

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

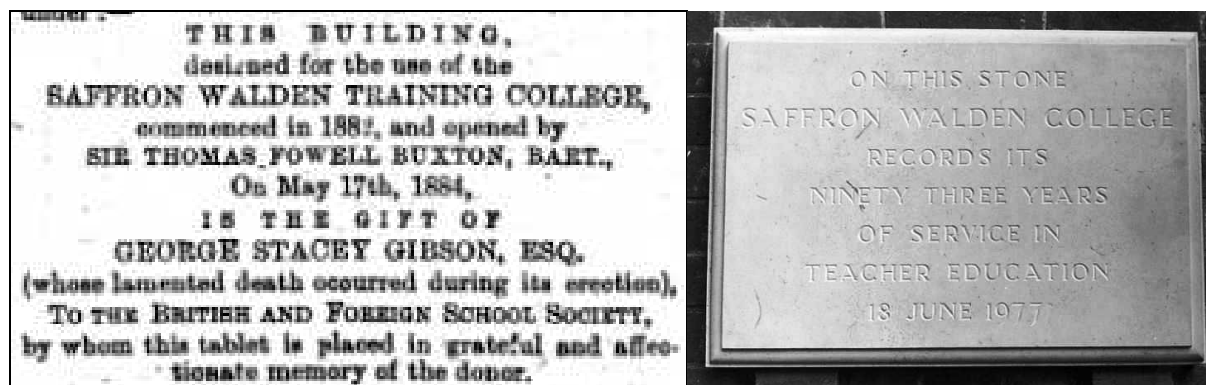
The following article appears by permission and is the copyright of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* and the author. Fair dealing for the purposes of private study or non-commercial educational, archival or research purposes is freely allowed, but under no circumstances are articles or illustrations to be reprinted in any other publication, website or other media without permission. All rights reserved. It has not been possible to include all the original illustrations with the articles, but these can be seen in copies deposited at Saffron Walden Town Library.

Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

Saffron Walden College

©Gillian Collins

Reprinted (with alterations and additions) from: *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 14 Autumn 2007



Saturday 17 June 1977, now more than 30 years ago, was a sad but memorable day for Saffron Walden College of Education. As the plaque on the side wall of the building records, it marked the end of 93 years in teacher education. After much discussion about an alternative use, it began a new life as the Bell College, outside the state sector. Students on its courses from many parts of the world became a frequent sight in Saffron Walden, befriended by many in the town who had previously welcomed the intending teachers. The Bell Educational Trust later decided to terminate its lease from the British & Foreign School Society (BFSS) who owned the property, from 30 August 2007.*

Saffron Walden Training College

During the years 1884-1977 Saffron Walden College for Mistresses had a distinguished history, responding to the need to train an increasing number of women to teach children from five to thirteen on a three-year course. Latterly it had introduced a two-year course for a small number of mature men and women and extended its training to the nursery years. It was early in the field of providing a course related to the multi-ethnic

character of many schools. Unfortunately it no longer met the criteria of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in terms of size and diversification of courses, and the College had to end the purpose for which it was established initially to train infant teachers on Kindergarten lines.

Ends and beginnings

On the morning of 18 June 1977, a most moving Service of Thanksgiving and Valediction was held in St Mary's Church, Saffron Walden, which had close associations with the College from the beginning. A very large congregation of present students and their guests, former students from as early as 1911, present and former members of staff, and members of the College Governing Body, some representing the town, gathered to the ringing of the bells. Although small in number, the College Choirs sang the introit 'Behold now, praise the Lord' and the anthem 'Life Thine Eyes', most beautifully. The sermon was given by Professor John Ferguson, Chairman of the British & Foreign School Society. While understanding the disappointment about the closure of the College, he spoke of the need to be adaptable and to have faith that the Holy Spirit would be at work in the new endeavours. Members of staff and students led prayers and intercessions appropriate to the occasion. Processing from the Church, guests assembled for sherry on the front of the College at 12.30. Beneath the newly-erected plaque, Mrs E.W. Parsons, CBE, Chairman of the College Governors proposed a toast to the College. It was near a much larger one to celebrate its opening in 1884. Buffet lunch was then served to the 700 guests. In the afternoon everywhere was alive with people, staff and students reminiscing about the past and regretting the gap in teacher education.

