Our very own Magna Carta

The Great Charter of 1600 and the Origins of the

Royal Grammar School

Article written by Oliver Edwards, RGS History teacher, for an RGS Day presentation in 2012

Historians are awkward people and like to challenge the conventional version of events. Two easily remembered facts are that Thomas Horsley founded the Royal Grammar School and that the School was created in 1545. Yet is either of these facts true?

Thomas Horsley, depicted in the RGS stained glass window, 1870

The precise date of the founding of the Royal Grammar School is elusive. The most often quoted date is 1545, the year Thomas Horsley died. Horsley was born in the 1460s, the son of Northumbrian gentry. He began life as a corn merchant, was a Merchant Venturer (a member of a Company which had the right to trade overseas) and was Sheriff of Newcastle and twice Mayor. He died at the age of 77. In the will he made in 1525 he provided for the town's school. He left the town some property in trust, income from which was to pay the salary of a schoolmaster.

So should we see 1525 as the School's starting date? Interestingly the School chose 1925 as its four hundredth anniversary. Or should we regard 1600, the year of the Great Charter, as the true birth of the School?

Indeed, in the proper sense of the word, perhaps Horsley did not found a new school at all. Rather he left a legacy for an existing school. The origins of the Royal Grammar School probably lie in the fifteenth century when boys were being educated in the precinct of St Nicholas and sometimes proceeding to Cambridge University. One such was Nicholas Ridley, a Protestant bishop and martyr burnt in 1555 in the reign of Mary Tudor.

The debate about founding dates and foundation notwithstanding, Horsley's endowment – an unselfish gesture – is a historical fact. His bequest, however, was a modest one and had to be supplemented from two other sources. One was the Common Council (the name of the town council), the other was St. Mary's Hospital in Westgate Street. Traditionally hospitals had, among other functions, cared for the sick and distributed alms. Hence they were seen as sources of charity and the diversion of their funds into a local school was seen as appropriate. The problem for the School was that its relationship to St. Mary's was neither formal nor enshrined in law. Continued funding depended on the goodwill of the Master of the Hospital.

In the 1560s and 1570s that goodwill existed since the Master was the subject of legal action by the 'godly' (i.e. Protestant) Bishop of Durham, who wanted to remove him on account of his Catholic sympathies. Reading the records, one is struck by how litigious the property-owning classes of Tudor England were. The town supported the cause of the Master of the Hospital; in return he contributed to the stipend of the School's master. (There was only one master in those days and sometimes an assistant master, called an usher.)

Lack of financial security was not the only weakness of the late sixteenth century school. Its accommodation in an outbuilding of St. Nicholas's was so dilapidated that it had to move into a room in St. Mary's Hospital. The salary of the schoolmaster was meagre and his tenure not always secure. It could depend on whether his religious views coincided with those of the Common Council and whether he commanded the support of the majority faction among the burgesses who ruled the town. Though in the Reformation era religious divisions undoubtedly existed, as did tensions between greater and lesser burgesses (i.e. between wealthy and less wealthy merchants), they can be overstated. At one level the Common Council suffered from the rivalries and conflicts of interest characteristic of small group politics – the government of Newcastle was in the hands of an elite of twenty or thirty men.

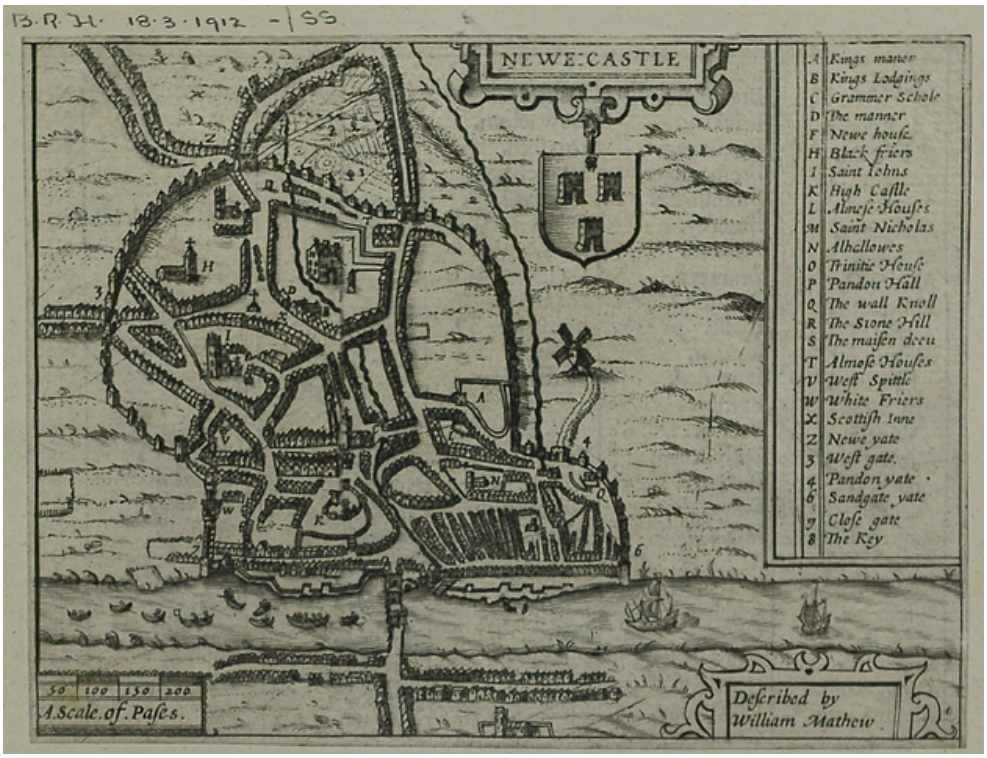
Postcard of Newcastle Cathedral in 1903. [RGS Archives, SUR/125]

