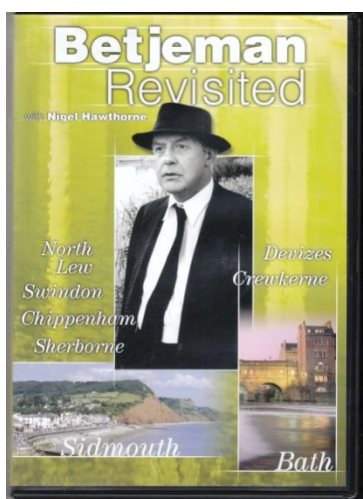
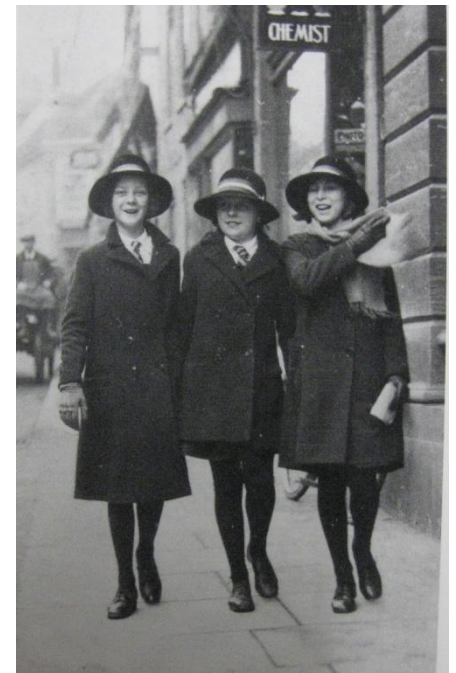


# Looking Back at Lord Digby's School - A Personal View

Transcript of Sherborne Museum talk (which included nearly 200 photographs) by Barbara Elsmore December 2017



## Sherborne Museum Talk December 2017: *Looking Back at Lord Digby's School - a Personal View* Barbara Elsmore

I had very little interest in history as a child but my introduction came much later through an interest in family history and I knew that my father and grandfather had attended Foster's School in Sherborne.

When my husband and I moved to Sherborne, about six years ago, I began volunteering at Sherborne Museum. I was intrigued by a closed cupboard with Foster's School written on the front of it and one day I received a telephone call from one of the volunteers to say that the cupboard was about to be opened and the contents re-examined and moved to the new storeroom. If I would like to help I should turn up the next day –

So let's go back to the beginning for me in order to explain how I have come to be here today taking a very personal look back at Lord Digby's School.

First of by way of explanation for any of you who do not remember Lord Digby's school

The three former secondary schools of Sherborne

- Foster's School for boys
- Lord Digby's School for girls
- St Aldhelm's School for boys and girls

1992 Amalgamated to become the Gryphon School

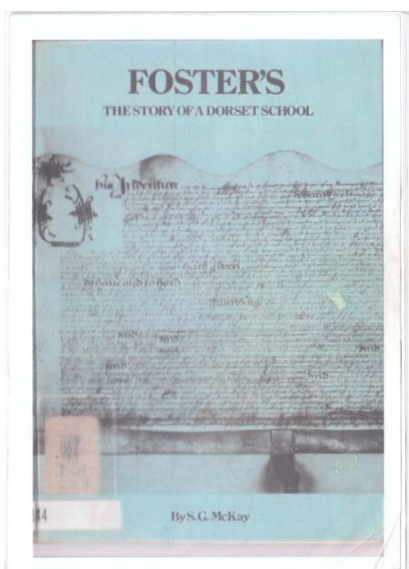
Now back to 3 May 2012 and I help Ken (Left) and John House (Right), who are not related to each other, sort through the archive for Foster's School in the Museum and transport it in boxes to the new storeroom. But first I made a list of all that we found



These are all the many items I had to choose from for an exhibition.

There are about 550 items to be found in the museum made up of:

- An extensive photographic collection
- Admissions books and minute books
- Items of uniform
- School Magazines
- Lots of paperwork
- Examples of the school china and lots of miscellaneous items
- There are also many other records at the Dorset History Centre(DHC) in Dorchester
- The WW1 and WW2 remembrance boards are on display at the Gryphon School and sporting cups also held by this school.



