

The History of Farnham College

Farnham College is the result of the amalgamation of two local Farnham schools, one fairly ancient (Farnham Grammar School, a boys' school), the other rather more recent (Farnham Girls' Grammar School).

Farnham Grammar School

The ancient school may have its origins in the year 1351 when a chantry was established at Farnham Castle by William Edington, Bishop of Winchester. Unfortunately, there is no surviving documentary evidence of this. The chantry was later transferred to the local parish church where a special chapel was built on the north-west corner. It is possible the school began under the supervision of the priest charged with carrying out his duties under the chantry who probably had spare time to run a school for pupils who showed promise in studying classics.

Farnham College can definitely trace its roots back to 1560 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, as that is the date of an historical record relating to the application for a licence to build a school at 'Farnham, in the County of Surrey, England'. In 1578 Robert Horne, Bishop of Winchester, set up a scheme for the erection of a school in Farnham - possibly a revival of the fourteenth-century chantry school as mentioned above. The first piece of corroborative evidence which confirms that the school had actually been built is a record from 1585, when a yeoman called Richard Searle, who lived locally, donated 20 shillings 'to the maintenance of the school of Farnham'.

The school benefitted from numerous bequests and gifts during the 17th century, some being made by local people and others coming from the generosity of the incumbent Bishops of Winchester. In 1611 a Dr. John Harding of Frensham, Professor in Hebrew and President of Magdalen College, Oxford left rent of £10 annually to the school from his lands at Dockenfield. Henry Massingberd who, from a poor background became a rich merchant, endowed the school in the reign of James I. (There is a very tenuous link through marriage of the Massingberd family to Sir Nicholas Stoughton, Baronet of Stoke, Surrey and, again, through marriage (Rose Stoughton) to the Onslow baronetcy.)

1657 brings the first mention of an actual building. The result of a court held for the Manor of Farnham in which Nicholas and John Brown surrendered one cottage and two crofts on land at Frensham that had been gained by encroachment resulted in monies from the sale of the properties being paid to 'the schoolmaster of the town of Farnham, being fit, approved and teaching the Latin tongue in the school house adjoining the church of Farnham.'

John Aubrey wrote about the school in 1673 (Perambulations in Surrey) when he visited Farnham, noting that the building was 'an ancient chapel or chantry'.

In 1680, after the Restoration, George Morley, Bishop of Winchester, left for the use of the schoolmaster a messuage (dwelling-house) at 25 West Street, a garden and several tenements in Farnham for use as his accommodation and that of the masters of the school, which were used much later as the school itself.

In 1722 it was reported that the school needed £100 spent on repairs. Once the repairs had been completed, it was envisaged the school could take on 30 more boarders. However, the school's reputation at that time was quite low and by 1725 there were just 15 boys.

In approximately 1758 it was decided to enlarge the churchyard by taking down the old school and selling the materials. No mention is actually made of what happened to the school as a result, but this may well be when the school finally moved to West Street, as mentioned above.

By 1788 the numbers were down to eight and the situation was becoming dire. In 1800, The Rev. Samuel Locke came down from London and brought 12 private pupils with him; however, he would only teach those boys and not the other local pupils.

In 1823 the brother of Jane Austen, the Rev. H. A. Austen, was Headmaster of the school; he held the position for five years until 1828.

The school almost certainly operated as an early grammar school; Latin and other classical languages comprised the main part of the curriculum, together with some music and mathematics. It was not permitted for other subjects to be taught in grammar schools¹ until the Grammar Schools Act of 1840. Consequently, the school in West Street was reorganised as a grammar school in 1849; in 1872 a new schoolroom and dormitory were added and it was partly rebuilt in 1893 by several old boys – the architect was Paxton Watson and the builder Tompsett and Kingsham.

The boys' school remained in West Street until 1906. Following the 1902 Education Act, through which the funding of grammar schools was redirected to the newly formed local education authorities (Surrey County Council in this case), the town centre assets owned by the Foundation were swapped for new premises at Morley Road which had been built by SCC. The availability of the West Street property, which was now owned by SCC, enabled the education authority to start Farnham Girls' Grammar School (FGGS) in the old boys' school premises.

The boys' school was established under a revised charitable trust – Farnham Grammar School Foundation Trust. Farnham Grammar School (FGS) re-opened in its new premises in 1906, with entrance to the school conditional on passing an entrance examination and the payment of fees or, alternatively, with a scholarship awarded on merit. The introduction of the common entrance examination (11+) under the 1944 Education Act radically changed this policy and grammar school places were awarded through academic prowess rather than the ability to pay. The school and its six acres of ground had cost £12,000; the school building itself cost £6,580 and was built by Crosbys (old boys themselves). The architects were Messrs Jarvis and Richards – who were employed some thirty-odd years later to build the new Guildford Technical College at Stoke Park. The school took about 150 boys of whom 23 were boarders.