The history of the school in the late 1500s can only be understood in the context of civil and religious conflict within the town, especially as the appointment of the schoolmaster was in the gift of the Common Council.

Similarly the issuing of the Great Charter of 1600 must be seen against the backdrop of the regional economy and the politics of Newcastle's merchant oligarchy. The wealth of Newcastle lay on or just beneath the surface of Tyneside in the form of 'seacoal' – coal transported to London by sea. Newcastle represented one corner of a profitable triangular trade, whose three points were Newcastle itself, London and King's Lynn. Coal was extracted from pits located generally south of the Tyne, taken to staithes (wharves) on the river and transported by keels (barges) to the mouth of the Tyne where it was loaded on to colliers and carried to London. On the return trip the colliers would stop at King's Lynn to take on grain. The dearth of indigenous timber and the growing population of London had seen a surge in demand for Tyneside coal. Newcastle was dubbed the 'black Indies' in the 1590s.

008881:Tyne Bridge Newcastle upon Tyne ?G. Hastings Auty Fine Art Photographers around 1604. Courtesy of Newcastle Libraries Flickr: https://flic.kr/p/7dehTf

The lucrative local trade in coal was controlled by a group of merchants who were a division of the Merchant Venturers. They were called hostmen. The transit of coal from pithead to river mouth was their business. Gentry mine owners and ship masters were hostages to these middle men who operated a virtual cartel. The hostmen's monopoly was facilitated by the fact that many of them were partners in the 'Grand Lease', which granted them a hold over the coalfields of Gateshead and Whickham for 79 years. The lease had passed to the hostmen via a complicated route.



John Speed's map of Newcastle, c.1610. Courtesy of Newcastle Libraries Flickr: https://flic.kr/p/Fy5rjJ

Securing access to the coalfields south of the Tyne had long been a priority for the corporation of Newcastle. Under a statute passed in the reign of Edward VI Newcastle had annexed Gateshead. Unfortunately for the burgesses of Newcastle the statute had been repealed in the reign of Mary and never reintroduced.

Indeed jurisdiction over the area had reverted to the Bishop of Durham only for the diocese to grant the lease to the Crown shortly afterwards. The Crown then sold it to a speculator and entrepreneur Sir Thomas Sutton who duly sold it on at a handsome profit. The Common Council had wanted to acquire the lease in the 1580s but had been unable to do so because of a legal nicety. Newcastle had not been properly incorporated and so could not buy the lease. At this point several members of the hostmen acquired the lease in trust for the town. However, by the time Newcastle had been given full corporation status by a royal charter of 1589, the hostmen were unwilling to sell the lease on to the Common Council. It was commercially too valuable. The Grand Lease was the basis of their monopoly of the trade in moving Tyneside coal. Moreover they had sold shares in the lease to other hostmen.

Unsurprisingly, the cartel operated by the hostmen was resented by other local merchants. They argued that the 'Grand Lease' should be owned collectively by the town, thus opening up the trade to other merchants. Indeed the 'Grand Lease' was the big issue in local politics in the 1580s and 1590s and the cause of bitter dispute. Both sides lobbied the Privy Council in London. Contrary to what we might think, this is exactly the sort of local issue, rather than great matters of state, which consumed most of the Privy Council's time. In 1598 the Privy Council found in favour of the hostmen.

The hostmen were a powerful and wealthy local interest group which the Privy Council did not want to antagonise at a time when England was at war with Spain. Yet the Privy Council was subject to all sorts of conflicting pressures. It was not only Newcastle's lesser merchants who had been complaining about the hostmen. The Corporation of London also had grievances against them. They complained about the variable quality and high price of Tyneside 'seacoal' and profiteering by the hostmen.

