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From the 2005-6 Lecture Programme: Old Swinford Hospital and the Foleys

Old Swinford Hospital in Stourbridge is a school founded by Thomas Foley, then of Witley Court, but earlier of Oldswinford. The first boys were chosen and entered the school on 13 June 1670; the traditional foundation date of 1667 probably reflects the start of building. Thomas Foley gave the school the name of Hospital or New School in Stourbridge, and the name Hospital has been carefully preserved to this day. In the 17th century Hospitals were charitable institutions for the poor, of three types, firstly education, secondly places for those too poor to afford medical attention, and lastly places for poor elderly people.



The school is remarkable in many ways, not least because so much documentation survives, chronicling its development down the centuries. Most of the documentary material is lodged at Dudley Archives, presently at Coseley, but some important papers are amongst the Foley Collection at Hereford Record Office. The school presently retains its admission books, which list every boy who has attended the school, usually with the names of his parents.

Few schools can boast as strong a connection with its founding family as Old Swinford. To oversee and govern his school, the Founder named Trustees (or Feoffees as they are still called) from influential families in Worcestershire. Amongst them were his three sons, Thomas, Philip and Paul, descendants of whom have ever since had the right of three places on the board of Feoffees, and this connection has been proudly and actively maintained by

the family to the present day. The Foley family had risen to prosperity in the first part of the 17th century, by developing iron works in the West Midlands, particularly employing a process for slitting iron for nails. By the end of the Commonwealth period, Thomas Foley had gained contracts to supply the Navy, probably through his acquaintance with Samuel Pepys. At that time, Baxter, the Kidderminster pastor, in praising Thomas Foley's character, observed that he was 'a truly honest man' who from 'almost nothing did get almost £5000 a year by ironworks'.

Some of this wealth Thomas Foley invested in land and estates, buying Witley Court, and estates at Stoke Edith and Prestwood, near Stourbridge, the latter two for his younger sons. It was said that he could ride from Witley Court to his school in Oldswinford without leaving his land. Tradition has it that he was persuaded to found his school as a result of a sermon delivered by Baxter at Worcester Assizes in 1655, on the 'Right Use of Wealth'. Baxter described various 'good works' for the rich, amongst them the founding of schools for the poor in 'rude parts of the country'. This idea clearly appealed to Thomas Foley and, after the Restoration, he set about his project with diligence. Visits were made to Queen Elizabeth's Hospital in Bristol, Cheetham's school in Manchester, and Abingdon Hospital near Oxford (a hospital for old people).

A small notebook, though not in Thomas' handwriting, survives, perhaps written by his Steward, detailing daily diet: half a pound of beef four times a week, together with a carrot or turnip; milk and cheese on the other days; 8 pints of beer a day per 12 boys - this would be 'small' or weak beer, used because of the unhealthy water supply. This diet must have been far better than the boys received at home.

Foley also constructed a fine building for the school, designed, as tradition has it, by Christopher Wren. The proportions of the building are indeed striking, and it still stands impressively on the Hagley road leading to the centre of Stourbridge. This may not be a fanciful story, as Foley would probably have met Wren in London, when dining with Pepys, as the diarist records.

The third unusual feature of the school is that it was established, not as a grammar school, but for boys from 'poor but honest' families who 'through poverty' would not 'otherwise be educated'. These quotations come from the 'rules' which Thomas Foley himself set, and are listed in his own handwriting in instructions to his brothers, sons and 'friends and relations'. No boy was eligible whose parents had ever received alms of the parish, and thereby Thomas Foley excluded a significant group; he seems to have aimed his school particularly at those who worked hard and had a number of children to maintain, the sons of blacksmiths, wheelwrights, nail makers and other craftsmen.

Boys had to be between 7 and 11 when admitted, and were apprenticed at 14. Sixty boys made up the school, 46 from named parishes in Worcestershire and Staffordshire, normally places with which the Foleys had a connection, including six from Kidderminster, four from Bewdley and four from Dudley. The other 14 boys were chosen by Thomas Foley or the Feoffees themselves from anywhere in the British Isles. This arrangement continued until well after the First World War.

Until the late 1940s all boys were clothed, educated, and boarded in the school entirely free. Thomas Foley had endowed the school generously. In the early years while he was alive, he seems to have directly paid all costs. He had his own room in the school, and so did his

Steward. When he died in 1677, he left by his Will the manor of Pedmore to the school, and other land and property in Stourbridge, Dudley and further afield, some 1500 acres in all. He also gave the school £2000 which was invested in land in Stone, Staffordshire. The land gave rental income, more than enough for the school's needs. Outline accounts survive from the early 1680s. From Michaelmas 1688 an account book details annual income and expenditure. In that year, the rents were valued at over £660, and the costs under £600. The school already had an accumulated surplus of over £200. In 1750 the income was over £900 and the expenditure under £700. After coal was discovered under the school's land in Dudley later in the 18th century, the financial situation was even better. No wonder the Charity Commissioners in the 1830s felt that the school was not spending enough of its resources.

