

Grammar school to church school, 1986–2019: a personal perspective

This article is something I put together in 2019 when I retired after 25 years as Clerk to the Boteler Educational Trust and having served for 15 years as Head of the school. It was intended as a record of the background to some of the decisions made to the structure, administration and governance which resulted in significant changes to the development of the school. During that same period there were equally important changes to the school curriculum, personnel and financial management, assessment and ethos – but that’s another story. It is a personal perspective but I hope, nevertheless, an accurate one. I apologise for any errors or omissions – and for its length – and hope you will find it of interest.

JH, April 2026

The history of the school and its foundation has been recorded in “Boteler Grammar School 1526–1926” produced by the school for the 400th anniversary, author unknown; “Boteler Grammar School 1526–1976” produced by the school for the 450th anniversary, based on the previous history and written by Harold Lievesley, Senior History Master; and “The Foundation, Maintenance and Management of a Free Grammar School in South Lancashire 1520–1842” the PhD thesis (Open University, 1989) of Eric Percival, formerly Deputy Head and Acting Head of the school. There is also “An Exhibition to Celebrate 50 Years at Latchford” compiled in 1990 by Wendy Kelly, Head of History for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the relocation of the school. School documents are deposited at Cheshire Archive and Local Studies and Warrington Museum and there are also some at Lancashire Archives at Preston.

Under local government reorganisation, Warrington became part of Cheshire in 1974. Cheshire reorganised its secondary schools along comprehensive lines in 1978/9. Those schools in the middle of Warrington became 11–16 high schools with sixth form provision at Priestley College (formerly the girls’ high school) whilst schools on the periphery became 11–18. Boteler Grammar School became the Boteler School, admitting girls for the first time. The Head was Robert English who sadly died in 1981 in a fell-running event in the Lake District. Eric Percival, Deputy Head, was made Acting Head on his death. On the neighbouring site the Richard Fairclough Secondary Modern School (which had been built in 1934 with separate boys’ and girls’ facilities) became the Richard Fairclough High School with John Baker continuing as Head.

Due to demographic changes, the pupil roll in Warrington at this time was falling and, as a result, some secondary schools were closed and others amalgamated. In 1983 the Boteler and Fairclough schools were amalgamated and given the name Victoria Park County High School. John Baker was appointed Head. The split-site had a footbridge over Wash Lane linking the upper school (Fairclough building) and the lower school (Boteler building); pupils walked between buildings, the staff tended to travel by car.

I was appointed Head of Victoria Park County High School in 1986. Pupil numbers in the school were still falling (they totalled 990 at the time and 51 teachers) and with LMS (Local Management of Schools) on the horizon, I could see bankruptcy and closure ahead. I

proposed to the governing body that we should close the Fairclough building and, with extra accommodation provided by mobile classrooms (pending some new-build), reorganise on the Boteler site. This was agreed by the governors but Cheshire LEA was hesitant – I assume that they were concerned about spending money on a school which, as I discovered at a meeting soon after being appointed, they had plans to close. They finally agreed however and the staff spent the whole of the summer holiday of 1988 preparing and moving onto the Boteler site. With only a few days to go before the first day of term, mobile classrooms were still being painted and examination desks were stacked in the hall to accommodate any classes whose classrooms were not finished; but we opened on the first day of term! The Fairclough building was later sold by CCC to the National Rivers Authority (to become the Environment Agency) as their regional headquarters and I was pleased that they accepted my suggestion to name the building Richard Fairclough House in recognition of the part the school had played in the town's education.

After discussion with senior staff, I also proposed that the move to the Boteler site should be marked by a change of name to Sir Thomas Boteler High School to reflect the school's long history. To my surprise, this caused some consternation amongst the governors. The chairman, Canon JO Colling, who had been chairman of governors at the grammar school, explained to me that negotiations between the two governing bodies following the decision to amalgamate had been difficult and it was some time before agreement on a "neutral" name was arrived at. However, the proposal was put to the governors at their next meeting and was carried.

Also at this time I learned from the chairman of a trust fund which was attached to the grammar school but had been "frozen" by the Charity Commission when the school became comprehensive in 1979. The "free grammar school in Weryngton" which Sir Thomas Boteler stipulated in his will of 1522 should "endure forever" only endured until 1979. Cheshire County Council, who were now the LEA, took over as trustees and put forward various proposals to the Charity Commission for the disbursement of the Boteler Trust funds across Warrington but they were not successful. I proposed that the school should have access to the funds "as the natural successor of the Boteler Grammar School" and the governors agreed. We were fortunate in having two officers who worked very hard over the next few years to move this proposal forward. Another scheme was prepared and a meeting with the Charity Commission took place in March 1992. A case was put that the school had never closed but merely "evolved" over time and, to everyone's surprise, this line of thinking was accepted (changing the name back to Boteler also helped) and the commissioner said that he could see no reason why the school should not benefit from the trust fund.