An exhibition of interesting and lively art work by third-year students was open in Lancaster Wing. In the library a collection of the College Archives, including manuscripts of testimonials to the first years of students, and examples of needlework and other exercises set before the turn of the century, were on display. The day concluded with a Valedictory Dance. In contrast to the final closure, a more auspicious and happy occasion on 17 May 1884 marked the formal opening of the newly-completed building known as Saffron Walden Training College for Mistresses. It had a pioneering role as the first college in the public sector established with the specific purpose of training infant teachers with an understanding of Kindergarten methods and principles. It represented the coming together of three factors.

Three important figures

In September 1880 George Stacey Gibson, a local Quaker prepared to use his wealth for beneficial purposes, wrote to ask BFSS whether it would like to have an additional college. On 29 April 1882 the Society took up his

offer of a two-acre site on the outskirts of Saffron Walden with a windmill opposite and fields or open space on the other side, together with the gift of £10,000.

The second factor was that the Secretary of the BFSS, Alfred Bourne, was keen to give the Society the role of innovator by establishing a new college which provided some training in Kindergarten methods for intending teachers, along the lines already begun at its Stockwell College. He gained the Society's agreement to fund the new venture.

The third factor was the approval of the Education Department. It was a happy coincidence that A.J. Mundella was its Vice-President from 1880 to 1885. Before taking up office he had seen something of the early Kindergarten experiment at Stockwell College, and as one of its Vice Presidents was sympathetic to the policies of the BFSS. He agreed to the new proposal.

The attractive design for the new building was the work of E. Burgess, a London architect. The lowest tender of £9, 369 from Messrs Thackray & Son of Huntingdon was accepted on 6 October 1882. Work began forthwith. It was almost completed when 30 students arrived in the afternoon of 30 January 1884. The railway station at Saffron Walden was by then complete and the muddy lane now South Road was probably the way they took to the present main entrance, then lit by gaslight.

The accommodation for the Kindergarten Practising School, three classrooms at the corner of the building, was only just ready for the opening. The grounds were laid out under the direction of W. Murray Tuke and comprised a croquet ground, walks and gardens for the students, a kitchen garden and drying ground. A playground area, part of which was planted as a garden, was set aside for the children. For students there were no playing fields or separate gymnasium since the daily walk was the main form of physical exercise, apart from Drill which took place in the Recreation Room or outside when the weather was fine enough.

Opening Ceremony 17 May 1884

This account of the opening ceremony is based on the report published afterwards in the *Herts & Essex Observer*:

Much careful preparation went into the opening ceremony.... The day was gloriously fine. Visitors began to arrive from London, helped by the special facilities granted by the Great Eastern Railway and were received with 'kindness and courtesy by the Vice Principal, the lady Superintendent, and governesses and students... each and all were most solicitous in showing them over the college and explaining anything which seemed to need elaboration'. The Corporation of the borough assembled at the mayor's residence at 11.30 am and having robed, walked in procession to the College. The mayor was preceded by the mace bearer and serjeant-at-mace and

followed by the aldermen and councillors, the town clerk and the treasurer. What a sight it must have been.

The proceedings began with an elegant repast in the dining room at noon. Grace was sung, with nice effect, in the corridor by the students, and guests were served by local ladies, including Mrs George Stacey Gibson, Mrs J.J. Robson and Miss Starling, who were members of the college Committee of Management. The principal gathering was in the Hall at one o'clock. The students sat on one side of the platform 'their faces beaming with intelligence and exhilaration' and the main guests and officials in the centre. Before the chair was taken the students sang 'very harmoniously and commendably... Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton took the chair and deputised for Lord Carlingford, referring to the steps leading to the foundation of the College and in particular to the generosity of George Stacey Gibson. Whenever his name was mentioned there was loud applause. Next an address to the mayor and Corporation was read and presented by Mr Lewis Fry, MP, and the Mayor, Mr E.B. Gibson... Local pride in the College and support for it were very clear.

