20 of April 1925. Often the contributions were of considerable length, 1300
words appeared in December 1927 under the title *When I Carried an Umbrella.*
Sometimes they have a "tongue in cheek" air about them as in *Pharisees Wives*, in
No 30, July 1928. Once again there is space for only a brief quotation:

I have learned by experience that there are many more fruitful occupations
than a study of the modern girl. It is disagreeable, futile, and superfluous,
and what is more, it makes one dream..........

We should bear in mind at this point that the separation of the sexes was the rule
at AGS at this time, with separate entrances for boys and girls, a rule that one side
of each classroom was for boys and the other for girls, and a fence down the
middle of the playground to prevent any mingling at break or lunchtime. Perhaps
a tendency to "dream" on the part of the young gentlemen of the school is
understandable.

With the onset of the economic depression at the end of the 1920s, the Old
Scholar's News begins to tell of emigration to the colonies and dominions. The
headmaster's letter in No 32 of March 1929 refers to the same movement:

 ..................to Old Scholars abroad in Australia, Canada, New Zealand. All
these Old Scholars who have gone abroad are showing the way which lies
open to all those young people who having health and strength and the will
to work are finding difficulty in obtaining work at home..........

At about the same time *The Record* begins to publish contributions sent in by
these emigrants, describing life in the countries they have gone to, with titles such
as *Life on a Canadian Farm*, or *The New Zealand Earthquake.*

The Old Scholars' Guild was flourishing at this time, with a reunion at
Christmas and July, both held on the school premises, and three dances each year,
usually held in Alcester Town Hall. The reunions seem to have been major social
events, attended in large numbers by both the Old Scholars and the staff. The
summer event involved tennis parties, or cricket matches against the school,
followed by a substantial buffet tea, and then an evening devoted to indoor games,
a sing-song around the piano, and usually dancing until midnight. The Christmas
reunion was along the same lines, but took place in the evening. Here is the
programme for the 1949 reunion as published in *The Record*; it clearly followed the pattern of the earlier ones:

The reunion will begin with games, community singing and general conversation at 7.00pm, followed by supper at 8.00, then the business meeting, followed by dancing until midnight.

An AGS cricket team, believed to be of the late 1920s
Mr Hall in the centre, Mr Druller in the back row, right

In reading through the old copies of *The Record* one gets the impression of a sort of cosy friendliness permeating the school and all its affairs. No doubt Mr Druller in his capacity as Editor was keen to convey such an impression, but it cannot have been a total distortion of reality. Indeed we have independent evidence of this friendly spirit from the Board of Education inspection which took place in 1932:

The Head Master who was appointed in 1912 has now given nearly 21 years service to the School, and is close to the time of his retirement. Three senior members of the staff have worked with him throughout this period, and to the
combined efforts of the four much of the success and of the happy feeling in the School is undoubtedly due.

The inspectors were less complimentary about the premises:

One serious drawback to the huts in addition to expensive upkeep is that there is no artificial lighting available, so that on dark afternoons the children cannot see to do their work.

and they had a plan for disposing of the huts:

the question was raised of using the Head Master's House which adjoins the school, in place of some of the hut buildings. The kitchen is already used in connection with the provision of dinners, but the other rooms are too small for classrooms, therefore the suggestion was regarded as impracticable

Modern scholars are taught in the rooms which were deemed too small in 1932, and can, no doubt, confirm the inspectors' judgement.

In one sense an era came to an end with the retirement of Mr Wells in 1933. He had started the new school off, given it many of its enduring institutions, and seen it become successful. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his imprint is still recognisable in the school we know in 1997. We have already quoted from his final headmaster's letter in The Record, in which he said goodbye to the pupils and Old Scholars. His retirement coincided with the 21st anniversary of the new school, and the latter was marked by Commemoration Day on July 13th 1933, involving a church service, followed by tea at the school for visitors, and a general open day and exhibition. All was of course, fully reported in The Record No. 36 by Mr Druller, in Notes and News.

In another sense the Wellsian era carried on under the new headmaster, Mr C. T. L. Caton, who had the sense to know a good thing when he saw it, and
saw no reason to mend what gave no
evidence of being broken. Minor
changes were made - the headmaster's
letter ceases to be a feature of *The
Record* with the departure of Mr Wells
for example - but everything else car-
ried on more or less as before. Mr
Caton was a man of some academic
distinction. A native of Birmingham, a
graduate with first class honours in
mathematics, and an MA, both from
Cambridge, he also held an MSc from
London. He had worked with
Lord Rutherford at the Cavendish and
came to AGS from Warwick School
where he had been the Senior Math-
ematical Master. One innovation which
did arrive in 1933 must have been very
welcome; *The Record* No.46 in
December, notes the start of the installation of electric light in the school and the
completion was reported in the following March. Whether the huts received the
benefit of electricity is not recorded. At about the same time (recorded in the same
dition of the magazine) the school was connected to the telephone system for the
first time, its number being Alcester 94.

Through the remainder of the 1930s the school continued on its way much
as it had in the Wells era. Holidays were granted for various royal weddings from
time to time, and in 1936 the whole school\(^1\) went down to Alcester to hear the
proclamation of the accession of King Edward VIII by Mr Caton (in his capacity
as High Bailiff of Alcester) from a window high in the town hall. The worsening
political situation in the later thirties does not seem to be reflected in the pages of
the school magazine until 1938, and then the incident has a comical aspect\(^2\):

Notes and News: During the Czecho-Slovakian crisis, the school bell was
commandeered by the police and school times were marked by the blowing
of a whistle.
Unfortunately we are not told why the police force took this action. Perhaps the officers supposed that the bell might be used for signalling to enemy forces.

The year 1938 brought some good tidings when the governors received news of plans for extensions of a "semi-permanent character". This was the present Chemistry/Biology block which is still giving excellent service nearly sixty years later! The work was under way by 1939, and The Record No.62, March 1939, reports with pleasure the prospect of the removal of two of the infamous huts, which stood where the new buildings were to go. They had been in use since March 1921 and:

In winter the inkwells froze. In summer the temperature rose to the 90s. There were leaks through the roof........soon we anticipate they will be nothing more to AGS than a memory.

AGS from the Air, believed to be taken in the middle 1930s
Note the hut (the physics lab.) where the 1962 building stands today. The dark buildings to the left of the main block are two of 1921 army huts.

Present day scholars will have experienced something similar in the current temporary buildings. The new buildings, together with other "minor works" such
as new cloakrooms and lavatories came into use in Autumn 1939, by which time the Second War was under way. Although the exterior of the new block was much as it is now, the internal arrangements were different. At one end were the Physics and Chemistry laboratories, with a shared preparation room, and at the other, three classrooms. Two of these were afterwards converted into the Biology laboratory and its preparation room, and the other became first the advanced Chemistry laboratory, and later the advanced Biology laboratory. But all these works were far into the future. As a result of the new rooms becoming available, some re-arrangement became possible¹⁹:

The former Chemistry lab is now the History room and houses the fiction library. The former Physics lab is again the Woodwork shop. The Art room is being used as a form room by Shell.

A little comment is needed here. The Chemistry laboratory had been on the upper floor of the main building and the Physics laboratory in a separate building in the grounds. Of "Shell" there is little to be said. The Record (No 8, December 1937), says mysteriously that the form, which had been introduced in the previous year, between Form III and the Lower IV had "disappeared"; but apparently it was still in existence in 1939. AGS also once had a form called "Remove", which was the top form of the Prep. School and has long since disappeared with "Shell". It all seems slightly reminiscent of Greyfriars; one remembers that William Bunter was known as The Fat Owl of the Remove.

The Second War brought many problems and difficulties, enough indeed to delay the opening of the autumn term until October 4th. Slit trenches, for protection in the case of air raids, had to be dug in the school field and the school day was re-organised so that buses were able to leave at 3.45pm, enabling all scholars to reach home before dark. In July 1940, with the threat of invasion after Dunkirk, the School Cadet Corps, attached to 7th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment was formed, with Mr Hall, the Senior Science Master, as Commanding Officer. At first, other things continued as usual. In the same month as the Cadet Corps was formed, the Old Scholars' Guild played its annual cricket match against the school. But the Editor of the school magazine was considering reducing to only two editions per year²⁰. In fact this proved to be a false alarm, for The Record continued to appear each term right through the war, and long after - a remarkable feat. More alarming for the pupils must have been an experiment with opening the school for three weeks for voluntary attendance during the six
week summer vacation in 1940. The support for the scheme was so poor that it was considered a failure and not tried again. The year 1940 also saw the arrival of a person who was to become part of the fixtures and fittings at the school for many years. Mrs Margaret Rutter was appointed as School Secretary in that year, a post she was to hold until her retirement in 1975.

Mr Caton had the reputation of being a wizard with the timetable. It was said that he could solve timetable problems from memory, without reference to the actual document, when people stopped him in the corridor to ask for help. He was to need all these skills late in 1940:

On November 26, 120 boys from King Henry VIII School, Coventry arrived at Alcester to share the AGS buildings at short notice. The staff had to work hard to secure billets in the town.

