

**NORTH WANSDYKE  
PAST  
AND  
PRESENT**



**Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society**

**No. 12, 2000**

# North Wansdyke

# Past and Present

**Journal of Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society**

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*Cover illustration:*

'Bird and grapes mosaic' from Keynsham villa. Photo by Charles Browne.

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## **Two Vicars and a Deacon: three of Keynsham's Influential Men, 1841-1893.**

**Elizabeth White**

There is a widespread belief that individuals can have but little effect on the course of history. The history of Keynsham would not bear that out. Three men who were active over a large part of the nineteenth century had a profound effect on the history of the town, and even affected the lives of people living here in the last 50 years, long after all of them were dead. They were the Reverend George Robinson, vicar from 1854 to 1870, the Reverend Joseph Gray, vicar from 1870 to 1893, and Thomas Oxford, Baptist Deacon, and among many other jobs, Clerk to the Guardians of the Poor at the Union Workhouse from 1841 to 1887.

Thomas Oxford was the first to arrive. He had been a teacher, running his own school in London, and a shorthand writer at the House of Commons (at the same time as Charles Dickens) before he came to the West Country, initially to report on sermons preached by Dr Chalmers at the opening of Zion Chapel in Bedminster in Bristol. He took over as the Clerk to the Guardians in 1841. Until his retirement in 1887, he conducted the weekly meeting of the Guardians at the Union Workhouse. He took shorthand notes of all that took place, which he later wrote up in detail, in superb copperplate handwriting. It is due to his detailed minutes that we know so much about what went on in the workhouse. He was also a punctilious little man (he was not very tall) and did everything according to the law. Every deviation from the rules was sanctioned by a letter to the Poor Law Commissioners (later the Poor Law Board), in London. Both the request and the answer were carefully recorded. So we know when they had a surplus of potatoes, Thomas Oxford wrote to London to ask for permission to alter the dietary from a bread and cheese dinner to one of potatoes with lard (which sounds like chips!). He was a stern disciplinarian, and probably very authoritarian, but he had a sense of justice. When paupers were in front of the Guardians for infringements of the discipline of the house, they were allowed to state their case and explain their behaviour. They were also allowed, though probably not encouraged, to complain against any bad treatment they received at the hands of the Staff. In 1857 the Master was prosecuted for treating an inmate harshly and fined ten shillings by the magistrates. I have not so far found any other workhouse minutes which record what the inmates said about the behaviour of the Staff.

The inmates of the workhouse do not give the impression of being cowed by the system. The riot of 1864 is a good example of what could happen, if the inmates considered that they had been treated unjustly, and also of the way in

which the Clerk and the Guardians coped with the crisis. The problem was created by the schoolmaster, Richard Woolwright; a not very effective teacher of some very tiresome boys. They took his keys and refused to admit to having them, or to give them up. In retaliation, the schoolmaster then deprived them of their dinner, and forbade the visiting hour which the mothers were allowed on Sundays. This was the only time in the week when they were allowed to see their children, and they had usually saved some little treat from their own food to give their children, a piece of cheese, for example. When the mothers heard that they were not to be allowed to see their children, they rioted. They broke windows, crockery, furniture, and threatened the staff. When order was restored, by whom and how, we don't know, the ring leader Marcia Wellington was put into the refractory ward for four hours. The Guardians dealt with them the next morning. As usual, the women were all allowed to state their case. The schoolmaster was interviewed, and the Master. The conclusions the Guardians came to are very interesting. The ringleaders were prosecuted and dealt with by the magistrates. They received very short prison sentences. Some of them, like Marcia Wellington, mother of 3 illegitimate children, had been in trouble before. In 1856 she had bitten the Master's hand. She gave the nurse a black eye in 1863, and subsequently in 1869 took two of her children with her out of the Workhouse and abandoned them in Keynsham High Street. Maintaining discipline in these conditions and with these people was not easy, but the Clerk and the Guardians do not appear to have resorted to extreme measures to maintain control. In 1864 the schoolmaster was reprimanded for causing this riot, and warned not to exceed his authority. He had no powers to deprive the boys of their dinners or to forbid the Sunday meeting and was warned never to do it again. The Master was also told to keep a tighter rein on his staff and not to allow his authority to be usurped. And the women?.. In future they were to have two meetings with their children, on Sundays and Wednesdays, so the rioters could be said to have scored a victory. Another interesting aspect of this case is the reaction of the women when they were in trouble. They used the opportunity to 'blow the whistle' on the staff. They reported to the Guardians the activities of Mr Woolwright, and Miss Batt, the Industrial Teacher. They alleged that he had visited her in her bedroom when there was no one else present, and that they had spent time together in the book cupboard. The two were questioned by the Guardians and Thomas Oxford. They confessed they had a barrel of beer in the cupboard, but that Mr Woolwright had only been to Miss Batt's bedroom once and then only to enquire after her health when she was ill. The pair were rebuked, but they were not dismissed or even reported to the Poor Law Authorities. This approach can be seen in many other incidents. When, as happened all too frequently in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Workhouse, the staff, four of them, quarrelled among themselves, the

Guardians tried to smooth things over, urging them all to get on with each other.

