

# **"Moss's Folly"?**

## **The Early History of Ripon Girls' High School**

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**Ripon Girls' High School (1909 photo)**

On January 22nd 1909 12 girls, ages ranging from 9 to 14, arrived at a new building on Coltsgate Hill, Ripon, to be received by the governors of the school of which they were to be the first pupils. They were presented by Alderman W.T. Moss, the Chairman of the Governors, with copies of John Ruskin's "Sesame and Lilies" as a memento of the occasion. It was fitting that Alderman Moss should preside over the ceremony as he had led the campaign for such a school to be built, against the opposition of large numbers of local people, who resented what they deemed an unnecessary burden on the rates, as secondary education for girls was regarded by them as unnecessary. For some time after the school was opened it was known by some as "Moss's Folly".

So why had it happened just at that time? It was not until the Education Act of 1902 that public funds could legally be used to provide secondary education at all. Ripon had, of course, its ancient Grammar School for boys established in Tudor times and endowed from the properties of the chantries dissolved by Henry VIII. In 1902 it had thus existed for nearly 350 years, but there were only small private schools for girls beyond the elementary school age.

However in 1906 the West Riding County Council (WRCC), which covered Ripon at that time, included a secondary school for girls in Ripon in a list of proposed new schools in its area, and Ripon City Corporation felt obliged to agree to support such a school, the cost of which was estimated to be £7,500, about half of which it was said would be borne by the WRCC and the rest by local sources.

To secure plans for the building a competition was advertised in 1907 with a prize of £25 for the winner and £ 15 for the runner-up. Five sets of plans were received later that year and the winners of the competition were Messrs Conlon and Chorley of Leeds. The school was to accommodate 80 pupils and also evening technical classes which were to be transferred from the Mechanics Institute. Early in 1908 Messrs William Airey of Leeds were appointed building contractors with Mr. A.E. Huggan of Scarborough as Clerk of Works.

The new building was to have walls of brick from Middleton and local brickworks and a roof of dark Westmoreland slate. Heating was to be by hot water low pressure apparatus. The building was to consist of a basement and two storeys. The basement was to contain a manual instruction room, boiler room and bicycle room. The other storeys were of course to include the classrooms and staff rooms. There were to be five ordinary classrooms sufficient for 20 or 25 girls with special provision for art, cookery and laundry and a laboratory. The main hall was to be fitted out as a gymnasium and there was to be a dining room for 24 girls and of course a cloakroom and toilets with an outside lavatory for the boys who came to the technical classes.

Tennis courts and a hockey pitch were to be provided and there was to be a separate caretaker's house.

On March 2nd 1908 Alderman Moss cut the first sod on what was described in the local paper as "a bright sunny but cold morning with a sprinkling of snow". On March 30th he laid the foundation stone in a cavity in which the Mayoress placed a small metal box containing copies of the current week's issue of the "Gazette" and "The Observer", the "Yorkshire Post" of Saturday, coins of the realm and photographs of the Mayor and Mayoress. Alderman Moss was presented with an ornamental mallet. On October 13th of the same year a party was held at the Unicorn Hotel to celebrate the roofing of the school, which was eventually opened three months later.



The school was first known as Ripon Girls' Secondary School, but the name was soon changed to Ripon Girls' High School as the word 'secondary' was thought by some to be derogatory. The school badge, chosen a little later, was to show the Yorkshire rose and the Ripon horn with the words "Veritas Summum Decus" ("Truth is the highest virtue").

Although the building was to be put up and maintained at public expense it was the understanding from the start that parents would pay fees for their daughters to attend this school. In 1908 it was suggested that these were likely to be about £6 (actually it was to be £6 15s when the school opened), but about £9 for pupils living outside the rated area. However clever girls might be able to win a place in various ways. First to be arranged were scholarships under an approved adaptation of the Underwood Charity which had provided funds for teaching poor children to read and write since the 17th century. Three such exhibitions were publicised in 1908 and at the same time three for the Grammar School. The County Council also agreed to provide scholarships for pupils from the local elementary schools. These were later known as County Minor Scholarships and soon the Governors elected three girls as Governors' free scholars. Apart from the fees parents would also be expected to provide books and what is described as "other equipment".



**Ripon Girls' High School photos  
from the 1909 Prospectus**

Arrangements for suitable staff for the school had begun in 1908 with an advertisement in the *"Journal of Education"* for a headmistress-salary £250 a year. Over 100 applications were received. Of these, eight were invited to come for interview but two more were subsequently added from late applicants, one of these two being the successful candidate. She was Miss Minnie Davie who for two years had been headmistress of Truro County School for Girls. She had been the first head of that school and no doubt that experience helped to get her the appointment in Ripon.