The solution to the problem as related in The Record No. 68 of March 1941, involved the two schools working entirely independently, each with its own staff, but sharing the buildings. The Coventry school fitted into the gaps in the AGS timetable, and also used the Baptist Schoolroom and such unlikely centres as Alcester Town Hall, and Arrow Village Hall. A major problem was caused by playing fields, for AGS was a soccer school:

For games, the school fields would obviously not stand the strain of any more use, and further the position would be complicated owing to Coventry's playing Rugby football. Fields have therefore been secured in the neighbourhood for their games.

One cannot help feeling that both sides were heartily relieved when King Henry VIII returned to Coventry in the summer of 1942. Meanwhile, the cultural education of the pupils continued despite the war; The Record No. 69 reported visits to the theatre in Stratford in July 1941 when pupils attended performances of both Julius Caesar and Twelfth Night. About the same time came some sadder news; The Record No. 70 gave its first report of the death of an Old Scholar on active service; he was John Walters, only 19 years old. As the war continued, the old familiar landmarks of the year began to drop away. In March 1942 The Record announced that the Old Scholars' Guild had cancelled the Christmas reunion for the remainder of the war, and reported that the same fate had befallen the July event the following summer. Mr Druller became Senior Master with the retirement of Mr Hall, and succeeded him as C.O. of the Cadet Corps, with the rank of Captain. The demand for school dinners rose to the point.
where four sittings took place simultaneously in various rooms around the school.

Another link with the past was severed with the death of Dr Richard Spencer, The Chairman of the Governors, on 31st of December 1942. *The Record*

stated that he had been "to a large degree instrumental in securing for Alcester the present Grammar School " and he had worked tirelessly for it as Chairman of the Governors since its re-foundation. Even at the height of the war prospects of the improvement of the facilities was not ruled out. In July 1943, No. 75 of *The Record* was able to report:

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......a prospect of conversion of former woodwork room into a kitchen and creation of a dining room to the playing field side of it.
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Perhaps the provision of school meals was seen as a contribution to the war effort by releasing the childrens' mothers from cooking meals, so that they could do war work. Whatever the reason, the proposed conversion did come about, but not for
another two years. It seems that 1943 was a remarkable year in many ways. The girls' tennis team completed three seasons without losing a single match, and the pupils collected 350 lbs of rose hips for medicinal use in the autumn, as well as spending a week assisting local farmers to get in the potato crop.

The next year was a momentous one in the history of education in Britain with the publication of the Education Bill, which was intended to make secondary education free for all. It caused the governors to set up a sub-committee to see what could be done to turn the school into an "aided school" since the headmaster thought that this might yield some advantage. Nothing came of this enquiry, and the Education Bill does not seem to have occupied the governors further. The Old Scholar's News section in the school magazine for the remainder of the war is filled with news of members serving in the forces in the guarded language permitted by the Official Sensor. Old Scholars would be described as "serving with the RAF somewhere in the East" for example, or "on a battleship in Northern waters". Sometimes former AGS pupils would run in to each other in some unexpected situation like Hong Kong Harbour, or an obscure town in India, and all would in due course appear in the pages of The Record.

It must have been clear that the Second War was drawing to a close in March 1945, when the builders descended on the school again for the first time since 1939:

The canteen building and extension to the Mistresses' Study is underway.... announced The Record in No. 80 of March, 1945, and in the next edition declared the buildings to be in use. The former dining room was converted into a domestic science room. The "Mistresses Study" is now (in 1997), the Head of Sixth Form's study. The formalities of the Education Act (as the Bill became in due course) came into force on 1st April 1945, and The Record for July 1945, No.81, concerned itself with associated financial matters:

Fees were abolished from April 1st 1945. Text books etc will from now on be loaned to pupils. There will be a charge of 2/6d to a "School Club Fund". This will finance Clubs, Societies, Games etc. all of which are outside the provisions of the Education Act.

At the end the fees were five guineas (£5.25 in decimal) per term.

A little over one month later the war in Europe came to an end, marked by a day's holiday for "VE" day. But it would be many months before all returned completely to normal. Long after the defeat of Japan in the following August,
teachers were still serving in the forces and had to be "de-mobilised" before they could return to civilian life. Having seen off Herr Hitler, as it had The Kaiser before him, the school turned to coping with the changed circumstances and new problems of the peace.
Chapter 6: After The Second War

The Education Act of 1944 introduced for the first time the principle of free secondary education for all. Previously the state had provided only "elementary education" free of charge. The Act also introduced the "tripartite system", and selection at the age of eleven (or thereabouts) by a national test. On the basis of the results of this test, children were allocated one of three different kinds of school. Those who achieved a high score went on to grammar schools (if they wished), and those who did less well continued their education at either "technical schools", or "secondary modern schools". At least that was the intention, but in practice the technical schools (intended to provide an education suitable for those aiming to become skilled manual workers and technicians) were few and far between, so a low score at the "eleven plus" test for most of the country's children meant that they went on to a secondary modern school.

Thus the structure of state education as set up by the 1944 Act was primary education for all to the age of eleven, then the selection test, followed by secondary education either at a grammar school for the more academic, or at a secondary modern school for most of the others. In the early years at least, secondary modern schools did not prepare pupils for public examinations such as the School Certificate or its successor the General Certificate of Education, so "failure" at the eleven plus cut children off from qualifications at the age of sixteen and eighteen which grammar school pupils took as a matter of course.

The implementation of the 1944 Education Act altered the whole basis on which the Alcester Grammar school operated. Up until this time, entry to the school (Newport Free Scholars excepted) depended on the ability of the parents to pay the fees as long as the pupils could pass a fairly simple entry test set by the headmaster himself. After this time, entry was only possible if you could pass a national standardised test (the 11+), and there was no requirement to pay fees. The result was a great increase in numbers, from 2321 in December 1939, to 339 in January 19472. To some extent the extra students were accommodated by the running down of the Preparatory School; only nine pupils were present in December 1946, and the department closed in July 19473. If the increased numbers and wider intake produced any problems for the school, there is no evidence of it in either the minutes of governors' meetings, or the school magazine. To all intents and purposes the school carried on much as before. There were some changes - new registration procedures for example - but these were
mostly of a minor nature.

To return to 1945 for the moment, The Record, No. 82 reported a major excursion when the whole school went by train, with reserved accommodation for the journey, to the Danilo cinema in Redditch to see the film King Henry V. Visits to the cinema (usually in Alcester) became a feature of the postwar years. In fact it took some time for the effects of the war to pass away. Staff did not begin to return from the services until the summer of 1946, and the Old Scholars' Guild was not re-founded until later in the same year. A school photograph was taken "for the first time in several years" in Autumn 1946. Slowly things got back to normal.

The early part of 1947 was remarkable for the bad weather which affected the whole country. An account in the magazine tells of a blizzard which started on March 4th and lasted through to the end of the next day. Alcester was cut off completely by road and rail for four days, and no buses ran on the Inkberrow route for nine school days. The thaw, when it came, was so sudden that there was widespread flooding, and this was followed by a gale which blew down the school's flagpole. At one stage the school ran out of fuel and those pupils who were able to attend were kept warm by doing physical training or singing! Alcestrians must have felt that enough was enough by this stage.

In September of the same year came the sudden death of the headmaster, Mr Caton, at the early age of 43, and The Record expressed the opinion that "...the trying time of the war with its problems took a toll of Mr Caton's strength ". Mr Drurier was appointed acting headmaster until a formal appointment could be made. The new headmaster, who had been appointed early in 1948, was Mr C. F. R. Ackland MA, who had previously been Senior History Master at King Edward Sixth School, Norwich. Whether it was at his instigation, or the influence of the 1948 Olympic Games (held in London that year, with "The Flying Dutchwoman", Mrs Fanny Blankeskoen, playing a prominent part, as older readers may recall) we do not know, but a major departure from tradition came in the summer with Sports Day. As The Record, No. 90, July 1948 put it:

This year for the first time in the history of the school, the girls were allowed to compete in Sports events. "What! girls running on Sports Day expostulates the scornful male.......while it is obvious that they cannot compete actually with the boys they surely have a right to appear on the programme, even if their events are drastically curtailed"
One innovation that Mr Ackland introduced was that of "General Activities" whereby the last two periods on a Friday afternoon were devoted to clubs, societies and scouts. At this time the school had dramatic, radio, stamp and photographic societies, as well as a scout troop.

Late in 1949 the school was inspected for the first time since 1932, and the report shows that the facilities left much to be desired. The school no longer provides adequately for the number of pupils in attendance. There are enough classrooms, though two of them are in a 1914-18 wooden hut, and three more in a wooden building erected in 1939. No room is large enough for the whole school to meet in. There is no library and no biology lab at present. The woodwork room at the school became a kitchen for school meals during the war and about two thirds of the boys now go to a handicraft centre in Alcester. School ends at 3.35 so that the buses may be released in time for factory workers and the rush hour on the Birmingham routes; this makes for a very short day. In 1948-49 42% of pupils left before completing their 5 year course. The school is faced with several interesting and not insoluble problems of development.