To get any sort of an understanding of the history of the school luckily there is Mr Stanley McKay's book published in 1975.

And here is Mr McKay teaching in the 1950s



Here is the resulting exhibition which was on for a year and happily generated a lot of interest. The curator asked if I would have a go at an exhibition for Lord Digby's School the following year – this was a huge challenge as I had no knowledge of the school at all. So I decided to follow how I went about staging the Foster's School exhibition

First of all in January 2014 I met with Pauline Batstone, Chairman of the Old Girls' Association and with June Helson a former pupil and teacher at the school. I would have many subsequent meetings with June as she helped me become a little more acquainted with the school.

I decided to make a list of all the items at the museum together with anything else in private collections that I could use in an exhibition

I discovered that there were around 130 Items which included:

- Honours Boards etc
- Items of uniform
- Photographs
- School Magazines
- Some documentation

Just as Mr McKay's book on Foster's School had helped me with a little understanding of the history of the boys school so Miss Thompson rode to my rescue with her history of Lord Digby's school published in 1969. She paid many visits to Dorset Records Office (now the DHC) and she thanked the county archivist. She also thanked many local people who helped her produce her book which she dedicated 'to the old girls of the school'. June Helson recently reminded me that Miss Thomson taught history at the school.

Here is the resulting exhibition that ran from 2 April 2014 for a year

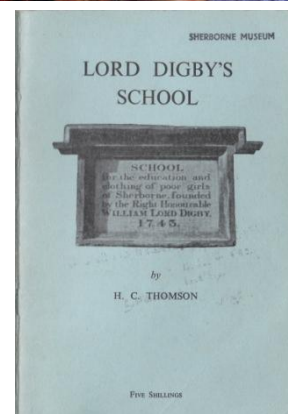
That is the background to how I come to be standing here today - now let's look a little more closely at the history of the school.

And using Miss Thompson's excellent book as a guide we go back to the very beginnings of the school

**Lady Jane Digby** was the daughter of the Earl of Gainsborough she was born in 1664. Jane married William the Fifth Lord Digby. Miss Thompson found documentary evidence that Lady Digby '*started a little school in Sherborne*' and she may even have taught there herself. Jane's husband was William 5th Lord Digby – Ten years after the death of his wife he founded a school in her memory on 16 September 1743 to be known originally as 'William, Lord Digby's School'.

Lord Digby left an endowment - a copy of which is held at the DHC and Sherborne Museum has a framed copy which probably hung in the school.

There were two parts to this endowment: The First part –was piece of land known as Ashcombe



It consisted of 56 acres of land at Caundle Marsh - described as a 'roofless tenement' - interpreted to mean land without a property on it. The land was given to the Master and Brethren of the Almshouse to administer and income was to be used for three purposes:

- Firstly to keep the school house in repair
- Secondly to provide for a school mistress chosen by Lord Digby or his heirs to be paid £10 a year to instruct 13 poor girls.
- Thirdly to be spent on clothing the girls in a decent manner and in buying lesson books. All leavers to be given a bible and a copy of 'The Whole duty of Man'.

Second Agreement - on same day refers to the school house

'a newly erected dwelling house' had a rent payable of 'Two pence per year - if the sum shall lawfully be demanded'. It was described as a 'late parcel of a cottage with its little garden and backside situated in the Homage of Hound Street'.

There would be thirteen girls to be chosen by the founder or his successors and they were to be at least seven years old:

- Could stay at school until 14
- To be taught to read and to do 'work of any plain sort'
- Should be initiated into the Christian religion and brought to church on Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Holy days
- They sat on the South side of the church well separated from the boys of the Foster's School Foundation who sat on the North side

This photo of the School House is taken from Miss Thompson's book.

Incidentally she tells us that the engraved tablet was placed in the wall by George Crawford in 1836 – he was paid £2

Just by way of a reminder – the date is 1743

Foster's School for boys had been established for just over a hundred years as it first opened its doors in 1640.