Shortly afterwards Miss M.S. Copland and Miss E. Prothero were appointed assistant mistresses at an annual salary of £110. These two with Miss Davie were the only full time teaching staff. Miss Davie was to teach mathematics and some English; Miss Copland taught French, history, literature, and scripture. Miss Prothero taught elementary science, botany, geography, and some English. Miss Copland and Miss Prothero were also to share the teaching of needlework, games and drill, such an agglomeration of subjects being made necessary by the very small numbers of pupils expected in the first few years. Art and class singing were to be taught by two part time visiting staff. These were Miss Barker who came from Otley to teach art, and Miss M. Pearce, a Ripon music teacher, who provided class singing lessons. For a short time Swedish Drill was taught by Herr Junker who was a Dane employed as Instructor for the West Riding and based at Wakefield. In October 1909 cookery classes started under Miss Clapham. The first school caretaker was Mr. H.R. Benson formerly of Brewster Terrace.

The timetable for this first year consisted of four morning lessons in the more academic subjects with ten minutes drill and 15 minutes break in the middle. After a dinner break from 12.30 to 2.15pm the afternoon subjects, which took place in three lessons of varying length, were usually less academic-scripture, needlework, singing, cookery, drawing and games.

By the end of the opening year there were only 33 pupils, but these small numbers did not stop the school having its first Speech Day in December, 1909, although this did not include the usual presenting of prizes, to which the headmistress was opposed. She also apparently disapproved of examinations. Her attitude led to some disagreement with the Mayor and others although on this occasion the headmistress's view prevailed. Miss Davie's report was followed by an address by the Bishop of Ripon and then by a programme of music and recitation followed by a masque. The following year there were prizes presented by the Bishop's wife.

The first account so far found of a Sports Day was that in 1912, which was said to have taken place on the tennis lawn at the back of the school. Beside the more usual obstacle, potato and slow bicycle races there was also one called the 'cloakroom' race. Prizes included books, brooches and an ink pot!

One of the 1909 pupils when interviewed by one of the Sixth formers of 1962 had this to say about the school uniform in her time at the school. "Our parents had to provide us with a school hat - a hard straw boater, indoor slippers with low heels, white gym shoes and a drill costume consisting of a navy serge tunic, knickers reaching to the knees, long black stockings and a red blouse of cashmere or delaine. How hot they were! The second year we had white blouses for summer. The prescribed hair style was pig-tails one or two." The same pupil when asked about lunches said they could bring their own but excellent school lunches were provided at a cost of seven pence.

Another former pupil (1913-18) said that the red blouses were eventually changed to something lighter because the red came out in the wash. She also refers to wearing porkpie navy blue caps

with badges in the winter and that they did not have uniform outdoor coats. "In fact" she says "one girl from Littlethorpe used to come in a fur coat"

But by the time this latter pupil entered the school there had been a number of other developments. In April 1910, an advertisement for the new term refers to the existence of a boarding house recognized by the Governors (not the one to be opened later where the guest house called Box Tree Cottages now is). Then in 1912 the decision was reached to open a separate preparatory department for children under 10 and Miss E.G. Hawkins was appointed Preparatory Mistress.

There had also been considerable changes in the teaching staff. Miss Prothero resigned in 1910 and was succeeded by Miss M.E. Gray who taught mainly science subjects, and she in turn was replaced by Miss F.G. Wright in 1912. In that year Miss Copland left to be married to a member of the Cathedral clergy. She was replaced by Miss M.I. Barnes. In 1910 Miss Smith replaced Miss Clapham for cookery. In 1913, when the art teacher from Otley found the strain of the journey too much for her and resigned, she was replaced by Miss E. Babington who was to prove the longest serving member of staff ever. She only retired in 1954.