The Workhouse at Keynsham had a reputation with the Authorities of generally being '*too liberal*'. But as the House was well run, and generally few faults or breaches of the regulations occurred, there was not much they could do. Keynsham Workhouse is an example of how individuals can mitigate even a harsh, and arbitrary system like the New Poor Law. Being a pauper in the nineteenth century was a fate to be dreaded, but, if it had to be endured, Keynsham was probably as good as any workhouse in which to be housed. All through the Minute Books are small instances of the actions mitigating just a little the severity of the system, always bearing in mind the narrowness of the regulations within which they had to work. For example, the washerwomen were allowed meat dinners on the days they did the washing, and extra tea and sugar on the days they did the white wash. The men were allowed meat dinners when they were digging potatoes, and a pint of beer or cider a day when they were doing field work. In 1870 the Master asked whether there would be the usual Christmas dinner and a box of oranges for the children. Local people were encouraged to organise treats for the children and the old people. The old men all had tobacco at Christmas given by a local doctor; of course this was long before the dangers of smoking were known! His obituary said of Thomas Oxford that he had

*'a generous sympathy with honest labour no matter who the workman. He was content to serve his generation as an Officer of the Guardians of the Poor. That office gave him ample opportunity for kind sympathy and occasional aid'*

Certainly in the Keynsham Union men were encouraged to go out and seek work, sometimes being given clothes and a little money to enable them to travel to look for work. The medical provision of the workhouse appears to have been remarkably good for the time. The infant mortality rate in the house was at least as good and probably better than rates for the poor outside. Old people in the workhouse seem to have lived to a ripe old age. Separate provision was made for the lunatics, of whom there were about 40 in 1860. They were not in the general ward, which they were in many other rural workhouses. Violent lunatics were sent to local asylums even before the creation of County Asylums. The inmates were often cruel to each other, stealing from and tormenting others especially the simpleminded. This was punished by the Guardians. They also tried to get the Medical officers appointed to do their job properly. With one medical Officer they had especial trouble. This was John Lloyd, Medical Officer for Keynsham and Bitton. He was notorious for his temper, his rudeness, and the offhand manner in which he treated paupers. He was supposed to attend to paupers in their own homes, if requested to do so by the Relieving Officer. (There was one in each village). One woman, sent to fetch him, said she wouldn't go

again to him, not for five shillings. She was only the messenger, not the patient! One pauper woman complained that his manner and speech were very harsh, and that he used a disgusting phrase to her, but Thomas Oxford did not record what it was! The Guardians found that Dr Lloyd had not attended the paupers, as his records claimed. One poor old man was visited once and then not again for several days. He was suffering from a stoppage of the bladder, and subsequently died. Lloyd was rebuked. In future his notebooks of his calls were checked weekly. Had a Coroner's verdict gone against him he would have been prosecuted for his neglect. The Guardians were in a difficult position. The Medical Officers had to be qualified, but the pay was not great. Many did it for the access to men whose families would be more profitable patients than the paupers. If Lloyd was dismissed he would be difficult to replace. It was also difficult for the Guardians to dismiss someone of their own social class. But go he did in 1869. He caused his own dismissal by being arrested in Bristol for being incapable of taking care of himself and his horse because he was drunk. He was attempting to ride his horse down St Nicholas Steps, having just ridden up from Baldwin Street. He spent the night in the cells at Bridewell, and next morning, appeared in the magistrates court and was fined. Although at first reluctant to do so, he was persuaded to resign.

Being Clerk to the Guardians was certainly no sinecure. For more than forty years Thomas Oxford was in charge at the workhouse, and it is hard not to ascribe many of the characteristics of the Keynsham Union to his influence. He was, after all, the one constant. The Guardians came and went; though many served for years, none had the length of years and the daily connection with the House. In that time there is no record of his taking a holiday and only one short period of absence due to illness. Yet his private life cannot have been easy at times. His first wife had died, leaving him with two children at home, of whom, one son was deaf and dumb. He married again, and by 1861 had two more children, a son and a daughter. One of his daughters ran a school at their home and the other became a nurse in a London Hospital. His eldest son became a clergyman in the Church of England. Thomas' second wife died in 1879, but he lived on until 1893. By this time he had had to give up all his public posts because of his blindness. It was said of the family circle that they '*never knew idleness and found work a recreation*'. The range of his activities, even as an old man, is astonishing. In addition to his full time job at the Union Workhouse, he was Vaccination Officer, Clerk to the Cemetery Board, Secretary of the Keynsham Feoffees, Secretary and Correspondent of the Baptist School while it existed, Clerk to the Rural Sanitary Authority, and Clerk to the School Attendance Officers. There was, of course, criticism of some of his actions. Towards the end of his active life he was accused of not keeping the vaccination records properly. Did his eyesight and oncoming blindness have anything to do with this? He was also accused of favouring his

candidates for posts at the Workhouse, but as the criticism came from a Master about to be dismissed for misconduct, little notice was taken of it.

Thomas Oxford was a committed Baptist. He soon became a Deacon and in 1865 a Senior Deacon in Keynsham Baptist Church. He was a generous subscriber to Church Funds, and one of the original Trustees who purchased the land for the Schoolroom. He instituted weekly offering boxes instead of quarterly offerings. But his membership was not without controversy. In 1865 he was to be elected Senior Deacon, but refused until the Church agreed to admit members of other churches who were resident or visiting in the area, a departure from strict Calvinistic doctrine. At times he was in severe conflict with the ministers. There was a major problem in 1878 when the new minister, the Reverend Charles Fellowes, wanted to have more influence in the way the Church was organised. Oxford and his fellow Deacons, James Ollis, and George Sheppard resented what they regarded as interference. The minister insisted on the creation of Church Rules, and Oxford was obliged to accept. Another severe problem occurred in 1881, over the legal ownership of the Chapel and Schoolroom. This is dealt with in detail in Russell Leitch's excellent book, *A History of Keynsham Baptist Church*. The outcome of this dispute was sad. Thomas Oxford's name was removed from the list of members, for nonattendance in 1883. He was a man who had been accustomed to the exercise of authority for more than 40 years. A younger generation of men must have found him very hard to deal with. All through these years he was trying to establish a non Church of England school in Keynsham. The details of the long struggle he had with Joseph Gray are given later

The second of these influential men to arrive was George Robinson, who became Vicar of Keynsham in 1854. He was Irish and had been educated at Trinity College in Dublin. He was a man who combined great tolerance with passionate belief. In his relations with Catholics in Ireland it was said, by a Catholic, '*Mr Robinson always did us justice and never spoke a harsh word*'. He is said to have left Ireland because he did not wish to spend his life fighting Roman Catholics. When he came to Keynsham he showed a similar vein of tolerance towards Nonconformists, which was unusual at that time. On arrival he called all the Nonconformist leaders together and asked them to pray with him for the village. There were many who did not approve of this action. And there were to be many other actions of which people did not approve. One day, when he was at the Bishop's Palace at Wells, the Bishop pointed to a pigeonhole stuffed full of letters. '*They are all about you*', said the Bishop. In the end his people came to appreciate him and there was genuine sorrow when he left, in 1870, to go to Liverpool to work in Walton.

