

# The History of KGS

Adapted from an article by Alexa Clark and Eileen Sclater in the *Kirkwallian* magazine, 1974

The history of a school in Kirkwall goes back to about 1200 AD, when Bishop Bjarni founded a Cathedral school where the clergy probably taught singing and Latin. The school is mentioned in the Royal Charter of 1486.

In 1764, £60 sterling was donated for repairing and rebuilding two public schools. After workmen had inspected the school they reported that it would require a very large sum for repairing it. Magistrates and Council therefore came to a resolution of building two new schools at the north side of St. Magnus Cathedral.

When, in 1824, the Town Council of Kirkwall appointed Mr. James Craig master of the Grammar School, they informed him that should the number of scholars exceed sixty, an assistant would be taken on.

In 1872, the school was described as being "completely out of repair, the floor being broken up in more than one place. Windows in part, without glass, walls admitting damp." In the same year the Education Act led to the amalgamation of the Grammar School, Subscription School and Infant School under the name of Burgh School of Kirkwall (the name Grammar School was restored in the early part of the 20th Century).



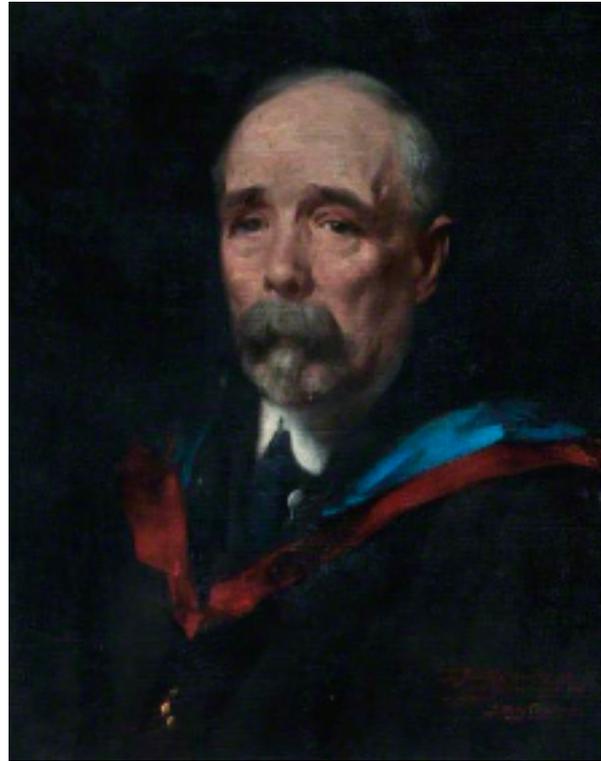
KGS in 1874

Within the next few years a new school was built on the site of these three schools, with a new feature, the Tower, to provide a

Board room and to house the school bell. The architect of this school was T. S. Peace.

The School Board were very pleased with their work and in 1879, the year when John McEwen was appointed headmaster, they asserted that they had "Second to none on this side of Aberdeen, a school airy and well ventilated, containing ample accommodation for all the children, furnished with all necessary appliances, and worthy of the Royal and Ancient Burgh of Kirkwall".

The young headmaster, John McEwen, graduate of Aberdeen University with honours in classics, had no easy task during his early years, for he had to overcome apathy, illwill and active opposition. Truancy was on a scale undreamt of now, but he was a man of tough fibre and by 1890 he had guided the school to one of its most successful decades. By 1890, the school was proving too small. Three large rooms were added, parallel to the existing central block. Up until 1955 this wing was the Infant Department of the Burgh School.



John McEwen, Rector 1879-1914

As early as 1884, the Kirkwall School board thought that pupils were being treated too harshly. Corporal punishment by assistant or pupil teachers was forbidden, and if the Headmaster used corporal punishment, it had to be recorded. But it was no easy matter to keep discipline with large classes. One of the teachers who taught the higher classes, or standards as they were then called, asked for permission to use the tawse (belt)!

The Board then agreed to qualified assistants being taken on. Pupils, selected by examination at the age of 14, served for four years as pupil teachers at a salary rising from £10 to £20 per year. They taught all day with very little supervision and, either before or after lessons, they themselves would receive formal instruction for an hour. The pupil teacher training, though rugged, provided an opening to further education for pupils of ability before bursaries were available, and competition for a place was keen.



