

A History of Chesterfield Grammar School

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The grammar school at Chesterfield, where there appears to have been a school from the thirteenth century until the Reformation, was endowed by two generations of a local gentry family, the Foljambes of Walton, in 1585-95. It was probably established c.1598, when the burgesses obtained letters patent from the Crown, which empowered the new corporation to manage the school. Nothing is known in detail of the school in the seventeenth century, but in the early eighteenth century, under the headmastership of William Burrow, it enjoyed a wide reputation. A large number of boys from the school went to St John's College, Cambridge, where several Derbyshire grammar schools shared a scholarship endowed by James Beresford, an early sixteenth-century vicar of Chesterfield. Among them was Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), poet, scientist and polymath. Like many grammar schools, Chesterfield declined in the late eighteenth century and, after years of desuetude, closed completely in 1832.

The school reopened in 1847, following the intervention of the Charity Commission and the Court of Chancery. A new schoolhouse was built the year before, close to the site of St Helen's chapel, on which an earlier building of 1710 had stood. Until then the school appears to have been housed in the medieval chapel. It developed into a sound local grammar school, with a few boarders from further afield, and expanded after the passing of the Technical Instruction Act of 1889, when it became a 'school of science', offering evening classes to part-time students. A large extension was opened in 1901 to the building of 1846 (which had been modestly enlarged in 1860 and 1872). From 1903 the school received county education committee grants but in 1926 the governors resolved to become a direct grant school funded by the Board of Education. Two years later, as pupil numbers were rapidly rising, the governors bought Hurst House, opposite the school on Abercrombie Street, and 28 acres of land for playing fields at Brookside.

In 1935 a new headmaster suggested moving the school to Brookside, a proposal which the county council supported, but the Board of Education made its approval conditional on the transfer of the school to the education committee. This took effect in 1940, just after the outbreak of war made new building impossible.

After 1944 Chesterfield School became the largest and most prestigious grammar school maintained by the Derbyshire education committee. Led by W.E. Glistler, headmaster between 1947 and 1968, it not only achieved outstanding examination results but also offered a very wide range of extra-curricular activities.

The move to Brookside was not achieved until 1967, by which time pressure was building to reorganise secondary schools in Chesterfield on 'comprehensive' lines. An interim scheme, introduced in 1974, deprived the three academic secondary schools of pupils below the age of 13, and the remainder of Geoffrey Price's period as headmaster of Chesterfield School was overshadowed by the determination of the county council to complete the destruction of selective education in the town. Success finally came, despite strong local opposition, in 1991, when Chesterfield School was closed, together with the two other academic secondary schools and several others which had served the town well since the reorganisation of senior education in 1928-32. A concluding chapter outlines the history of secondary education in Chesterfield since 1991.

This new book, sponsored by the Old Cestrefeldians' Trust, discusses the history of the grammar school in detail, drawing on its own records and those of the local education authorities and the Board of Education and its successors. The book sets the history of the school within the wider context of the history of Chesterfield, of the other endowed grammar schools in Derbyshire which evolved into modern secondary schools, and the general development of secondary education. It is the first full-length academic study of any Derbyshire grammar school.

An illustrated hardback of 720 pages (ISBN 978 1 898937 80 7), the book was published on 16 December 2017 at a retail price of £35. The launch event took place at the old grammar school on Sheffield Road (now part of Chesterfield College) on 16 December, at which the author gave a talk about the writing of the book.

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The author was a pupil at Chesterfield School between 1963 and 1970, and went on to read modern history at Oxford. He has been a university teacher since 1976 and a member of the History Department at the University of Nottingham since 2001. He is the county editor for Derbyshire of the Victoria County History.

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