Amidst all the politicking and special pleading the outlines of a solution emerged which found expression in the Great Charter of March 22nd 1600. A bargain was struck between the Crown and the hostmen. The latter were incorporated as their own separate trading company and granted a monopoly over the shipping of coal and grindstones from the River Tyne. Queen Elizabeth's Charter also sanctioned election arrangements which entrenched the position of the hostmen in local politics. A weighted system gave senior office-holders a disproportionate influence over the election of new municipal officers. Since the existing senior officers were hostmen, they nominated fellow members of the Company of Hostmen and retained a lock on key positions. Only one Newcastle Mayor between 1600 and the outbreak of the Civil War did not belong to the Company.

The Great Charter, 22 March 1600. Courtesy of Tyne & Wear Archivesand Museums [ref: MD.NC/D/1/1/15]

What did the hostmen offer the Crown in return? They assigned the 'Grand Lease' to the Common Council – a perfectly acceptable concession given the dual monopoly over the Tyneside coal trade and local government they now enjoyed under the Charter. They also agreed to the reinstatement of an ancient tax on Tyneside coal, which in the short term yielded an extraordinary three per cent of total Crown revenue. This tax was an important source of income for an English state still at war with Spain. Though this provision did not appear in the Charter, the hostmen also agreed to a ceiling on the price of coal sold to London.

But what of our School in this story? It appeared in the Charter as something of an afterthought. The Charter officially founded a grammar school in Newcastle, entitled to hold land in its own right (though there was no endowment to go along with the Charter and the fact that the School never owned any land was to prove a major handicap subsequently). The School was also given a name, the 'Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Newcastle', though for some reason it was never used and the School continued to be known as the Newcastle Free School. When the naming clause of the Charter was finally invoked, we assumed our current title of Royal Grammar School. The Charter also empowered the Mayor and Common Council to appoint the Master of the School. The Master was to serve at the pleasure of the Council and so could be dismissed at any time. The Charter was our birthright: it established the School as an institution in its own right and an autonomous legal entity. Perhaps 1600 should be viewed as the true founding date of the School. It would certainly make the whole business of anniversaries much easier.

The upturn in the School's fortunes continued after 1600. The Council wanted to place the school on a more secure financial footing by harnessing it to St. Mary's Hospital. The Hospital was an endowed body with its own lands and the Council wanted income from the Hospital's assets to benefit the School. This sort of arrangement could only be put in place, however, if the Council was authorised by the Crown to reform the Hospital.

Illustration of the Royal Grammar School at the Westgate. From Eneas Mackenzie, History of Newcastle Vol I (1818). [RGS Archives, ref: C13/23]

Consequently early in 1611 the burgesses petitioned the Lord Privy Seal for a re-foundation by royal charter of the town's hospitals. The charter was duly granted in May 1611. The Crown renounced all interest in the lands of the Hospital and conferred the right of appointment to the Mastership on the Council. Moreover the Council were given the right to revise the orders and statutes governing the Hospital. The Charter amounted to a licence for reform. The town now paid for the conversion of the Main Hall of the Hospital into a proper schoolroom and election room (where voting for the Mayor would take place).

The Master of the School could now also serve as the Master of the Hospital. The School, having undergone a period of turbulence in the late sixteenth century, began to thrive. In 1615 Robert Fowberry was recruited as Master, having previously held the Mastership of Hull Grammar School. It was interesting that the School could now recruit an existing headmaster and a man of high calibre. The large salary and the promise of the Mastership of St. Mary's were doubtless incentives. In the 1640s a former pupil recalled Fowberry's ability 'to indoctrinate youth in Greek and Latin.' The new Master was undoubtedly well read. At his death he owned 150 volumes, a relatively large private library for a provincial schoolmaster. There was enough money to employ an usher too. The School now had a well remunerated Master and usher, a well appointed schoolroom and new-found financial security. The partnership with St. Mary's was to prove crucial to the future wellbeing of the School. At times, in the absence of a conventional endowment, our survival as an institution depended on it.

So, what conclusions can we draw from this story? If it was suggested previously that the foundation of the School was something of an afterthought in a Charter which had more to do with Crown finances and the grubby politics of the local coal trade, this is not the whole truth. Self-interest was also at work: Newcastle's burgesses wanted their sons (and the sons of all freemen) to benefit from an education in Latin grammar. But the town's ruling elite was also moved by civic purpose and local pride. The Council was thinking of the town and the education of its sons. Its members had a vision for their community and school. They seized the opportunity presented by negotiations behind the Great Charter to put their School on a secure footing.

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On RGS Day it is appropriate to recall Thomas Horsley's simple act of philanthropy in 1525 and remember him for thinking of this city and the schooling of its sons, endowing a 'common grammar school for the erudition and instruction of all and singular the scholars in this town.' His bequest may have been limited but out of this one noble gesture has grown a great school. Horsley built better than he knew.

This article was produced with reference to the research of Dr Richard Tuck, particularly for his chapter 'Civil Conflict in School and Town 1500-1700' published in 'Royal Grammar School Newcastle upon Tyne: A History of the School in its Community', by Brian Mains and Anthony Tuck (eds.) (1986).