

J. W. "Boss" Turner B. A. (1896 - 1980)

Headmaster at Swanage Grammar School from 1932 until his retirement in 1960.



James William Turner (JWT) was born at Willenhall, between Wolverhampton and Walsall, in Staffordshire on April 15, 1896, the fifth child of a family of seven. His mother was widowed early and had a hard life bringing up her children. After gaining a scholarship to nearby Wolverhampton Grammar School JWT became a student teacher but the First World War interrupted his teaching career. Though he enlisted in the Army, where he quickly gained a commission with the South Stafford Regiment, JWT volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps. As a flight Lieutenant he flew anti-submarine patrols in flying boats over the North Sea and was mentioned in despatches. On two occasions he forced landed on water; the second time he was rescued in the nick of time. After the war JWT enrolled at Birmingham University where he gained First Class honours in English with Subsidiary Latin. He then taught for five years in a co-educational school at North Shields and a further three years were spent at another co-ed at Melton Mowbray, by which time he had married Alice Jane James.

After joining a summer vacation course at Oxford JWT secured the Oxford Secondary Teachers Diploma with distinction, the only distinction awarded that year. Later he became Second Master at North Manchester Municipal High School for Boys, where he remained for three years.

In 1932, aged 36, JWT was able to fulfil his dream of living on the South Coast when he was appointed Headmaster of Swanage Grammar School and set up home at Ulwell Road. In April 1934 JWT's book *Applied Grammar* was published by Elkin Mathews & Marrot Ltd. and written in Swanage. At some stage he thought of moving on to a larger school but was so happy in Swanage that he decided to put down his roots and remained in Swanage for the rest of his life. He remained Headmaster at Swanage Grammar School for 28 years, until his retirement in December 1960.

During his time at the School JWT oversaw many changes and improvements. On his arrival at SGS and throughout the 1930's there were 167 scholars and a staff of eight. With the passing of the 1944 Education Act and the introduction of secondary education for all, coupled with the abolition of school fees, the floodgates opened. With an annual entry of 60 pupils and a five-year main course the school's pupils and staff had more than doubled by the time of JWT's retirement. However, the school and its grounds had not expanded to cope with this influx and proved more inadequate as each year passed.

JWT will ever be remembered for introducing, in 1937, the annual Spring Term Festival, a wonderful concept that enabled the less academic to show their prowess in other equally important areas, chiefly the Arts. It was started with the object of stimulating interest in Speech and Music but soon included other arts and crafts. After the declaration of war in September 1939 43 year old JWT remained at SGS. His First World War flying experience made him an ideal commander of No 1314 (Purbeck) Flight, Air Training Corps, which had Headquarters at Wareham Senior School and the SGS 6th. Form room, once known as the Geography Room.

JWT will also be remembered for inaugurating Oldfield House in 1948, a bold experiment that involved a cocktail of

50 co-educational boarders. JWT became Oldfeld's first Housemaster, with his wife Alice as Housekeeper, the couple remaining in charge until the arrival of the Brighams in 1950. The acquisition of Oldfeld brought with it a gymnasium - PT had previously taken place in the school hall. After the building of a purpose-built woodwork room at Oldfeld the former premises were converted into what became a first class library, opened in 1953, the year of HM Queen Elizabeth 2's Coronation. Also, in 1948 further space became available in the school when the canteen was built and during the following year the old Cookery Room and Kitchen were converted to a new Domestic Science Room and a form room. During 1956/57 JWT oversaw the building of the new Science Labs and the new Art Room, thereby freeing up more space for much-needed classroom space.

JWT retired from teaching and Swanage Grammar School in April 1960. On April 23 a Presentation Dinner was staged for him at the Grand Hotel in Swanage during which J. E. Lindsay presented JWT with an electric hedge trimmer. There were 101 guests present. Also in April JWT and his wife bade farewell to Oldfeld. In a subsequent letter to housemaster P. Glyn Roberts he wrote:

"We are very proud to be called "The First Oldfelders". The name seems to show that all Oldfelders are one family and that we who started it still belong to it, as people do belong to their families long after they have left home.....When you know one another, as you do at Oldfeld, there are personal qualities which count more than intelligence. Mental efficiency is important; careers are important; but the successes and failures are equal when they get back to their families. There the best are those who are best to know and to live with. I hope you will always be a happy family at Oldfeld....My wife and I are now more in the position of grandparents. In time we will be ancestors; and finally the Adam and Eve who started it all"

Golf had always been JWT's recreation but following a fall on a course resulting in a torn ligament he decided to take up bowls. which he continued to enjoy for many years during his retirement. Many of us will recall seeing JWT and Mr. Rees-Jones engrossed in bowls on the green near Swanage Rec. during the 1960's and 70's. JWT died at his home Mowbray in Battlemead, Swanage on January 11, 1980. JWT's dedication and conscientious diligence built Swanage Grammar School into a fine institution. I leave the last words to former SGS Headmistress, the late Hilda Sheffield, who served the school with JWT for 30 years:

"To him (JWT) the most formative period of school history belongs. Scholastic achievements climbed, but although these have a necessary place, particularly among parents, they are not the cement for building that vital quality, esprit de corps. Mr. Turner's peculiar contribution was to produce incentives whereby Swanage Grammar School could train individual endeavour combined with leadership and team spirit, Hence the enthusiasm with which he guided the School Festival and the Debates. These surely will remain a lasting memorial to him and to the school, until the third and fourth generation"

Written by Dick Riding. First published in "The Swan" 2003.



Mr. J. W. Turner, scanned from the 1957 school photograph.