

A Biography of Harry Marks

Michael Sewell

(The King's School, Grantham, 1943 - 53)

Department of Mathematics, University of Reading.

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/users/pes20/MJSewell/mjs.html>

Written for *The Old Granthamian*, Issue 30, 2007

December 25, 2006

Harry Marks exhibited an alert and measured stance. He conveyed the impression that whatever he did was done with consideration. His chosen profession gave him the opportunity to influence many people by his example. Those who noticed this example had something beneficial to learn. His contribution was significant in the various surroundings of his first thirty years, and then he made a huge contribution to The King's School in Grantham. He played a committed role in the town too.

Harold Frederick Marks was born on 18th January 1898. He died on 19th June 1961, in hospital after a heart attack, while still in harness at The King's School, but only six weeks before he was due to begin a well-earned retirement. I can remember him as clearly as if I saw him yesterday, as I can remember the moment when my mother telephoned with the news that he had died. There had been earlier indications of heart problems.

His parents were Frederick, of Wellington in Somerset, and Jessie (from London). The 1901 census lists them, and Harold with two brothers, William and Gilbert, two years on either side of him. His father was a cabinet maker (and employer). The family were living at 11 George Street in Wellington, a small end-of-terrace brick house built in 1893. As a small child he was a pupil at Courtland Road County School and then, from September 1910 to July 1915, he attended

Wellington School [not to be confused with Wellington College in Berkshire, for example, or other Wellingtons]. By this time the family were living at 22 Fore Street, a continuation of High Street, right in the centre of the town, and only a short walk from both schools. His first appearance in the Wellington School magazine, in April 1911, records that he took part in a Paper Chase, in which some masters were the hares and the schoolboys were the hounds, for 17 miles over hill and dale, and he completed the course without a mistake. This character forming exercise was repeated over 20 miles the next year. He also won the Form Prize in that year, and appeared in *The Merchant of Venice*, football teams, and the Debating Society. (His brother Gilbert was in the School, a year behind him). In his last year at the School he became Senior Prefect.

In 1915 he left to attend the nascent University College of the South-West of England at Exeter, but after less than a year he entered war service in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (Bristol Division). Brief details of his war record are available in Admiralty files ADM 337/3 and ADM 171/127 kept in The National Archives at Kew. He moved through the ranks of Ordinary Seaman (31st July 1916), Able Seaman (31st October 1916) and Signalman (21st January 1917) at the shore-based stations of Victory VI and Pembroke I. Then he served at sea as Signalman for nearly two years on the cruiser H. M. S. *Astraea* (16th March 1917 to 9th January 1919). Photographs of the ship can be found at http://www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/hms_astrea.htm on the Web. This service abroad (which may have been on the Cape Station, ranging on both sides of southern Africa) qualified him for the Victory Medal, in addition to the British War Medal given to all servicemen. On 10th January 1919 he embarked on H. M. S. *Dwarf* for passage to England, arriving on 27th February 1919 to rejoin Pembroke I. He was accepted by the War Office for admission to an Officer Cadet Unit, but this was not pursued because of demobilisation on 26th May 1919. This period between the ages of 18 and 21 must have been a very formative experience at an impressionable age. By the end of it, if not before, he was self-propelled.

In 1919 he resumed his course at Exeter, at a time when that College was a rapidly evolving institution, but with a small staff. From 1919 to 1922 the Mathematics Department staff consisted of a Lecturer (L. B. Benny) in charge, and two Assistant Lecturers. Harry Marks graduated with external degrees from the University of London, namely Pass B.Sc. in 1920 and Honours B.Sc. (Second Class) in 1922. In science in 1920, teaching at Exeter was for the Pass degree only. He became Chairman of the Students' Union at Exeter, played for the College rugby and soccer teams, and was a leading light in their Dramatic Society.