One of his actions was in fact to extend the vicarage. He had married the year before he came to Keynsham, and by 1870 had 12 of his 13 children. The living



was a poor one, and one of the sons remembered always being hungry. In fact none of the children enjoyed the robust health of their mother who lived to be 92 and died in 1919. All of them were outstanding intellectually. Six of the boys were eventually ordained, two becoming missionaries, one a missionary doctor and one a schoolmaster. The girls were all well educated. Two became deaconesses, another taught at Cheltenham with Miss Beale, while another was one of the first women to read theology at Oxford.

George Robinson had taken over a very neglected parish. The church building was in a very poor state. Attendances were very low, with services taken by a series of standins, because the previous vicar was nonresident. The village had no resident gentry. The advowson (the right to present to the living ) was in the hands of the Duke



Fig. 1: The Reverend  
George Robinson

of Buckingham and Chandos, who also took the tithes from the village. He was nonresident and on the verge of bankruptcy himself. The church and the whole community needed an injection of new life. It came from George Robinson. His first task was not the state of his dilapidated church, but the state of education in Keynsham, which was dire. A Government survey in 1833 showed that there were 7 dame schools educating 36 boys and 74 girls. There were two private academies, two Sunday Schools, one run by the Baptists, and one which became the Adult School Union. There was also a small school, opened in 1819, and in 1824 incorporated into the National Society, which established Church of England schools on the monitorial system, whereby the teacher taught the monitors, who then taught the lesson to a small group of children in their charge. By 1844 it was described as an infant school. It was, incidentally, on the site of what has been scheduled as the site for a Keynsham Museum at the top of Dapps Hill. There was also in Keynsham, an ancient and decayed foundation, begun by the Bridges family in the late 17th century, which should have provided education for 20 boys in reading, writing and Latin. By the 1850's it was known as the 'Free School', and consisted of 13 boys taught by the parish clerk. George Robinson tried to get money from the Feoffees of Keynsham, the local Charity Trustees, to improve it, but this was refused. In 1854 there was even a Pestalozzian Academy, but what the

place did not have was a public elementary school capable of taking more than a handful. By 1851 the population of the town was 2,319. By the calculations of the Committee of the Privy Council for Education, 1 in 5 of the population would need education, and seven in eight of those would need public provision. So, in theory, 419 school places were needed.

George Robinson raised the money for the new school. It cost £1,200. A grant for building was made by the National Society, but £500 was raised by public subscription. It was designed by S. B. Gabriel, who designed several Bristol Churches, including St Michael's, Two Mile Hill. It was intended for 300 pupils, though it only had three classrooms, one 65 feet by 18 feet, the second 52 feet by 18 feet, and the third 18 feet by 16 feet. When it opened, it had two qualified teachers, two pupil teachers and 113 pupils. Education was not compulsory or free in 1857 when the school on Bath Hill was opened, and many parents had to be persuaded that education could benefit their children. The Bishop of Bath and Wells, Baron Auckland, who opened the school in 1857, addressed the parents, urging them to keep their children at school till 13 or 14, saying, *'Each employer of labour now requires an intellectual person to work for him, and it is that children may obtain the best wages and the best situations that the school is now opened for them'*. Raising the money for the school building was, of course, only part of the task. Every year,



Fig. 3: Children outside Bath Hill School. The Head Teacher's house is in the background.

Robinson and his successor, Joseph Gray, had to raise money for the running costs of the school. The children paid a few pence, the government made an annual grant, but the bulk of the money had to come from subscriptions.

If raising the money for the school was hard, raising money for the restoration of the church was much harder. Before the Restoration was begun in 1861 Robinson had had two previous attempts about which we know nothing. By 1861 the situation was desperate. The Chancel ceiling began to fall, and the church was declared to be dangerous: the walls were bulging, the pillars leaning, the windows '*had lost their Perpendicularity*'. The once fine wooden ceilings in the aisles were falling down faster than they were being repaired. The interior, full of high box pews and dominated by a two decker pulpit with sounding board, was dusty, dirty, and shabby. While the Restoration was underway, the Bishop gave permission, when the licence fee was paid, for services to be held in the schoolroom. This was the Bridges School in Station Road, quite close to the Church.