The Chairman then addressed the assembly. He emphasised more obviously the pioneer educational intention behind the College's foundation and the overriding importance of having suitably trained infant teachers, before declaring the buildings open. Other formal resolutions followed; the students sang again... dedicatory prayers were offered and the blessing given by Rev T. Stevens, Vicar of St Mary's. The Rev A. Rollason, the Baptist Minister, was the only one to make a direct reference to the Kindergarten intention of the training when he said there would be a middle-class school for Kindergarten for which they needed scholars between three and seven years. It had been decided that the Practising School should provide for this class since there was more than ample provision for the usual elementary education in the town and Alfred Bourne had been warned of this fact by George Stacey Gibson.

Later in the day Alfred Bourne gave an exposition of the Kindergarten system and explained that it consisted of a series of 'gifts' and 'occupations' through which the eyes and hands of children were exercised in a way which could not be done in the routine of an ordinary infant school. Visitors thronged the Kindergarten classrooms during the afternoon and evening and governesses and students were on hand to answer questions. ... 'The proceedings were throughout most enjoyable and successful and the day must be ranked as a red letter one in the calendar of both the town and the British & Foreign School Society.

Future events were to prove that this was so, though no one could have predicted that before a hundred years had elapsed a drop in the school population and a government policy which believed large institutions to be more economic would have led to the closure of the College.

Frances Steele 1884-90

Although Alfred Bourne was technically Principal of the new college, it was Frances Steele, Vice Principal from 1884 to 1890 who implemented the policy of giving the College its specific Kindergarten role. She was eminently suited to do so. Appointed Senior Governess at Stockwell College in 1868 she was well acquainted with its early work in Kindergarten training. But by 1882 this had declined as the college

became more academically focused. Frances Steele was well known to Alfred Bourne, Principal there also. At her leaving ceremony on 3 December 1883 he commented:

We trust the weight of your influence and the respect which is felt for you in schools all over the country will give an impetus to the New College at Saffron Walden... praying that you may be able to do as much as you have already done at Stockwell for the additional training college of the British & Foreign School Society.

Whilst there she had written a *Kindergarten Handbook for English Teachers: a brief account of the system and its appliances*. It was to become required reading for students at Saffron Walden. Outside college she was a member of the Froebel Society and addressed its monthly meetings on several occasions, so furthering her knowledge of Kindergarten work outside the limits of the BFSS.

Frances Steele arranged the daily routine for students at Saffron Walden as recorded in her Log Book. They obviously had a long and very busy day. People in the town would have recognised them as they took their daily lunchtime walk. She was responsible for making the time table and was involved in teaching school management, the Education lectures of the day and other lectures with specific reference to Kindergarten methods. They were taken in LH, the large hall in the centre of the College or in G, the Gallery Room. The three class rooms at the left corner served a double purpose. Referred to as the Kindergarten Practising School, they were used as a private Kindergarten for children of the town between three and seven years old. Grace Rollason, daughter of the Baptist Minister in the town, was one of them.

Students from the College often went into the school informally or did part of their teaching practice there, though because of its size schools in the town were also used. In the Kindergarten School, Cecil Reid was responsible for their supervision as were headmistresses in the other schools which were used. Comments on them were entered in the College Registers and Frances Steele, who also visited them, added her assessments. She also recorded details of their criticism lessons which she conducted usually in the Gallery Room.

She also prepared and signed the Certificates which they received at the end of their training. Particularly interesting is the certificate entitled Kindergarten Training as Applicable in Elementary Schools. Unfortunately, that for Emily Bellchambers dated 31 December 1885 is the only one to survive: it gives details of the Kindergarten Course. Since this was not recognised as a qualification by the Education Department, successful students also received a testimonial which recognised them as a Certificated Teacher. Examples are the ones for Clara Clough and Annie F. Matthews but more exist in the College Archive Collection. The Regulations for Students are also of interest (see illustration below).

Another job which fell to Frances Steele was to receive the H.M.I. on their visits, occasions viewed with some trepidation by both staff and students. Staff had to give lectures in front of them, and students had to read, recite and teach before them and submit to a full week of written examinations which they invigilated. Subsequently the Inspectors met the College Committee of Management to discuss these matters and to report on the state of the buildings and health of the students. There was little which did not have to pass their scrutiny. What the Inspectors said was taken very seriously since grant was related to their assessment and could be withdrawn if the recommendations which they made were ignored.

