



The History of Mayfield School

Mayfield School may be unique in owing its existence to a picnic.

On 26th May 1863 Mother Cornelia Connelly, who had founded the Society of the Holy Child Jesus in 1846, escorted a small group of girls from the Holy Child School at St Leonards-on-Sea to the ruins of the Old Palace of Mayfield, where they would enjoy a picnic. The peace of the countryside and the elegance of the ruins must have left their mark on Cornelia, for within a matter of weeks the estate had been purchased by the Duchess of Leeds (Louisa Catherine Caton) and presented to the religious order.



Chapel porch, 1863, before and after restoration by Edward Welby Pugin for SHJC from May 1864

Restoration of the Old Palace began in 1864 and the ruins of the 14th century hall were transformed into a church within 14 months by the architect Edward Welby Pugin. Although the nuns educated a small number of orphans on site almost immediately, it was not until 1872 that young girls from St Leonards were brought over to be the first pupils at the school.

Development of the school continued in order to meet the needs of the growing number of pupils at Mayfield. In 1886, the architect Peter Paul Pugin built the Cloisters to the north of the Chapel, adding the red brick school building in 1896. The Concert Hall was built in 1929 by Adrian Gilbert Scott, and a suite of other facilities were constructed throughout the second half of the 20th-century and beyond.

In 1953, the schools at St Leonards-on-Sea and Mayfield merged to form St Leonards-Mayfield School. Pupils remained at St Leonards up to the age of 13 and then transferred to Mayfield to continue their education to 18. In 1975, the junior school at St Leonards closed and Mayfield became the school it is today, educating girls from 11 to 18.

Until the end of the 20th century the Headmistress of St Leonards-Mayfield School was drawn from the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, at which point the school appointed its first lay headmistress.

The links with Holy Child, however, remain strong: three members of the Governing body are nuns and three nuns live in the school grounds, supporting the pastoral work of the School.



Mayfield

The Old Palace is so named as it was a residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury. On 4th February 1260, Pope Alexander IV gave Archbishop Boniface of Savoy permission to build a simple and comfortable manor in his forest at Mayfield:

“Sicut nobis significare curasti, desideres quondam manerium construere in foresta tua de Mawefeld, diocesis Cicestrensis, et tu successoris tui possitis ad illud honeste ac commode, cum necesse fuerit.”

Between 1278 and 1284 Archbishop John Peckham spent a further 2,000 marks improving the manor house. Edward I visited on 22nd June 1299 and Alan de Goldesburgh, the king's saucemaker (or *salsarius*, who provided spices) gave the Clerk of the Palace Kitchen 6 shillings. The king returned on 28th June 1305 with his dogs, 3 beagles: 9 greyhounds, 20 staghounds, 23 harriers, and 27 deerhounds, each costing ½ penny a day to feed.

It is believed that the Great Hall was built by Archbishop Winchelsea c. 1310 employing the master mason Michael of Canterbury, although Archbishop Islip (1356-1366) enlarged it and built the greater part of the Palace.



Edward I and his court circa 1280-1300; Cotton Vitellius A. XIII, f.6v British Library; carved head at exit to Chapel.



Unknown Flemish artist, King Henry VII, oil on panel, 1505, 425 x 305 mm, NPG.



Mayfield



Hans Holbein the Younger, William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, oil on panel, early 17th century, 822 x 663 mm, National Portrait Gallery.



Warham's Coat of Arms on the base of the Crucifix, and on the door spandrel in Gresham.

Henry VII visited several times in the 1490s, possibly in connection with the iron furnaces. In the early 16th century Archbishop William Warham built the Gate House and Chapel Porch; his Coat of Arms can still be seen on the door spandrel in Gresham: a goat with three scallop shells. Travelling with Archbishop Warham from Knole, the 19 year old Henry VIII visited Mayfield Palace in August 1510; he is likely to have brought with him his young wife, Katherine of Aragon. After Warham's death the Palace passed to Archbishop Cranmer who surrendered it to Henry VIII on 12th November 1545. On 5th January 1546 Edward North, Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations who managed Henry's revenue from the dissolution, paid £337.6s.8p for Mayfield Palace and over 8,000 acres of land, selling it on to Sir John Gresham, a London merchant who became Lord Mayor of London the next year.



Unknown Artist, Sir Thomas Gresham (1519?-1579), c. 1565, oil on panel, 1003 mm x 724 mm, National Portrait Gallery



Mayfield

The Palace eventually passed to a younger member of the Gresham family, Sir Thomas Gresham, in 1567. Gresham was the founder of the Royal Exchange, acting as Crown Agent at Antwerp between 1551 and 1574, managing Tudor finances. Gresham's badge of a grasshopper and the date 1571 appears in a chimney piece formerly on the first floor but now moved down to the Governor's Room near the Courtyard. In August 1573 Gresham was honoured by a visit from Queen Elizabeth I; the lavish decoration in *The Queen's Room* was valued at the enormous sum of £7,553.10s.8p in his journal.



Nicholas Hilliard Queen Elizabeth 1 watercolour on vellum, oval, 1572, 51 mm x 48 mm, National Portrait Gallery. The Gresham family badge of a grasshopper in the Governors' Room, 1571; The Lee Ring, before 1575, gold, green enamel, chalcedony intaglio, V&A.

After Gresham's death in 1579 the Palace passed through several hands until it was bought in 1617 by John Baker of a local family of Parliamentary ironmasters; several impressive monuments to them survive in St Dunstan's Church. As the iron industry declined in the 18th century, so too did the fortunes of the Bakers; the Palace was abandoned in 1740 and fell into ruins. The picturesque ruins featured in several 19th century guidebooks to fashionable Tunbridge Wells and in the autumn of 1832 the Duchess of Kent visited the Old Palace with Princess (later Queen) Victoria. Princess Victoria presented her companion, daughter of Lord and Lady De La Warr, with her silver mounted riding whip and this is still on display in the School.



Samuel Hieronymus Grimm, Great Hall at Mayfield Palace, 1783, Watercolour, 26.7 x 37.2cm, British Library, Add MS 5671, Item No f32 (No.53).



James Bromley after a portrait by Sir George Hayter, Queen Victoria, when Princess Victoria, 1834, mezzotint, 41.5 x 30.7cm, National Portrait Gallery

In 2009, the school celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Cornelia Connelly. The pupils joined in the festivities by living a day in the life of a Victorian nun, playing whist and eating gingerbread!

With thanks to historian Tim Cornish