Exmouth Secondary School

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Exmouth Secondary School was one of the first selective secondary schools to open in the county of Devon during the early 1920s. It was housed in a building known as The Grange, Withycombe, and was opened on 3 May 1921. Dartmouth Secondary School and Plympton's restarted grammar school had both opened the previous day, 2 May 1921. These events were recorded by local newspapers.[1] At Exmouth, the *Devon and Exeter Gazette* stated that about ninety pupils were enrolled. Mr C. E. Thorneycroft, chair of governors, presided.[2]

This article will trace the history and development of the school in the 1920s, using local newspapers and the school magazine, *Exmothiensis*. In addition, the reminiscences of Patricia Beer, a child in the 1920s and 1930s, have been included, along with an account of Exmouth Grammar School from a pupil's perspective.

Background and History

Even before 1918, there was support for secondary education. After the First World War, there was a perceived need for more and better secondary education to meet the needs of Britain and its position within world trade.

The 1902 Education Act (Balfour)

This dealt mainly with elementary education. However, it did allow Local Education Authorities to fund schools other than elementary, and it seems there were some 1,000 by 1914, including over 300 for girls.[3] It did also designate as Local Education Authorities, counties and county boroughs. Secondary education does not get a mention in the Act.

The 1918 Education Act

This was sometimes known as the Fisher Act. Herbert Fisher was an educationalist and historian. He was the vice chancellor of Sheffield University and then a Member of Parliament. The Prime Minister David Lloyd George invited him to join his Cabinet as president of the board of education. He was assured that money could be found for 'ambitious education measures.'[4]

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[1] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 3 May 1921.
[2] *Western Morning News*, 3 May 1921.
[3] Derek Gillard, 'Education in the UK: A History', (June 2018) <www.education-uk,org/history> [accessed 19 April 2024].
[4] Brian Simon, *Education and the Labour Movement* (The Camelot Press Ltd, 1965), p. 343.

The legislation made secondary education compulsory to the age of 14 and gave the responsibility for secondary schools to the state. Many existing endowed grammar schools and higher elementary schools applied to become secondary or central schools. In reality, most pupils stayed in their elementary (primary) schools up to leaving age, rather than going to a separate institution.

The delayed Education Act was largely a failure due to many clauses being repealed because of cuts in public expenditure and the economic depression of the 1920s. Therefore, the legislation was not implemented until 1921 and even then was watered down. Nevertheless, there was an underlying appeal for secondary. Indeed, it was a mantra that secondary education was for all. Yet, even by 1938 it was reckoned that only 14% attended specialist secondary schools.[5]

Although deemed a failure, Fisher led to much discussion and subsequent reports such as Young and Hadow. The Hadow Reports were published between 1926 and 1933 and covered all stages of education from the nursery to the school leaving age. They helped to prepare the groundwork for the influential Education Act 1944 (Butler) that established the tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary moderns, mostly based on a selection system at age 11.[6]

Young Report 1920

The committee that produced the Young Report 1920 was chaired by the Liberal Member of Parliament, E. Hilton Young. This report examined scholarships and free places. At that time, 6 million children were in public elementary schools but there were just 961 grant-aided secondary schools with 246,000 pupils. 72,386 had free places – 53,000 provided by LEAs, 16,548 by governors and 2,378 by other endowments. Lack of space meant over 11,000 entitled to free places could not join, despite the illegality of this in the 1918 Act. Young proposed a massive rise of 75% pupils in each 11–16 year group should be allocated places in secondary schools. As a first step, free places should be increased from 25% to 40%.

Young also proposed increasing the number of secondary schools to provide at least twenty school places for each thousand of the population. Maintenance allowances should be available for all free-place students who show need from the age of 11 (11 was deemed to be the best age to transfer but there was no agreement on how selection would take place). The committee hoped all secondary places would eventually be free. Fisher was labelled by the House of Commons as one of the 'most expensive statesmen' and by 1921, the *Daily Mail* was criticising him as a spending minister.[7]

[5] Derek Gillard, chapter 8.
[6] History of Education Society, <Historyofeducation.org.uk> [accessed 19 April 2024].
[7] Brian Simon, *Politics of Educational Reform, 1920–1940* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 28.

In 1921 – the year in which Exmouth Secondary School opened – the town had a population of 11,962 according to the Census figures, thus meeting the criteria to have its own secondary school.

