

LUKE HOWARD AT SCHOOL

When Luke Howard, father of Robert and John Eliot Howard, was eight years old (1780/1) he was sent to “one of the two most important Quaker schools in southern England” at Burford, Oxfordshire, where he stayed for seven years. Thereafter he received no more formal education but nevertheless became a distinguished scientist in chemistry and meteorology and was in due time elected a Fellow of the Royal Society (1821).

Burford, a small and pretty Cotswold town (and nowadays something of a tourist trap) has a longstanding connection with the Quakers, 1709 being the date on the entrance gate to the Meeting House. The Friends in this area have had their ups and downs over the centuries: they flourished in the period we are looking at and today the community is in a very healthy state.

As the town is not far from Tetbury I recently decided to see what I could find out about the school and why Luke's parents, Robert and Elizabeth Howard, send him there. They, after all, lived in Old Street, London, just north of the City, a long way from the Cotswolds, and one might have expected them to choose somewhere nearer such as Forster's School in Tottenham. His sister Elizabeth records that he came home only “in the midsummer vacation”, so, no family reunion at Christmas? ... that seems rather hard.

While I have not identified the second “important school” it is clear that the choice available was not great since most of those that now come to mind had not then opened or were not fully established. Thomas Huntley's School at Burford had however been in existence since 1751 when he himself started it. A local historian calls it a fine school, nationally known, and describes Huntley as a competent scholar who produced French, Latin and English grammars and wrote tolerable Latin verse though his English verse was less solicitous.

Luke's own verdict can be found in his well known letter to Goethe of 1822, “a Friend who was an excellent man and a good Classic. But [he says] he was of the old school and his method was to flog those who could not learn fast enough and leave those who could to their own pace. The consequence to myself was that I acquired more Latin than I have since been able, much neglect of study notwithstanding, to forget; and I was so little prepared for the Mathematics that, amidst more active occupations, I have never found the way to them.” Elizabeth calls him a worthy man, very strict in his rules towards his scholars.

After two years Luke's younger brother William followed in his footsteps but the school itself closed in, 1811 and Huntley died in 1813. At about that time his son, Joseph Huntley, removed to Reading where he started a small biscuit factory and shop and a Huntley of the next generation, another Thomas, went into partnership with a certain George Palmer. Such was the beginning of Huntley and Palmers who, for well over a hundred years, made Reading justly famous.

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Tetbury, Glos.
April 2000

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for help and information given by
The Rev Raymond Moody of Cobb House, Burford
and
Mr R H M Warner of The Lodge, Burford.