

THE ROYAL KENT SCHOOL, OXSHOTT

By E.A. Crossland

It is often said that the school gets its name from having been opened by the Duchess of Kent on 16th October 1820. The date is right but, although the Duchess was present at the ceremony, it was conducted by her brother, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and she took no active part in it. In his speech he made it clear that the name commemorated the support the late Duke had given to the work of the British & Foreign School Society, of which the Duke's father, King George III was patron.

Towards the end of the 17th century people were becoming concerned that the working classes were illiterate. The King wished that all his subjects could read the Bible. Joseph Lancaster, himself of lowly origin, devised a system of education by which one person, by teaching the basics of reading, writing and sums (the 3 Rs) to a group of older children could conduct a school of more than 100 pupils. This was done by the older children passing on to the younger ones what they had learnt. A group of Lancaster's friends formed a Society to promulgate his idea. Having gained the support of the King it was called the Royal Lancastrian Society but in 1812 changed its name to the British & Foreign School Society. It was very successful and many "British" schools were started.

As one of the criteria of the Society was that it should be non-sectarian and was strongly supported by Non-conformists, the Established Church was stung into creating (in 1811) the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England. Nevertheless the Duke of Kent, who was a vice-patron of the B & FSS undertook missions abroad to publicise its work. He died in January 1820, six days before his father. His place as vice-patron was taken by his brother-in-law, Prince Leopold and the new King, George IV, became the patron.

Another keen supporter of the Society was the Reverend Thomas Lewis, the minister of the Union Chapel in Islington. He had been a lay preacher in the Wesleyan Church but studied at Homerton College to become a Congregational Minister. His son had been at a school in Witney run by John Burrell. When Burrell considered moving it nearer to London Lewis persuaded him to choose Leatherhead. There, the two friends set about organising a Congregational church, at first in a barn in the centre of the town. By 1816 there was also a "British" school joined to it, which later continued in a room at the back of the building in North Street (now a florist's and a carpet shop) until 1912. The church is now the United Reformed Church (Christchurch) in Epsom Road.

Most of the information of the early days of the Royal Kent School comes from letters printed in the "Evangelical Magazine" the Journal of the B&FSS. They were written from Leatherhead by two supporters of the Society who signed themselves with just their initials - "A.J." and "J..B." The latter was obviously John Burrell and the other was possibly Alexander Jardine. There was a family of that name living in a house at the High Street end of Church Street, Leatherhead in 1841, probably the building now occupied by the electrical shop of Clear & Sons Ltd.

The letters to Thomas Lewis give detailed accounts of the conditions of the people of Oxshott and the efforts made by a group of wealthy people to improve their lot, at first by setting up a Sunday School and then a "British" day-school in a barn of Birds Hill Farm, Oxshott belonging to Prince

Leopold. It was opened on the birthday of the King, 7th June 1818, and quickly grew to having 100 pupils.

It was obvious that a permanent building was necessary and a committee was formed to raise money for one. The President, the Lord of the Manor, Hugh Smith, gave a lease of 199 years to Alexander Jardine (presumably the "A.J." of the letters) and Robert Bateman Wilkins of Jessop's Well, who may have been the churchwarden mentioned in the letter. By the time of the second anniversary of the start of the Sunday School it was possible for Thomas Page, the Lord of the Manor of Cobham, acting as proxy for Prince Leopold, to lay the foundation stone of the Royal Kent School; the name being borne on one of the several flags carried in the procession from the meeting in Birds Hill Farmhouse to the site on the opposite side of Oxshott Green (where is now the QB petrol station).

Four months later the new building was ready to be opened. Although the opening ceremony does not appear to have been quite as colourful as when the foundation stone was laid, it was attended by many prominent people such as the officials of the B&FSS, the clergy who had taken part in the proceedings on the three previous occasions as described in the letters to the Reverend Thomas Lewis; also the Reverend Dr. W.B. Collyer (1782-1854) the minister at the Hanover Chapel in Peckham where the Dukes of Kent and Sussex were worshippers; the Reverend Dr. J.H. Rudge, a protégé successively chaplain to Prince Leopold, the Duke of York and the Duke of Sussex and the Reverend Dr. Waugh a protégé of the Duke of Kent. The Committee ordered a report of the Proceedings to be printed.

