

R.T. Milford: The Mysterious Case of the Forgotten Housemaster

In December 1910, the Headmaster of Sherborne School appointed Robert Theodore Milford as Housemaster of the new boarding house which was then being built in Richmond Road in Sherborne¹. This house was named Lyon House and R.T. Milford remained its Housemaster until his resignation just three and a half years later in Trinity term 1914. However, Milford's place as the first Housemaster of Lyon House has been completely overshadowed by the subsequent thirty-two year reign of A.H. Trelawny-Ross who took over from Milford as Housemaster and remained in charge until his retirement in 1946.

*The Sherborne Register 1550-1950*² records that Milford had an MA from New College, Oxford, and that he left Sherborne School in 1914 to take up a post on the staff of the Bodleian Library. But where had Milford come from and why did he leave Sherborne School after just three and a half years to take up a post at the Bodleian Library?



R.T. Milford in 1903.

Milford had in fact taught at a number of schools before his appointment at Sherborne. Having gained a BA and an MA in Classics at New College, Oxford³, his first teaching post was at St John's Foundation School in Leatherhead, a post he held from 1887 to 1894. Milford evidently enjoyed his time at St John's, as a letter written by him published in *The Johnian* school magazine in 1894 reveals:

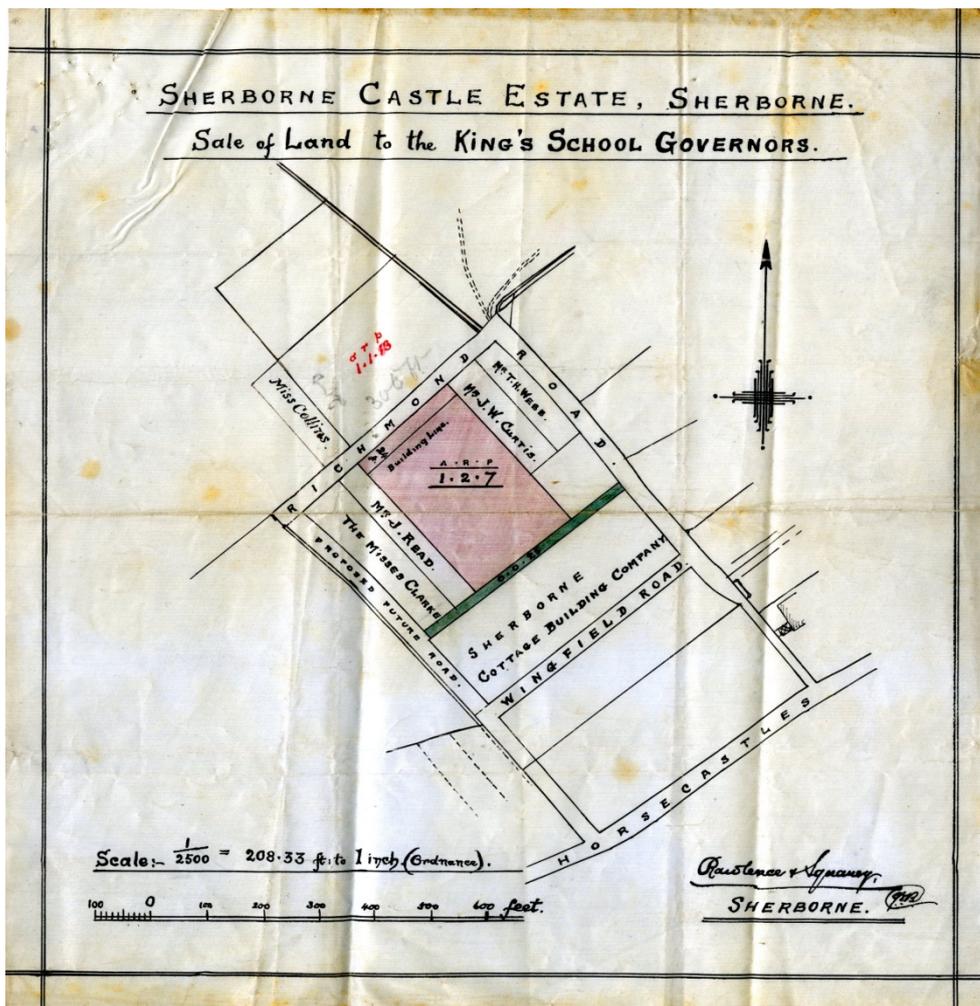
*"Will you kindly allow me space in your columns, to express in writing, what I could not adequately express in words at the end of last term, viz., my thanks to the past and present boys of St John's for their most handsome present of fish knives and forks? It came as a complete surprise to me (though my form on one occasion, I remember, nearly let out the secret), and I need hardly say how pleased and gratified I was with the gift. The seven years I spent at St. John's were among the pleasantest of my life"*⁴.