The last sentence has a hint of understatement about it. But we must remember that these were the "austerity years" when money was short. No doubt the inspectors' comments were valid, but securing the finance to do anything about it was a different matter. Nevertheless, change did come about bit by bit. Early in 1950 the removal of "the remains of the wooden fence between the two playgrounds" was reported but there was no mention of mingling of boys and girls being permitted. The same edition of The Record mentions a remarkable feat. Apparently non-scientist members of the sixth form, stimulated by the prospect of television reception reaching Alcester, challenged the others to build a television set. Having first scoured Birmingham for war-surplus radar components, the scientists built a television set from them and "with the first TV license ever issued in Alcester, received the first pictures on December 17th 1949". Meanwhile the connections with the school's past were being severed as long-standing members of staff retired and the school took the School Certificate exams for the last time in the summer of 1950; they were replaced by the General Certificate of Education the following year.

The headmaster, Mr Ackland, left to take up the Headship of Selhurst Grammar School in Surrey, in December 1950. His successor, Mr Eric Davison, came from the headship of Easingwold Grammar School in Yorkshire.
A mathematician of some distinction, he had served in the RAF during the war, working in his own field of aerodynamics. Soon after taking up appointment in January 1951, he requested the governors that his study should be suitably furnished with "curtains, a cupboard and an easy chair", and that his house (the headmaster was still required to live on the premises) should have two 15 amp sockets fitted "as the single 5 amp outlet was inadequate". It seems likely that the electrical facilities of the rest of the school were just as bad; "power electric points" had been installed in the Senior Mistress's room and both staff rooms only in the previous year; there was no mention of electricity for classrooms.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the governors' minutes show a constant struggle on the part of Mr Davison and the governors to wrest improvements from the Local Education Authority. No doubt that body was besieged by similar supplications from all its heads and their Boards of Governors as the austerity period faded and expectations rose. The first success at AGS (apart from the electrical fittings) was the conversion of two classrooms in the new (in 1940)
block, into a Biology laboratory. This was complete early in 1952. Soon the new Domestic Science and Woodwork rooms were under construction (They stood roughly where the north car park now is); their completion allowed the previous Domestic Science room to revert to use as a classroom (it is now, in 1997 the staffroom). Things then quietened down for a bit until the school acquired the new playing field ("the top field") which came into use in September 1953. The headmaster and governors were unsuccessful in persuading the Education Authority to pay for a pavilion on the new field, so the governing body funded it from their own resources; it was complete and ready to use in July 1955. These improvements to the buildings might be described as marginal however, and the report of the inspection of 1960 said as much: 

Apart from conversion of two classrooms into a biology lab, and the addition of huts for handicraft and housecraft, conditions much the same.......as in the last report

*The new buildings under construction, 1961*

Plans were already in hand for something more substantial however, and the work on the new buildings started in February 1961. Consisting of a hall/gymnasium,
physics laboratory, art room, school meals kitchen, dining room and four classrooms, with a separate engineering workshop, it was the largest extension since 1912. Opened on 15th November 1962 by the Lord Bishop of Coventry, it remedied most of the deficiencies reported after the 1949 inspection, and allowed the last of the 1921 huts, which stood in front of the present advanced Biology laboratory close to the North entrance, and other old buildings to be swept away. In particular the old hall became the present library.

Having seen how the buildings were brought up to date, in part at least, we must return to the early 1950s to look at other things. In 1951, Mr Wells paid a last visit to the school he had started; two years later, his death, at the age of eighty-one, was reported in The Record. In December of 1952 the School Cadet Corps was reformed, only to be disbanded again in 1957. The Dramatic Society started to put on productions (there had been one or two in the 1940s), but in the absence of a decent school hall, the Alcester Youth Hut was used. The Old Scholars' Guild still flourished, with two reunions and three dances each year, and in 1953 it started to compile a "roll of honour" to commemorate the service of Old Scholars in the Second War. In 1956 the Guild presented an oak lectern to the school, which is is still used for morning assembly, as a memorial to this war service. The coronation in 1953 was celebrated by three days holiday, and a visit to the Alcester Cinema by the whole school to see the coronation film. Sports Day saw further changes in 1955 when discus and javelin were added to the list of events. In 1959 Mr Druller himself retired after forty years of service, thirty-six of which he spent as Editor of the magazine. He said his farewell in No. 22, having seen 106 editions appear in print.

As the 1950s drew to a close, another inspection was in prospect, and Mr Davison carried out a review of the examination results since his arrival at the school. He must have found the information quite encouraging. The numbers actually sitting the ordinary level examination had risen from forty in 1951, to fifty-eight in 1957, and over the same period the percentage of students passing in four or more subjects had risen from 42.4% to 53.4%. At the same time the average number of passes per candidate had risen from 2.9 to 4.2. This improving of academic standards was noted by the inspectors when they came in 1960:

The eleven years which have elapsed since the last full inspection have been marked by steady growth and development. Numbers have increased from 312 to 336 and early leaving, formerly a serious problem - 42 per cent in 1949 - is now negligible - 3 per cent. The Sixth Form has grown from
twelve in 1951 to thirty-eight, all of whom have advanced level examinations in view. Two open awards and three state scholarships gained by pupils in the last three years are a gratifying indication of rising academic standards.

As the 1960s opened, another break with tradition came with the announcement that the school magazine would in future appear annually, in the Autumn, instead of termly as it had since 1923. Shortly after, the Brownies, Jackals and Tomtits, the "sides" which had existed from the the earliest days of the new school were renamed Newport, Spencer and Wells respectively. The new school hall allowed the presentation of quite elaborate dramatic productions. Previously when such things were put on, some outside venue such as the Alcester Youth Hut, or the canteen of the Entaco works in Studley had been used. The logistical problems involved in transporting everything to such a venue, constructing the sets and so forth seem overwhelming, but it had been done. From now on we see sophisticated productions presented annually in the school hall, starting with Twelfth Night in 1964. There seems to have been something of a flowering of extra-curricular activities at this time, and we see reports of the activities of the field club, outdoor club, music society, chess club, school choir, tennis club, table tennis club, ballroom dancing club, square dance society and dramatic society in the school magazine on a regular basis. On the other hand the scout group had quietly faded away in the late 1950s, and in 1962 the Old Scholars' Guild disbanded itself "for lack of support". The Guild seems to have been going strongly until the late 1950s; it celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1958 by presenting the school with the portrait of Mr Wells, the Guild's founder, which still hangs in the library. Another feature dating from this period is the Roll of Headmasters in the hall, which was put up in 1964 with the aid of a grant from the Newport Foundation.

By the middle 1960s, the headmaster and governors could look back on more than a dozen years of steady improvement, both in facilities and academic standards at the school. The academic standards continued to improve. But the future held a threat to the school's existence as a grammar school which was to occupy headmasters and governors on and off for the next twenty years, and further improvement to the facilities was to be delayed as a result.
Chapter 7: The Years of Change

The election of the Labour government, with Harold Wilson as Prime Minister in November 1964, brought the subject of comprehensive education to the fore. Throughout the 1950s, discontent with the tripartite system set up under the 1944 Act had been growing. In some areas more than one third of all children went to grammar school, whereas in others it was fewer than one in five, and the difference depended simply on the number of grammar school places available.

These were uncomfortable discrepancies, and the idea of educating all children (in the state system) in one type of secondary school arose as a response. Such schools, aiming to educate children of all skills and abilities under the same roof were given the title "comprehensive", and were introduced voluntarily by a number of local education authorities towards the latter part of the 1950s. But in October of 1965, Anthony Crosland, then Secretary of State for Education in the Labour government, published the famous "Circular 10/65" which required local education authorities to prepare plans for the reorganization of secondary education along comprehensive lines.

At this time in south Warwickshire, there were grammar schools in Alcester and Stratford upon Avon, and non-selective schools in Alcester, Studley, Stratford upon Avon, Bidford on Avon and Kineton. The non-selective schools, designated "High Schools" were in modern buildings, and the Education Authority had attempted to give them "parity of esteem" with some success. The schools encouraged their pupils to stay on beyond the statutory leaving age and to take public examinations, both the Certificate of Secondary Education (introduced in the early '60s), and the older General Certificate of Education; some of them ran sixth form units. The high schools were doing a good job, and enjoyed the strong support of their local communities, a fact which was to influence the course of events, as we shall see.

The first impact of all this came in January 1966, when the governors received notification of a draft plan prepared by the Education Committee in response to the DES circular 10/65; the plan itself was considered at a meeting on 10th of February. The difficulty was to make the best use of existing buildings on all the sites, and two schemes were proposed by the Education Authority. One was to make Alcester, Bidford and Studley High Schools into "Middle Schools", taking pupils from the age of 9 to 13, with Alcester Grammar becoming a "Senior High School" for pupils from 13+ to 18+. The existing primary schools would
take pupils from 5 to 9 years old. The alternative plan was to close Bidford and Studley High Schools, and expand Alcester High School and Alcester Grammar School into an 11-18, comprehensive school with eight forms of entry on the two sites. The Education Authority favoured the first plan, largely on the grounds of minimum cost.