Richard Foster's endowment had made provision for:

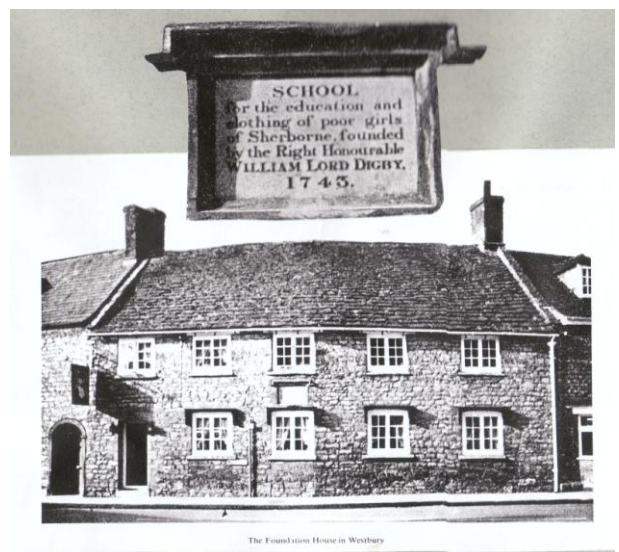
'Thirteen Pounds six shillings and eight pence per annum for the better education and breeding upp of ten poor boyes.'

'In addition Ten Pounds per annum for the education for Ten suche Poore Maids to be educated and brought uppe in such sorte as the Master and Brethren shall direct.'

There appears to be much to-ing and fro-ing over the years regarding the Ten Pounds per annum for the Ten Poore Maids.

A timely reminder from Miss Thompson:

*'The history of the school cannot be understood until it is realised that its sources of income were few and slender indeed'* H C Thomson



**Where are records and items to be found?** They are to be found in Sherborne Museum, the DHC, private collections, and more. If you are intrigued by the 'and more' we will come to an example later

- Honours boards and head girl boards now in Museum Storeroom in Yeovil .
- Photographs have been taken showing all the names and are available on the museum digital collection
- There are some items of uniform in the Museum storeroom
- There are 35 full school photos some are multiple copies of the same year plus others in the museum. Some are also to be found at the DHC and with private collectors.
- There are many rather wonderful old photos in Museum, private collectors and the DHC.
- This is a list, compiled following closure of the school, held by Sherborne Museum of records that were deposited at the DHC when the school closed. There have very likely been many more items deposited there since this time

John Betjeman's visited Sherborne in 1962 in which he describes Sherborne as an 'An Abbey town of golden ironstone - a town of schools' - there is quite a large section on Lord Digby's School and I think it is a joy to watch. It is still available to buy via Amazon

Helen Fountain (now Pettman) reported: 'Sir John Betjeman visited the school to talk to the girls and we all went to the Assembly hall. Sir John started by disclaiming his right to be called a poet, '*I am just a rhymster and anyone can do what I do*', he said. He looked around the room and began to make up some verses about the things he saw, starting with the big school clock. The modesty and yet brilliance of this man has been a memory at the forefront of my mind every since. If John Betjeman doesn't deserve the title of 'poet', then who does?'

Helen also states: John Betjeman enjoyed the company of Miss Thomson as he liked formidable women.

*Sherborne House and its People* was researched and written, in 1996, by former headmistress Shelagh Hill with an informative chapter on Lord Digby's School and a useful family tree for Lord Digby

Here is the board, held in the Museum, that gives us the names of the headmistresses. Miss Thomson tells us the earlier history of the school in her book and then goes into more detail about the pivotal time following the Education Bill of William Forster in 1870. (Incidentally while reading an article in the *Marshwood* written on behalf of the Bridport History Society I discovered that William Forster was a Dorset man born in 1818 in Bradpole).

The Forster Act tackled for the first time covering the country with good elementary schools .