Under the new scheme (1994) trustees were appointed – 2 representatives of CCC, 2 of WBC and 3 co-opted. It was suggested that the Head should act as Clerk and the School Bursar (Tony Grix at that time) as Treasurer. The funds, £1.3M, were reinvested and the trustees were able to incorporate a number of small charities – mainly to do with school prize funds such as the Lamplugh–Massingham Prize for Divinity and the Robert Halley Ashton Prize for English – under the Boteler umbrella.

A special service to officially inaugurate the newly-formed Trust and to welcome new pupils was devised by Canon Colling (Rector of Warrington and Chairman of Governors) and myself, replacing the Founder's Day Service and held at Warrington Parish Church on 24th September 1996. The processional hymn at the beginning of the service was "All our hope on God is founded" echoing the motto of the school, Deus Spes Nostra (God our hope) and a wreath placed on the tomb of the founder in the Boteler Chapel. The preacher was the Ven. David Woodhouse, Archdeacon of Warrington.

The first meeting of the newly-formed Trust was held on 25th January 1995 and Canon JO Colling was elected chairman. As Head, I presented my first request for funds totalling £46,000 to the meeting in June 1995. The list of projects included two which were close to my heart: the salary for a School Counsellor and funding for educational visits to allow children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to take part and widen their educational experiences. Another request was for funds to support the rapidly developing teaching of Information Technology.

Looking back at the school's conversion to Church of England (Aided) status, it would appear that a number of initiatives came together at about the same time. In the late 1990s the school governors considered whether to apply for special status as a school (Humanities/Music/Sport, etc.) but it was proving difficult to get local sponsorship. I made what I regarded as an "off-the-cuff" comment that the school should perhaps revive its original links with the church: after all, the first Master was to be an "honest and discreet Priest"! Canon Michael Finlay, Rector of Warrington, who had become chairman of the Trust, on behalf of the Anglican clergy in Warrington, spoke to the trustees about the possibility of an Anglican high school in Warrington. The Anglican Church nationally, and the two local dioceses (Chester and Liverpool) were in discussions about increasing the number of church schools. And Tony Blair's Labour government, after 1997, spoke of creating 100 new C of E secondary schools. Malcolm Roxburgh, the Director of Education (Warrington had become a unitary authority in 1998) later attended a governors' meeting to say that the authority felt that a C of E high school would extend the diversity of its school provision and particularly complement the C of E primary school provision.

The school was finally granted C of E status in 2002 and a new Charity Commission scheme was produced in 2003 to incorporate the change of name. The Boteler Educational Trustees agreed to act as the trustees of the school. John Sharples was appointed as Head in 2001, during which time the school was designated a specialist music college, and on his retirement in 2014, Beverley Scott-Herron was appointed Head. The school became part of the Challenge Academy Trust (TCAT) in 2017.

When I retired as Head in 2001, I said that I was willing to continue as Clerk to the Trustees, if the trustees so wished, to provide continuity until the school's status was finalised. My period of office as Clerk continued for rather longer than expected! But I have to say I wasn't complaining; after retirement I was keen to keep my brain active and there was plenty to do.

The principal task of the Clerk is to prepare for the three meetings per year of the trustees and manage the associated administration. The first, and urgent, task requiring my

attention in 2001 was to determine the ownership of the school so that it could be transferred. Cheshire LEA said that the deeds for the school land had been lost. In 1923, when the school was located at School Brow, the governors purchased land at Latchford from the Manchester Ship Canal for playing fields. In 1925 they also purchased an adjoining plot of land with the intention of moving the school there – this didn't happen until 1940. After some considerable time and effort, I was able to locate the deeds and registration with the Land Registry was completed in 2006.

In 1522 the trustees acquired land and property in Lancashire and Cheshire and the income from rents funded the running of the school. When this land was sold off over the years – for housing, a garage, a school, a supermarket the freehold interest was retained. With ground rents being fixed in the 1930s on 999-year leases, it was, by 1994, uneconomic to collect them. The trustees approved the sale of the freehold to the tenants and by 2006 virtually all the freehold reversions were complete. Other tasks included the management of the lease on School House; the sale of small parts of the playing field; obtaining permission to spend some of the trust's endowment; the school's change of status to an Academy; and the setting up a new system of reporting to the Charity Commission.

I found my time as Clerk to be mentally stimulating and very satisfying in allowing me to continue to be involved in the development of an organisation which has served the community of Warrington for nearly 500 years.

The Boteler School has been an important part of my life for a number of years. I pay tribute to my former teacher colleagues for dedication to the education of Warrington children and their friendship and support; the trustees and governors for freely and generously giving of their time in advancing the aims of the scheme and supporting the school; and my two Headteacher successors who have invested so much energy and personal commitment into moving the school forward and providing a unique educational experience for the pupils in their care.

John Higgins
November 2019