The Alcester Grammar School governors expressed their opposition to the plan, and confirmed their confidence in the existing selective system, believing that it could be improved to provide the real advantages of a comprehensive system. The staff of the school similarly opposed the plan⁴. The governors of the local High Schools also had their doubts about reorganization, but preferred the three tier system if change was unavoidable.

No plans were submitted to the DES at this stage. Another year went by, and then the LEA produced a modified set of proposals, with the transfer age being 12+ instead of 13+, a sixth form college in Stratford, and 11-16 comprehensives in Alcester, Bidford and Studley⁵. Once again no plans were submitted to the DES for approval, and the election of the Conservative government with Mr (now Sir Edward) Heath as Prime Minister in the summer of 1970, took the pressure off to some extent, although the new Secretary of State, a certain Mrs Thatcher, of whom we were to hear much more in due course, approved plans for the reorganization of other parts of Warwickshire.

It is convenient to leave the story of reorganization at this point, in the summer of 1970, and return to other matters in the school's story. A feature of the school which impressed many visitors in the 1960s, was the large heap of coke (fuel for the boiler) which stood at the front of the main building. This had exercised the attention of the headmaster and governors since 1952 at least, for in that year⁶ they asked the Education Committee:

- to provide suitable storage facilities for coke to obviate the need for stacking large quantities of coke in front of the buildings.

Evidently nothing came of this, but Mr Davison tried again in 1966, requesting⁷:

- ... oil firing for the boilers in the 1912 school building, like other schools in the locality

He had no more success, for the Education Committee's reply stated that⁸:

- conversion of boilers of the old school from solid fuel to oil is not possible "in present financial circumstances"
and the coke heap remained.

In 1967, Mr Davison still lived in the headmaster's house as his predecessors had since 1912, but he planned to move out and have the building converted into classrooms and other facilities. This was achieved in 1968, and the school acquired sixth form classrooms and a new staffroom for male teachers. The school office, housed at this time in what can only be described as a large cupboard, moved into the former masters' staffroom. There had been changes in other things too. Later in the 1960's the building in Alcester which had housed Newport's School for so long was demolished without ceremony, to make way for new houses. Rugby football had been introduced in the early 1960s, and in 1967 the boys had a tennis tournament for the first time. In 1969 the school made its first attempt at winter sports, with a visit to Austria in conjunction with Hanley Castle School.

Mr Davison retired in the summer of 1970, after nineteen years as headmaster, to be replaced by Mr John Turner, who came from the grammar school at Henley on Thames, where he had been Senior Master and Head of Mathematics. A graduate of King's College, London, he was at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge for his post graduate training in Education and had taught previously at number of schools, including that once attended by Sir Edward Heath. As a new Head, Mr Turner had an agenda of changes which he wished to bring about. Among these were alterations to the school uniform. Readers may be surprised to learn that school uniform was not an ancient tradition at AGS, and that we have authentic testimony on this point. Mrs Clarke, already quoted as an eyewitness on opening day in 1912, said that there was no school uniform then, whereas:

Uniform became compulsory in the 1930s. Great pride was taken in wearing it. A school cap had to be worn on Saturday and Sunday as well, and woe betide you if you were caught not wearing it.

Mr Turner speedily abolished (without lamentation - on the part of the pupils at least) the wearing of caps and berets. He also encouraged the parents to set up a Parents' Association, which soon began to raise considerable funds for extra-curricular activities of various kinds. Parents' evenings, when parents could come in to discuss their child's progress were speedily introduced. With these innovations, the school was brought more in line with other grammar schools of the 1970s.
In one of his early governors' meeting, the new headmaster reviewed the state of the school. There were 381 pupils on roll, of whom 84 were in the sixth form. Only five of the sixth form students came from High Schools. The results in the examinations in the previous summer showed a pass rate of 76% at advanced level and 61% at ordinary level of GCE, and fifteen of the leavers had gone on to universities or polytechnics. Mr Turner foresaw that pressure on room space could only be relieved by temporary classrooms, and that a house for the school caretaker off the school site was needed. Here we find one of the themes of Mr Turner's headship - an unrelenting campaign for more and better accommodation of all kinds which he carried on until he retired twenty years later. At this time the school still had separate staffrooms for male and female teachers, and an early target was the establishment of a joint staff common room. The governors approved plans in June 1972 for the conversion of two small classrooms, in what had been the headmaster's house, into such a joint staffroom (it is now the staff marking room). The curriculum also came under review; new subjects were introduced - Economics was the first in 1971, and German and Liberal Studies soon followed.

A long-running saga ended with the start of the installation of oil-fired heating in the 1912 building in 1971, and as a result the great coke heap at the front of the building soon disappeared. Another curiosity had been the absence of any indication to a passer-by that the site on Birmingham Road housed a school at all, let alone that it was Alcester Grammar School. Having entered the school gate the visitor then seemed to be faced by a doorless facade with no visible means of entry. All this was remedied by the design and installation of an elegant sign board facing the main road, and indicators to show the intending visitor how to get in to the place.

Meanwhile reorganization returned to the scene. It was considered at a governors' meeting in March 1972 and they resolved that they were:

...not opposed to secondary reorganization, but preferred an 'all through solution' to a 6th form college.

The latest plan when it appeared, (considered by the governors on 20th June 1972), was for AGS to be the upper tier in a three tier system, taking pupils from 13+ to 18+. This was exactly what had been proposed five years earlier. By November the Education Committee had adopted this plan, and the governors were discussing a new name for the school in its new form. It seemed as though
reorganization would go ahead - everyone was in favour, including the local high
schools - but all such changes need money, and in June 1973 the DES refused to
release the funds needed for building extensions, holding out no possibility before
1976-77. At once the whole subject was put on the back burner.

When it came to the fore again in 1975, the political wind had changed
direction and we had a Labour government; pressure for reorganization was
renewed. The Education Committee had also changed its tune. In a new plan,
considered by the governors in November 1975, the "three tier" scheme was
replaced by plans for a "federation" - in effect a "split site" school with all the
attendant evils. There was considerable local opposition to the new plan. The AGS
view, held by headmaster, governors and most of the staff, being that there was no
point in replacing the existing system with something which would be worse
overall than what the area had already. As before, money turned out to be a
problem when the Chief Education Officer, Mr Ridger, gave it as his opinion that
no money would be available to implement the scheme before 1982, if then.

Nevertheless the Education Committee went ahead with the federation
scheme, despite steadfast opposition from Mr Turner and the governors. The latter
preferred a single site 11-18 comprehensive in Alcester (on whichever was
deemed to be the most suitable site), but failing that a two tier, 8 form entry, upper
school with years 8 and 9 (as we would say now) on one site and 10-13 on the
other. There was even more opposition from Studley, where the village was very
proud of its High School, and wished to see it become an 11-16 comprehensive in
its own right. So was born the "Studley Plan" which had (in addition to the
Studley comprehensive) an 11-18 comprehensive in Alcester with two tiers; AGS
was to form the upper one. Pupils were to transfer to Alcester from Studley for
16+ education.

In the event Warwickshire submitted the "Studley Plan" to the DES, only
to have it rejected on 20th December 1978 by Mrs Shirley Williams, then the
Secretary of State for Education. The County's first response was to submit a plan
for a 13-18, two tiered school, based on the AGS and St Benedict's sites - more or
less as suggested by Mr Turner and the AGS governors. This was in January 1979,
with a general election pending. The Education Committee withdrew its plan on
the 1st of May 1979, and on the 3rd of May, Mrs Thatcher and the Conservatives
won the general election. Reorganization in south Warwickshire did not merely go
on to the back burner - it was taken off the stove altogether, only reappearing as
the consequence of another election result some years later, as we shall see.

All this weighty business was going on behind the scenes to some extent, as far as the pupils, parents and most of the teachers were concerned, and we must return to the early 1970s to follow the progress of change under Mr Turner. The Parents' Association was able to present the school with its first minibus in the summer of 1973, the result of strenuous fund raising, which included Christmas Coffee Mornings and Spring Fairs, a feature of the school calendar from then on. The arrival of the minibus opened a lot of educational opportunities, from regular visits to Studley swimming baths, through field trips and theatre visits to journeys to sites of interest by various school clubs and societies.

The year 1976 brought another event which has since become a fixed point in the annual calendar - the first visit of year 10 (then called "the 4th form") to Marle Hall, Warwickshire's Outdoor Pursuits Centre in North Wales. Soon the Biology and Geography departments began to use Marle Hall for their annual

*Staff and students build the minibus garage, 1974*
*From the left: Mr D. Maund, Tim Drew, Robert Sealey, Andrew Lamb, John Clemmow, Adrian Dunbar and Mr P. Holmes*

Page 58
field trips as well. For some time before this, Mr Turner had played a leading part in the campaign to have Alcester "twinned" with a town in France. In due course this was arranged, and a consequence in 1978 was the first exchange visit between AGS pupils and their counterparts in Vallet.

