

Sandbach History Society

Report on March 2022 meeting

Margaret Roberts: Educating Cheshire: The County Training College, 1908–1974

“Educating Cheshire: The County Training College, 1908–1974” was the title of the talk given by Margaret Roberts at the March meeting of Sandbach History Society by Zoom. Mrs Roberts is the Publicity and Social Media Officer for the Family History Society of Cheshire and the editor of “Playing Past”, the online magazine for sport and leisure.

She said that in 2019, whilst working as an archivist at the Crewe campus of the Manchester Metropolitan University, when the university decided to withdraw from the site, she was able to save material relating to the former Crewe County Training College from its foundation in 1908 up to 1974 when it amalgamated with Alsager College. Most of the material has been deposited with the Crewe Family History Unit based in the municipal buildings in Earle Street.

The Education Act of 1902 radically re-organised the administration of education, creating 328 local education authorities which had the responsibility to provide all aspects of education including the training of teachers. Building grants were made available to encourage the LEAs to provide their own county training colleges and by September 1908, the Crewe County Training College was opened.

Planning was slow but the need for teachers was pressing and so the LEA leased rooms at the Mechanics Institute whilst a suitable site was acquired and buildings approved. 65 students were enrolled and the Principal, Robert Delaney, was appointed with three other full-time staff together with part-time and visiting lecturers. For students not living at home a hostel on Edleston Road was provided for the women while the men found lodgings in local houses.

In July 1912, the college moved into new buildings on land which had been acquired at Crewe Green. (These buildings still stand today). The women had their own hostel but, at this stage, the men were still accommodated in local houses. They did, however, have use of a day community room which it was hoped to convert to a hostel at a later date. Men and women were segregated in line with the social norms of the day, having their separate entrances to the college. In the teaching block the corridors were wide and fraternisation was not allowed. Some teaching rooms were shared – but not at the same time. Outside the gymnasium there were separate exercise yards separated by a 10 foot-high brick wall where the women were safe from the male gaze whilst in pursuit of their sporting endeavours. Apart from church attendance on Sunday and an end of term social, the only time the sexes mixed was for choral singing in the Great Hall on Saturday mornings.

Mrs Roberts spoke about some of the early students including Sybil Booth, born 1893, who joined the college in 1911. She lived at home, in Crewe, and Mrs Roberts said that she must have experienced something of a culture shock, coming from a working class background where she probably shared a bedroom, and even a bed, to have her own room, her food cooked and served and her laundry attended to. Sybil was elected a senior student (a sort of head girl) and was captain of the hockey team. The women played in navy box-pleated

gymslips which had to be at least 8 inches below the knee. Matches were played against other colleges, team members often travelling by bicycle. One of the team, Ethel Lawson, came from a wealthy family and turned up at matches on her motorbike. Field trips were organised to North Wales (men and women on separate courses) and Mrs Roberts showed Sybil on Snowdon in the ordinary clothes and footwear of the time. Sybil made many lasting friendships at college including James Hibbert whom she later married. As a married woman, along with women in other professions at that time, she had to give up her teaching career after the wedding.

Mrs Roberts described a typical college day. Students were up at 6.00 am and breakfast was served at 7.00 am. There was no break in studies until lunch at 12.00 pm. Tea, consisting of bread and jam, was served at 4.00 pm with a roll call at 6.00 pm followed by supper at 8.00 pm. After prayers, it was bed by 9.30 pm. The women were, more often than not, hungry, said Mrs Roberts, and would organise "bean feasts" at 2.00 am with pork pies and lemonade. They were also known to persuade the men to obtain fish and chips for them from Crewe which they hauled up to their rooms in a basket on the end of a rope.

The men, who were in lodgings, were supposed to be under similar strict regulations as the women but stories show that they were out at all times, climbing out of their bedroom windows to go to the cinema on Saturday evening, for example. There was no uniform but students had to be formally dressed. They were also required to speak to each other with the appropriate title and were similarly addressed by the staff.

During the period of World War I, there was peer pressure on young men to suspend their studies and enlist in the services. By late 1915 the only men in college were those who had been rejected for service. By the end of the war, 14 former students had died in action. One of them was Howard Pedler who had secured a teaching post in Fulham. Keen to do his best, he enlisted with the Royal West Kent Regiment but was killed in the early stages of the Battle of the Somme. His identity disc was recovered and in the files, said Mrs Roberts, is a very moving letter from his father, an Anglican priest, asking whether his son's remains were ever recovered. Howard's brother was later killed in the war.

In 1930 a new Principal, Mr Brock, was appointed. He was keen to give more responsibility to students and a Students Union was set up on the campus. But some strange rules still applied such as a ban on male and female students sitting together on the college lawns. Mrs Roberts also mentioned that in 1930 Mary Hutchinson enrolled at the college, later to become Mrs Mary Whitehouse.

As the thirties continued, financial cuts started to bite as a result of the depression. The building of the men's accommodation block was again postponed and students had to buy their own exercise books. In 1941 the education committee informed the college that sweeping economies needed to be made and that abolition was being considered. In order to save the college, Mr Brock proposed continuing as a female-only college and the proposal was accepted. Mr Brock was forced to retire and the Vice-Principal, Miss Hall became Acting Principal until the appointment of Miss Margaret Laurence in 1946.

Miss Laurence was a formidable lady, said Mrs Roberts, and very autocratic. She organised “remedial English lessons” for students with strong accents, which she regarded as “uncouth and rather common”, getting them to recite poetry at weekly gatherings to improve their diction. The programme was short-lived however, after the Education Committee got to hear about it. But although outwardly scary, some former students would point to a humane side to Miss Laurence.

The lifting of wartime restrictions and the introduction of the 1944 Education Act led to big changes. New buildings and new courses – including a specialist course for the training of nursery school teachers – led to increased numbers, including students from other countries.

With the advent of the three-year teacher training course in 1960 came more extensions including a large hall, dining room, gymnasium, Rural Studies facilities and three hostels. In 1962, Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon came to the college whilst on an official visit to Crewe. This was the principal’s proudest day, said Mrs Roberts, and preparations went on for weeks. The occasion was somewhat soured when the local press reported that 30 members of the domestic staff had been locked in the kitchen until the couple had departed.

Until the age of majority was changed to 18 in 1970, the college took *in loco parentis* very seriously and strict rules were laid down, in and out of college. The women students were not allowed to wear slacks and there was no visiting in rooms between males and females; the college had a reputation as something akin to a finishing school.

When Miss Laurence retired in 1971 the college had grown to over 900 students. The newly appointed Principal, Miss Bronson Ward, was to oversee the re-admission of men and courses other than teacher training. She became the Director of Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education on the amalgamation of the two training colleges in 1974 and oversaw the move to university status, as part of Manchester Metropolitan University, in 1992.

Mrs Roberts ended by saying that she had enjoyed listening to the voices from the past, as contained in the archive material, and trying to piece the jigsaw together. There were inevitably some pieces missing but she hoped to continue with the work and would be interested to hear from former students.

The next meeting of the Society will be held **in Sandbach Town Hall** on Tuesday 5th April at 7.45 for 8.00 pm when Jeremy Nicholls will talk about “Nantwich and the Railway”. Visitors are welcome but are asked to contact the Society via info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk to assist planning and to reserve a place.

John Higgins

13/03/22