At a local level, David Parker has commented that the education system continued to mirror the social classes. In spite of all the attention given to the spread of socially prestigious secondary schools, they remained relatively few in number and small: 'For the year 1928–29 the total number of pupils in secondary schools maintained by the county council was 3,274, with a further 585 in schools grant-aided by the county'.[8] This amounted to around 15% of young people aged 12–16. He goes on to say: 'Just a quarter of these pupils were county scholarship holders or had achieved places through local bursaries.'[9]

Exmouth Secondary School Early Days

Devon County Council, some years previously, had purchased a large house named The Grange. This property, situated at the entrance to Withycombe village, was reconstructed and adapted to become Exmouth Secondary School (see Figure 1). It was situated in its own grounds of around 14 acres, with ample playing fields, lawns and gardens. It was due to be lit by electricity when the school opened. Games organised included football, cricket, tennis and hockey. The chemical and physical laboratories were due to be housed in the former stables. In a personal touch, Patricia Beer mentions 'some darkly creosoted huts and bicycle sheds' clustered round the central area.[10]

Figure 1: The Grange Withycombe, later to become Exmouth Secondary School. This postcard is dated circa 1930, but must have been produced somewhat earlier[11]

Newspaper reports appear early in 1920 reporting the preparations for the opening of a new secondary school at Withycombe by Easter. At a meeting of the Exmouth Council, a letter was read from Mr G. F. Young, secretary of Devon Education Committee, stating that the

[8] David Parker, *The People of Devon in the First World War* (The History Press, 2013), p. 259.
[9] David Parker, p. 259.
[10] Patricia Beer, p. 209.
[11] DHC (Exmouth Library Collection), Small Box 1.

committee were preparing to open a secondary school at Withycombe at Easter. It was desirable that governors were elected as soon as possible, according to the following formulae:

> Six by the County Council, at least one a woman
>
> One by Budleigh Salterton UDC
>
> Four by Exmouth UDC, at least one a woman
>
> Two by St Thomas RDC, including one woman
>
> Six co-opted (at least two women)

The chairman put four names forward from the meeting.[12] At a governors' meeting later in the year, it was recorded that Exmouth's new secondary school was to be mixed and accommodate 150 pupils.[13] Beer does indicate that 'mixed' meant little more than boys and girls being taught under the same roof.

All did not go according to plan, as work on the new school was delayed due to industrial action in the Exmouth building trade, when both carpenters and plumbers came out on strike. The local press suggested that it could possibly be opened after Christmas, but again, this did not happen. The fees would be £2 10s per term or, £7 10s per annum. For Budleigh Salterton scholars, the new school would be more convenient than having to travel to the King's School at Ottery St Mary.[14] Prior to the school opening, it was perceived that Exeter could provide all the secondary education Exmouth required.

The first headmaster of Exmouth Secondary School was appointed in early 1921. Mr W. A. D'Arcy Hughes was offered the post. At that time he was head of Rushworth Grammar School, near Halifax.[15] His appointment was later confirmed by the county authority, alongside the following additional staff: Miss Mary Tingle of King's School, Ottery, as junior mistress; Miss D. Fleming of George Dixon School, Birmingham, and Mr D. Civil of Weymouth Secondary School as chief assistant master.[16] The fourth member of staff was Mr Earp, who had served in the First World War and taught in three grammar schools before coming to Exmouth. At this time, the teachers had to be versatile, often teaching across a number of subject areas. He remained at the school for 36 years before retiring in 1957. [17] Thus, at its inauguration, Exmouth Secondary School had four members of staff as well as a headteacher. Mr Hughes remained at the school until he retired on 1 August 1949. At his retirement, he was presented with a cheque by the Society of Old Exmothians.[18]