Towards the end of Mary Kenerstone's time a new scheme for the school was drawn up. Canon Lyon had urged that the Trustees should see that '*the education to be given to the girls must depend on merit and not merely on the recommendation of Mr Digby.*' In November 1884 the new scheme was printed and bound and submitted to the Education Department for approval which was given and the school re-opened in February 1885 There were ten members of the governors and Mr J D Wingfield Digby was ex officio. Miss Clarke, a first class certified teacher was appointed headmistress, Clerk to the governors was Mr T C Bartlett and Canon Lyon was the chairman. All Three would work closely together over the next twenty years



There was a new syllabus in 1885 – All Elementary subjects to be included plus the following class subjects

- English
- Geography
- Singing from notes
- Needlework
- Drawing

plus some specific subjects such as

- French
- Religious Education was to be according to the Church of England

Canon Lyon stated that it was for those who did not want to send their daughters to ordinary schools. The school was named: 'Lord Digby's School for Girls, founded by William Lord Digby, in or about the year 1743 in Sherborne' – quite a title. The fees are to be 9d a week and will cover all expenses except stationery and lesson books used at home.

It's worth reminding ourselves once again of Miss Thompson's words of warning: '*The history of the school cannot be understood until it is realised that its sources of income were few and slender indeed*' as, once again, some new and bold ideas but the same amount of original income would provide the underpinning with the addition of 9d a week per pupil.

#### **In 1887 the school moved over the road to larger premises**

There had been criticism of the conditions at the school during Miss Clarke's first two years by the schools' inspector and larger premises were deemed necessary.

Canon Young, headmaster of Sherborne School, offered a five year lease at £60 per year on Westbury House (now a Dental Practice) and in 1887 with 75 pupils and with a view to attracting more plus better working conditions the school house was rented out and the school moved over the road to larger premises. It was hoped that the improvements to the premises would attract more pupils but with the newly opened St Anthony's, just along the road, accepting Anglican pupils as well as Catholic pupils these additional pupils did not materialise.

There were many schemes to raise money but crisis followed crisis

1891 'Mr Digby went to London to discuss ways and means' with the Solicitor General including Richard Foster's endowment from 1640 – *Thirteen Pounds six shillings and eight pence per annum towards the better education and breeding up of Ten Poore Boyes of the town of Sherborne Ten Pounds per annum towards the education of Ten such Poore Maides.*

The Foundation House had been rented for £10 per year but finding the other £50 to pay the rent on the improved premises had proved impossible and so they had to move back over the road in 1892 and into the foundation house once again.

ALL IS NOT WELL and the financial struggle continues:

Foster's Foundation gives £21 per year in Exhibitions

Miss Clarke is charged £15 15s for rent of her 'apartments' per year out of a salary of £80. The Clerk gave up his salary altogether and paid all postage for many years. The schools inspector recommenced his criticisms. The railway, the silk mill and many local people chipped in. 1893 the Almshouse lent the Governors £200 on the security

of Ashcombe Farm. New accommodation desperately needed – 1894 plans drawn up to build a new school to cost about £750 – plans dropped ‘*architect did badly out of the affair*’ it was remarked at the time. 1895 Headmistress salary reduced from £90 a year to £45 and Assistant from £80 to £40. 1897 some good news as Ashcombe timber brought in £149



1897 a Governor Mr Dalwood (described by Miss Thomson as the ‘*builder of curious bungalow in North Road*’) suggested buying St Swithin’s Laundry – time was short the governors raised a mortgage on the building and on Ashcombe Farm and purchased the property for Lord Digby’s School for £950. Mr Digby came up trumps and bought the old school for £200. The Charity Commissioners were not happy - and Mr Digby goes to London to ‘*pour oil on very troubled waters*’ and while this was going on the school moved in. A prospectus was printed emphasising the airy position in the town.

They would be there for 34 years

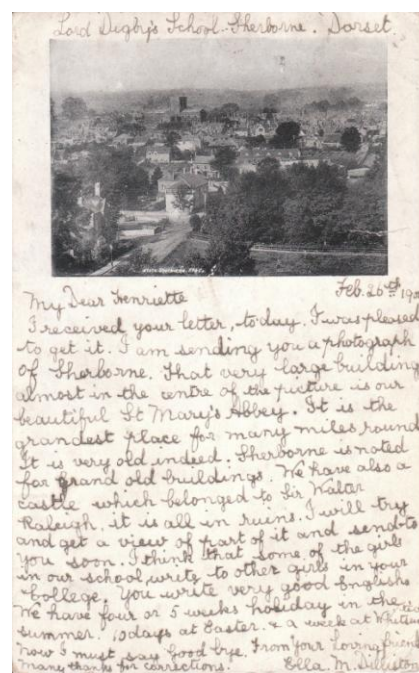
Miss Thompson found a cache of Miss Clarke's letters at the DHC and they give an account of Miss Clarke's valiant attempts to keep the school viable and to concentrate on improving the education of the girls in her charge and I recommend that you try to get hold of Miss Thomson's book and read about these turbulent times for yourself.