By law Robinson could have raised the money by a church rate which all the inhabitants of Keynsham would have been legally liable to pay. In an area so strongly Nonconformist this would have been wildly unpopular and Robinson did not go down that route. He was praised by some subscribers for not adopting the church rate solution. It was hard to raise the money. George Robinson wrote numerous begging letters, the replies to some of which are still extant. Some were reluctant to give because they were deeply suspicious of 'restoration', believing it to be a means of subverting the Church of England into more Catholic ways. These were in favour of 'repair'. The squire of Brislington, Mr Clayfield Ireland, was one of these, and declined to become the chairman of the Appeal Committee. This was at the time of the controversy over the Catholic Revival, which developed from the Oxford Movement, when attempts were being made to revive the worship of the church, by the enhancement of the appearance of churches, and their worship. Stained glass windows, organs, robed choirs, candles, crosses, sung services, daily services, and frequent Communion services were all being introduced in this period. The design of the architect, Mr Ferrey, must have alarmed the nervous, for it involved the removal of the box pews, the provision of stained glass windows (he himself gave the stained glass in the circular window at the east end of the north aisle) and the enhancement of the chancel with a reredos, encaustic tiles on the floor, and an elaborate gas lighting system, called a corunna, with blue and gold glass. The gift of a beautiful altar cloth by Lady Anna Gore Langton, and curtains by Mrs Milward and her daughter Mrs Parker, for the screens separating the Lady Chapel (converted to a vestry), must have deepened their suspicions. They need not have worried. George Robinson had the most impeccable Evangelical credentials. But in an area so strongly Nonconformist the Church had to establish a clear identity. It is probable that from this period

developed the tradition of liturgical music at St John's. The old singers had gone, and a choir was introduced, capable of singing fourpart anthems at the opening of the church in 1863.

Many people did give willingly. H. Rooke from Frenchay sent half of a £50 note one week, and the other half the next. The writer, we don't know if it was a man or a woman, was pleased that such a fine church was going to be restored, and might be able later to give more, but it was no good at 83 making promises that he/she might not live to fulfil. The Bishop was sympathetic, and sent £10, and apologised for not sending more, but he had already given to 20 churches that year and it was still only May. He did say rather sharply that if the congregation had repaired the church as they should have done, help would not now be needed. £150 came from the surviving children of the Reverend Thomas Slater, who was Vicar of Keynsham from 1753 to 1789. Like Vicar Robinson, he had had a large family and had married twice. Keynsham people gave willingly. Many Nonconformists contributed to the restoration of the parish church. The total cost was over £4,000, a huge amount for a place such as Keynsham to raise. The cost of the chancel repair, £1,000, was paid for by Gore Langton from Newton St Loe. He was the son-in-law of the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, who had owned the Abbey lands. The Diocesan Building Fund gave a grant. The rest was raised by public subscription. The restored church had a new chancel arch separating the nave from the chancel, a new vestry, a restored altar inside restored communion rails and dignified by a new altar cloth, new 'open' pews in place of the box pews, two new oak roofs, a hammer beam roof in the chancel and a kingpost construction in the nave, new carved corbels to support the new roofs (these replaced the old plastered barrel vaulted ceiling), three new roofs outside, Welsh slate on the aisles (the old lead having been removed) and Westmoreland slate on the nave roof, a restored and repositioned pulpit, a new font and canopy (the old one was repositioned near the Chancel arch), and restored arches to the north and south aisles. Inside, the appearance of the church was enhanced by the removal of the white-wash which had covered all the fine carved woodwork, and cladding with ashlar, fine stonework, the rough walls of the chancel.

Despite the enormous improvement in the state of the church there were some observers who seem determined not to be impressed. The reporter for *The Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser* wrote, '*The church is a spacious edifice, but its architectural beauties are not numerous*'. Other papers, however, recognised the tremendous achievement of the vicar in the nine years he had been in Keynsham, of which the restored church building was just a symbol. The *Western Daily Press* wrote on May 28th 1863, '*Two attempts have been made to restore the church in the last eight years, but they had been made in vain. Now, the church is not the only object restored There are large and handsome schools, an efficient master and mistress,*

excellent pupil teachers, and above 200 children under instruction. A new parsonage house has replaced the old dilapidated building which formerly existed. Yesterday saw the completion of these improvements. In the restored church are 100 seats for school children, 475 assigned seats and 400 seats unappropriated'.

A vigour returned to church life. There were now more communicants than the total number of people who used to attend the church. The church gave active support to societies, such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The evening services were especially well attended. People came from other parishes to worship here; much more difficult in the 1860's than now. The Gallery across the west end of the church would have been necessary to accommodate the numbers attending.

Like Thomas Oxford, George Robinson was a man of high principles. These at times made him difficult to get along with. The incident when he refused to pay for a dinner he had not eaten and the wine he would not have drunk, hit the headlines of the newspapers. It is recounted in *North Wansdyke Past and Present* vol. 2, in an article on 'The Feoffees'. As Thomas Oxford was secretary of the Feoffees, it is possible that the two men did not get on. That may be behind another problem George Robinson encountered. Robinson was the chaplain at the workhouse where he conducted two services on a Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Then the *Guardians* announced that the service times were to be altered to exactly the times Robinson was required to be in his own church. He resigned the position and his curate, whom he had to pay, took the post. The loss of income must have been a serious blow in such a poor living. The *Guardians Minutes* do not reveal who suggested altering the time of services. George Robinson left Keynsham in 1870 and went to Liverpool. There he worked so hard that within 10 years he was allowed to retire to the south of France for his health, while his second son took over the parish. The rest came too late to save him and he died in 1881, aged 62.

His successor, Joseph Gray, was probably the most outstanding intellect of the three men. Like Robinson, he was an Irishman. He was educated at Trinity



Fig. 2: The Reverend  
Joseph Gray

College, Dublin, where he won the Primate's Hebrew Prize and the Regius Professor of Divinity Prize. He went as a missionary to India, and became Principal of the Church Missionary College in Madras. He married, late in life, the daughter of an Indian High Court Judge, she was twenty two years his junior. He was, like Thomas Oxford, a man of great energy and vigour. She died in 1889 at 53; he died in 1893 aged 80. Gray was appointed by Alfred Peache, the Vicar of Downend, who was so concerned at the growth of the 'high church' element in the Church of England that he bought up all the advowsons that he could in order to see that Evangelicals were presented to these livings. However, there is something almost medieval in Gray's concept of the Church as the source of all aid, both spiritual and physical. He ran a Coal Club, whereby coal was given to the needy, free or at very low rates; a Blanket Club where the poor who saved a little money could receive a blanket of higher value than their savings; a Clothing Club which provided clothing cheaply so that poor people should not feel excluded from church because of their lack of respectable clothing and hats; a Mothers' Club where the women who paid in a few pennies weekly could have a layette of higher value than their savings for the new baby; a Parochial Library and a Pastoral Aid Scheme. He started Evangelistic services in Temple Street and at Chewton Keynsham. He organised a system of parish visitors for every street. He started Parish Magazines, and the Choir of men and boys was robed. He persuaded his flock to give about £1,000 a year to his good causes, which included the Curate's Fund to pay the curate; the Harmonium Fund to provide harmoniums for Chewton and the school room; the Irish Church Aid; the Zenana Missionary Society, which was a medical missionary Society working in parts of India where women could only be attended by women doctors; and many other missionary projects.