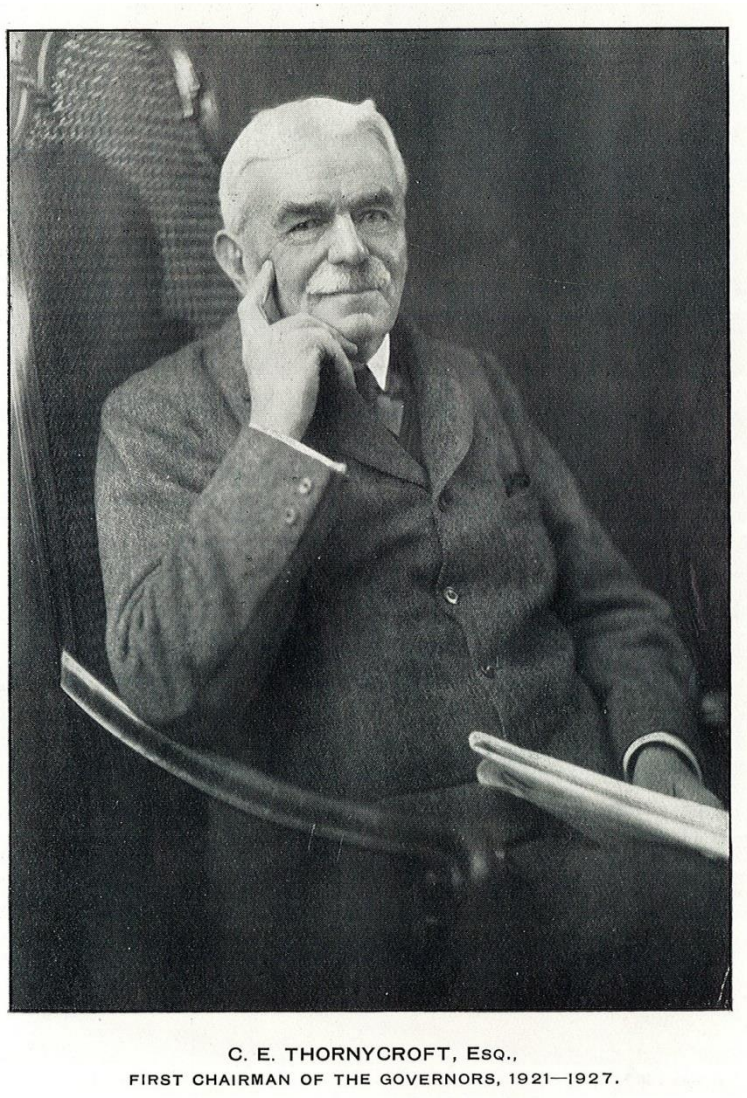
[12] *Exmouth Chronicle*, 10 January 1920.
[13] *Exmouth Chronicle*, 6 March 1920.
[14] *Exmouth Chronicle*, 23 October 1920.
[15] *Western Times*, 28 January 1921.
[16] *Western Times*, 14 March 1921.
[17] Old Exmothians 1955–1962 <www.oldexmothians.co.uk> [accessed 19 April 2024].
[18] *Western Times*, 5 August 1949

Figure 2: A photograph of the headmaster from the frontispiece of the school magazine, *Exmothiensis*[19]

The opening ceremony on 4 May 1921 was reported extensively by the local press, in what was deemed to be an important event for Exmouth.[20] It was opened by J. W. Hetherington, principal of the RAM College, Exeter. There was a large gathering, including governors, members of the urban councils, parents and others interested in education. The building had been adapted from an existing house for its new purpose. At its opening, some ninety pupils had been enrolled.

Mr C. E. Thorneycroft, chair of governors presided. He was the first chair of governors serving between 1921 and his death in 1927. He resided at Highfield House, Exmouth, and prior to that he had lived at Courtlands in Lympstone. The gentleman was born in Cheshire, bur located to the town at some point. He was educated at Harrow and later Brazenose College, Oxford.

[19] Exmouth Museum, *Exmothiensis*, vol. 111, no. 2, summer 1925.
[20] *Western Times*, 6 May 1921; *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 4 May 1921



C. E. THORNYCROFT, Esq.,
FIRST CHAIRMAN OF THE GOVERNORS, 1921—1927.

Figure 3: Mr C.E. Thorneycroft, chair of governors, the frontispiece of the school magazine, *Exmothiensis*, for the spring issue, 1927. It formed part of a tribute following his death[21]

Exmouth Secondary School Early Progress

Additional staff were appointed to the school in September 1921; Mr Heath taught English literature, and like a number of teachers his degree was interrupted by the First World War. He served at the school until his retirement. Miss Dorothy Morgan also joined the school at this time. She is associated with the teaching of science and is particularly remembered for the teaching of botany. On the retirement of Miss Fleming in 1945, she became senior mistress.[22]

[21] DHC Local Studies, sPER/ASL *Exmothiensis*, magazine of Exmouth Grammar School.
[22] Old Exmothians 1955–1962 <www.oldexmothians.co.uk> [accessed 19 April 2024].