Throughout 1970s, numbers in the sixth form grew considerably. Not only did the overwhelming majority of AGS pupils stay on to become sixth form students, but the numbers entering from the local high schools (and from various other schools) increased as well. By 1977 there were 100 students in the sixth form, compared with eighty-one when Mr Turner came to the school\textsuperscript{15}. The consequence was pressure on space in general, but laboratory space in particular, because of the growth in numbers in sixth form science groups. This was partly ameliorated by the conversion of a classroom in the 1962 building into an advanced laboratory to house sixth form Physics groups.

The pressure of numbers became much worse with a decision of the Education Authority, in November 1979, to concentrate all sixth form work in the area on Alcester Grammar School. The result was a further increase in sixth form numbers at AGS in the early 1980s, with consequent problems of accommodation. To make matters worse, the school was faced with a drop in capitation of 10\% \textsuperscript{16} and the headmaster had to inform the governors that the cut would result in a fall in staffing and curtailment of the sixth form curriculum.

As well as these problems, the curriculum was expanding at the same time. Computer Studies started in the school in autumn 1979, In the next year, 1980, the school spent £2000 on microcomputer equipment, of which one half came from the flourishing Parents' Association. Some improvement to the buildings did take place. A classroom ("Room 9" in those days) in the 1940 block was converted into an advanced Chemistry laboratory, and an old cloakroom was converted into a sixth form study and reading room, both projects being completed in 1980.

By 1980, Mr Turner had been at the school for ten years, and a number of changes of many kinds had been made. But what of academic progress in this time? The good work started by Mr Davison had continued. In 1980 there were fifty-two A level candidates who entered for a total of 136 subjects and achieved an 87.5\% pass rate - the highest since 1954 when there were only seven candidates. This represented a substantial improvement over 1970, the year of Mr Turner's arrival.
It was clear at this point that the 1980s were going to be a difficult decade for the school. Sixth form numbers were expected to increase even more, and inflation was still eroding the value of the capitation allowance in real terms, although not at the spectacular rates seen in the late 1970s. There was still a chronic need for improved accommodation, particularly for the burgeoning sixth form. The occasional windfall came along, for example a legacy from Pearl Jephcott, one of the most illustrious of our Old Scholars, which provided the school with its first photocopier in 1981, but for substantial development, Warwickshire's Education Committee was the only source of funds. Here the constant shadow of reorganization still lay over all; the County was reluctant to spend large sums of money on a school whose future was uncertain. Nevertheless some progress was made. In 1982 the original Chemistry laboratory was reconstructed and refurbished - not before time. It had been described as "the most old-fashioned in the whole of Warwickshire" by the County's Science Inspector. Similar plans for the Biology lab (equally antiquated) to be refurbished immediately afterwards were dropped because of lack of money. The need for a decent common room for the sixth form was partially met by the conversion of a former girls' cloakroom for the purpose - opened for use on 23rd December 1983.

More change came in 1985 with the opening of a library extension and enlarged sixth form study area adjacent to it, a new joint staffroom, an enlarged school office area, and a covered way ("The Red Corridor") which linked the 1912 and 1962 buildings. A further development came about in a curious way. When, in the 1970s, the wooden buildings (put up in 1953) housing Home Economics and Music were given a modern central heating system, the installers, by some oversight, weakened the structure so that serious cracks appeared in the walls. In the great gale of October 1987 the cracks got very much worse, and the building was condemned as unsafe, with the result that the school obtained a brand new brick-built building, opened in 1989, as a replacement.

Changes were taking place in other ways as well. Spring term 1984 saw the first sixth form "Rag Week" - a great fund-raising effort. In the autumn of 1984, Speech Day was replaced by Leavers' Night - a social evening when recent Old Scholars returned to the school to meet old friends and collect their examination certificates. The same year saw the start of the Duke of Edinburgh's award group at the school. In 1986, new courses for sixth formers started - Law, Human Biology, Theatre Arts and Geology, all taken at GCE Ordinary Level. In
1987 the first Advanced Supplementary courses for sixth formers were offered. Intended to broaden the sixth form curriculum, each being equivalent to one half of an A level in content, but equal in intellectual status, they proved popular with the sixth form. AGS was one of the few schools in the country to invest much time and effort into A/S curricula and the reward was to be visited by numerous HMIs and other inquisitive persons wishing to find out how it was done.

From the middle 1980's the school began to be affected by the implementation of a series of education reforms. The first of these was the replacement of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) at ordinary level, by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), bringing in a common examination system at 16+. The major new departure for most subjects at the school was the introduction of teacher-assessed course work; the first candidates took the new examination in June 1988.

This period could well be described as the age of acronyms - TVEI, GCSE, LMS, GNVQ, GMS etc etc - there seemed to be no end of them. From 1985 onwards, rapid change was the normal thing, all of it initiated in Whitehall, all of it producing large amounts of printed matter, and all consuming an inordinate amount of time and energy on the part of the teaching staff, none more than the headmaster. He had the responsibility of leading everyone through it all, which meant that he had to be familiar with all the documents. Here the school was lucky to have Mr Turner at the helm. Never one to be impressed by the majesty of pompous paperwork, he encouraged the teachers to concentrate on the substance of the new ways of doing things, rather than the publicity. Thus the school was able to cope with the introduction of The National Curriculum, Balanced Science (both, by a masterpiece of the educational planners' art, at the same time in September 1989), and the Technical Vocational Education Initiative.

Some of the reforms were aimed at the basic organisation of the country's schools, with the intention of giving the headteachers and governors more control of the resources which they needed to educate their pupils. The first of these was LMS - Local Management of Schools - intended to encourage local authorities to retain less of the money in central hands and disperse more of it to the schools. More radical was GMS - Grant Maintained Status. Under the arrangements set up by this legislation, schools could - if the parents balloted to do so - "Opt out" of local authority control altogether and become funded directly from Whitehall. While all this was in progress, the mushroom-like growth of the sixth form
continued, reaching 186 students in 1986 - when Mr Turner came in 1970 there had been only 84 - and 220 in 1989.

An old problem raised its head in the middle 1980's when control of Warwickshire County Council (and thus the Education Committee) passed from Conservative control for the first time in living memory. The policy of the Labour - Liberal Democrat alliance which now held power was for reorganization. Plans were prepared, and meetings held in the southern and eastern areas with the intention of publicising the new policy\textsuperscript{19}. For a time it seemed as though reorganization was almost certain. But it was now 1987, and another general election was due. It was won yet again by Mrs Thatcher and the Conservatives, and almost immediately the Education Committee's plans were dropped, and selection continued in the southern and eastern areas of Warwickshire.

In 1990 Mr Turner retired from the post of headmaster of the school after twenty years. He had served for longer than any of his predecessors except Mr Wells\textsuperscript{20}, and had presided over far-reaching changes in the school which prepared it for the 1990's. His successor was Mr Andrew Shearn, who had been a Deputy Head at AGS since 1983. A graduate of the University of Exeter, and the first geographer to become headteacher at the school, he had served as an officer in the RAF before taking up teaching. Towards the end of Mr Turner's time, a start was made on the reconstruction of the Biology laboratory, together with other conversions in the 1940 block which would make the operation of the Chemistry and Biology laboratory suites more efficient; all the work was completed by September 1991\textsuperscript{21}.

The start of Mr Shearn's term as headteacher corresponded with the start of Local Management of Schools in the area, giving the headteacher and governors much more freedom in how they used the day to day finances to run the school. But it did not solve the outstanding problem - the need for considerable capital expenditure on new buildings to enable the extensive collection of temporary classrooms which adorned the grounds to be swept away. The situation was made more pressing by the "Greenwich Judgement" on the early 1990s, a test case which established that local authorities could not enforce catchment areas for schools, or even use county boundaries to exclude any pupils who wished to enter and were qualified to do so. The result of this was pressure from parents living in Worcestershire, and far-off parts of Warwickshire, for entry for their children to the school at 11+ (year 7). By 1991, 8.5% of the year 7 entry came from outside...
Warwickshire.

These problems led the Governing Body to consider the question of an application for Grant Maintained Status in the spring of 1992. Although the school had enjoyed very cordial relations with the Warwickshire Education Department and there was no wish on the part of the Head, governors or staff for any separation from the County, Grant Maintained Status was seen as the only opportunity for obtaining the money for the new buildings which were so sorely needed. Before any action could be taken however, the matter was pre-empted by a rumour of a request from the parents for a ballot on GMS status to which the governors, under the terms of the legislation, would have to accede. The matter was considered before the ballot became a fact, and the governors resolved that 22:

The Governing Body would generally be in favour of becoming a Grant Maintained School if a petition from parents were to be received.

