

## Wintersloe School



Wintersloe is a building on Wake Green Road next to Sorrento Court. It was erected in 1881 and in 1896<sup>1</sup> it became a private school. At that time elementary education was free but only compulsory until the age of ten or until a certain standard was reached, whichever was the later. Despite the law, many poor children still did not go to school, their parents preferring the financial advantage of sending their children to work in mines, factories or on the land where there was a labour shortage because of the number of men and youths fighting in the Boer War.

Education beyond ten was available through a variety of secondary schools which paralleled existing social class culture. At the top were the great public schools such as Eton and Harrow. These educated the sons of the English upper and upper-middle classes, plus those of officers and senior administrators of the British Empire, for entrance to Oxford and Cambridge and public service. Below the top public schools were endowed grammar schools (maintained wholly or partly by a permanent charitable endowment); private schools (owned by the master or mistress who conducted them); proprietary schools (owned by individual companies or corporations but not maintained by a permanent charitable endowment nor the property of the school master or mistress) and finally higher grade 'board schools' catering for children over thirteen years of age. Board Schools were state run and aimed to provide secondary education for all. They, therefore, offered some free places for gifted children from poor families.

All these secondary schools were, in turn, graded according to their educational standards and aims. First-grade schools provided a 'liberal education' plus Latin and Greek up to 18 or 19 years of age. They aimed to prepare upper and upper-middle class boys for university and the older professions. Second-grade secondary schools had a leaving age of 16 or 17. They taught two modern languages plus Latin in a broad curriculum to prepare middle class boys for the army, the newer professions and departments of the Civil Service. Finally, there were third-grade secondary schools with a leaving age of 14 or 15 which taught a basic education plus the elements of French and Latin to lower middle class boys, who would be expected to become small tenant farmers, small tradesmen or superior artisans.<sup>2</sup>

Wintersloe appears to have been a private school working to 'first grade' standards. Its best known Headteacher was Howard Fisher (b.1869). Howard's first name was actually Sampson but he preferred to use his middle name. His father, Thomas Fisher (b.1830) was an iron founder engineer. In 1881 two of his older brothers had also become engineers but, interestingly, his elder brother, Frank, was at university, suggesting a home where the father owned rather than worked for a foundry business.

At some time in the next ten years, Howard may have attended university, though his father died during that period which would have reduced the family fortunes. Certainly, by 1891 when he was 22, Howard was working as a private teacher of languages and mathematics and living with his mother at 84 Summerfield Crescent, Kings Norton. There was also a paying lodger who was an organist and music teacher. By 1901, he had married and had three daughters. He was still teaching but living at 19 Clarence Road, Kings Norton – an affluent area at that time where his neighbours either owned or managed businesses.

Howard then became Wintersloe's Headteacher. His wife, Amy, had added two sons to their offspring and, by 1911, the whole family had taken up residence in the school. Also living in the household were two boarders and a young assistant teacher, Leonard Valentine. Howard adopted his family motto for the Wintersloe - '*Virtutem Extendere Factis*', meaning '*To spread abroad manly strength by deeds*'.<sup>3</sup> He can be seen seated, aged 51, in the centre of the 1920 school photograph with a handkerchief stylishly displayed in his left breast pocket.



You will see that the school roll was quite small being between fifty and sixty pupils. All wore a uniform of cap with badge, tie, blazer and leather ankle boots. Large, detachable 'Eton' shirt collars, imitating the uniform of the public school, were worn over the lapels. On colder days a waistcoat would be worn under the jacket for extra warmth since modern day jumpers and sweaters were little seen. Younger boys wore knee length trousers with long socks. Traditionally, at around the age of fourteen, schools celebrated the arrival of 'manhood' with a change to a more adult style of dress including long trousers.

Howard was obviously a gifted and inspiring teacher who was much loved by his pupils. Old magazines<sup>3</sup> indicate a very caring and encouraging atmosphere in which gaining a place at Technical College was given the same merit as passing the entrance exams for Oxford. Although academic standards were important there were also many extra-curricular activities such as sport. This was included in the curriculum of most secondary schools as a means of teaching pupils team spirit, how to handle failure and to stand up for themselves in both a moral and physical sense. There were also regular educational trips to the theatre or a place of interest. Clubs also offered a range of hobbies from chess to country walks.

At times when the walking club went to Wales, the Headteacher may well have accompanied them for, although born in the Midlands, Howard Fisher treasured his family's Welsh origins. He called his second daughter Bronwen (after the daughter of *Llyr*, the god of the sea) and his second son Idwal ('lord of the wall' or 'protecting leader'). Interestingly, unlike his other children who were born in Moseley, Idwal was born in Caernarvon (now Caernarfon) hinting that there were close relatives there.