Above all, he needed to raise money to keep the school open. The population of Keynsham was some 2,300, not all of whom were Church of England. The Vicar acted as treasurer for all of these funds, each of which was subscribed to separately. Each year a printed list of the subscribers and how the money had been spent was produced in the Annual Church Report. Leading Nonconformists in the town subscribed to some of these activities, such as the school or the Coal Club funds. But such cooperation was going to be under threat. Under Robinson and Gray the Church of England had regained its confidence, its popularity, and its influence. The establishment of a nondenominational school, which many of the townspeople wanted, was now less likely. It terminated in a conflict in which both Gray and Oxford wanted what they regarded as the best for the children of Keynsham, but they ended up on opposing sides.

When the Parochial School had been opened on Bath Hill, the increasing vitality of the Church in Keynsham evoked a response from the Nonconformists.

The Baptists, led by Thomas Oxford, formed a building committee to buy a piece of land adjacent to the Chapel. By 1859 the Sunday School was finished, and they began to consider opening a Day School on the broad basis of the British and Foreign Society, which was the Nonconformist equivalent of the National Society who had provided help in building the Church School. By 1862 additional accomodation had been provided and the the British School, run by the Baptists, had a capacity of 120 children, and an average daily attendance of 95. It was headed by a teacher trained at Borough Road College. The opening of this school affected attendance at the Parochial school. This would become more serious as the school became increasingly dependent on the children's pence.

The Baptists had a hard struggle to maintain their school. They did not receive a Government grant for their school. The reason for this seems to have been the nature of, or the condition of, their building. The school room was adjacent to the chapel. It had a grave yard in front, a tiny yard at the back, and property owned by non-Baptists on either side. Inside was a connecting door to the Chapel, to which officials at the Committee of the Privy Council for Education, who were in charge of the provision of public education, objected. In 1870 the British school closed. The Pastor's wife was allowed to teach in the mornings only. The reasons for the closure are unclear. Possibly it was due to the increasing financial burden of supporting the school; possibly it was not being well conducted; or possibly it was felt its closure, and the consequent reduction in school places, would be an additional argument in favour of the establishment of a Board School.

The Education Act of 1870 provided for the provision of elementary schools in areas that did not have sufficient educational provision. These schools were to be funded on the rates, and were to provide nonsectarian Bible teaching for the children, whose parents could remove them from these lessons if they so wished. Joseph Gray, who had just arrived in Keynsham, was vehemently opposed to Board Schools. He saw them as the first step to atheism. He was not opposed to the Baptist School, but to the establishment of 'Godless' education in the town. He believed that if a Board School was established it would damage the Parochial School. It was even suggested at a public meeting in October 1870 that the Parochial School should become a Board School. Gray objected to this. Officials at the Committee for Education agreed, and concluded that if the British school reopened that would provide enough school places. If it did not reopen, then the Parochial school would have to be enlarged. If it wasn't enlarged, then the Committee would have to enforce the provision of a Board School. So Gray set to work to raise £300 to extend the Parochial School to provide 383 places.

Thomas Oxford had not given up. He wrote to the Committee urging them to rescind their decision, saying that a large number of the real friends of education

in the town would be glad to see a Board School established. There then followed a very confused period when the British school opened and closed in 1875 and then reopened in 1876, with the children flitting between to whichever one seemed to have the easier discipline.

By this time Thomas Oxford was the British School's Correspondent, and was working hard to get the school official recognition, which would get them a Government grant. Vicar Gray was furious and wrote to the Committee, saying that the Church had struggled to extend their school at the request of the Committee. He demanded that recognition of the British school be refused on the grounds that it would damage 'our school'. Lord Sandon agreed and recognition was refused.

Thomas Oxford did not give up. He wrote three times during 1876. In 1877 recognition was again refused. The Committee was concerned about the inter-connecting door and the state of the urinals. In 1879 his persistence paid off. The requisite number of W.C.s had been provided and connected to the town sewer. In 1880 the British School was recognised, and after its probationary year, received an annual grant. It had accommodation for 178 children, though only 74 attended in 1880 and 107 in 1881. So Keynsham now had two schools funded by government grants and voluntary subscriptions.

But the demand for a nondenominational school had not gone away. Another public meeting was held in 1889, when the Nonconformists tried hard, but unsuccessfully, to refute the arguments put forward by the Vicar. He argued that the Board Schools were 'Godless' and, what was more telling, extremely expensive, and would cause the rates to soar to dizzy heights. The problem became more acute as Keynsham grew and the lack of educational provision became more apparent. As higher standards were demanded and additional subjects taught, more space was needed. The only way the Baptists could expand was upwards, by providing an upper floor. In 1892 they applied for permission to add an upper floor. It was refused. It was likely that their accommodation would be condemned as inadequate.