The result of the parents' ballot, held between 15th of June and the 6th of July, 1992 was in favour of Grant Maintained Status; of those eligible to vote, 66% did so, and of these 72% voted in favour and 28% voted against.
Once the decision had been taken, and the assent of the DES gained, the Governing Body pressed ahead with preparations. The formalities were complex and many meetings were held in order to make everything ready. All was completed on time however, and on 1st April 1993, just over eighty-one years after coming under Warwickshire's control, the school left it. For the pupils and teachers nothing much changed; life went on much as before. For the governors and Headteacher, things were very different. Meetings became more frequent and longer and paper-work increased considerably as they took on administrative tasks which had previously been carried out by salaried officials at County Hall in Warwick.

As a consequence of GMS, the school was able to apply for capital grants for new buildings, and architects were commissioned to prepare plans for extensions. Before this took place however the governors concerned themselves with the future structure of the school, and applied for expansion to three forms of entry instead of two, hoping thereby to alter the balance between the sixth form and the lower school in favour of the latter (nearly 50% of the school was in the

Mr Shearn at the announcer's desk, Sports Day 1993
sixth form in autumn 1993), and to increase the likelihood of Alcester children
being able to enter the grammar school\textsuperscript{23}.

Eventually permission was granted for the school to move to three forms
of entry from September 1997, and funds were obtained for new building work,
starting with extensions to the hall and the sixth form common room in 1994. In
1995 came the first half of a new Technology/Art/Business Studies block;
completed in the autumn of that year, it was the first major building construction
on the site since 1962. The second half of this building, housing Information
Technology, was completed in September 1996. Work started almost at once on a
three storey extension to the northern wing of the 1962 building, to house Modern
Languages and Mathematics. Funds were also granted for a general science
laboratory and associated offices, work on which was due to start in the autumn of
1997. A further extension to the three storey block to include a lift for disabled
students, and others to the sixth form study area, and the sixth form common room
seemed likely to proceed (at the time of writing) for completion by the autumn of
1998.

So much for the buildings, what of the quality of education which went
on in them? Surveys of sixth form exam results carried out by Warwick-
shire in the early 1990s showed that the school was doing well compared with
other institutions in the county\textsuperscript{25}.

This gave the staff some confidence when the prospect of the first
full scale inspection since 1960 was announced. It was conducted by
Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education), under the new rules for
such events, and occupied a week in November 1994. The inspectors pro-
duced a glowing report on the school and its work, but drew attention to
deficiencies in the buildings and equipment which may have encouraged the

\textit{The new Art/Technology building, 1995}
DFEE (and later the Funding Agency for Schools, or FAS) to release the funds needed for the new buildings referred to above. In 1995, Ofsted awarded the school the description of "An outstandingly successful school" on the basis of the inspection results for 1994, an accolade reserved for only about thirty-two of 900 schools inspected.

Academic success, welcome though it is, is not enough. Something more is needed for a school to be successful. Alcester Grammar School has this extra ingredient in a number of forms, ranging from outstanding annual productions of plays such as *Macbeth* or musicals such as *Cabaret* or *Fiddler on The Roof*, field trips by the Geology, Biology and Geography departments, a wide range of musical activities, including an annual music competition organised by the Music department and a flourishing school orchestra, exchange visits to Germany and France, innumerable visits to the theatre, expeditions to wild country all over the British Isles and many other events which make life at the school in the 1990s both rewarding and fulfilling.

*The three storey extension in progress, Spring 1997*
Chapter 8 : Conclusion

A long story such as this has to be brought to a halt somewhere, although Alcester’s Grammar School carries on as it has done for the past 500 years or so. This account ends in the spring of 1997, with new buildings springing up, with an enviable record of academic success, and 595 students on roll, 286 of whom are in the sixth form. Many people have contributed to this success, notably the Heads - Mr Wells who started the school off in the right way in 1912, Mr Caton who saw it through the Second War, Mr Davison who ensured that academic standards improved in the 1950s and that there was new building in 1961, Mr Turner who made the school into a modern institution and piloted it through the changes of the 1980s and Mr Shearn who brought it through the transition to Grant Maintained Status and saw it recognised as an outstandingly successful school. But although these men were the major players, many others have contributed by their efforts - the staff of all kinds and descriptions, the parents and pupils and last but not least the governors who have contributed an enormous amount of time and energy, especially in recent years. The school has progressed because of a real team effort by all these people, and the reward has been success.

Readers will remember that in the days of Mr Dyson, the headmaster who used to lock the pupils in the classroom and go for a walk across the fields, the governors were "sanguine that Alcester would become a great school". In the spring of 1997, over 100 years later, it seems as though their hopes have been realised.

The End
## Appendix 1: Headmasters of The School

### At Newport's School
(from Saville, 1978)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1490</td>
<td>Richard Norman (Chantry priest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1614/16</td>
<td>William Traunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1648</td>
<td>William Mede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1661</td>
<td>Gregory Maurice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1662</td>
<td>Robert Waldron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1671</td>
<td>Daniel Grove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1682</td>
<td>Joseph Webster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1686</td>
<td>Abraham Jennings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1688</td>
<td>Edward Herbert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1693-96</td>
<td>John Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1703</td>
<td>Richard Jennings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1703-26</td>
<td>John Gibbons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1734</td>
<td>William Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>Anthony Clarke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791-1810</td>
<td>Matthew Booker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1811-15</td>
<td>John Holmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825-78</td>
<td>Richard Harbridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878-80</td>
<td>William Sutton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880-89</td>
<td>Francis Gegg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-93</td>
<td>John Dyson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893-1906</td>
<td>A. W. Parvin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-09</td>
<td>Reverend R. W. Clarke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909-12</td>
<td>F. H. McCrobin</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### At Alcester Grammar School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912-33</td>
<td>Ernest Wells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933-47</td>
<td>Cyril T. L. Caton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948-50</td>
<td>Charles F. R. Ackland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-70</td>
<td>Eric Davison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-90</td>
<td>John W. R. Turner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Andrew Shearn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2 : Some Personal Reminiscences  

From Dr Michael Caton, Scholar 1940-48  

I have many happy memories of AGS which was both my school and home. We lived in the headmaster's house adjoining the school. My sister and I were very fortunate, since after hours we were allowed to play in the school buildings and playing fields. Here we used to meet many friendly people including Mr Ankcorn, the School Caretaker, Mrs Fletcher who used to prepare the school dinners, and Mrs Rutter, the School Secretary.

I started in the Prep. Department in August 1940, and passed through the forms I, II, Lower and Upper Remove. I especially remember Miss Weatherup who taught us several subjects including arithmetic and handwork, when we would make things with clay, paper maché or coloured raffia of which she kept a large bunch in the corner of the classroom. At one time she had a "behaviour ladder" on the classroom wall on which was pinned a name tag for each pupil. The well behaved ascended one rung each week, but misconduct meant being held back or moved downwards according to the number of bad behaviour marks awarded! Other junior school teachers I recall include Miss Moore, Miss Phillips and Miss Elphick.

The main school forms were III, lower and upper IV, lower and Upper V and VI. There were two parallel classes and in 1945 I entered IIIA. Our form teacher was the school Geography master, Mr Walker, who at that stage taught us maths - arithmetic, algebra and geometry. I remember him telling us how lightly we were let off in having to learn only a fraction of the theorems he had to memorise in his own school days when he was brought up on the books of Euclid!

I only spent three years in the main school, as we left Alcester in 1948. On looking back I realise how much groundwork in the basic subjects we had covered, such as the structure of the languages where we learned English with Miss Young, French with Mr and Mrs Petherbridge and Latin with Dr Falk and Mr Druller. My favourite subjects were the sciences, Physics with Mr Hadwen and especially Chemistry where I eagerly awaited Mr Thornton's weekly lesson when he would show us all sorts of exciting experiments. I had a lab. of my own in the pantry in the schoolhouse where I would try out these experiments with my chemistry set.

Sports Day was an annual highlight. The football field became a sports arena for races which included "slow bicycle", and an obstacle race in which competitors had to scramble through sacks suspended from one of the goalposts! The other big annual occasion was Speech Day. I recall this in 1945 when I was presented with a music certificate, (awarded for piano lessons with Miss Griffiths), by Dr Charles Hill, the "Radio Doctor" who had known my father in student days at Trinity College, Cambridge.

My father conducted morning assembly in the school gym which doubled up as hall. A memorable feature of the end of term assembly was the way in which the pupils said goodbye for the holidays by filing past the teachers and shaking hands.

Page 69
From Francis Petherbridge, teacher 1947-84, adapted from his contribution to *The Record*, written in 1984

Present pupils would find it difficult to imagine the whole school assembled in the library, which at that time (1947) served as both hall and gymnasium. Fainting was not an uncommon occurrence and the extraction of the victim was extremely difficult. Clothing coupons were still in force and P.E. lessons involved the issuing of gym shoes, which could not be purchased by individuals, from wire cages at the bottom of the stairs. It was with relief that I was able to sell off our stock within a year or two.

There were two playing fields. The boys' field, now occupied by new buildings and the tennis courts and surrounded by the lime trees, and the girls' field beyond the verandah. In the soccer season the former quickly became a sea of mud and marking lines would have been impossible but for supplies of sawdust begged from the cabinet works across the road. With regard to cricket I think the boys were better off than at present, in spite of the new artificial wicket. School matches were played in Ragley Park on well-prepared wickets, which were the envy of visiting teams.

