



Uppingham by the Sea 150 Years Since the Great Migration to Borth

**By Jerry Rudman, School Archivist
Adapted from a Chapel Talk, May 2009**

150 years ago, Uppingham was in trouble, serious trouble. Edward Thring was 54 and in his 22nd year as Headmaster and he had a major problem on his hands – TYPHOID.

On 24 June 1875 the young son of Lord Hawke, a boy in the Lower School (now The Lodge) died. On 21 September 1875, Kettlewell of the Lower School contracted the disease and by the end of the month there were 27 cases in the house, 17 cases in West Deyne, 1 in West Bank, 6 in Lorne House and 1 in Redgate (the House opposite Highfield which was at that time a school boarding house). Cecil Mullins, the young son of the Housemaster of West Deyne died on 15 October. A few days later, Nash from Redgate died, and then Hastings, Oldham and Richardson at the Lower School died. There was also the tragic case of the young man from Southampton who had arrived in Uppingham in September to work at the Lower School only to hear when he got out of the coach at The Falcon that he was entering a place of death. He was poor and had no money for the fare home. He stayed and was dead within the month.

All the boys were sent home on 2 November 1875, and it was hoped that the long break before the start of the Easter term on 28 January 1876 would be sufficient for conditions in the town and the School to have improved, but NO.

By 20 February a boy contracted typhoid in Cobb's house (a small boarding house on the corner of School Lane). His boys went home. There were more cases in Redgate and by March, cases in West Deyne and one in Thring's House (School House, which at that time was the present library and common room). Again, Thring ordered the dispersal of the whole School. Swine flu in the UK pales into insignificance compared with this crisis in Uppingham.

In these previous months telegrams had rained down on Thring from worried parents and he knew that reassembly at Uppingham and yet another epidemic would mean the end of the school. The parents would take their sons elsewhere.

There was a special masters' meeting on 7 March and Campbell, Housemaster of Lorne House said "Don't you think we ought to flit" – The idea was born of mass migration of the school.

**150th Anniversary
Uppingham's Exodus to Borth ~ March 1876**

If nothing was done Thring and his masters would be personally ruined. They had invested their money and all their energy into building up the School. They owned 90% of the buildings and infrastructure. This crisis was particularly painful for Thring. He had come to Uppingham at the age of 32 as Headmaster and said to friends at that time “I have found my life’s work today”.

He was an inspirational leader, an imaginative and determined schoolmaster, an independent thinker, author and radical educationist. He was also assertive and sometimes ruthless. He could make enemies by his wilful actions and fought numerous battles and had rows with his own parents, with rebellious boys, with the Trustees, with the Endowed Schools Commission, and with the Town and National Sanitary Authorities. To oppose Thring was difficult although he was sometimes unfair or wrong. He was a God-fearing man and an attack on Thring was “An attack upon God whose will he was interpreting”. He magnified so many differences of opinion into matters of principles. Though small and stocky, he had a majestic, noble, austere presence in frockcoat and top-hat - a visionary figure, an autocrat who had a great love of life and a ready smile.

Thring had inherited a small country Grammar School in 1853 of 43 boys, 18 of them day boys. The School had been approximately that number for the previous 269 years. By 1876 there were 300 boys and Thring had increased the staff from 4 to over 20. In those 22 years the schoolroom had been built, the Chapel, workshops, laboratories, an aviary, gardens and a gymnasium. French, German, Science, History, Art, Music, Carpentry, games and athletics were taught. The Lodge, Lorne House, The House adjoining the old Post Office (Garden Hotel), Red House, Constables, West Deyne, Brooklands, Highfields – as it was then known. The house at the corner of School Lane, West Bank, Fircroft and Redgate had all come into existence under the leadership and guidance of Edward Thring. This charismatic figure with radical ideas on education had produced a flourishing successful school with a national reputation. He was highly respected by other Headmasters. The first meeting of The Headmasters Conference had recently been held at Uppingham. He was a powerful man and about to be ruined by typhoid fever.

And what of Uppingham – the place at that time? What brought about this awful state of affairs? Well, it was drains and cesspits and wells. Uppingham was still a cesspit town.