It is worth realising that the College at Exeter was a very different institution in those years from what it later became. This is clear from the history of it written by B. W. Clapp, and published by the University in 1982. For example, H. F. Lunn was appointed “Mathematical Master” in 1901. He was one of the first four professors in the College in 1904 and they, together with the Principal and the Mistress of Method, ran the College for a period from 1910. But Lunn was obliged to become a Second Lieutenant in an anti-aircraft detachment near London when the 1914 war came. It is not clear who was left to teach Harry Marks when he first arrived in Exeter. Aside from Lunn, just one Assistant Lecturer and a Demonstrator are named in the Mathematics Staff list for his first year. In any case, “men students almost disappeared” at the start of the war, but at its end “men flocked back to college” and “there were ex-servicemen’s grants generous enough to attract larger numbers to universities than ever before”. Lunn retired in 1919. In 1920 a new Principal (Hector Hetherington) was appointed, and in 1922 the Streatham estate just outside the city was bought to provide essential building land which is now the main campus. In 1963 Hetherington published a fascinating account of the evolution of *The University College at Exeter 1920 - 1925* during the brief but crucial years of his Principalship. From it we learn, for example, that in Harry Marks’ final year (1921 - 22) there were only 94 degree students in all subjects (and 323 full-time students in all), that the College site in Gandy Street was “all wrong”, and that in 1920 “its small library was housed in the City Library”. On the other hand, many of the students were ex-servicemen, with the maturity that would go with that. Harry’s role as Student Chairman may have involved him in business meetings with Principal Hetherington from time to time. Coming from Wellington, only 22 miles away, Exeter could have been seen by the family as Harry’s “local” university. But it may have given him fewer advantages at that time than were experienced by the many students who he later prepared for university courses himself.

After graduating from Exeter, HFM chose to become a schoolmaster. He had already done some private coaching. In later generations, someone of his ability would have had the alternative option to become a research student. His first job was Mathematics Master at Truro Wesleyan Middle Class College [called Truro School since 1931, and quite different from the modern 18+ Truro College founded in 1993]. This job was from 1922 to 1924, for an annual salary of £240 (of which he paid £65 to live in the College). He taught mathematics, physics and (to lower forms) English. His skillful sad rendering of “Lightning, the cart-’oss candidate for the Derby” at a Christmas 1922 party is remembered in the *Truro College Magazine*. He ran chess and drama ventures for the pupils very successfully. When he left he presented a shield to the College, to be awarded annually “to the boy

who has done most good to the College”, and he was succeeded in his post by his younger brother Gilbert (also a B.Sc.). Harry then moved away from the south-west to the post of Senior Mathematics Master (£363) at Morley Grammar School in Leeds, from 1924 to 1927, with responsibility for mathematics throughout the School. His wife undertook some French teaching there, and he also taught classes at Morley Technical School. Mr. and Mrs. Marks were both active in the Old Morleians Amateur Dramatic Society and in School drama. For example, in an Ervine play “As a typical country parson he was delightful, correctly presenting us with a mixture of piety, absent-mindedness, timidity and reproachfulness”. There was “dismay” in the senior forms at Morley when he left. He joined The Mathematical Association in 1926, and was a member for the rest of his life. This is the national professional Association for mathematics teachers. In January 1928 he took up the post of Mathematics Master at The King’s School, Grantham (£394 - 8s - 2d). The house where he and his wife Dorothy lived on Signal Road is named “Exon”, presumably to reflect the Exeter connection. Did they have it built? The Marks’ had no children. Perhaps the energy which might have gone into such a family was channeled into The King’s School. Dorothy Marks died on 26th October 1964 at Langham in Rutland.

On 1st September 1948 Harry Marks was appointed Second Master, on the retirement of Billy Rowell. He undertook much of the organisation of the School and, in particular, prepared the timetable in those years on the peg-board mentioned by Clive Hutchinson in *The Old Granthamian* of 2002. He figures little in the School magazines (*The Granthamian*) after 1948, but he was an enormous asset to successive Headmasters. From January to March of 1959 he served as Acting Headmaster, between the departure of W. J. Huggins and the arrival of G. A. Goodban. Having started under Tate, and then Bispham, he worked with four Headmasters.

Tributes to Harry Marks by Goodban and by Huggins can be read in the issue of *The Granthamian* for Summer 1961, which also contains the photograph shown in Fig. 1 (supplemented here by his signature from a Form Master’s Report). My purpose here is not to repeat those comments, but to add to them. A former colleague, D. O. Childs, wrote to *The Grantham Journal* to say that “Grantham has lost an outstanding figure”. To one Old Boy he “represented all that was admirable in the teaching profession”. He surely was an exceptional teacher of mathematics. The clarity of his explanations, and the thoroughness with which he marked homeworks, have been long remembered by his former pupils. Some say that “he got me a Credit in my School Certificate”, as if they did not actually get it themselves. Sixth Form homeworks, in particular, came back with extensive