Miss Thomson concludes 'there is little doubt that during the twenty years that Miss Clarke taught at the school the welfare of the girls was paramount’.

As a little aside do you remember I hinted at how ‘other sources’ are now available when it comes to making discoveries? Well here is an example.

Miss Thomson found evidence in one of Miss Clarke's letters which enabled her to conclude that Miss Clarke seems to have held ideas which were advanced for her day for she writes 'I do not know if I have told you but I have five girls in correspondence with the same number of girls in France I think it improves them and not only in French'.

I now have the most fascinating piece of proof that this occurred - due to the sharp eyes of a fellow member of the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society. A postcard that I was able to buy on eBay is dated 26 February 1902 and was sent to Henriette a French Schoolgirl at a school in Beauvais, 60 miles north of Paris.



The postcard was sent by Ella Dilliston and in it she outlines some of the main buildings in Sherborne giving a little of the history of the town not easy in such a small space!

She also says: 'I think that some of the girls in our school write to other girls in your college.' She ends ‘Many thanks for the corrections’.

Who was Ella Dilliston? Ella was born in 1886 the fourth child of Josiah and Ellen Dilliston. Josiah was a tailor and employed three men in 1881. The family lived in Long Street. Sadly Ella’s father died when she was a year old and her mother had to support the four children. By 1891 the eldest son Herbert is at school at Christ’s Hospital School in the City of London and the two younger boys and Ella are listed as scholars in Sherborne. Mrs Dilliston is the Bible Depot Manager which we think may have been in one of the offices in the basement of the schoolroom in Long

Street. Now the downstairs to Upstairs/Downstairs. Mrs Dilliston received a commission on the number of bibles sold.

Back to 1888-89 and the Accounts are £95 short at end of year. By 1900 there was doubt that the school could carry on.

Then in 1902 an Education Act was passed – known as the Balfour Act. It was a controversial act at the time but eventually led to the standardisation and upgrading of education for the next four decades. Over 1,000 new secondary schools would open up before 1914. It was envisaged back in Sherborne that new teachers would be needed and so in 1904 a Joint Teachers Centre opened with Foster's School - Miss Duxfield was appointed head of female side.

It is around this time that it is decided to re-establish Lord Digby's School as a Secondary School – Miss Clarke is described as 'a Government Certified teacher' and appears not to be able to teach all the newly required subjects and so she is given notice. According to Miss Thomson Miss Clarke made a fight for it she even consulted the National Union of Teachers but in 1905 she finally accepted the Governors' terms and leaves with a gift of £75 and takes the assistant teacher, Miss Roche, with her to start a new school near Cheltenham. Miss Clarke was 58 and Miss Roche was 40. They had spent, respectively, 20 years and 15 years at Lord Digby's School.

Thanks to Jim Linton of the Charlton Kings Local History Society we discover that Miss Clarke did indeed start a new school in Cheltenham which she named Girton House. The school prepared young ladies for the Higher and Lower School certificates. The school ran for about three years and Miss Clarke retired and continued to live at the school house with her sister and died aged 80.

Miss Roche found herself guardian to a niece with a property in Cheltenham which she converted to a school named 'Trefaldwyn'. She ran this school from 1908 until 1950 - the school changed premises several times as it grew. Jim Linton looks back at Miss Roche's life and concludes it was one long struggle, mainly with finances, to provide an education which was broad in its outlook, embracing foreign languages, music and drama. She was 85 when she died

School closed April 1905 and reopened June 1905 as a secondary school with a leaving age of 16. Miss Duxfield is the new Headmistress. The school is now a Secondary School and Pupil Teachers' Centre. It takes girls up to the age of 16. Fees £2 per term £10 for boarders with free places by examination. Half of Richard Foster's endowment appropriated to Lord Digby's School. Additional subjects, which Miss Clarke stated she was unable to teach, were: Latin, German, Bookkeeping, Dancing and Fancy Cooking.