The developments at the school were reported on regularly by the local newspapers. In January 1922 there appeared to be a problem as to where pupils could eat dinner. It was proposed that a room over the laboratory should be used. This work would involve new windows and an external staircase. There would also be the added expense of employing a cook. The estimated expense would be £168.[23] A cooked meal at dinnertime was considered to be important as a number of children attended the school from a wide area. An indication of the distance travelled can be gauged from the contents of a later report by the governors, on the awarding of scholarships to sixteen pupils who had passed the entrance exam. They were listed as follows: 'Exmouth Council School 9, Lympstone 4, Exton, 1, Alphington 1 and Woodbury'. [24] A further insight can be gained from the fact that Miss Fleming had two boarders, Kathleen and Mollie Lane. Beer records, 'They were farmers' daughters and came from Dunkeswell, a village much too remote for them to live in while attending school.' [25]

By 1923, the school was catering for some 253 pupils in what was proving to be a popular and successful school. At a manager's meeting, the headteacher reported on the increase in pupil numbers and the success of the school. The Education Committee decided to allow the appointment of an additional assistant teacher.[26] Therefore, the committee decided to appoint Miss Enid M. Cox of Tonypandy, formerly an assistant teacher at Ashburton Grammar School. Here, the staff had been reduced because of a decrease in numbers attending the school. To support the increasing numbers, the managers also agreed to obtain extra desks from Newton Abbot Secondary School.

A further problem for this successful school revolved around a small number of pupils who left education before the age of 16. The problem was reported in the local newspapers and there was a proposal that a fine should be imposed on the parents of pupils who left Exmouth Secondary School before the age of 16.[27]

By 1924, the number of pupils at the school numbered 256 with the numbers for the next term anticipated to be 282.[28] This was in buildings recognised to accommodate 238 pupils. Some fifteen pupils from Budleigh and East Budleigh, eligible to go to the King's School at Ottery St. Mary, were attending the school because the train service was not convenient. A special subcommittee was set up to address the ongoing problems. The following recommendations were made:

- An additional master be appointed.
- The present hut be divided into three classrooms.
- Steps be taken for the erection of a building 60 × 30 feet, which might be used as an assembly hall and gymnasium, as well as classes in certain subjects such as singing.

[23] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 6 January 1922.
[24] *Western Times*, 29 June 1923.
[25] Patricia Beer, p. 211.
[26] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 28 September 1923.
[27] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 5 October 1923.
[28] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 25 July 1924.

Mr Walker joined the staff in September 1924 and taught science and mathematics, eventually becoming senior chemistry master and head of science.

Exmothiensis

Exmothiensis was the school magazine of Exmouth Secondary and had its first issue in Christmas 1922.[29] From a complete set of the magazines up to 1930 it is possible to glean further information about the life of the school during the 1920s. During this period, the president of the magazine was the headmaster and the editor was Mr Heath. In the early years, Miss Clarke acted as treasurer. The magazine followed a fairly standard format, beginning with an editorial.

In 1922, 235 pupils were in attendance. The school was divided into four houses; Athenian, Corinthian, Spartan and Trojan. The school had a debating society and a literary and dramatic society. There were also reports from hockey, netball, tennis and badminton matches. *Exmothiensis* featured advertisements for a number of local traders, for example: Thomas Tucker's; Grigg and Son; the school outfitters; James Nicholson, the pharmacist; and Eland's, the bookseller.

In the issue for Easter 1923, the editorial appealed for subscriptions to the magazine at 4s per annum. There were library notes, poems and puzzles. In the issue for summer 1923, an Old Students Association was formed. The first ever prize distribution on 6 June 1923 was reported. The school had 238 pupils and nine members of staff, using nine classrooms.

By Christmas 1923, issue number 4, the editorial committee had expanded to include more pupil involvement. The continued growth of the school was noted in 1924 when it had 257 pupils and was 'one of the largest in the county'.[30] It had ten forms. Changes in staff were also recorded. It appeared that Mr Curtis had left the school due to domestic circumstances and was replaced by Mr Bampfylde. He was at the school for 26 years until his retirement in 1950. Events in the town were also commented on; for example, when Withycombe Mill Stream flooded, the water reached almost to the school.