KGS in 1904

The following are extracts from writings by the late Henrietta Groundwater, called 'Education in Kirkwall', in which she remembers her school days:

*In the latter part of the 19th Century, Kirkwall Burgh School was the centre of education for the Orkney Islands. The island schools sent their brightest pupils to Kirkwall and the brilliance of the scholars sent to the universities finally turned the limelight on to the headmaster, Mr. John McEwen, and won for him the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature.*

*'Facilities for education were very good as far as the three R's were concerned. The trouble was that children had to leave school and fend for themselves as soon as they reached ten years of age.*

*There was no instruction in drawing, colouring or painting. No science class. No extras, except the three languages. Great emphasis was put upon writing but the mistake was that each class had its own style.*

*Sewing and knitting were taught by the headmistress of the Infant Department and singing was taught from the first Infant class to*

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*the final class.*

*I remember once paying 12/6 for one quarter for school fees to the clerk of the School Board.*

*Free education came into being about the end of the century, followed by free books shortly afterwards.*



*In winter, especially, we infants sang and marched along the galleries up and down the stairs to keep ourselves warm. Action songs were used such as 'This is how we wash our face'.*

*The 'tawse' was the usual punishment for both boys and girls. In Standard 1, the girls rebelled and some of the bolder spirits clubbed together and stole the tawse. There was a great to-do but the tawse was never returned. Although a new one was soon forthcoming, it was never again supposed to be used to punish girls.*

*Play formed a large part of school life outside in the playground, but there was no organised sport for either boys or girls. That did not prevent us from having fun and inventing our own most enjoyable games."*

Dr. Stanley Cursiter, a former KGS pupil, reminisced about his schooldays:

*'In 1904 the school leaving age was fourteen. The older pupils intending to do higher education were taught in two classrooms next to the headmaster's office which was at the base of the tower. There they were prepared for university, often by the headmaster himself. On Friday afternoons the headmaster would take these two classes together by opening the glass partition. He would then ask*

*this class, of about one hundred pupils, general questions. The idea behind this was to prepare the students for the oral examinations they would get at university.*

*As there was no school hostel the island pupils had to stay in lodgings in which there was often not much chance to prepare lessons. The headmaster would then make a boy living in Kirkwall 'adopt' a boy from the country or islands and they would work together. On Friday afternoons one of the two had to know the answer to the questions. If they didn't know the answer both had to go to the foot of the class. In the winter months, however, advantage was often taken of this so that they could be near the huge fire.*

*There were no specialist teachers at this time - one teacher taught all subjects, often with the help of a pupil teacher. The first specialist teacher was a mathematician. He was a very clever man but could not teach or keep discipline. After a lot of trouble he left.*

*The rooms were built so high because of ventilation. With fifty to sixty pupils in a class and not many baths it was necessary to have high rooms. Sometimes the atmosphere was pretty bad.*



*Dr. McEwen, the headmaster, had been known as 'Stumpy' but when he became Dr. it was decided that 'Dr. Stumpy' didn't sound right and it was changed to 'Dr. Stump'. Dr. McEwen got some remarkable results. In one year he had seventeen pupils going on to university. At this time there was about 700 pupils in the school.*

*The main classes began at 9.15 and the Infants at 10.00. The break was from 11 to 11.15. During this interval the pupils could purchase*

*liquorice sticks, sweets and toffee made by the owners of the 'Rocky' shop. Lunch was from 1.00 to 2.00. School did not close until 4.30 or even 4.45. One day Dr. McEwen, who was very strict, walked into a classroom and asked the pupils how many of them were expecting to get the half-term holiday which was soon coming up. Of course, the whole class raised their hands, to which he replied 'Well you're not getting it!'*

*The wooden desks seated six to eight (individual desks did not come into use until after Dr. Cursiter had left school). Slates and slate pencils were used to write with. There were often two subjects going on at the same time Ñ the teacher taking one group at the front of the class and the pupil teacher taking the others at the back. About one half of the teachers were women. Often two classes were called together by opening the partitions.*

*There were no sports at school and therefore no sports day, but to amuse themselves the children played catching games or marbles. In the summer months the children were lined up in the playground at two o'clock and marched into the school.*

*Pupils who lived about three miles out of the town had to walk to school. Pupils were envious of Edwin Muir, who got away half an hour earlier to get home by daylight. Registers were called first thing in the morning.*

*Inspectors came to the school once a year and it was a much dreaded occasion. A story was told of a very pompous little inspector who came to the school. One day, whilst in one of the junior classes, he asked, "What am I?" At first no-one answered, then a little girl put up her hand and said, "A man." He got rather annoyed, expecting the answer of "a school inspector", and asked again. Another little girl put up her hand and said "A little man." At this point he got very annoyed and lectured them. Finally he asked them again, only to get the answer "A funny little man."*

Near the beginning of the century, Kirkwall School Board undertook a further extension. They eventually approved plans for a new block which became known as the "Upper School" and which included a science laboratory, a hall and five classrooms, opened in 1904. Not everybody agreed to the new extension. However, the number of senior pupils increased, new subjects were added to the curriculum and a second storey was built on to the greater part of the old building where woodwork, art and domestic science could be taught. This extension was ready for use by the summer of 1914.