There was a new joint governing body appointed to govern both Lord Digby's and Foster's Schools with, for the first time, a representative of Dorset County Council. Chairman was Canon Goodden and there were 18 other members. There is a *Joint Minute Book for Foster's and LDS 1912-1932* held in the Foster's School archive in Sherborne museum

So who is Miss Duxfield? regrettably unable to find a photograph. Susie Ellen Duxfield b1883 Southport, Lancashire first appointed Head of the Pupil Teacher Training Centre in 1904. When Miss Clarke left her post in April 1905 also appointed headmistress of Lord Digby's School – she was aged 22. She had trained at Whitelands College in London and had taught students in France. Miss Duxfield is remembered as being: '*A youthful headmistress but very efficient*' '*go-ahead and managed wonderfully in most difficult circumstances*'. This last comment indicates continuing struggles.

When pupils at teacher training centre began to decline, possibly when a centre opened in Yeovil, Miss Duxfield proposed opening a Kindergarten for boys and girls from aged four. She put the school name in gold letters on the gatepost of the school and proposed that the distinctive fleur-de-lis badge should be worn on the hat band of the straw hats. She started a library and the first Governors scholarship was set up and awarded to Muriel Fudge. She



also started the old girls association – but this must have languished as it would be revived later. Gradually numbers increased and a third teacher was required.

Miss Duxfield resigns in 1911 - Shock! - Horror! - why did she resign when everything seemed to be going so well and the school seemed finally to be on an even keel? It seems she wanted to read for a degree. She would be meeting lots of others in the town perhaps with long memories of Miss Clarke and the fact that she left because she was not deemed sufficiently qualified to teach the new syllabus. She attended the first Sherborne Suffrage meeting in March 1909 - chairman of the governors and one or two other governors were there too - this very interesting fact has been discovered by Rachel Hassall, Sherborne School Archivist. She would also be meeting teachers from Sherborne School for girls. Was she dissatisfied with her qualifications? Did she somehow feel they fell short of allowing her to carry out some of the tasks necessary? We will probably never know.

In her letter of resignation she records her deep gratitude for the kindness of the Governors and commented on the good relations which existed between them. This prompted Miss Thomson to comment 'that this happy state of affairs has obtained since'.

Did she get her qualification? Yes! Miss Duxfield marries the headmaster of Banbury Municipal School in 1921. She has her BA (Hons). She had been one of the assistant mistresses there where she was much esteemed by colleagues and pupils. She appears to be giving up her job on her marriage. - would she work in another school? Somehow I think not as this appears to be a practise that would continue for some time into the future.

Miss Ashwell is appointed in 1911 and she is a graduate of London University. There are now 66 girls and a larger staff. Full recognition is given to the school by Local Board of Education provided work done on the building - it is carried out but left 'a large overdraft'. May 1912 'nearly all' the Ashcombe lands are sold to Mr H G R Gillingham for £900 ending the connection with Lord Digby's Foundation

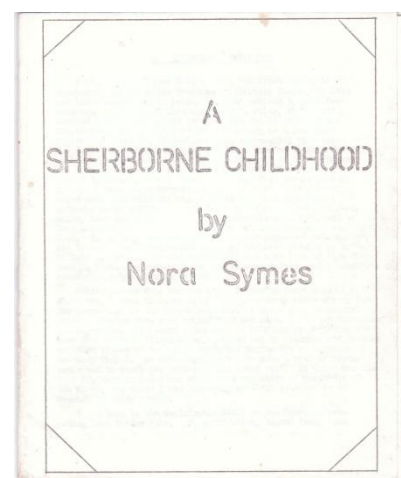
1913 Building Fund started. Nowhere near enough money came in. Ospringe House nearby rented for a year for boarders. Hill View (later Corby House) Long Street 'acquired' and altered to make a good boarding house but Mr Penny's bill of £67 could not be met – finally paid by Mrs Kenelm Wingfield-Digby out of her own purse

Miss Ashwell started the school magazine in 1917. Prefect system set up. Shorthand and typing started for girls and 'outsiders'. Two girls won major County Scholarships and went up to University. Miss Ashwell left in 1917 and Miss Billinger appointed

By 1921 There are 173 pupils – 37 are boarders

Miss Billinger lived in Ransome House (now Ransom House) as it is rented for the headmistress and the boarders. A flourishing Preparatory Department also run from here by Miss Sparke, a friend of Miss Billinger. They would later purchase Stonegarth in the Avenue and run this as the LDS boarding house with Stonegarth Preparatory School in the adjoining Little Stonegarth.

