

Twyford School



Alexander Pope's school, Segar's Buildings, Twyford, now demolished. Image: Dr Michael Roberts

Twyford School - a myth nailed

Recent research has shown that a long-held story of the origins of this famous prep school is wrong and reality is even more interesting, writes Barry Shurlock...

NO prizes for knowing that Twyford School is in the village of that name near Winchester. Nor, for those who follow these things, that it is a very successful prep school with a long history. But trotting out the tale that it was in origin a Catholic school attended by the celebrated poet Alexander Pope will now earn nul points.

Research by school archivist Andrew Keeling has recently shown that the roots of Twyford School were in fact 'an academy' started in 1777 in Twickenham by the Rev. Liscombe Maltbe Stretch. Its premises were at Bath House, on the London Road, near the existing Fuller's pub, The Cabbage Patch.

More of this below. The story of education in general in the Twyford area, and in particular for Catholics, is of considerable interest in its own right. Although the Reformation dealt Catholics a savage blow, Winchester was more tolerant of the old religion than many parts of the country. The village of Compton in particular had close links with the Catholic faith, which became centred at Silkstead, where pre-Reformation St Swithun's Priory had once held the farm.

It was here, at Silkstead, at some time before 1688, that a Catholic school was set up, later to be 'fed' by pupils from a lower school in Segar's Buildings, Queen Street, Twyford. Now demolished, a farm of that name still stands in the area.

The purpose of the school was to educate young men to a certain level before shipping them off to Flanders to the English College at Douai. It is this 'school in Twyford' that has previously been confused with Twyford School. It was formerly thought that, after the

Jacobite Revolution of 1745, the Catholic school was obliged to go underground, only to re-emerge later as the roots of the Anglican prep school.

This has now been shown by Andrew to be wrong, but interestingly a part of the myth survives, as it was in the school in Segar's Building that the poet Alexander Pope, in the hands of his family's priest, did start his education. The master's style was to teach Greek and Latin grammar simultaneously! Pope was apparently 'whipped and ill-used' and, it is said, expelled for writing unflattering verses about the master – plus ça change!

In the heat of the anti-Catholicism of 1745 the school fled from Twyford and within a few years had been re-established in the mansion of a friendly family at Standon Lordship in Hertfordshire. It later moved to the site of a school which still exists, St Edmund's Academy, Ware. This was founded on the basis of the ex-Twyford school in 1793 by English Catholics returning from abroad, obliged in the aftermath of the French Revolution to return to England, where toleration was growing.

So, in this way the ex-school in Twyford was a pioneer in the re-establishment of Catholic colleges and seminaries throughout England. Also, the building of St Edmund's was made possible by an enormous gift of £10,000 – about a million in today's money – from a Hampshire merchant, the Catholic John Sone.

He is described in the record as a 'mealman', meaning someone who traded in grain. In 1742, he held the upper mill at Bedhampton,

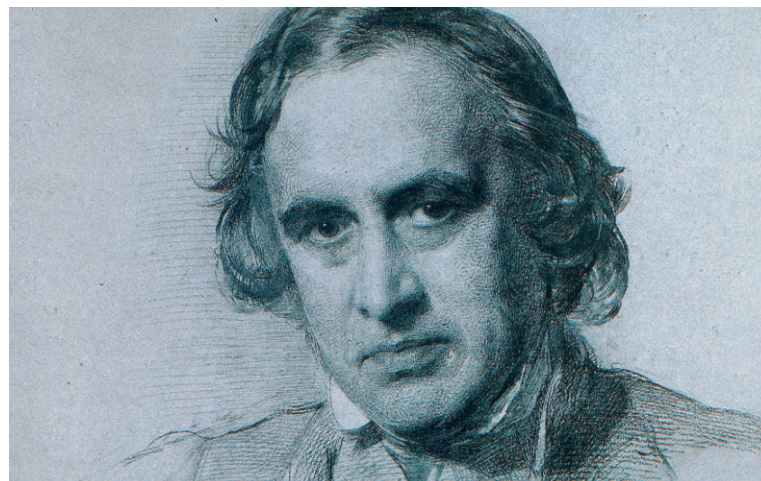
according to Jennifer Bishop (www.thespring.co.uk). Ironically, he probably grew rich during the wars with the very French who had exiled the Catholics from Douai, whom he rewarded with his largesse.

Sone's will in the National Archives shows that when he died in 1806 he owned a fleet of sloops, unimaginatively named Providence of Portsmouth, Havant of Portsmouth, Unity of Portsmouth, Friends of Portsmouth and Industry of Portsmouth!

To return to the history of Twyford School, its real founder the Rev. Liscombe Stretch, ordained in 1761, was a career churchman who started his academy at Twickenham after a succession of livings and curacies – at Chipping Campden, Evesham; Leysdown, Kent; and Warlingham, Chipstead and Merstham, Surrey. In 1787 he eventually fell on his feet with the vicarship of Twyford church and the chapelry of Owslebury, appointed by the patrons, Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

Three years later he advertised in the *Chronicle* for 'a few Young Gentlemen to board and educate in a genteel and liberal manner'. He boasted his credentials: 'the number of youths who have passed from under his care to almost all the public schools, to both universities of this kingdom, and to the most distinguished in foreign countries, leaves no room to question his ability for this undertaking'.

Stretch was obviously an ambitious man with a serious interest in education. In the early 1760s he had been involved in the publication of *The Bible* in



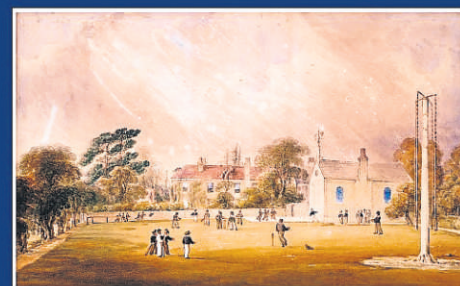
Former pupil Archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench, who inspired the Oxford English Dictionary. Image: Twyford School



Rev George W. Kitchin and Sixth Formers, 1858. Image: Charles Dodgson alias Lewis Carroll

Twyford School

~ An Illustrated History ~



Roger Porteous & John Stott

'Boys at play', 1848, on the cover of the school history

monthly parts. In 1770 he published *The Beauties of History*, an educational book 'for the instruction and entertainment of youth', subtitled *Pictures of Virtue and Vice*.

He must have earned some money from the venture, as editions were in print for 30 years or more, not only in London but also in Dublin, and even in the USA, in Springfield Massachusetts. And he left more than £7,000 in his will.

Twyford School as we know it really got going in about 1808, when Stretch was joined by a nephew, the Rev. Liscombe Clarke, who had been to Winchester and New College, Oxford. At about the same time the school took up its present site, moving from the vicarage to the front part of the present building.

After Stretch's death in 1813, Clarke stayed on for two years, before embarking on a church career that ultimately led to a canonry at Salisbury Cathedral. For the next 18 years the

headmaster was the Rev. James Bedford, whose portrait hangs in the school in 'staircase hall'. It shows a pupil once invisible, but revealed in the 1980s when the picture was cleaned.

Over the past century and a half, the school has gone from strength to strength – with the occasional hiccups.

Andrew's research corrects a section on the early history told in a beautiful book, *Twyford School: An Illustrated History* by Roger Porteous and John Stott published in 2010 (George Mann Publications, Easton, available from: twyfordschool.com for at £10 plus p & p). Headmasters have included no less than five members of the Wickham family, who actually owned the school from 1833 to 1956, when Robert Wickham set up the Twyford School Trust.

For more on Hampshire, visit: www.hampshirearchivetrust.co.uk.

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