Like many schools of that era, the staff and pupils were very patriotic. In 1915, at the start of the First World War, the school magazine was claiming that '*Wintersloe Boys are made of the right stuff and can be relied on to do their duty to the Empire*'.<sup>4</sup> As proof, a regular feature in each magazine was a list of alumni who had enlisted and the fate of those in action. The magazine was also claiming, somewhat

dubiously, that war might be a good thing to ‘*bring out the qualities in our men which would never have had the chance to develop in times of peace and luxury...The finest can only be achieved through suffering, adversity and strenuous effort... we can be sure that as many men will be made as marred*’.<sup>5</sup>

War brought many changes to school life. The Walking Club activities ceased because of the abolition of half-day tickets on public transport and the rise in rail fares. The annual bonfire, athletics, excursions, gym displays and cricket were also cancelled. The main reason was insufficient spare time for the boys were now developing ‘victory gardens’. These became most popular in WW2 when the whole country was urged to ‘dig for victory’.<sup>6</sup> However, the origins of the campaign lay in WW1 when gardens and areas of waste land were turned over to the production of vegetables, fruit and herbs. The activity not only acted as an insurance against possible food shortages, it helped people feel they were contributing to the war effort.

Mr. Heath of ‘Leasowes’ gave 1000 square yards of his land on Wake Green Road to the school. Leasowes was a 57 hectare (141 acre) ferme ornée - a country estate laid out partly as a park and partly for farming- close to the school. It was designed by the poet William Shenstone between 1743 and 1763 and remains of one of the most important and influential landscapes of the 18th century. Here, in wartime, thirty-seven boys from Wintersloe removed turf and double dug trenches ready for growing potatoes. A further 1000 square yards on Grove Avenue had been purchased by the Council and provided twenty-seven Wintersloe boys with allotments. These gardening activities earned senior boys two shillings and juniors one shilling from Mr Heath’s coffers.<sup>7</sup>

After the war Wintersloe magazine began to show concern at the changing attitudes of pupils and parents. In 1921 it reiterated that the school was trying to ‘*inculcate principles of truth, honour, obedience, industry: to build character and to make men instead of prigs*’. However, it felt that many parents were failing to discipline their children adequately and even encouraging a poor attitude to school and work by doing their homework for them, allowing whole days off for routine check-ups at the dentist and helping them to avoid games and punishments. Modern attitudes of making everything easier, it claimed, were a ‘*growing menace to the energy, patience, perseverance and self-reliance of our boys (and) must be checked*’.<sup>8</sup>

By 1925 Wintersloe’s concern continued. ‘*Boys that lack the proper school spirit are still in the minority – but increasing... The England of twenty years hence will be what boys who are now at school make it...If we could be sure that they are going to develop into men of character, deep-rooted in honour, love of work and unselfishness, it would matter very little what poisonous suggestions were made to them later on by Bolsheviks or Pro-Germans*’.<sup>9</sup> Home influences were again blamed, perhaps with some justification. In 180 school days, 225 ‘excuse notes’ had been received to exclude some boy from ‘*things that are vital to his character – doing..., sticking to his job ..., striving to be the top of his class... some essential activity*’.<sup>10</sup>

By 1927 things got worse. Now both teachers and pupils came under fire, ‘*The great thing seems to be to do the minimum ...character is lacking...All these modern dodges in so-called Education not only do not form character; they actually encourage lack of character*’. The solution given was to, ‘*Begin by instilling principle...work is the chief object of life and that their aim must be to do...the maximum*’. Character development was also vital. ‘*At Wintersloe boys of character are fewer, but some were on the right lines... (though the) detention list is long*’.<sup>11</sup>

The ‘decline of youth’ theme continued as the main magazine topic. After more complaints about the boys in 1929, the school lamented that, ‘*We offer every opportunity for action in school and out; our chief aim is to instill a desire to do things; to strive to accomplish something, whether it be learning a*

*page of history, producing a photograph, or walking a mile to school every day; so long as they do it, as we say, off their own bat...Surely the joy of achievement is the greatest joy in life... (but) the desire and delight to do things themselves is absent'.<sup>12</sup>*

With relief, Wintersloe confirmed in 1931 that their efforts were now having effect: '*We think the spirit, tone and discipline of the school is now on the upward move*'.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, despite the discipline and detentions, most boys loved the school and saw it as the happiest days of their life. Grateful parents gave donations and items such as new rugby posts or a magic lantern, in gratitude for what it had done for their boys.<sup>14</sup> Howard Fisher, in particular, was much loved by his pupils and kept close contact with them. An Old Boys Club formed in 1925 and recruited nearly fifty members. However, it terminated in 1931 **after Howard's death and the closure of the school?** In December, 1932, they erected a Lychgate at St. Mary's Church, Moseley, in his memory. The lintel is carved with the Fisher family and school motto.

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## References

1. Wintersloe regularly produced a magazine. The first copy owned by Moseley History Society was produced in 1911 and is edition XLIX (49). If 2 magazines were issued each year, which is mostly the case, that would place its founding date as 1886,
2. Information from *The National Archives* [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) and Gillard D (2011) *Education in England: a brief history* [www.educationengland.org.uk/history](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history).
3. Information and photographs provided by Moseley History Society.
4. Wintersloe Magazine, March 1915, p.3
5. Ibid, p.7.
6. Wintersloe Magazine, July 1917, p.2.
7. Ibid, 6-7.
8. Wintersloe Magazine, Jan 1921, pp.3-4.
9. Wintersloe Magazine, Feb 1925, p.3.
10. Ibid.
11. Wintersloe Magazine, Jan 1927, p.3.
12. Wintersloe Magazine, Feb 1929, p.3.
13. Wintersloe Magazine, March 1931, p.4.
14. Many references in Wintersloe Magazines, e.g. April 1916, pp.11-12.