After leaving St John's in 1894, Milford took up the post of Headmaster of Yockleton Hall Preparatory School in Shropshire, he also married Elspeth Barter (1868-1959) the granddaughter of George Moberly, Bishop of Salisbury. Milford remained Headmaster at Yockleton Hall until 1903, during which time he and Elspeth had three sons. Their eldest son, Theodore Richard Milford (1895-1987), went on to become Canon and Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral and in 1942 founded Oxfam⁵. T.R. Milford married twice, his first wife was Nancy Dickens Bouchier, the great-granddaughter of Charles Dickens, and his second wife was Margaret Nowell Smith, the daughter of Nowell Charles Smith the former Headmaster of Sherborne School who had appointed his father as Housemaster of Lyon House.

No records survive of the nine years that Milford spent as Headmaster of Yockleton Hall Prep School, but in 1903 he left Yockleton Hall and took up the post of assistant master at Denstone College in Staffordshire. *The Denstonian* school magazine records Milford's arrival at the School in Michaelmas term of 1903 to teach modern languages and also mentions that he was an avid cricketer and singer. Milford remained at Denstone College for just two years, leaving in the Lent term of 1905⁶. However, the next five years of Milford's life between leaving Denstone College and his arrival at Sherborne School remain a mystery.

In February 1911, Nowell Charles Smith, the Headmaster of Sherborne School, reported Milford's appointment to the School Governors:

*"The number of boys was, in the Lent Term 202, in the Summer Term 213, in the Autumn Term 229. This term the number is 227. Last term all the Houses were full, and there were two boys over, who lived with Mr Palmer. You therefore decided to build a new Boarding House on an excellent site in Richmond Road, and I appointed Mr R.T. Milford, MA, of New College, Oxford, lately a master at Denstone College to be our chief modern language master, and asked him to take charge of the new House when finished. Meantime this term he has taken Gainsborough House in South Street, where he has begun with four boarders. I earnestly hope that the building of a new House will be justified by a considerable increase in numbers after the Summer Term."*⁷



Plan of the plot of land on which Lyon House was built, 1910.

While Milford awaited the completion of Lyon House he set up a temporary boarding house with four boarders in Gainsborough House in South Street. It was during this time that the boys discovered a skeleton underneath the floorboards, which resulted, as A.H. Trelawny-Ross revealed in his book *Their Prime of Life*, with the boys giving Milford the nickname 'Cripps' in reference to the Dr Crippen case which was in the news at the time and to whom Milford bore a passing resemblance⁸.

By October 1911, the 15th Annual Report of the Old Shirburnian Society reported that the exterior of Lyon House was complete:

“Mr Milford’s house is now finished outside and looks very large and thoroughly serviceable. It is not, unfortunately for its future occupants, very near the school, but it is nearer the Field than any other boarding house. Mr Milford has at present about a third of his future complement of boys and will go into the big house in the New Year.”⁹

And in November 1911 *The Shirburnian* was hoping that Lyon House would soon be habitable:

“Mr Milford has not occupied the new house this term, as was anticipated, owing to the building being not quite completed. But next term we hope to see him installed in Lyon House, which, judging from its external portions, might fitly be termed a palace.”¹⁰

In the meantime, Milford continued to try to teach modern languages to the boys at Sherborne School which, from the Headmaster’s Report on the Examination of the School in 1912, was something of an uphill struggle:

“The French report of the VIth was very unsatisfactory, especially in view of the fact that the Form had one period a week more French than the previous year. The examiner was the same in both years. Taken in connexion with H.M. Inspector’s report, this results shews that our French teaching leaves much to be desired. The time allotted to the subject is very little, except in the two lowest forms; but though this fact necessarily limits the quantity of ground covered, it need not be inconsistent with accuracy and soundness. Probably the chief bar to progress is the invincible reluctance of Britishers to utter the French language aloud: but in any case I hope we may attain to greater grammatical accuracy.”¹¹

An insight into Milford’s French lessons appears in Alec Waugh’s semi-autobiographical novel about his time at Sherborne School, *The Loom of Youth*, in which Milford is caricatured as Henry Trundle:

“Henry Trundle was one of the French master’s. He was entirely English, had won his Blue for golf at Oxford, and had got a Double First. He also was quite incapable of teaching anything. His form made no pretence of keeping order; the noise that proceeded from his class-room could be heard anywhere within a radius of a hundred yards. And yet he was not a bad fellow; he was a good husband, and his children were very fond of him. His domestic virtues, however, were sadly lost on Fernhurst, who looked on him as a general buffoon, a hopeless ass. His class-room was considered a sort of Y.M.C.A. entertainment hall, where there was singing and dancing, and a mild check on excessive rioting.”¹²

Milford sought solace from his troubles in the classroom in the musical activities of the School, joining both the School’s Oratorio Choir and the Chapel Choir as a tenor¹³. He also took part on 19 December 1910 in the Musical Society’s Christmas Concert singing two School songs with Messrs. Dennis, Tester and Parry-Jones, and again at the Archaeological Society meeting on 19 March 1911 when Mr Tester gave a lecture on ‘The Development of Song’ in the Big School Room Milford and Mr Dennis sang a selection of songs to illustrate the lecture¹⁴. At the two hundredth concert of the Musical Society on 29 July 1912, Messrs. Milford, Davis, Dennis and Moore sang a special School Song composed especially for the concert by Mr Tester when *“The choir cooed like doves, soared like larks and did everything else which they were expected to do with much goodwill and the admirable singers.”¹⁵* Milford’s musical activities evidently played a part in encouraging Lyon House to win the House Glee competition in March 1914¹⁶.

The eventual opening of Lyon House on 25 January 1912 for the start of the Lent Term appears to have been a quiet affair with no fanfares or fuss, quite unlike the grand opening by Lord Milner of the Carrington Buildings and Westcott Art School just over a year previously in November 1910.

Milford and his family moved into Lyon House in January 1912 with sixteen boarders. The first sixteen boys comprised Arthur George Adams (1893-1976) who became the first Head of House and went on to become a Lieutenant with the Indian Army Reserve of Officers, being awarded the Indian Police Medal in 1928, and his brother Owen Philip Adams (1894-1939) who joined the 1/4th Battalion Dorset Regiment and later became a solicitor. There was also William Charles Woodbury Hammond (1897-1960) who joined the American Protective League (Secret Service), Kelsick Ernest Alexander (1897-1990) who became Vicar of Kenton in Devon, John Reginald O'Bryen Steward (1896-?) who joined the Lincolnshire Yeomanry, Robert Malcolm Nicolls (1897-1977) who became a tea planter, and Robin Edward Moberly (1899-1993) who became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. Frank Sherwood Taylor (1897-1956) went on to become Director of the Science Museum in London, and Hamilton Morton Howard Sleigh (1896-1979) who was knighted in 1970.



A postcard of the newly-built Lyon House, 1911.

Of the first sixteen boys, five became casualties of the First World War. William Wallace Edmund Messenger Clark (1897-1916) was killed in action in 1916, Maurice Porter Bennett (1897-1917) died of wounds in France in 1917, Charles Graham Rivers Halliday (1897-1917) was killed at Ypres in 1917, Eric Seth Ward (1898-1917) was killed in action in 1917, and John Walter Gunning (1897-1918) was killed at Bapaume in 1918. And two of the boys, Maurice William Sidney Harris (1897-1922) and Herbert Kenneth Richard Bent (1896-?), were awarded the Military Cross¹⁷.

Milford's tenure of Lyon House was not to be a quiet one. In 1913, Sherborne School had a diphtheria scare. The first case occurred at Abbeylands with a few days after the beginning of the Summer Term 1913 when the house was isolated and the boys sent home. Later that term cases occurred at The Green, Harper House and Lyon House, with Mr Milford himself contracting diphtheria. As a result of the scare all milk supplied in future to the School was pasteurised and supplied by Mr Stanley Young of Barton Farm¹⁸.

Discipline at Lyon House under Milford appears to have been rather slack, as revealed by the former House Tutor and later Housemaster, A.H. Trelawny-Ross, in *Their Prime of Life* (1956):

*"I think, looking back, that the House, when I went up as Tutor, was rather typical of the old-fashioned system, or lack of it, which was based on the theory that boys, if left to themselves, would develop all sorts of fine qualities. The wastage involved was not perhaps sufficiently considered. I shall have more to say about that. Meanwhile I, as a young House Tutor, was faced with a great deal of cheerful anarchy, which could obviously not always remain cheerful since that inevitable five per cent, whose weaknesses force restrictions on any young community, would certainly bring along some minor tragedy, if unchecked. One large fellow, not a Prefect, had fags bring up his breakfast to him in bed; boys in charge of Prep. (Hall Keepers, to use the local name) would do so with their feet up, drinking lemonade through straws; even Prefects might go to sleep in their baths. Luckily all this was in its early stages and could be stopped before real harm crept in."*¹⁹