By 1925, Devon Education Committee had sanctioned that £2,313 be spent on a gymnasium and hall for Exmouth Secondary School.[31] The school magazine reported in the summer of 1925 on its progress, including the fact that the annual prize giving usually took place in the open.[32]

Changes in staff were again reported. In the Christmas issue for 1925 the treasurer of the magazine, Miss Clarke, had left to take up new duties in Southhampton and would be replaced by Miss Hoadly. In spring 1926, the editorial reported on the opening of the new gymnasium. In addition, the school was losing Miss Darroll, the games mistress on her

[29] Exmouth Museum, *Exmothiensis*, vol. 1, Christmas 1922.
[30] *Exmothiensis*, vol. II, summer 1924.
[31] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 4 September 1925.
[32] *Exmothiensis*, vol. III, no. 2, summer 1925.

marriage to Mr Vine. It was the usual practice at the time for female members of staff to resign their position on marriage.

Prizegiving that year took place in the new gymnasium. The extra accommodation made it possible to host extra events. Later in the year, the first ever school concert was held in the gymnasium. This was reported in the Christmas issue. It was well attended and raised the sum of £34 13s 0d. Cheques were sent to Exmouth Cottage Hospital and Withycombe Entertainment Committee.

Staff achievements were often noted. In 1927, the headmaster was appointed president of the Incorporated Society of Headmasters for Devon and Cornwall. Congratulations were also offered to Mr Civil on his election as vice president of the Devon branch of the Assistant Masters. It was also noted that Miss Bartlett, who taught physical training and games, had played hockey for the West of England.

Somewhat later, there was considerable pupil interest when Mr Walker and Miss Rafter became engaged, including how many children they might have! On their marriage, 'The school gave them a mahogany standard lamp; the staff gave them a Devon pewter tea-service and a cut glass bowl.'[33] As was policy at the time, Miss Rafter would have had to resign on her marriage in 1931.

Figure 4 has been provided by a member of the old Exmothians, Pat Edwards, who was the daughter of the couple later to become Mr and Mrs Walker. The photograph has been inserted at this point in the text in order to show members of staff in the early years of the school.

[33] Patricia Beer, p. 224.

Figure 4: Summer 1923
Miss Daroll,?, Mr Visick,?, Mr Heath,?, Miss Rafter*
Miss Morgan, Mr Civil, Mr D'Arcy Hughes (head), Miss Fleming, Mr Earp
*Married Mr Walker, 1931 – Pat's mother[34]