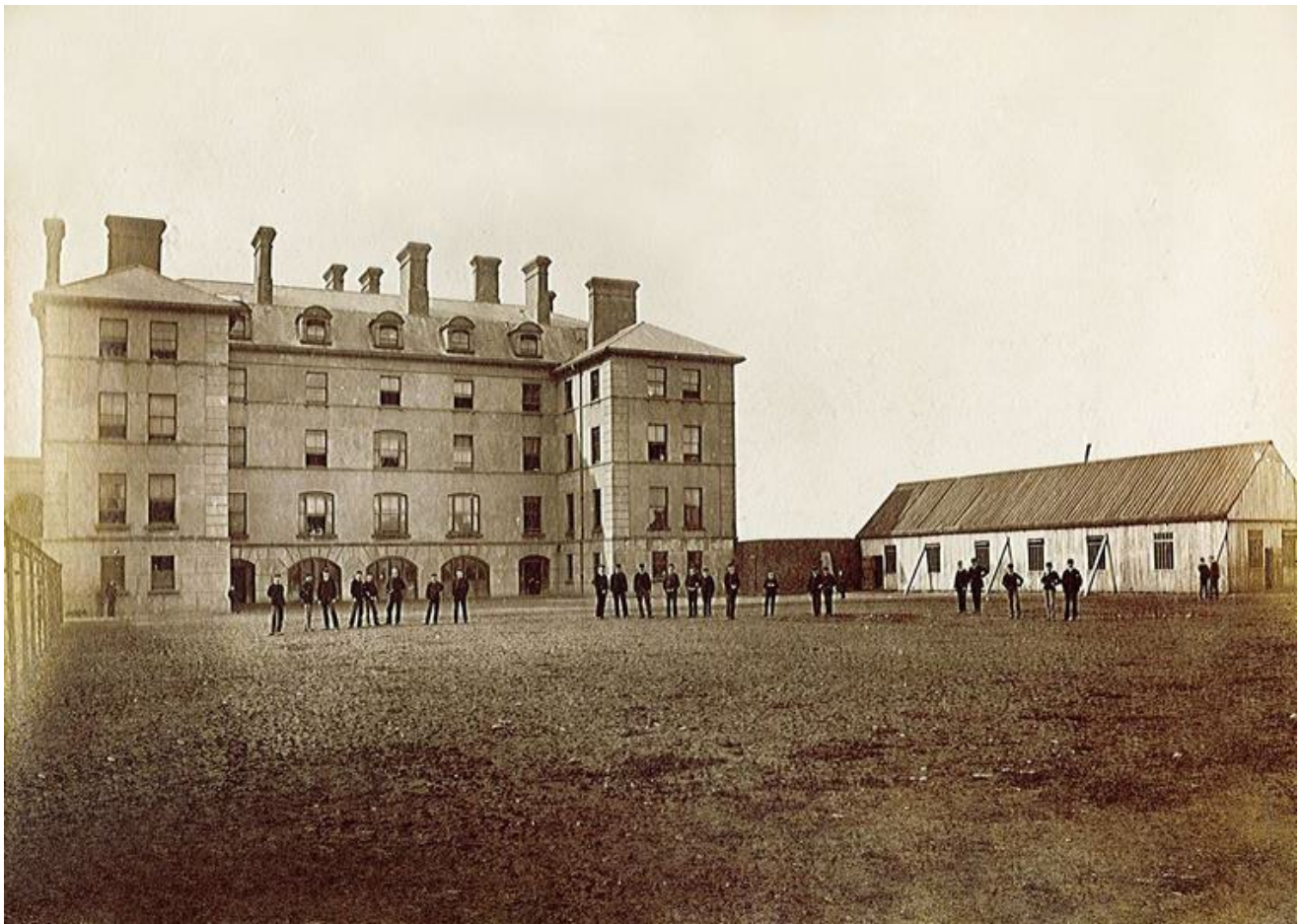
In a report by Haviland, the Medical Officer of Health, he describes how “material from the Lower School cesspits was pumped out and used on the celery beds in the garden as fertiliser. The garden drained into the stream, which then flowed on down the valley, becoming polluted successively by further effluent, oozeings from the old gas works “the drainings from manure heaps, a cowshed, a pigsty, a stable and other accommodation of filth, plus cesspit overflow and drainage from the cemetery before becoming the feeder of the bathing place and swimming pond, and then passing to the south of Bisbrooke where it is used for brewing purposes.” The sewers were in a most sorry state. It is not surprising that disease took hold with the mixing of sewage and well water. Basically, the drains, wells and cesspits were inadequate. There was no waterworks.

There isn’t time in this address to go into any detail on the claims and counterclaims of school and town and whose cesspits and drains were to blame for these outbreaks of fever. Suffice to say the School was certainly not without blame, and Thring and his masters were not in modern parlance, transparent, and quick in their action in the early cases of typhoid. The School did so much between the two outbreaks of typhoid fever in terms of improvements with drains, cesspits and ventilators, but it was not enough, and the town authorities still had much to do. If this area interests you, you need go no further than to Nigel Richardson’s scholarly work published in 2008 titled “Typhoid in Uppingham.”