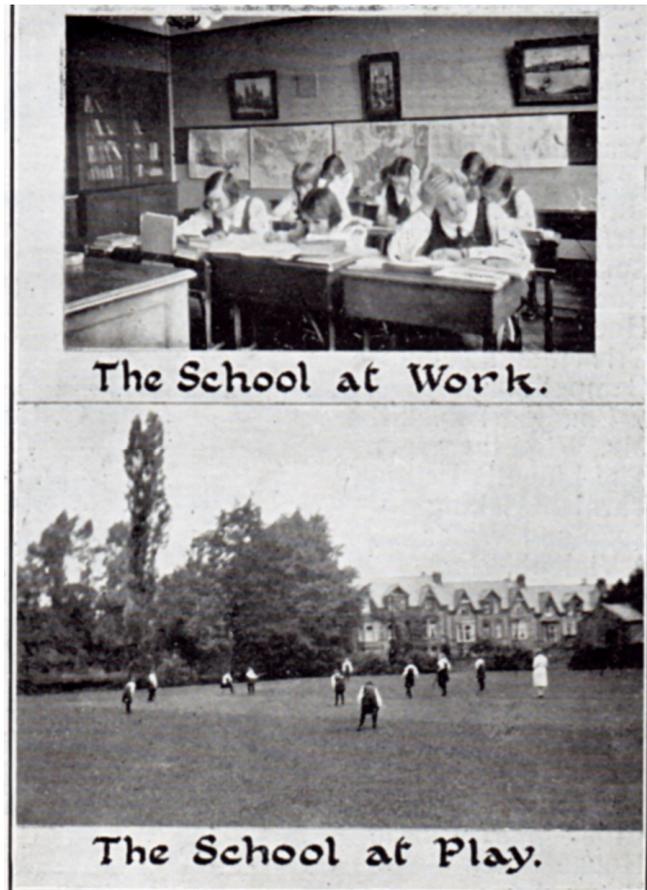
But the most important early change of all had taken place in 1911 when Miss Davie, the headmistress, resigned, having been offered the headship of a bigger school in Bournemouth. Advertisements for the Ripon post led to 94 applications of which seven were selected for interview. The result was the appointment of Miss A.R. (Annie Romola) Piggott, a Newnham graduate whose degree was in modern languages, thus necessitating the appointment of a mathematics teacher, Miss Wilmott. Miss Piggott was half Italian and had had part of her education in Italy, and soon after her appointment in Ripon gave three lectures on "The Making of Modern Italy". Before her appointment in Ripon she had been doing coaching and secretarial work in Cambridge, and no evidence has been found of her teaching in a school before coming to the headship of Ripon Girls' High School. One of her pupils later wrote that she had "a charming personality" and was "loved by us all". Her untimely death in 1915 "was a great sorrow to everyone". One of her school houses was subsequently named Romola after her.

Miss Piggott's early death led to the appointment in 1916 of the third headmistress in seven years. This was Miss M.W. Johnson, and this time the Governors were luckier. Miss Johnson was to remain a much respected headmistress for 33 years and so provided the school its much needed stability. Under her guidance the number of pupils grew gradually from 77 to 253 in 1947, at around which number it settled, providing sound secondary education for girls until its amalgamation with the Grammar School in 1962.

*The school had long since ceased to be regarded as Moss's "Folly".*



**Ripon Girls' High School (photo 1923)**



**Ripon Girls' High School  
(photos 1931)**



**Miss MW Johnson**  
Head Mistress from 1916 - 1948  
(photo 1948)



**Miss MW Johnson**  
(80<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1966)

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***Miss Jean Denton 1923 - 2014***

This brief early history is based substantially on the article written by Jean Denton in 2005 for *The Ripon Historian*, the magazine published by the Ripon Historical Society.



Jean's parents were both born in Wakefield, John William Denton (aged 25) married Ethel Oldridge (aged 23) on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1907 at St Helen's Parish Church, Sandal Magna, Wakefield.

John was a local government officer for all his working life with the WRCC, based at County Hall Wakefield. During WW1, he served in the Royal Garrison Artillery, he kept a diary throughout the war which Jean deposited in the archives of the Imperial War Museum. John was the organist at his local Methodist Chapel for over 40 years and he died aged 89, his wife Ethel died in 1960 aged 77.

Jean's Sibling Dorothy was born on 1910 and was a primary school Headmistress in Bradford where she lived with her husband Kurt Graupher until her death in 2007.

Jean was born in 1923 and attended St James Primary School and then Thornes House School (later Thornes House Grammar School) from 1934 to 1940 where she was Head Girl. Jean then went on to read History and English at London University.

After Graduating, Jean first taught at a school in Weston- Super-Mare, then in Rotherham before moving to Ripon in 1953 to teach at the Ripon Girls High School. Following the amalgamation with the Grammar School, Jean continued to teach history until her retirement from RGS in 1982.

*History provided by Kenneth Wilson-Oldridge - Jean's cousin*

**Information sources for Jean's article were:-**

Ripon Gazette 1905-15  
RGHS school magazines of 1959 and 1962  
RGHS & RGS School Archives

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