When the boys left at the age of 14, they were provided with an apprentice's blue coat uniform and a bible. It became harder to find apprenticeships in the 20th century, but previously the boys were eagerly sought by apprentice masters, as being literate and numerate, and strictly brought up. It was only after World War II that boys began to take public exams. A Sixth Form was established in the 1950s, when the school became a Technical Grammar School. The original concept of the Founder was thus maintained until about 60 years ago. The school remains primarily a boarding school, but within the state maintained sector, with virtually every boy who leaves the Sixth Form proceeding to University. Girls have recently been admitted to the Sixth Form.

The school, with its considerable assets, might have developed into a traditional independent boarding school in the 19th century, but the Foley family seem to have been instrumental in keeping the school true to the Founder's intent. Following the visit of the Charity Commissioners in the 1830s, who complained that the wealth of the foundation was not being fully utilised, Mr Hodgetts Hodgetts-Foley, M.P. instituted a thorough review of the arrangements, which resulted in more boys being admitted, and a slightly wider curriculum, but maintaining the age range and the goal of apprenticeships. Originally the emphasis of the teaching was on 'reading, writing and casting accounts', as Thomas Foley himself put it. In the 19th century, geography, history, and, for older boys, lectures on mechanical drawing were added. Suggestions later in the century that Latin should be introduced, and girls admitted, were firmly rejected.

The process of admission varied little down the centuries. The Vicar, Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor were approached whenever there was a vacancy for a boy for a particular parish. The original return from the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of Oldswinford has been recently found in the Foley Collection at Hereford. Sixteen names were put forward for the 8 places (the Feoffees always asked for two candidates for each place, so that they had a choice), and the chosen 8 were the first to be entered into the Register Book of the School. The document is dated 13 June 1670. A letter of extravagant gratitude, dated 28 June 1670, was sent by the Vicar, Churchwardens and overseers of Dudley to Thomas Foley, tendering 'abundant thankfulness' for 'favour towards us, by affording ye poor boys of our Dudley some room in that foundation, and to taste ye sweet effect of your bounty and charity'; they earnestly prayed 'that God would bless and prosper your virtuous self and all your offspring and relations'.

This method of 'selection' worked well until the 1930s. In earlier years it seems likely that most boys entered the school illiterate. In the 19th century, the Feoffees employed 'examiners', usually local clergy or Headmasters of local Grammar Schools, to set examination papers and to report the results. Copies of these exam papers have survived from the mid 1800s. By the age of

13, boys were tackling complicated Maths papers in Euclid, English papers requiring extensive understanding of grammar and structure of the language, and 'Divinity' papers demanding detailed knowledge of the Bible. This was the preparation for apprenticeship at 14. Of the first 200 apprentices 50 were sent to London and 20 to Birmingham but, perhaps surprisingly, the chosen trades were not overwhelmingly in iron working of any kind; nearly a quarter became tailors or shoemakers; only 24 became blacksmiths or nail makers. A hundred years later the picture had changed: nearly a quarter of those apprenticed between 1750 and 1770 went to Birmingham, only 7 to London, but a notable 25 to Wolverhampton. The number and range of small Black-Country industries was growing and this is reflected in the range of crafts that the boys took up e.g. brass candlestick makers, toy makers, locksmiths, whitesmiths. Most boys took up a metal-making apprenticeship of some kind, few (6) became tailors, but some became grocers or mercers. Many did very well: one went on to establish Jesson's school in Dudley, replicating some features of his old school.

Without doubt, the regime until well into the last century was harsh. An inventory of 1671 lists stocks in front of the school building. The use of the cane was frequent, certainly in the 1800s when punishments were recorded, and birching in front of the whole school persisted at least until the First World War. The boys occasionally 'rebelled'. In 1704 nearly a quarter of the school was expelled for rising up, and beating and abusing their Master, Mr Perks. In 1792 no boy was allowed to 'bring into the Hospital any pistol, gun or firearms of any kind, not gunpowder, whether in bombs, squibs, crackers, or other fireworks of any denomination'. Boys usually expressed their displeasure at the regime by running away. In 1850, it was decided that all boys who ran away should automatically be expelled, although this was not always enforced. A few years later, the Feoffees reported a 'state of rebellion'. Only 17 boys answered the morning bell, and then some boys threw stones at the Headmaster from behind a wall. The ringleader was summarily expelled, and the Headmaster ordered to put any further disobedient or impertinent boys in irons and send for two Feoffees.

In spite of these occasional incidents, there is little doubt that a stream of boys, who might otherwise have had little or no education, left the school into the ranks of the Black Country businesses, and perhaps contributed to the growth of small-scale industry in the Black Country.

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