Back to the story, and this is where Thring came into his own as a leader - a man of great faith, vision and courage. Migrations from schools had happened in the past when disease had struck them and their towns. Arnold at Rugby had held reading parties over a number of weeks for groups of scholars in the Lake District, but no one had ever contemplated moving the whole school lock, stock and cricket roller.

The Lake District was considered as a possible location. Thring knew it well, and had a holiday home in Grasmere, but Cobb was sent to the West coast of Wales on 13 March 1876. On 15 March Thring, a couple of trustees and another master joined Cobb. They had found Borth, and there was the Cambrian Hotel, a large white building with two wings and a walled grassed enclosure. The Cambrian Terrace – a set of Welsh cottages – overlooked the enclosure at right angles. On 16 March a contract was signed at £1 a head per week for board and lodging. Negotiations were made with the owners of the 12 cottages for studies and bedrooms.

On 27 March a goods train of 18 trucks – 300 beds and mattresses, desks, chairs, lamps, books, papers, games equipment and yes that cricket roller. Hardly anyone in Borth spoke English at the time. The workmen were surprised that Thring assisted in the manual labour - stitching curtains, making dining room tables, plastering and cleaning. A wooden school room was built, it was just a little smaller in size than the OSR, the stable became the school carpentry, and the coach house the gymnasium. There were rooms for music practice, studies, sick rooms and even fever hospital accommodation. Furniture had to be made, bookshelves, ticketing of doors, and a huge consignment of bathroom and bedroom ware was ordered from the Potteries. It was all very hectic, and the staff had less than one month to create a new school.



The Cambrian Hotel, where most of the boys boarded, in 1876 (Uppingham Archives)

Would the parents go along with this “Great Experiment”? In the archives we have a letter dated 9 March 1876 written by Sam Haslam, Housemaster of The Lodge (that House existed on the Site of East Block and the Hall). The letter was sent to Mr Copeman, whose sons Robert and Alfred were in the Lodge. It must have been typical of many written by Thring and his housemasters.

"Dear Mr Copeman

I must write you a few lines about the course we are taking. It is our last stand to save a great school and one that has done much good work. If we do not assemble somewhere while the necessary work is being done, the School will surely vanish or nearly so, the boys being absorbed by other schools and tutors. And so would one of England's best schools be nearly obliterated, and not only that but all Public Schools be rendered less secure in time of danger. And among other incidental advantages not the least is the good likely to accrue to every boy's character who shall come and share our difficulties in this crisis. So, we hope for the confidence and support of all parents who feel that we are doing our best for the boys and for the School.

Yours truly"

The parents were notified that boys should reassemble at Borth on 4 & 5 April and remember there were no emails and no telephones at that time. Thring must have been apprehensive, concerned and anxious that the boys would not arrive. But his reputation, the high esteem that parents held for him, and the good name of the school prevailed, and 297 of the 300 boys arrived. Within three weeks the School had moved – from nothing on 15 March to 297 boys and all their school equipment – mostly in place in various lodging houses and hotel by 5th April.

We won't go into the battles Thring had with his trustees – fundamentally they said he was on his own. They would pay the masters' salaries but would not financially support otherwise. Yet again Thring was financing his life's work. He wrote "It was like shaking the alphabet in a bag and bringing out the letters into words and sentences, such was the sense of absolute confusion turned into intelligent shape." The colony was established. The camp existed. The campaign had begun. Exile in Borth.

What did the boys think of it? Well, it really must have been fun. Four miles of beach, a maritime plain, scrambles in the hills and mountains to climb, Cader Idris and Plinlimon, rivers to explore such as the River Dovey. Fishing on the River Lery. Trips and concerts in the towns of Aberdovey and Aberystwyth. The first matches against Shrewsbury were played in cricket and football. (We won the cricket and drew in football). Athletics happened along the Old Borth Road. There was no "lock-up", no bells – they signalled significant times of the day by flags, as the noise of wind and sea would drown any tolling of bells. (Two of these flags remain in the Archives.) Boys got lost on rambles, stuck on rocks for hours when the tide caught them out.



The schoolboys were active in the village's sporting life (Uppingham Archives)

The boys had to adapt and be flexible. Classes of 20, up to 6 boys sharing studies. Exhilarating five minutes breathing time at 11.00am each day on the beach. The food wasn't brilliant, a great amount of Welsh mutton, and vegetables and fruit were difficult to find for such numbers. I am sure that present day Health and Safety Legislators, Risk Assessors and the Independent Schools' Inspectorate would have had an absolute field day.