When Dr. Hugh Marwick became headmaster of the school in 1914, his first few years were difficult. Some of his staff volunteered without delay to join the Army. Of six male teachers in the Secondary Department in 1914, only one survived the war.

The first school magazine was published in 1913 at a price of 3d. It was the editors' intention to publish the magazine twice yearly. "If, however, there is sufficient encouragement, it will be published each term." A former pupil writing in the 1913 magazine says "It is hoped that the introduction of the gramophone will not bring down the level of the school to that of a picture house or penny entertainment!"



Dr Hugh Marwick, Rector 1914-1929

The arrival of school caps, in 1925, was hailed with delight by the boys. The girls' hats created less disturbance. In the same year the magazine says, 'We regret to record that two young ladies of the 5th year, who ought to have known better, celebrated the occasion of the school social to such a degree that even their strong desk of

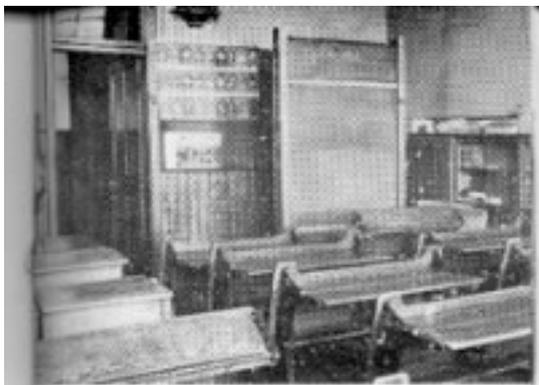
wood and iron in the maths room collapsed under their combined weight!

In 1929, Dr. Marwick was appointed Director of Education and was succeeded by Mr. Alexander Leask. He proved to be an excellent Rector, taking a deep interest in his pupils and the school. He had difficulties to surmount, though; the unhappy times of the thirties and the six years of World War 2. In his later years, the school was extremely overcrowded, 1100 pupils in all and very little extra accommodation. It wasn't all unhappy though, and one happening caused quite a stir. "An unaccountable and distressing form of insanity has broken out among the scholars. The chief symptom is a craving for early morning strolls - no later than six thirty am, sunshine or storm!"



Alexander Leask, Rector 1929-1953

In 1934 the pupils received a lecture from Mr. Barr of the Band of Hope Alliance, on the necessity for temperance in all things and complete abstinence from strong drink. In 1938, for the first time since the Drever Gold Medal was awarded in 1928 to the dux of the school, there was a tie.



In 1942, from the end of November until the end of February, school started at twenty five to ten, presumably due to the dark mornings. There was great excitement three years later when a new dining hall was opened. Now all the pupils got hot food!



Harry McKerron, Rector  
1953-1971

When Mr. Leask retired, Mr. Harry MacKerron was appointed Rector in his place in 1953. From then on, the school never looked back. The new Infant School was opened in 1955, the Primary School in 1962, and a new hostel in 1970.

After the sudden death of Mr. MacKerron in 1971, Mr. William P. L. Thomson took over as Rector.



William Thomson,  
Rector 1971-1990

Phase 1 of the new Grammar School building at Papdale was ready for use after the summer holidays in 1973. All pupils were accommodated in the completed building by 1975.



The school also took on the partial role of Kirkwall College of Further Education. Mr Thomson continued as Rector until his retirement in 1990. He was succeeded by Mr

Eric Sinclair, who was previously Depute Rector of Bridge of Don Academy, Aberdeen. KGS saw another major change in 1994 with the building of an extension to house new offices, a conference room, an Open Learning centre and accommodation for pupils from Glaitness Aurrida school. Mr Sinclair left in 1999 to work in Aberdeenshire.



Eric Sinclair,  
Rector 1990-1999



Iain Ballantine,  
Rector 1999-2011

His place was taken by Mr Iain Ballantine, who had been teaching in KGS since 1991. In 2000 the new Orkney College building was opened and the school reverted to being used purely for secondary education. This meant more changes in accommodation. Mr Ballantine retired in 2010, having overseen the beginning of the process leading to the construction of a new Kirkwall Grammar School, which is due to be opened in 2013.

In February 2011 Mrs Sheila Dick took up the post of Head Teacher.