All this was happening at a time when efforts were being made to make education compulsory. In 1893 a fee grant was to be paid for every child, which would make education virtually free. With the fees they could earn for their school by passing examinations each child could bring 17s 6d (87½p) per year to their school. However the actual cost of educating a child in a voluntary school was estimated to be £2 a year. When education became free more children would be able to attend. The pressure on school places would be greatly increased, but any enlargement to their schools would have to be funded by the churches.

The Baptists precipitated the crisis when they announced that their school would be closing in January 1894. They demanded the calling of a public meeting to vote on whether there should be a Board School in Keynsham. When the



meeting was held in January 1893, neither of the chief protagonists was there. Thomas Oxford had retired from public life and was blind. Other men took up the cause he had espoused. Joseph Gray had been very ill in the previous year and was recovering from bronchitis. Both men were to die before the year was out. Gray died in October 1893 aged 80, and Oxford in December in his 89th year. The extraordinary length of public life of these men meant that decisions affecting the life of Keynsham for decades to come were made by men whose formative years reflected the world of the 1830's and 1840's.

Although Gray was not present at the meeting, his was the decisive influence. From his sickbed he wrote a twelve-page pamphlet which he had printed and circulated to every household in the parish. It was obviously very influential because every speaker who supported the demand for a Board School found it necessary to refute his arguments. The pamphlet was wittily and persuasively written. It contained arguments which were exaggerated and inaccurate, but appealed to the public's prejudices. Gray asserted that if a Board School was introduced it was only a matter of time before all religious instruction in the school would be abandoned. He said there were schools where this had happened but gave no details. He said that Christians were commanded to teach their religion to their children. The more educated a man was the more he needed religion. His most expansive arguments were on the subject of cost. He claimed wildly exaggerated figures for the cost of Board Schools, writing scathingly about the expense of providing Board Rooms for the School Boards to meet in, with luxurious furnishings, deep pile carpets, and comfortable arm chairs. (Was this a reflection on Gray's experience of the Keynsham Union? Both he and Oxford were on the Board.) He made great play of the numbers the Committee said needed schooling in Keynsham, claiming it was exaggerated, and that the Parochial school, with accomodation available at Chewton Keynsham was sufficient for the town's needs. We, who have the benefit of the 1891 census, know that he was wrong. There were far more children than he calculated, but that was not known at the time. Gray concluded that to keep out a school board would save the children from the danger of being agnostics or infidels, save the inhabitants of the parish from injurious feuds, and their pockets from emptiness. Both at the meeting, and at the vote held subsequently, his arguments won the day. Vicar Gray had succeeded in defeating a popular demand for a nondenominational elementary school.

In justice to Joseph Gray, some of his fears for the fate of the Parochial School were probably well founded. The financial burden on the Church was enormous. Until 1893 the goverment grant never covered more than roughly 50% of the teachers' salaries, always the biggest expenditure in a school. The fees paid by the children were by 1887 more than the voluntary contributions. Although after

Gray's death the government grants did increase, they did not keep pace with the rising expenditure. This was because of the increasing numbers of children in school, the increasing number of years they were at school, which meant more teaching staff. Rising standards meant more subjects were being taught to a higher standard, which meant increasing demands for books, equipment and accommodation. The school was in debt and remained so. It was by far the largest item of the Church's expenditure. It must have been an anxiety for Gray that he could never be sure that he could raise the necessary funds each year. Every year his congregation and the subscribers gave about £900 to £1,000. By 1893 half of this was needed for the school. It is not possible to know exactly how many people were committed Church members who provided the bulk of the money. It seems from the annual reports Gray published that there were about 30 regular communicants and about 100 on the electoral roll of 1895. It would seem the congregation was giving on an heroic scale. The School fund did attract contributions from nonchurch members and from outside Keynsham, but the bulk came from the congregation. If a Board School had been established, there would have been a drop in numbers, and the pressure on the remaining contributors would have increased. Paying rates for the Board School would have been compulsory for all. It would have been even more difficult to get voluntary contributions for a Church School as well.

The Board school proposals were dropped. The British School closed officially on January 31 st 1894, and the children were transferred to the Parochial School. A new infants school was desperately needed, especially after the closure of the tiny school at Chewton Keynsham when Sir Thomas Courtenay Warner sold the Chewton estate. Again the bulk of the money had to come from public subscriptions. The National Society again gave a grant, described as very urgent to avert a Board. The new Parochial Infants School was opened on the Temple Street site in October 1895 by Miss Ireland, the daughter of the squire of Brislington.

From then on, all the children of Keynsham went to Church Schools until the age of fourteen, unless their parents were able to pay for private education. There is evidence that some did choose to send their children to private schools in the town, or to schools in neighbouring villages. The Parochial schools were not highly regarded. In 1935 it was proposed to build a county secondary school in the town. This was vigorously opposed by the Church with a 'Save Our Schools' campaign, but times had changed. There was not the support for the campaign that there had been in 1893. The new Broadlands School was opened in 1936, leaving the Parochial School as a Church of England Junior School. Not until 1957 did Keynsham have a non-denominational Primary School, when Keynsham County Primary School was opened in Kelston Road. There was a final irony. When the Church School moved to a new site in Charlton Park as St

John's Church of England (V.C.) Primary School, the old school buildings were taken over by the local authority and a primary school established on the Bath Hill site. Joseph Gray's influence had taken a long time to eradicate, but in the end his school buildings had become a nondenominational school.

Without Gray's opposition a Board School would almost certainly have been established in Keynsham. In these days when education is seen as a universal good, it is easy to label him as either a reactionary, opposed to educational progress, or as an autocrat, concerned only to maintain his own authority. It could be interpreted as either a sectarian squabble, or a personal conflict. None of these interpretations does justice to the protagonists, or the complexity of their motives. The dominant motive for Gray was the salvation of souls. Every extant writing of his contains this theme. And the same was true for those who opposed him. They cared, albeit with the prejudices of their age and their class, for the children, their education, their material wellbeing, and above all, for the salvation of their souls.