Frances Steele would not have been admitted to the committee to hear these comments, and perhaps this was as well for in the last two years the examination results were not so good. However, it is unlikely that this was the explanation of her resignation and that of her friend Jane Stoker at the end of 1890. Frances Steele was only 56, although most professional women worked much longer in this period. It seems that Jane Stoker's continuing poor health was the main reason. Sadly she died soon after they were settled at 2 Mount Pleasant Road. Frances Steele lived on until June 1912, but former students remembered her in her last years as a rather lonely woman. Their send-off from College was by contrast a happy affair. Presents were given and tributes made in the form of addresses which were read out on the occasion. Students acknowledged the wise counsels and helpful sympathy of Frances Steele, and said she had inspired them with a sense of the importance, the responsibilities and the dignity of their work as teachers. With her sense of humour she may have responded with her cheery little laugh which is said to have been characteristic of her. Staff thanked her for her courtesy, wise guidance and helpful encouragement. In the absence of Alfred Bourne through ill health, his assistant, Mr P. Williams represented the BFSS saying:

They had piloted the college past shoals and quick sands and the danger of the coast and now... it was speeding prosperously over the open sea before a favouring breeze.

This was indeed true and more than anyone else Frances Steele had set the College on the successful course it was to follow until 1977.

SAFFRON WALDEN TRAINING COLLEGE.

* REGULATIONS FOR STUDENTS.*

1. Students are required to attend punctually and regularly at meals, classes, and family worship, unless leave of absence is expressly given.
2. In favourable weather, every student will take a walk daily, at and during the hour appointed, in company with some fellow-student. On Saturday afternoons, a longer excursion is to be made.
3. Leave of absence, if desired, must be asked personally of the officer in charge of the class, exercise, &c., from which the student wishes to absent herself. Such leave will be given only on special occasions.
If the desired leave extends to temporary absence from the house, permission must also be obtained from the Vice-Principal or the Lady Superintendent.
4. Any student withdrawing from class, &c., on account of illness, must at once report herself to the Lady Superintendent, under whose care she will remain until well enough to resume her usual duties. While thus under special care, no fellow-student may visit her without permission.
5. Every student will make her own bed; will sweep, dust, and keep neat her own room; will open the window in suitable weather; and be answerable for the orderly condition of the window-blind. She will also take, in her turn, an appointed part in the lighter domestic work of the College, such as dusting class-rooms, washing tea-things, and care of ink.
6. Accommodation is provided on the ground floor for washing, changing shoes, &c. Students will therefore not go upstairs without leave between 8.30 a.m. and noon, nor between 1.30 and 9.45 p.m.
7. Students may not, without the permission of the Lady Superintendent, go to the kitchen, the laundry, or the infirmary; nor may they cross from one wing of the building to the other by the upper corridor.
8. Ink may not be used in the dining-hall or bedrooms. Food may not be carried to the class-rooms or dormitories.
9. Students are expected to protect the fittings, furniture, and other property of the College, and to report at once any damage that may accidentally occur. Damage caused by gross neglect, carelessness, or disorderly conduct will be repaired at the cost of the person in fault.

Notes

1. A fuller account is given in *Saffron Walden College: the first six years 1884 to 1890*, (1984), pp 5-6.
2. *Op.cit.*

Note: The author's PhD thesis entitled 'The Contribution of the British & Foreign School Society to the Kindergarten Movement from 1868 to 1907 with particular reference to Stockwell and Saffron Walden Training Colleges' (1984). See also *Saffron Walden History* journal nos 12, 13, 24 and 36. See also Collins, G.P., *Education Matters: excerpts from Saffron Walden College Magazines 1899-1995* (1995).

***Note:** Following the closure of the Bell College (which had taken over the old training college), the playing fields were redeveloped for housing and the former college buildings converted into apartments, while retaining the frontage, as can be seen below in the photographs of the Training College 1900s and what is now called Bell College Court, pictured in 2013. (c)Photograph Jacqueline Cooper.



Disclaimer: please note that all opinions expressed in articles are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal*. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of articles, but any corrections can be sent to the website editor at saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com