There is a 7,000 word article written by Norah Symes granddaughter of Edmund King licensee of the Woolmington Hotel where she was born in 1914. Norah tells of her life growing up in Sherborne. She went originally to Lord Digby's School in Newland, which she describes in great detail and then she moved with the school across the road to Sherborne House. Her mother went to the school when she was a girl and is pictured in the earliest photo found, so far, of a performance of *Mayday* in 1892. Norah appeared in a performance of A A Milne's *Make Believe* in 1923 and probably donated both photographs to Sherborne Museum.



Although the school was flourishing in many ways the old St Swithin's laundry building was becoming increasingly inadequate.

In 1924 Mr Littleton Powys, former Headmaster of Sherborne Preparatory School, became chairman. In 1927 Mr Powys heard that the lease on Sherborne House would expire in three years and he worked unstintingly to get the school moved. In 1930 it was the property of Lt Col F J B D Wingfield Digby. He was awarded the D S O in 1918 '*For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty*' during an exchange that resulted in the capture of a fieldgun (most probably the gun that was in Pageant Gardens and is now in Castle Gardens).

Littleton Powys was one amongst many who worked so hard over the years to help keep the school buoyant. He played a huge part in inspiring all the children of the town to take an interest in the natural world around them. He gave a first finds award to the school girl or boy who collected the largest number of first finds each year. So the first violet or the first primrose would be rushed into school and had to be entered in the logbook.

Norah Symes was particularly successful with her pressed flower collection when she managed to collect a staggering 431 wild flowers in one year. Littleton Powys reported in the school magazine for 1927 '*Norah Symes collection of pressed flowers was the best I have ever seen since it has been my pleasure to judge the Natural History Competitions.*'

On Monday 9 November 1931 the school left the old St Swithun's laundry and moved across the road into Sherborne House on a 21 year lease. Particularly interesting to see Miss Billinger with armfuls of flowers as a sixth former would pick and arrange flowers for the hallway and headmistress's room.

Norah Symes remembers '*We were about to move across the road to Sherborne House and much to my amazement, Miss Billinger handed me the key of the gate. It was like being given the key to "The Secret Garden". Miss Billinger explained that she was expecting a visit from some of the governors and, handing me a pair of clippers and telling me I need not hurry, she asked me to gather enough flowers and foliage for her study, the staff room and the hall and on no account to 'cut them short. She loved tall expansive flower arrangements with plenty of foliage. I went quietly over, without a word to anybody, and wandered around registering every tree and shrub. It was a wonderful morning*'.



30 September 1940 and one of the bombs that was dropped on Sherborne made a direct hit on the house that Miss Billinger and Miss Sparke shared at the end of the Avenue. This was about 4:45. Luckily the school children who were waiting in front of the wall for the school bus to Milborne Port were standing here at about 4:15.

In 1942 Miss Billinger retired and Miss Thomson is appointed. In 1944 Following the Butler Education Act the school became Lord Digby's Grammar School for Girls with entry via the 11+

Miss Thomson retired in 1967 after 25 years and Mrs Monica Ditmas is appointed. Mrs Shelagh Hill headmistress appointed 1979.

The school finally closed its doors with the coming of comprehensive education to Sherborne in 1992.

A book of memories collected during the time of the exhibition is available as a PDF via [www.fostersdigbys.co.uk](http://www.fostersdigbys.co.uk) Many photos, including photographs of the honours boards, can be viewed digitally and copies requested, during opening hours, at Sherborne Museum.

Many people have my sincerest thanks for all the help so freely given to me during the preparation of this talk.

Barbara Elsmore, December 2017