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## Keynsham Heritage 2,000

This was a truly memorable Millennium Exhibition, held in May in the Parish Church and Hall, revealing the long and varied history of the town to over 15,000 of its inhabitants and visitors.

The Parish Church displayed nine panels of two Roman mosaic pavements from the Durley Hill Cemetery Villa. This is the first time for over 70 years that connecting sections have been laid together as they were originally found in the 1920's, thus enabling their true magnificence to be appreciated. People interested in mosaics countrywide thought it sufficiently important to visit the exhibition, an indication of their unique value. This palatial villa, its size, architecture and mosaic flooring, both pictorial and geometrical, was quite outstanding. Writing in the *Newsletter* of the Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics, after visiting the exhibition, Stephen R. Cosh declared, 'The centre of the largely geometric mosaic from Room J/K must be the finest example of the art in the fourth century and the three figured panels from Room W were so bright and colourful—the monochrome photographs with which many members are familiar do not do them any justice'. If the villa could have been completely excavated and revealed in all its glory, Keynsham would have been famous worldwide. However, burials had to continue thus destroying floors, walls and other artefacts. Prior to this, in 1820's, the main road was realigned on an embankment built

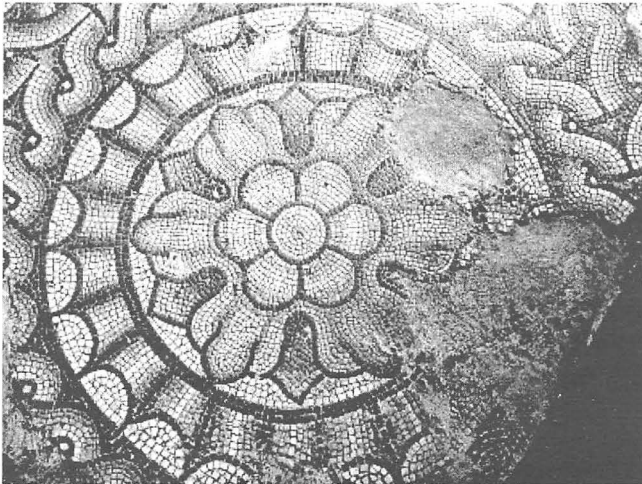


Fig. 1: Keynsham Roman villa mosaic. Centre of stylised flower from Room J/K.

Photo by Charles Browne.

above part of the villa, so that every time we travel along the Bristol Road we pass over the west corridor and sumptuous reception rooms (hopefully well preserved). An exciting 'dig' for the future perhaps. Details of the excavation of this villa are to be found in 'The Roman House at Keynsham', *Archaeologia* 75 (1926) by A. Bulleid and E. Horne (in Keynsham Library).

The Church also hosted a wonderful display of artefacts from Keynsham's Augustinian Abbey, founded about 1167-70. The world famous ceiling bosses, exhibited in the Hayward Gallery, London in 1984, show the skill and fine workmanship of the masons. Sadly, the Abbey remains were another of Keynsham's historical masterpieces which were all but obliterated when the by-pass cut through most of the great cloister, western, southern and south-eastern ranges. The rescue of these artefacts is solely due to the dedicated work of members of a Folk House Archaeology class and its associated Society (which included a number of Keynsham residents.)

Also on view were photographs of artefacts recovered from Fry's (Cadbury's) sports field in 1991 when part of a rugby pitch was levelled uncovering and removing extensive Roman remains, yet another instance of our heritage being lost, damaged or destroyed. Our thanks must go to Barbara Lowe, Margaret Whitehead and a faithful band of helpers from FHAS, that pottery, bronze brooches, bracelets, coins etc have been saved for future generations. Charles Browne surveyed the remains of one building and small Roman road, and, since then, at least ten other building outlines are visible during summer droughts.

The Church Hall echoed to the sound of people reminiscing while looking at pictures of old Keynsham buildings, businesses, people and the 1968 floods.

All in all, it was a very illuminating exhibition that, we hope, made a lasting impact on those who came, and the realisation that what has been saved of our heritage must be valued as a lasting reminder of Keynsham's importance (which is often overshadowed by our nearness to Bath).

We are indebted to members of Keynsham Heritage Trust, Keynsham and Saltford Local History Society for organising and staging this exhibition, particularly Sue Trude, Barbara Lowe and Margaret Whitehead. Many members of both of these societies augmented those from the Folk House Archaeological Society in stewarding the exhibition and we extend our gratitude to them all.

Next year, we hope to hold an exhibition focussing on Saltford's history.

## Mary Fairclough a memoir

Charles Browne (ed.)

*When Mary Fairclough died in December 1999 Keynsham lost a treasure. Her detailed knowledge of Keynsham's history, from the Romans to the latest outrageous planning decision by the local council, was always freely shared with scholars and interested citizens alike. In the 1940s, long before I came to live in Keynsham, I was discussing some aspect of Keynsham Abbey with Frederick C. Jones, the Bristol local historian, who said 'If you want to know anything about Keynsham go and see Miss Fairclough'. How right he was! She is remembered fondly by all who met her, and here we print a few tributes to her memory.*



Mary Fairclough in a characteristic pose, at a meeting of the Committee of Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society.

## A Vignette

Margaret Whitehead, February 2000

My chief memory of Mary Fairclough will always be the quick-as-a-flash quotations from English literature she would produce during conversation. The one I remember most vividly comes from the Bible and was said to me during a telephone conversation regarding a mutual acquaintance who had caused us both some hassle. With a sigh and the long-suffering voice she could adopt on these occasions she intoned 'the grasshopper that becometh a burden'.

Mary used to love reminiscing about her grandfather Thomas who owned the Albert Mill, and how he used to take her down with him sometimes. She always got into trouble with her mother for getting her nice clean dress dirty! This was not surprising considering the petticoats and dresses etc., that small children wore at that period, which judging from old photographs, always appear to have been white.

