

## A History of Kingston Grammar School



Queen Elizabeth's Charter, reproduced by kind permission of the Kingston Museum and Heritage Service

On 1st March 1561 Queen Elizabeth I signed a Charter which established the "free grammar school of Queen Elizabeth, for the education training and instruction of boys and youths in grammar". There is written evidence of a public school in Kingston at least two hundred years earlier, and some historians have suggested that the Charter was in effect putting the royal stamp on a school that had been operating off and on since the Middle Ages.

In the early days emphasis lay on the teaching of Latin grammar, limited reading of English, and on religious instruction. The Elizabethan schoolboy worked longer days and had shorter holidays than his modern counterpart, and discipline was strict. There would have been a handful of pupils, certainly never more than 40 or 50, who comprised both free scholars and fee-paying pupils, including a few boarders. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the importance of reading and writing English was acknowledged and other subjects made compulsory: arithmetic and accounting, geography and map drawing, as well as Greek. However the School's first ever inspection, in 1865, was critical of both the learning and the lack of discipline; it was scathing about the premises. This led to some fundamental changes in the way the School was run, a more progressive curriculum, and the building of a new school across the road. A sixth form was started, the range of sports greatly expanded, and pupil numbers rose.

This proved a short-lived revival, however, as competition from other schools intensified, pupil numbers fell and the School's financial situation worsened. The Board of Education Inspection in June 1903 went so far as to raise "the very serious question of the future of the School..." and pronounced it to be well below the standard expected of a Grammar School. It was clear that something radical needed to be done if the School was to continue. The Governors' plan involved appointing a new Head, raising extra resources via a public appeal, and changing the name of the School. In 1904 Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School became Kingston Grammar School, with a new identity for a new era.

Despite this progress was slow, and major change was not to begin until the appointment in 1913 of Headmaster C A Howse. Over the next twenty years numbers rose dramatically, the School's financial position was consolidated, and by the 1930s more boys were going on to university and the professions than ever before. The establishment of the house system, the expansion of the curriculum to embrace the arts, drama and music, the introduction of overseas school visits in the 1920s, all contributed to the transformation of the school. In 1957 the school was admitted to the Headmasters' Conference and its academic place amongst the country's public schools was assured.

Since 1561 much else has changed. Although the numbers of boarders at the School had always been small, none was taken after 1914. From its foundation the School was closely linked to local government in Kingston; for much of its history until 1978, when it assumed independent status, it came under direct administrative control of the local authority. In that same year the School began to accept girls as well as boys.

The history of the School has always been inextricably linked with that of the Chapel of St Mary Magdalene, founded in 1309 by Edward Lovekyn, and now more commonly known as the Lovekyn Chapel. The School was housed in the Chapel from its foundation until 1878, when it moved to purpose built premises on the other side of the London Road, where it remains to this day. For many years after the move the Chapel continued to be used – as a gymnasium, a preparatory form room, and later as a woodwork centre. It was last used for teaching in 1992. While its central location in the ancient market town of Kingston gave the School an enormous advantage, the growth of sport in the curriculum in the late 19th century brought about a pressing need for more extensive playing fields. In 1926 the School purchased land in Dinton Road just over a mile away; in 1965 the sports grounds moved to Ditton Fields, opposite Hampton Court Palace. In the 1960s plans were drawn up to build a large new school nearby, but a change of government meant that this had to be abandoned in favour of an ongoing programme of improvement and extension at the London Road site. In November 2005 the Queen Elizabeth II building was opened by Her Majesty the Queen.

Kingston Grammar School has produced many distinguished alumni. Old Kingstonians have excelled in the arts and literature, in law and in the military, and as sportsmen and women. The Old Kingstonian Society was founded in 1909 and the Old Kingstonian Association continues to provide links between former pupils and the School.