Boarders At Mrs Aitken's house in Borth (Uppingham Archives)

The initial plan was that the School would be away from Uppingham for one term but inadequate progress on repairs to drains in the town, and another typhoid case meant the School stayed away for a year. They were not without their troubles at Borth in that time. Seven cases of scarlet fever, and a massive storm in late January 1877 shook the "colony", and the village of Borth. But there was great pleasure and appreciation in helping the villagers rebuild, clear roads and restack their fuel dumps of peat. As Skrine wrote "An education which gained those boys the impulse of prompt helpfulness later in life at other places, in different circumstances". Borth was an enlivening experience and much of its achievement was the trust and freedom which Thring described as its greatest benefit. In a sermon in 1876 at Borth, Thring said:

"You may show to all England that boys can be trusted, that boys have truth, that boys need not prison walls and bars and bolts to keep them from wrong, but can be self-governed, trustworthy, genial companions, above playing tricks, above the meanness that must be watched, above the idea of successful cheating. And it may be that our free life here, lived in a spirit of true liberty, every boy in earnest to make things go right, may do more to overthrow low views of education than all that ever happened before. For new and startling facts have great power."

In April 1877 before the School left Borth the villagers paid many tributes to the School. Here is just one short one:

"We the inhabitants of Borth beg to tender our most sincere thanks to Dr Thring, and all the masters and scholars of the celebrated Uppingham School, for the very generous acts and kindly feelings exhibited to us during their sojourn here. No offence had ever been given. No boy had laughed at the villagers, if they were old and queer looking or queerly dressed. There had been no disorder, no shabby act, nothing undecent".

Thring rose in reply and gave one of his most heartfelt speeches.

"I have made many speeches in my life since I have been master of this School. Two and twenty years of school mastering give me a good deal of exercise for the tongue from time to time, but never in my life have I stood up to make any speech which I feel so little capable of making as I do tonight; not from want of practice, but because the feelings you have aroused in us are such - and our sojourn here has been such a boon to us – that it is impossible for me to tell you the value we set on living here and the welcome we have received. Never in my life have I had such testimony to the School which I cared so much for as the testimony you have given tonight." The full text of the speech, and it is a good one, can be read at the end of Skrine's book, "Uppingham by the Sea".

The School left Borth in April 1877 and there was much rejoicing and floral arches and bunting and a very warm welcome from the townspeople of Uppingham. There were lengthy speeches by town dignitaries and from Thring. Great progress had been made with the drains and wells.

Thring preached a commemoration sermon every year until his death in 1887 to remember Borth. In Chapel in May 1878, he said in his first Borth Commemoration service:

"We hold our thanksgiving today for a great deliverance and year by year I trust as long as this School lives, the memory of its life preserved shall be commemorated as it is on this day, that strange flight, the home we found, the strange return and every year shall deepen the feelings of a great deliverance and make us say with Jacob – The Lord is in this place: The Lord shall be our God. We are too close to it as yet. As time passes what has happened will be better seen".



The School continues to tell the Borth story each year, honouring Thring's request, a tradition which will be remembered by generations of OUs,

Thring interpreted the Borth story in biblical terms. He saw much similarity in Bible stories to the School's crisis in Uppingham, the deliverance at Borth, and the safe return to Uppingham one year later.

In the few years leading up to Borth, it could be said that Thring was "cruising". He had lost some vision, he had become a little complacent, perhaps a little smug. He wrote in his diary on 28 May 1876:

"I shall not easily forget that morning before prayers in Upper School when I stood – about a month before the typhoid – and in a sort of Christian Nebuchadnezzardom rejoiced in the School, and thought that though God could easily shake the School and destroy it, I did not quite see how".

Well, the School was truly shaken, and nearly destroyed, but the actions of that great Headmaster with his strong faith in God, the success of up-rooting and the return to Uppingham provided many biblical references in Borth commemoration and Thanksgiving services down the years.

At the end of Thring's life he wrote an address for the teachers of Minnesota and he was reflecting on his teaching methods and education principles and he said:

"I am only looking through the keyholes of the doors which I am trying to open for you. I see glimpses of the landscape, and the path, and the light on the path and all the life of it. I hope you will enter in and make it your own."

For current Uppinghamians, I trust the landscape of your education here is or has been challenging and rewarding. I hope the landscape of your lives after school is full of bright light. But when the clouds, the dull times and the storms appear, which inevitably they will, you will have built into your character from this place the qualities and values so much displayed by those boys, by the Headmaster and masters, and from the people of Borth all those years ago. TRUTH, TRUST, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT, COURAGE and LEADERSHIP. And I know that these traits will guide you in making the right decisions with your own families, and in your life's work wherever and whatever that might be.