We have for some years now become accustomed to "terrapin" classrooms. They appear little better than the World War I vintage army huts which stood near where the north car park is now. Each was heated by a pair of stoves, one coke-fired and one coal-fired. The appointment of a form stoker was a very important matter, there being considerable rivalry for the job. The aim was to make the stoves glow red! Needless to say, this could be overdone; I remember once being called to an empty hut by someone teaching next door, to find flames creeping along the wooden floorboards. A fire extinguisher did its job, the huts were saved and I was blamed for the long delay in their replacement.

I was very sceptical at first of the house system. At that time houses were called "sides" and had very strange names. No staff were attached to the houses and each was run entirely by its Captains. This could not possibly work, I thought, but soon found that it did work remarkably well.

Staging school plays without a proper school hall was a nightmare. I remember on one occasion, a play had to be transferred at the dress rehearsal stage from the Youth Hut in School Road to the Entaco Hall in Studley. Even Speech Day was held in the local cinema in Alcester High Street, where the proprietor, unless restrained, was wont to entertain the company with the popular "hits" of the day.

From Jonathan Morgan, Scholar 1988-95, presently reading Law at Balliol College, Oxford

To begin at the beginning, with a September Wednesday in 1988, when I stole anxiously into Room 11 to meet my compatriots in Form 1M, and our tutor, Mrs Davis (who was to guide us gently through our first year). Then to assembly for an encounter
with the massed ranks of the school, and a rousing chorus of "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" (if memory serves). Originally, three solemn handclaps from one of the Senior Prefects would be the signal for everyone to stand, as in swept the headmaster (then Mr Turner). At the beginning and end of term there would be a hymn, including on occasion Jerusalem (the school song, unofficially at least). That all this has faded away disappoints my sense of pageantry. Memorable assemblies include Mr Wells's about his sadistic games teacher, the hardy perennial "The History of Spencer House" by Mr Johnson at house assembly and the climactic "Assembly sketch" in the 1993 Sixth form Pantomime.

Returning to 1988, my first lesson at AGS was Home Economics. At that time the HE and Music rooms were still housed in what were called (with no little irony) "temporary" classrooms. These were finally razed to the ground after the construction of the new "McDonalds building" (so christened after its style of architecture), on the quaintly named "Headmaster's Lawn". Alas many temporary classrooms remained, complete with perishing winters and boiling summers. Other structural/linguistic changes ensure that while no more is to be heard of the blue and pink "grottoes", the fabric of the school has gained both the "shed" and the "cave"! Desks have now been completely purged in favour of (rather soulless) plywood tables.

To matters sporting, and I will always remember cross-country running as a potent blend of exhaustion, mud, rain and (during the Inter-House Race) the icy River Arrow. Sports Day by contrast was forever held in blazing sun. Abiding impressions range from the nauseating adrenalin-soaked isolation at the start of the 200 metres race to the carnival atmosphere of the closing tug of war contest.

Committed as I was to extra-curricular music and drama, my exploits on the stage warrant a tome to themselves, from Mad Dogs and Englishmen (Y7), via Cabaret, (Y10) to Cold Comfort Farm (Y13). Presiding over all were Mr Dobell (serene and good-humoured optimism) and Mrs Green (infectious energy). Floreat "Absolute Beginners"!

How to summarize thousands of lessons? CDT with the ever amiable Mr Maund. History with Mr Woodcock - Staffordshire bull terriers and the exploding slide projector. Mr Warner's unflagging encouragement and patience, Mrs Albon's "favourite chemical reaction" and circle drawing prowess, Mr Simpson and the disappearing board-rubber. Mr Layton's sideburns, Mr Taylor's ties, Mr Micklethwaite's beard.

Chemistry deserves special mention, for despite my having been seduced by the wig, the gown and the dusty parchments, I remain a chemist (manqué). How fondly I recall the roar of the bunsens, the smell of the "essence of orange blossoms" (vastly overrated), titration, sodium dichromate, refluxing and "hosepipe massacres" beyond number. And in the chemistry lab on a May Friday afternoon in 1995, after (specially requested) glass blowing and a final refrain of The Elements Song by Tom Lehrer, came my AGS career to an end.
Notes and References

Chapter 1

1 A good survey of the history of all Alcester’s Schools is to be found in A Short History of Alcester’s Schools, 1490-1912, Occasional Paper No.7, by G.E.Saville, published by Alcester and District Local History Society 1978.

2 Additional material is to be found in Alcester - A History edited by G.E.Saville for the Alcester and District Local History Society and published by K.A.F.Brewin Books, 1986. Copies of all the Society’s publications are to be found in Alcester Public Library.

3 For a more detailed survey of the legislation and its relationship to the school readers could consult A History of Alcester Grammar School With Particular Reference to the Curriculum between 1912 and 1944 by Mrs V. P. Rewse, an unpublished dissertation, 1975. A copy is to be found in Warwick Record Office library, reference B Ale Rewse.

Chapter 2

1 Dugdale Vol 2 p774

2 HMA. Letter from E.Woodward Jephcott to the Chairman of Governors. Undated, but during Mr Shewell’s Chairmanship.

3 Various dates are attributed to Newport’s will; VCH alone gives two different ones. In Vol 2 p 369, 1582 is given and in Vol 3 p 19, 1591 is the date. One school prospectus of the 1880s gives 1542, and another of the 1970s, 1593. According to Dugdale Vol 2 p774, the date was "12 Junie 34 Eliz" i.e. on the 12th of June in the 34th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Dugdale is here dating by regnal years. This means that the date is between 17 Nov 1591 and 16 Nov 1592. Since the month was June, it must have been in 1592. A sight of the original will is needed to settle the point, but in any case the money would not have come to the school until the will was proved. If, as seems likely, probate was granted by The Prerogative Court of Canterbury, a copy of the will, with the date of the grant of probate attached, should be in the Public Record Office.

4 Dugdale Vol 2 p774. "Herberye" is now spelled Harbury. It lies in East Warwickshire.

5 Saville 1986 discusses the chantries in some detail; see also Dugdale p769

6 Quoted from Saville, 1978, p3. The original document is held by Warwickshire County Record Office

7 VCH Vol III p19

8 Saville 1978 p2

9 Report of the Charity Commissioners for Warwickshire 1827-75 (Lord Brougham’s Commission), Hundred of Barlichway p 2

10 Saville 1986 p101

11 CR1309/8; Manuscript memorandum from Mr Gegg to the governors.

12 Saville 1978 p 6

13 VCH Vol 2 p369. The VCH gives no source reference for this assertion
Chapter 3

1 Presumably the Inspectors of the Endowed Schools Commission or the Charity Commissioners must have visited the school, but if so, we do not know what they thought of what they found. The records, if they exist, must be still with the Charity Commission; they have not been deposited at the Public Record Office.

2 CR1309/8; These are extracts from the printed scheme, of which several copies are preserved at Warwick Record Office under this accession number.

3 CR1309/1; Entries in the minute books from 12 November to 3 December 1880.

4 CR1309/8; Manuscript memorandum from Mr Gegg to the governors.

5 CR1309/1; Governors' minutes 29 December 1882. Mr J.W.R.Turner, headmaster of the school from 1970-1990, carried out the pioneering work on Mr. Gegg and his troubles. The results of his researches were published by the Alcester and District Local History Society in the Autumn 1981 edition of Local Past, the Society's quarterly journal.


7 CR1309/1; All these details come from the governors' minute book.

8 CR1309/4; Admission register 1881-1902

9 Saville 1978 p7 gives a reprint of the complete prospectus.

10 CR1309/1; the undated cutting from the newspaper has been pasted into the governors' minute book.

11 CR1309/8; Mr Dyson's C.V. and references are amongst the unnumbered papers. The reference to the school in the report of the Bryce Commission was drawn to our attention by Mr Haydn Snow of Melton Mowbray in an undated letter to Mr J.W.R.Turner, now in the Headmaster's Archive.

12 CR1309/1; Entries in the governors' minutes, 1891.

Chapter 4

1 Mr Dyson's parting shot was to claim £30 from the governors for the employment of an assistant teacher in his last year. The claim was refused on the reasonable grounds that he had not employed an assistant!