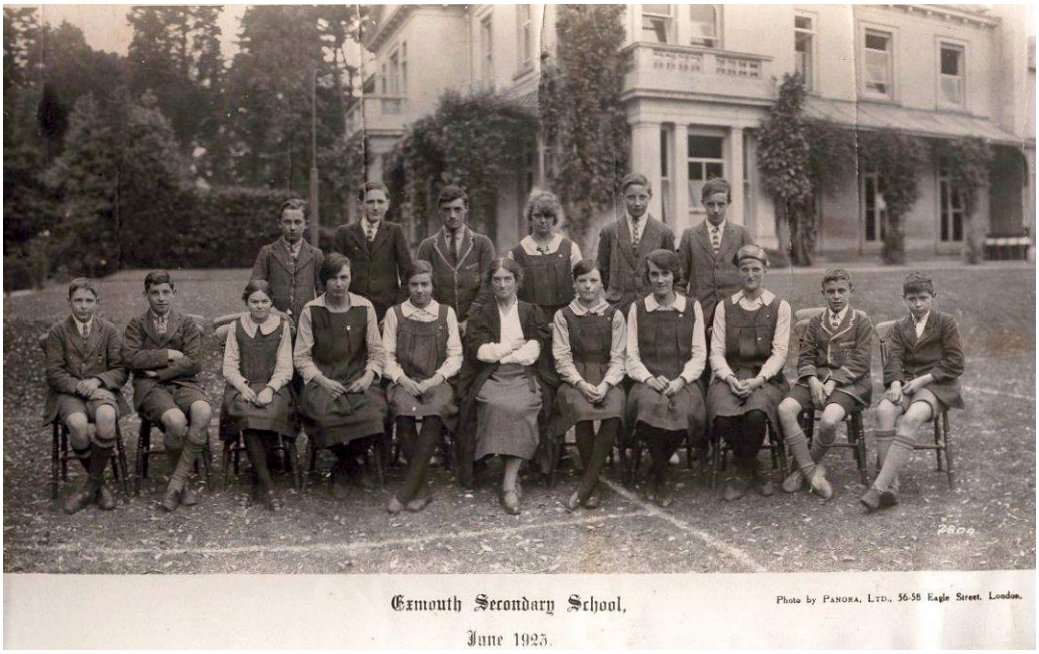


Figure 5: The Latin teacher, Miss Tingle, in the centre, alongside some pupils. At the school she was known as Miss Ruth Tingle, but when formally appointed was Miss Mary Tingle. The main school building developed from The Grange can be seen in the background

School Renamed Exmouth Grammar School

At the Annual Prize Day, the chairman reported on the change of name to Exmouth Grammar School from Exmouth Secondary School.[35] This would no doubt raise the status of the school. The fact was commented on in the school magazine: 'The school would regard itself as affiliated with the old grammar schools in the county, for example, Ashburton, Totnes and Crediton.'[36]

The preparatory department had opened in September 1928, under the guidance of Mrs Heath, the wife of the English teacher, Mr Heath. It would be unusual at the time for a married woman to be employed in the role. By the summer of 1929 it was full with a waiting list for the next term. Its popularity meant that the school was compelled to get an assistant; Miss Godfrey had been appointed. At this time, there were 280 pupils on the roll, including the preparatory department. The examination successes indicated that the results compared favourably with those in the county and also the country as a whole. Pupils were entered for

[34] Old Exmothians 1955–1962 <www.oldexmothians.co.uk> [accessed 19 April 2024].
[35] *Exmouth Journal,* 13 July 1929.
[36] Exmothiensis, vol. VII, no. 3, summer 1929; *Devon and Exeter Gazette*.

external examinations including the Cambridge Matriculation Examination and the Cambridge Senior Examination.

In order to find out more about the curriculum and other information, use has been made of an undated prospectus for Exmouth Grammar School, available in Exmouth Museum. This document probably dates from the 1930s and includes some details about the school not available elsewhere.

Tuition fees have risen to £3 15s per term, opposed to £2 10s in 1922. At this time, the school had eleven members of staff and three visiting staff to teach physical training and games, art and domestic subjects. The names of the staff are listed, together with all their academic qualifications. The school was open to boys and girls aged 10 to 18. The attractiveness of the physical location of the school was also described. It was situated in its own grounds, together with ample playing fields, lawns and gardens. In the dining room, a hot dinner was served daily for a small charge.

Subjects taught included religious knowledge, English language and literature, history, geography, mathematics, French, Latin, science (botany, chemistry and physics), art, physical training, domestic subjects, handicraft and singing. The school colours were dark blue and grey. All boys had to wear a school cap, or in summer a straw hat with the school badge or ribbon. No mention is made of the school blazer, however in the 1925 school photograph it is clear that the boys wore blazers as part of the uniform. All girls had to wear a grey blouse and dark blue gym tunic, with knickers to match. They also wore a school hat complete with headband. In terms of other necessary expenses, stationery was provided but textbooks and other items had to be provided by the pupils themselves.

Conclusion

The above piece has provided an analysis of the opening, growth and development of a large private house known as The Grange into a selective secondary school. Details of this extensive property can be found in a ‘for sale’ advertisement dating from the late nineteenth century.[37] This reconstructed building in the twentieth century would eventually become Exmouth Grammar School. One can find whole school photographs on the old Exmothians website, maintained by Robin Smith for the later 1920s.[38] However, they have not been included in the text because of poor resolution.

From its opening in May 1921, the growth and success of the school has been traced and commented on. A number of the staff appointed spent almost their entire careers in this one establishment, including the headmaster, Mr. D’Arcy Hughes. Female staff had to resign their positions on marriage, as was the practice across all professions. From a modest intake, the school grew to include a preparatory department and had over 280 pupils in total. The school became very successful and had a reputation for excellence alongside the more established grammar schools in the county.

[37] *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post*, 11 September 1867.

[38] Old Exmothians 1955–1962 <www.oldexmothians.co.uk> [accessed 19 April 2024].

Acknowledgements

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