During its 388-year existence, the school educated several thousand local boys. In its latter years, boys came from local towns such as Godalming, Guildford and Woking – the school had a rich history and achieved great success in educating boys from the surrounding areas, producing some famous and high-achieving people.

Both FGS and FGGS ceased to exist in September 1973 when, with the introduction of yet more educational reform, the schools merged to create Farnham Sixth Form College, the first sixth form college in Surrey. At the same time, the local secondary schools became comprehensives. The new college retained voluntary controlled status and the Trust was reformed as the Farnham College Foundation.

In 2007, Farnham College merged with Guildford College of Further and Higher Education. The Trust was reorganised under a scheme agreed with the Charity Commission as Farnham Educational Foundation and continues to own most of the buildings and land at Morley Road, which are leased to Guildford College. One former governor of Farnham College has joined the Guildford College Corporation in order to provide continuity.

The Foundation continues to take a keen interest in Farnham College and the success of its students; it gives awards to students and supports the enrichment of the students at the College.

The alumni of FGS have an active body called the Old Farnhamians' Association which considers Farnham College to be the natural successor of FGS. It supports the College in various ways and makes annual awards to successful students. In addition, the Old Farnhamians' Leaving Scholarship Trust offers financial support to College students who move on to higher education or professional and vocational training through a system of grants which ex-students can apply for on an annual basis whilst they are studying.

In 1985, The Farnhamians' 400 Trust charity was formed to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the school. The Trust was to provide the Farnham Lecture for the benefit of the town's residents; collect and preserve memorabilia relating to the history of Farnham Grammar School and Farnham College; to engage and commission research into the history of the Grammar School and the College and to pay the expenses for students, ex-students and ex-staff in respect of educational study approved by the trustees.

Morley Court is the original part of the grammar school. An old carved pillar dated 1607, which came from the West Street building, can be seen in the entrance to Morley Court – a permanent reminder of the old school.

In 2010, planned maintenance of the old school building revealed that the Bell Tower (Morley Court) was in a parlous state; a large crane removed it to safety pending repairs during the summer.

¹ Under a court ruling of 1805

The main building on the site is Surrey Court which houses the LRC, restaurant, teaching rooms and laboratories. College Court is a new teaching block with up-to-date classrooms. The crèche is housed in the former Music Centre.

The former school buildings in West Street were occupied for a while by Farnham School of Art and later still, once the School of Art had relocated to its new premises in Falkner Road, the Farnham and Ash Institute of Adult Education occupied most of the building.

Farnham Girls' Grammar School

In the latter part of the 19th century, a few girls attended Farnham Grammar School, learning alongside the boys (the number of pupils then was under 100); the only other alternative for them was to win a scholarship for the Tiffin Girls' School in Kingston-upon-Thames, which was on the other side of the county for Farnham-based pupils, but the scholarships were few and far between.

However, things began to change and in 1897 Farnham Council granted Mrs. George Swayne a licence to start a school at 74 Castle Street; from this simple red brick building Farnham Girls' Grammar School would grow. Initially, the school was named The Modern Commercial School for the Daughters of Tradesmen and was very small – a lobby, two classrooms, a music room and an assembly room. The school's curriculum was fairly broad-based and Mrs. Swayne was ably supported by several 'foreign governesses and certificated teachers'.

By 1899, there was another secondary school in the town for girls – Farnham High School had been established in East Street by the Penns (who were a local couple) and their daughters.

It was in this climate of impending national change – the Board of Education Act, 1899 meant that steps were being taken to put secondary education into government hands, plus the raising of the school leaving age to fourteen – that it became clear that neither private individuals nor voluntary organisations could cope with the growing demand for secondary education. In 1901, Rev. Thory Gardiner set up a committee to found a secondary school for girls in Farnham town centre which would slot into whatever kind of system might be set up by the government. Eventually, on 23rd September, 1901 with a new Headmistress (Miss Annie Julia Case [Girton College, Cambridge]) and a new name, the Grammar School for Girls, Farnham, opened at 74 Castle Street – a date which later generations would celebrate as Foundation Day.

In 1902 the Education Act was passed, which meant that old School Boards were wound up and County Education Committees would take their place. By May 1903, the SCC Education Committee examined the report generated on Farnham and, encouraged by a sense of urgency it was agreed in June 1903 to ask the Charity Commissioners to sell the West Street buildings (FGS) to the SCC for use as the Girls' Grammar School and to relocate. In November, 1903 the Morley Road site was purchased and in January, 1904 the 'Farnham Grammar School for Girls' was officially taken over by the county, the first grammar school in the county to be integrated into the new state system.