2 Rewse 1975; These details are in an undated prospectus reprinted in Mrs Rewse's dissertation.

3 CR1309/4; Admission register 1902. The names of the students, all from Alcester and nearby villages, are those familiar in the history of the town, including Styles, Dowdeswell, Purton, Overbury, Jephcott, Elsley, Sumner, Fisher, Woodfield, Devey, Whitehead and Parvin.
4 Rewse 1975, p4
5 CR1309/2: Entry in governors' minutes for 3 August 1906.
6 CR1309/2: We have no admission register for Newport's School after 1902. The decline in numbers is mentioned in the governors minutes for 1 March 1906, but no figures were given.
8 CR1309/2; Entries in the governors minutes for January 1908 tell the story in full.
8 CR1309/2; Governors' minutes 21st July 1910

Chapter 5
1 Rewse 1975: These are the reminiscences of Mrs B.N. Clarke, an Old Scholar who was present at the opening, recorded in 1975.
3 Rewse 1975: The information comes from a cutting from The Alcester Chronicle dated 20th January 1912, pasted into Mrs Rewse's dissertation.
4 Rewse 1975; Quoting The Alcester Chronicle for 10th May 1912
5 Rewse 1975; Quotation from The Alcester Chronicle, December 1912
6 Rewse 1975 p10; Quoting Mrs B.N.Clarke
7 HMA: Board of Education Report of Inspection of Alcester Grammar School, Warwickshire held on 11 and 12 December 1913
9 Record; No 45, July 1933, headmaster's letter
10 Record; No 94, December 1949
11 HMA; Letter to Mr J.W. R. Turner, dated 24 June 1986
12 Rewse 1975; Quotation from an Old Scholar, p 22
13 Record No 16, December 1923
14 HMA; Board of Education Report of Inspection of Alcester Grammar School, Warwickshire, October 1924
15 HMA; Board of Education Report of Inspection of Alcester Grammar School, Warwickshire, December 1932
16 Record No. 53, April 1936
17 Record No. 61, December 1938
18 CR680: governor's minutes for 22 January 1938
19 Record No. 64, December 1939
20 Record; these details of the early war period come from Nos. 66 and 67
21 Record No 76, December 1943
22 CR680; governors' minutes for 15th February 1944
Chapter 6
1 Record: No. 64 December 1939
2 CR680; AGS governors' minutes, 14th January 1947
3 Record: No. 88 December 1947. It is important to distinguish between AGS Preparatory Department, and Alcester Preparatory School, which was started in 1942 by Mr Caton, in temporary accommodation and later moved to Kinwarton House. After the death of Mr Caton the school was continued by Mr Phillip Rutter, until its closure in 1986
4 Record: No. 87 July 1947
5 HMA; Report by H.M. Inspectors on Alcester Grammar School, Warwickshire, Inspected on 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th October 1949
6 Record; No. 95, March 1950
7 HMA; AGS governors' minutes 11 May 1950 and 1st April 1951, record the impending retirements of Mr Walker, Head of Geography and Mr Ankcorn, Caretaker, after 36 years and 39 years respectively.
8 HMA; AGS governors' minutes for 26 April 1951
9 HMA; AGS governors' minutes as for 7 above
10 HMA; AGS governors' minutes for 7th July 1955. The pavilion cost £802.15.3
11 HMA; Report by H.M. Inspectors on Alcester Grammar School, Warwickshire, inspected on 26th, 27th, 28th, and 29th January 1960
12 HMA; school prospectus of the 1970s
13 Record; No. 106 December 1953. No. 107, March 1954 contains a tribute to Mr Wells and his work.
14 HMA; AGS governors' minutes for 2nd July 1953
15 HMA; Manuscript in Mr Davison's handwriting
16 Record: No. 125, March 1960
17 Record: No. 129, 1963. If the change produced any public indignation, no record of it appears in either the governors' minutes or the school magazine.
18 Record; No. 130, 1964. From now on the magazine carries a report of the annual production, often with photographs.
19 Record; No.128, 1962

Chapter 7
1 There were (and are) two grammar schools in Stratford, King Edward VI Grammar School, a voluntary aided school for boys, and Stratford on Avon Grammar School for Girls, a county maintained school opened in the 1950s. In Alcester, the only secondary school at this time, apart from AGS, was St. Benedict's R.C. High School, although another school was due to open in the Autumn of 1966. When it did so it was named "The Greville High School", but on the amalgamation with Bidford High School much later, the name "Alcester High School" was adopted. To save confusion, it will be referred to by the latter name, its present title, throughout.
2 HMA; governors' minutes, 26th January 1966
3 HMA; governors' minutes, 10th February 1966
4 Reorganization of Secondary Education; Warwickshire County Council Education Committee, November 1966, p.17
5 HMA; governors' minutes, 9th November 1967. The change of transfer age was a result of the recommendations of the Plowden Report.
6 HMA; governors' minutes, 20th March 1952
7 HMA; governors' minutes, 23rd June 1966. At this time the heating system of the 1962 building was already oil fired.
8 HMA; governors' minutes, 10th Nov 1966
9 The old building was sold by the Newport Foundation to a private buyer in 1914, after an attempt to turn it into a "hostel" for AGS pupils came to nothing; details of the sale are to be found in the Newport Foundation papers at Warwick County Record Office, Ref. CR1309/3/1. It seems to have been demolished in 1967 according to a copy of a newspaper cutting in the Headmaster's archive at AGS.
10 Record; No. 133, 1967. The girls' tennis tournament was of long standing.
11 Rewse 1975; p.17. The school photographs in the lower corridor confirm the variable nature of school uniform, both in the early days and after the Second War.
12 HMA; governors' minutes, 10th November 1970. Some students had always been admitted to the school from the high schools at 13+ on the recommendation of their head teachers. Entry of large numbers into the sixth form came with the 1980s. The caretaker was housed in an upstairs flat in what had been a part of the headmaster's house. It was located over the Mr Turner's study and the new staffroom - a cause of a certain amount of friction.
13 HMA; governors' minutes, 6th March 1972. Readers will recall that one of the LEA's later proposals was for a sixth form college in Stratford on Avon.
14 The whole of this story can be followed in the governors' minutes in the headmaster's Archive. It would be tedious to refer to every meeting in the notes; important dates have been indicated in the text.
15 HMA; governors' minutes,7th Nov 1977.
16 HMA; governors' minutes,7th Nov 1977.
17 HMA; governors' minutes, 17th November 1980
18 For an appreciation of Pearl Jephcott and her work, by Mr Turner himself, see The Record No. 147, p.30.
19 The rest of the county had been converted to comprehensive education in the 1970s; only the south and east (around Rugby) retained selection.
20 Richard Henry Harbridge holds the prize (it might even be a world record) for length of service as a headmaster at the school - 53 years from 1825 to 1878, but the circumstances were rather different in those days.
21 The Biology prep room was reconstructed, the advanced Chemistry laboratory was converted into the advanced Biology lab, the Geography room (adjacent to the Chemistry Prep. room was converted into the advanced Chemistry laboratory, the advanced
Geography room (adjacent to the Biology Prep. room) became the Geology room, and Geography moved off to a double terrapin in the grounds.

22 HMA; governors' minutes for 13 May 1992

23 HMA; governors' minutes for 10th November 1992 record the receipt of DES approval for the change in status.

24 In 1993, only 57% of the year 7 entry came from Alcester, Studley and Bidford, according to the Headteacher's report to the governors on 10th November. Curiously enough, this was something of a reversion to earlier times; from 1912 until 1974, a good proportion of the school’s pupils came from beyond the Alcester, Studley and Bidford area, including many from Inkberrow and Redditch, over the nearby county border.

25 These comparisons involved the "value added" approach to comparative results analysis. For the reports on the AGS performance see HMA; governors' minutes for 3rd March 1992 and 11th June 1992
## Index

### A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic progress</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accolade from <em>Ofsted</em></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Ackland, headmaster</td>
<td>47-48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms, age of</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Supplementary courses</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Albon</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcester charities</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcester Cinema, for Speech Day</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Ankorn, caretaker</td>
<td>27, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual drama productions start</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assent of the DES for GMS</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance in summer holiday 1940</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Science</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell, confiscated by police</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belts versus braces for P.E.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology laboratory constructed</td>
<td>50, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham Road site for AGS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarders</td>
<td>11-12, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownies, Jackals and Tomtits</td>
<td>33, 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce Commission reports on AGS</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildings</td>
<td>20, 27, 34, 40, 44, 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caps and berets abolished</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Caton, headmaster</td>
<td>38-39, 42, 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantry schools</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity Commission</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry lab refurbished 1982</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheque, headmaster's salary withheld</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas Concert 1912</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Clarke, an Old Scholar's memories</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coke heap, history of</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemoration Day, 1933</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common room, for sixth form</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common room, unified staff</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive education</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Studies introduced</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### D

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to <em>The Record</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covered way constructed</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>15, 22, 27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Deans</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputation to Edn. Committee</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbandment of Old Scholars Guild</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discus and javelin introduced</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Dobell</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Science room constructed</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Druller</td>
<td>33, 35, 42, 51, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dugdale, Sir William</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Duke of Edinburgh's Award</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Dyson, headmaster</td>
<td>19-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### F

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics introduced</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act of 1870</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act of 1889</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Act of 1902</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Bill of 1944</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric light, installed at AGS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Elphick</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endowed Schools Commission</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Evans</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination of Newport's School</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensions to AGS, 1938</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities in 1920s</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### G

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Falk</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>29, 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field House, site for AGS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First exchange visit</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First master at Newport's School</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Fletcher</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox Inn</td>
<td>15, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fumigation of school</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### G

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCSE introduced</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Gegg, headmaster</td>
<td>14, 16-17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>