She also loved to tell how he would take her into Hickling's well-known ironmongery shop in the High Street (site of the current Boot's Chemist and Entertainer toyshop) shortly before November 5th, and how Mr Hickling would describe with great enthusiasm and suitable gesticulations how a particular fire-work went off. She was, of course, quite superfluous to the conversation.

I particularly enjoyed this account as Robert Hickling took over the shop when my grandfather, John Henry Down, died suddenly in 1906 at the age of 42. They had spent their apprenticeships together.

When Mary died last December I lost not only a friend, but a source of wisdom and inspiration and of information about the town where she lived all her life, and where several generations of my own family lived.

We will endeavour to keep her legacy of research and love for Keynsham alive.

## Miss Mary Fairclough

Jack Maggs A.V.M., 2 February 2000.

Grandfather William Thomas J.P. of St. Augustine's, Station Road, Keynsham was, with his brother Alfred Thomas of Saltford, the owner from the mid-eighteen eighties of Albert Mill, Dapps Hill, Keynsham, processor and suppliers of dyewoods for the high class leather and specialist cloth trades.

The Mill, usually known as the Logwood Mill, is now an expensively converted residential complex on its two top floors. The bottom ground floor, complete with

the original grinding and rasping machinery and its two water wheels are preserved and protected as a Grade II building of 'special interest' by the Department of the Environment. (*Journal of the Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society* 1974).

I fear that, having acceded to this request for childhood memories, my offering is very small. Mary was six months older than my own current 86 years, my Aunt Rose, her mother, being the elder Thomas daughter who married Sydney Fairclough, also of Keynsham.

My mother Hilda, the other daughter of William and Selina Thomas, married in 1913 my father, Frederick Maggs, but tragically for my mother to die of Puerperal Peritonitis a week after I was born in February 1914.

Sydney, Rose and Mary spent the whole of their lives in Keynsham, whereas my Father left Keynsham, on marriage, to live in Bristol thereafter where I was born. They lived in successive houses in Charlton Road. Bristol was my home, and Keynsham meant to me in my earlier and schoolboy days holiday spells with Grandpa and Granny Thomas, mostly spent down at and around the Logwood Mill watching the huge logs coming in from all over the world, or fishing and wandering the banks of the River Chew.

Mary and her parents, as I recall it, had little interest in mill matters and were rarely seen down there. Sydney worked at W.D. & H.O. Wills, and Rose and Mary, plus dog, were keen country walkers up Queen Charlton way. Occasionally I joined them, and Mary and I played together at their house, whence invariably I arrived back at St. Augustine's to be scolded by Granny Thomas for being late for her meal long waiting for me.

I cannot recall where Mary went to school, but I am certain that she continued at a local Keynsham school. Conversely, I went to Bristol Grammar School, until in 1932 I went up to St. John's College Oxford, later to join the Royal Air Force at the end of 1938, to retire back again but to Keble College Oxford as a Fellow in 1969.

From the earliest days Mary's interests were predominantly art, music and literature. I recall that she also studied at the West of England Art Academy, where she later specialised in lino-cut work and portraits. I still possess a number of her works in my house.

I cannot comment on Mary's many contributions to Keynsham life so characteristic of her interests and sense of local service. I always visited her when, for Governing Body Meetings of Bristol Grammar School I travelled down to Bristol. I will only say I realised that she sacrificed much of her self for others, not least as a dutiful daughter during Rose's later failing years.



## **Memoir written for *Keynsham Talking Newspaper***

**Bunty Dunford, 06.01.00**

Mary Fairclough, who died on New Year's Eve at the age of 90, is a great loss to Keynsham and to her many friends. Mary had many gifts as an artist, writer, historian, photographer and not least a wicked sense of humour especially directed at pomposity.

Mary was a founder member of the Keynsham and Saltford Local History Society and of Keynsham Civic Society. The Civic Society was formed when Mary and other people were horrified at the demolition of the little cottages in Temple Street which were replaced by the hideous office block which she would have described as 'egg-box' development. Mary knew that many of the cottages, far from being slum properties, had been lovingly restored into cosy little homes. With them went a valuable part of Keynsham's history. The listing of what remains of Keynsham's historic buildings is largely attributable to Mary's research and recommendations.

Between 1968 and 1981 Mary gathered large pebbles from the beach at Dunster near where she spent her holidays and produced her 'Cloughstones'. She could see images in the shapes and would paint them in poster colours, sealed with varnish. I am the proud possessor of her 'St Keyna'. She has painted the lady, after whom Keynsham is reputedly named, in the act of turning a serpent into an ammonite. St Ladoc Road in Keynsham is mis-named it should be St Cadoc, this Celtic Saint was the uncle of St Keyna. Somewhere along the lines the name was misspelt but the saintly bishop has his due respect in my 'Cloughstone'.

Mary's small flat was filled with books which reflected her wide range of interests. She recently gave John two books on ships, one 'The Last Wooden Walls of England' a nostalgic look at famous warships of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In Keynsham Library there is a painting by Mary of her impression of what Keynsham looked like when there was a magnificent Roman Villa at the site of what is now Keynsham cemetery. She also designed a coat of arms for Keynsham incorporating its geography and history.

Mary's concern with Keynsham was not only its past but also its future. At a talk she gave on the 21st anniversary of the founding of the Civic Society she said that when Queen Elizabeth I passed through Keynsham she commented on the filthy state of the High Street. She illustrated with contemporary photographs that things hadn't changed much.

Mary was guide on coach tours of Keynsham's environs including a Civic Society Jubilee trip to Lansdown in July 1977. Mary will never be forgotten, the History and Civic Societies will make sure of that.

