A brief history of St Peter’s School

St Peter’s School
3–18 YORK
St Peter’s School was founded by St Paulinus of York almost 1400 years ago, in 627 AD. He founded both the School and York Minster in the same year on the same site. At that time they would have looked very different; small wooden buildings in the middle of a compact, ramshackle town on the River Ouse.

In the 700s, Egbert, the Archbishop of York, established a fine library at the School, which became renowned throughout England and Europe. He also appointed Aelberht, later to succeed him as Archbishop, as Master of the School.

In 741 when disaster struck and both School and Minster burned down; it was Aelberht who set about rebuilding them. Archbishop Aelberht travelled across Europe collecting rare texts, and used them in the St Peter’s curriculum.

In 778 a former pupil, Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, became Head Master. The pupils, all boys at this time, studied Latin, grammar, rhetoric, time-reckoning, logic, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic and natural history as part of an incredibly varied curriculum.

“Older than the House of Commons, older than the Universities, older than the Lord Mayoralty, older than the House of Lords, older even than the throne or nation itself.”

Arthur F Leach, “Fortnightly Review”
November 1892
In 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, the city of York was sacked. William I appointed Thomas of Bayeux as Archbishop and the School flourished.

In 1289 the School changed premises in the first of many moves over its long history. The relocation took the School from the site of the current nave of the Minster to a house near the Minster’s present east end. Fifty pupils were housed in nearby St Mary’s Abbey.

Around 1350, the Black Death spread to the city, plaguing the citizens of York for around twenty years. The population of the town was devastated, and research suggests that the incumbent Schoolmaster was probably a victim of the disease.
In the sixteenth century, the School was given a Royal Charter by Queen Mary I of England, and in 1557 moved premises to new buildings in the Horsefair, just outside the city walls. Less than twenty years later, in 1575, our most infamous student, Gunpowder Plotter Guy Fawkes, attended St Peter’s.

The Gunpowder Plot involved Guy and twelve others, including brothers and fellow St Peter’s pupils John and Christopher Wright. The School’s connection with Guy Fawkes continues, with our current location in the Clifton area of York situated on land once owned by the Fawkes family.

In 1644 the School buildings were destroyed in the Siege of York. The boys were moved back inside the city walls and the School continued in Bedern, a former refectory and dormitory for clergy. Bedern Hall still stands and is today a popular wedding and events venue. After this tumultuous time, a period of stability was ushered in when Rev William Thomlinson became Head Master in 1679.

In 1718 an Old Peterite was appointed as Poet Laureate. Laurence Eusden (1688-1730) has the distinction of being the...
youngest ever appointee to this role, at just 30 years old, but sadly he has been described as the worst Poet Laureate ever, and was rumoured to have obtained the position through flattery rather than the excellence of his verse.

Another period of upheaval started in 1730 when the School briefly moved premises to the Bagnio, a Turkish bath on Coney Street in York, then five years later to the disused church of St Andrew where it remained until 1828. A survey of the School around 1819 showed that the School only had twenty pupils.

In 1827, Stephen Creyke, a young Oxford graduate, was appointed Head Master and given the task of saving the School. By the time he departed the number of pupils had rocketed to over 100.
The twentieth century saw the School continue to evolve, starting with the acquisition in 1901 of St Olave’s Prep School. In 1922 the School swimming pool was built, first as an outdoor pool, before being covered over in 1965 and later replaced in 2011.

In 1860, with British fears of a French invasion, St Peter’s became one of the first schools to set up a Cadet group, St Peter’s Company (no. 4 Company, 1st Volunteer Rifle Corps, York).

The Combined Cadet Force (CCF) continues to be a part of School life to this day.

1838 marked a major event in the School’s history, when St Peter’s School amalgamated with Clifton Proprietary School, and as part of the merger moved to occupy the present 47 acre site just outside the ancient city walls, with its beautiful buildings and grounds by the banks of the River Ouse.
In 1976 the first girls were admitted to the Sixth Form. In that first year there were five; by 1980 there were twenty three. In 1987 St Peter’s School became co-educational at all levels.

In 1994 the School purchased Clifton Pre-preparatory School, allowing St Peter’s to provide a seamless, continuous education from ages 3 to 18.

In 2001 St Olave’s moved to the Queen Anne site, so that all three Schools shared the same grounds. Today life goes on at the School: Buildings are improved; our pupils go on to achieve great things.

The story continues...