By this time, the Castle Street house was totally inadequate for the fifty girls who were attending the school. It was decided that a move into temporary premises was required until the West Street premises were ready, so the school in East Street was taken over. The boys had already transferred to FGS; the remaining girls simply joined the incoming school. Both Headmistresses lost their jobs; SCC appointed Miss E. M. Clarke as the new Headmistress. The fees were fixed at £2 a term, plus a 2/6d charge for stationery.

In 1905, despite the fact that the East Street premises 'being about as ill-designed for the purpose as it was possible for a school to be', the school was recognised as 'efficient' by the Board of Education, had its first official inspection and held its first official Speech Day.

The school remained at East Street for eight terms before eventually moving to the refurbished buildings in West Street in September, 1906. The cost of converting the buildings was £1,200, to which Farnham Council donated £500.

In 1908, the Headmaster at Farnham Grammar School decided that the name of the girls' school should be changed, in case people thought the schools were linked. Mr. Priestly, FGS Headmaster, pointed out that wholly maintained secondary schools were normally called 'County Schools' and the Education Committee favoured the idea. However, representations from the governors of the girls' school convinced the Committee that the title of Grammar School should be retained 'for strong local reasons'. As a result of their petition, the school became known as Farnham Girls' Grammar School. As a point of interest, the examination boards used to add (Boys) in brackets to the certificates issued to the pupils of FGS in order to make the distinction.

In 1939 Farnham Girls' Grammar School relocated to the new premises in Menin Way, the opening of which was celebrated in the presence of the Duchess of Gloucester on 20th July, 1939. Before the new school was built, the girls used to go up to Menin Way to play hockey; building of the new school began in April, 1938. The architects were Messrs Jarvis and Richards, who also built the County Technical College, Guildford. The new school could cope with 330 girls and had cost £50,000 to build. Miss Frances Wake King (appointed in 1937) continued as Headmistress.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of war in September, 1939 prevented the girls from using the school immediately - air raid shelters needed to be constructed before schooling could commence. Miss King was successful in persuading the authorities that a semi-underground boiler room would make suitable cover for 40 people and, on this basis, part-time schooling underpinned by schemes for home study began on 19th September, 1939, just five days after the scheduled start of term. By half-term the shelters were partially completed and permission had been obtained for 100 girls to use the basement in the case of an emergency and school life returned to something that almost represented normal.

In 1940, the school celebrated the first of its' Founder's Days – a short service was held in the Assembly Hall on 26th June, which was Thory Gage Gardiner's birthday. In mid-July, FGGS shared their new school with the Greycoat Hospital School from Westminster, who had been evacuated to Farnham via Brighton. There were now 430 girls and, as a result, Surrey County Council rented accommodation (Shide House in Great Austins) to cope with the overspill.

The Greycoat girls returned to their school in Westminster in 1943, leaving FGGS to resume its normal life. The Greycoats left, as a commemorative gesture, a prize 'For Service to The School' which was awarded for the first time at Speech Day in 1943.

In the summer of 1965, a circular known as Circular 10/65 brought about more reform. The declared objective was to end selection via the 11+ and eliminate separatism within secondary education. The FGGS had a healthy sixth form by 1969 – out of the 435 pupils, nearly 100 were sixth formers. By the end of 1970, the fate of both Farnham grammar schools had been sealed – they would amalgamate. FGGS would close and relocate to the Morley Road premises – the emerging school would be run as a combined secondary school and sixth form college in the first instance. There would be no more entries to the secondary school from the local schools, that route would close once all the students had moved up through the school into the sixth form when the joint transformation into a sixth form college would become complete. The grammar schools would become part of the past, imbued in the history of Farnham.

Mr. P. French, the then Headmaster of FGS, became the Principal designate of the new Sixth Form College, which opened in the autumn term of 1973. Mrs. M. Honick was the acting Headmistress of FGGS for the last few years of its life; she was the only appointee to have come from within the school and the only married headmistress the school ever had. FGGS held its final Speech Day in 1972; they also reverted to the old custom of celebrating Founder's Day with a short celebratory morning service in the Assembly Hall and took their last first form entry.

The FGGS buildings in Menin Way became a middle school (South Farnham Middle School) which opened in September, 1974.

In August, 2011 Clive Cooke left Guildford College Group in order to pursue his career; the Corporation appointed Dr. David Collins as interim Principal and CEO.

Acknowledgements:

A History of Farnham Grammar School in Surrey; Former Governors, Staff and Old Boys
The Story of a School – Farnham Girls' Grammar School - HN