It is therefore not surprising that by Trinity Term 1914 Milford had had enough and handed in his resignation to the Headmaster who reported to the Governors that *"Mr Milford resigned his Mastership, finding the strain too great."*²⁰ Milford had evidently also had quite enough of teaching and sought a quieter life back in his university town of Oxford. His brother, Sir Humphrey Sumner Milford (1877-1952), was publisher to the Oxford University Press and by 1914 was one of the most powerful figures in the Press, being the protégé of the OUP's chief executive Charles Cannan, and as a result his word would have carried some weight within the university²¹. It is therefore highly probably that Sir Humphrey secured his brother a place as an assistant at the Bodleian Library, where Milford would remain for the next twenty years until his death aged 73 years in January 1935²². At the time of his death, Milford was working on a catalogue of the Bodleian Library's collection of newspapers and periodicals from 1663 to 1800, including *The Sherborne Mercury*, which was eventually published posthumously in 1936 in the *Proceedings and Papers of the Oxford Bibliographical Society*²³. Milford's obituary appeared in the February 1935 edition of *The Library Association Record*:

*"Mr Robert Theodore Milford, who died recently, was a figure at the Bodleian for 20 years. He joined the staff soon after the outbreak of the War: he was over 50 but teaching had kept his Latin and Greek from rusting. He wrote a good hand, too, another valuable asset, and soon acquired a knowledge of library routine. As the younger men gradually left to join up he turned his hand to a variety of jobs, and ultimately held temporary rank as a statutory assistant. One of his first tasks was the cataloguing of the valuable Bywater collection, then lately received. He also revised the classical headings in the catalogue, a piece of work that is likely to stand after any revision. Later he wrote a hand-list of 'Libb. Polon.,' a collection of Polish books and books on Poland, bought many years ago, but never before made available for readers. For the last few years he was engaged on a catalogue of English newspapers and periodicals published from 1663 to 1800. The Bodleian Library, thanks to the Nichols and Hope collections, is particularly rich in early periodical literature, but its resources in that respect are at present insufficiently known to students. Mr Milford completed his work on the catalogue shortly before his death. It will be published by the Oxford Bibliographical Society, and cannot fail to be of the greatest value to those engaged in historical and literary research. Milford was a good colleague, a man of mild and cheerful serenity."*²⁴

Milford lived in Oxford at 153 Woodstock Road, just a few minutes walk from 135 Banbury Road, the home of Nowell Charles Smith the former Headmaster of Sherborne School. As a fellow of Milford's old college, New College, Oxford, it is possible that Milford and Smith knew each other before

Milford's arrival at Sherborne in 1911, but if they did not know each other well in 1911 then they certainly did by 1936 when their families were united by the marriage of Milford's son and Smith's daughter, and by the two daughters who resulted from the marriage.

R.T. Milford may have left Sherborne School in 1914 but he remains forever part of the history of the School through his role as the first Housemaster of Lyon House.

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Notes

¹ *The Shirburnian*, December 1910, p.406.

² *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950*, p.lvi.

³ Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses 1715-1886*, p.954.

⁴ *The Johnian*, 1894.

⁵ Tomkins, 'Milford, (Theodore) Richard (1895–1987), Church of England clergyman and philanthropist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁶ *The Denstonian*, 1903.

⁷ *Head Master's Report to the Governors for 1910*, p.8.

⁸ Trelawny-Ross, *Their Prime of Life*, p.16.

⁹ *Old Shirburnian Society 15th Annual Report*, October 1911, p.5.

¹⁰ *The Shirburnian*, November 1911, p.144.

¹¹ *Head Master's Report on the Examination of the School*, 1912, pp.3-4.

¹² Waugh, *The Loom of Youth*, pp.114-124.

¹³ *Sherborne School Blue Book*, Lent Term 1911.

¹⁴ *The Shirburnian*, March 1911, pp.22-25.

¹⁵ *The Shirburnian*, November 1912, pp.402-404.

¹⁶ *The Shirburnian*, March 1914, p.297.

¹⁷ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950*.

¹⁸ *Head Master's Report to the Governors for 1913*, p.3.

¹⁹ Trelawny-Ross, *Their Prime of Life*, p.16.

²⁰ *Head Master's Report to the Governors for 1914*, p.6.

²¹ Maw, 'Milford, Sir Humphrey Sumner (1877–1952), publisher', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²² *The Library Association Record*, February 1935, pp.81-82.

²³ Milford and Sutherland, 'A catalogue of English newspapers and periodicals in the Bodleian Library, 1662-1800'.

²⁴ *The Library Association Record*, February 1935, pp.81-82.

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