The school continued to grow after it had opened in the new building. "British" schools were required to make reports every year and that of the Oxshott school for 1821 shows that it had 80 boys and 40 girls. Those for the following years up to 1829 give similar figures but after that Oxshott disappears from the Society's reports and by the mid 1830s the authoress, Mary Howitt, reported that the building was derelict and being used by the farmer as a store. There was at this time a great deal of unrest in the countryside; prices were rising, there was growing opposition to paying tithes and men were being put out of work by the introduction of machinery on farms. On 6th December 1860 a barn at Oxshott belonging to Prince Leopold was burnt down in the so called "Captain Swing" riots. This was probably at Birds Hill Farm, the Prince's largest property in the area.

Hugh Smith had died in 1831 and the Manor and advowson of Stoke d'Abernon had been acquired by a Mrs. Phillips, obviously with the intention that her son Frederick Par Phillips should become the Rector but the Benefice was held by Smith's son, another Hugh, who had another in the West country. As a result, Phillips looked after Stoke as a curate and had to wait until Smith died in 1862 before he could install himself as Rector and so become a "squarson". Phillips was the wealthy grandson of the Duc d'Orleans and so related to the exiled King of France and therefore to Prince Leopold who, after becoming King of the Belgians in 1834, married the King's daughter Louisa. He had been the curate at St. Lawrence, Hougham near Dover, from 1841 to 1851 and it was there that his son Frederick Abiss Phillips was born. Smith had neglected St. Mary's and Phillips set about "restoring" the church in a pretty ruthless manner destroying much that we would like to have seen retained.

He also repaired Royal Kent School, added to it and built a house for the master. There is a story that he had to pay £50 to get rid of a squatter. Seeing that a labourer's wage at this time was 6/- a week (less in winter) this hardly seems credible. Moreover the census returns for the years 1841, 1851 and 1861 show the school building as occupied by a family named Iles and there is no mention of the squatter said to be named Joseph even though people living in tents in Steer Lane (Fair Oak Lane) and in barns at Little Heath Farm are identified.

The first schoolmaster of the re-opened school was George Copland the enumerator of the 1871 census which gives his age as 30, born in Buxton in Norfolk. His wife was born in Scotland and their first child, also George, born in 1864. By the time of the next census George Stoton was the schoolmaster and enumerator. His son William was just 2 months old, born in Stoke and another son, Archibald was 2 and had been born in Buxton, Norfolk so the family must have arrived quite recently, probably in 1869.



Oxshott School - from a postcard dated 1904 and signed by "Stoton".

The school was licensed for church services and Mr. Stoton played a harmonium there on Sunday evenings. He played at Stoke d'Abernon in the mornings and in the census he describes himself as "schoolmaster and organist" and his wife, Agnes, as "sewing mistress". Later, he had his daughter, Alice as a monitress and then Kate Ayling as a pupil teacher. She became a teacher in the "Iron School" when John Early Cook provided a corrugated iron hut in his brickfield at Little Heath Lane for the children in that area of the village. It was also used as a kind of community centre. Another hut in front of Royal Kent School (originally built by Edward Copsom Peake, curate in charge of Oxshott in the garden of his house, Oxshott Villa) was also used in that way and Miss Verrey of The Warren taught woodwork there to the boys of the village. When she and her sisters persuaded Frank Steadman to form a troop of Boy Scouts in 1912, they used the hut as their Headquarters.

George Stoton retired in 1907 and moved across the road to live with his twin daughters, Violet and Mary in their draper's shop in the parade newly built by Albert Hartshorn, the butcher next door to the "Victoria". He had his main shop at No. 1 North Street, Leatherhead.

The 1820s building continued in use until well after the second war but it was increasingly inadequate with poor heating and lacking any modern facilities. A Parent/Teacher Association formed in March 1950 put pressure on the authorities to improve matters until it was decided to build a modern school on a site in Oakshade Road (part of it known as Plum Pudding Meadow). Sadly the Surrey County Council failed to list the building as one of Historic Interest and the only reminders of the illustrious past are a plaque from over the door of the old building saying "Royal Kent School Founded 1820" and the bell from the turret on its roof which had cost £3.6s.6d. and which are mounted on a block outside of the door of the new school. Even these would have been lost but for the vigilance of a local man who rescued them from the builder's skip and presented them to the school.