Figure 1: Harry Marks in about 1930



Figure 2: Harry Marks on the 1950 School photograph

and detailed comments in his tiny hand, which always repaid study. Boys noticed that he could draw an almost perfect circle freehand on the blackboard. His influence permeated many aspects of School life. Old Boys will still recall, and find even now in their valued termly School Reports, his thoughtful comments. On my own Reports he was never content with a mere “Satisfactory” or “Could try harder”. The 13 vertical millimetres assigned for a Form Master’s Report could accommodate four lines of constructive commentary from HFM. In the classroom there was no ambiguity about who was in control. That jutting lower lip expressed determination. Some pupils were discomfited by sarcasm. He did not need the physical deterrent of a cane in the cupboard, or a chair leg, or a plymsoll shoe, or the edge of a ruler across the knuckles, or a flying piece of chalk or board rubber. Very occasionally the warning “Keep your Saturday free” would crackle across the room, and the culprit knew what that meant: two hours of Masters’ Detention on a Saturday afternoon, with other offenders, supervised by a (luckless) master. But for many he earned respect “by being quietly authoritative and approachable at all times.” The photograph in Figure 2 is from the 1950 School photograph, taken by Panora Ltd. of London. Another portrait can be seen in M. G. Knapp’s 1995 book of Walter Lee’s wartime Grantham photographs.

He taught mathematics beyond the call of duty. The last lesson of a term would sometimes be devoted to illustrations of fallacious mathematical arguments, and what surprising things could be “proved” thereby. If the syllabus was completed before the end of the year, off-syllabus topics would be introduced to the class. Examples of these were the consequences of $E = mc^2$, prompted by the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945; and the four-colour theorem. Sometimes a boy would be invited to visit him at home, upstairs in his “den” where so much of his marking and preparation was done, if he judged that such meetings would be a convenient way of expediting the learning process in a boy who would benefit from such a venue. One of his developed skills was the provision of carefully balanced tactical advice to sixth formers trying to choose between different universities and courses. I could sense his very discreet support when I was Head Boy, and several years later, when I became a university lecturer, he was still concerned enough for mathematical education to write to me with his views. The *H. F. Marks Memorial Prize* was established at The King’s School in 1962 for annual award to a scholar who has “a genuine flair for Mathematics at sixth form level, coupled with industry”. Governors, staff, boys and Old Boys contributed to a Trust Fund for this purpose. *The Granthamian* for Summer 1962 announced the first award of the Prize, and the recipient for 2006 is named in the KSG Speech Night programme.

A small Austin car, HMF 815, became his preferred method of getting to

School, after the bicycle of earlier years up and down Hill Avenue four journeys a day. The car was well known never to exceed 35 m.p.h., even en route to the West Country for his annual holiday. On one such three-day journey the Marks' shared a hotel, and the only Sunday newspaper there (*The News of the World*), with the Archbishop of Canterbury, a fact with which he subsequently entertained more than one listener.

His pipe was lit on arrival at School, at 8.15 a.m., and for a second time at break at 11.10 a.m., and this was a source of some amusement. His last Headmaster, G. A. Goodban, was also a pipe smoker, but without matches, which he would borrow from HFM and then fail to return, thus provoking an outburst: "That man's stolen my matches again". Old Boys of pre-1950 vintage will remember that, for many years, there was a stable large group of experienced masters. Three of these had a pact whereby V. R. Waterhouse was assigned the duty of buying *Punch* for 9d on a Friday, bringing it into School on Monday for HFM to have it, until he passed it on to M. H. Raymond on Thursday. Confrontation might happen on Monday if VRW forgot to bring it.

His impact as a colleague was not something that schoolboys could easily judge, but he was highly respected in the Masters' Common Room too. Often known as Jerry there, he was ready with encouragement for younger staff. He was an active member of the Assistant Masters' Association, and in 1942 he was elected Chairman of the Lincolnshire Branch. He represented this Branch at some annual Council Meetings of the A. M. A., for example in 1943 (London) and 1948 (Weston-super-Mare). Whether he ever sought to be a Headmaster I do not know, but possibly not, because it would have meant limiting the time which he could give to his varied interests indicated here, and to the teaching of mathematics in particular.

The contribution of Harry Marks to the School, and to the town of Grantham, went well beyond mathematics. He was a keen rugby man, and for 22 years until 1950 he was actively coaching School teams. He wrote some rugby critiques for *The Granthamian*, and in this period he is still remembered by Howard Imber as "this rather august figure running around in his shorts refereeing". He often gave vocal encouragement from the touchline. Later he offered unambiguous oral advice to the referees of international matches when invited to share John Stenson's television viewing. He was in charge of tennis with Tom Brunyee in 1934, and he was Housemaster of Newton House from 1936 to 1948. He was active in encouraging School chess, and in the Debating Society. During the 1930s there were outlying branches of the KSG Old Boys' Society at some of the universities,

and HFM attended some of their dinners, at Cambridge, Nottingham and London in particular. At their February 1939 Annual Dinner in Grantham (at the George Hotel, no longer with us), HFM expressed the wish to see “an Old Boy’s Club” in the middle of the town, i.e. actual premises which could encourage Old Boy’s active participation in the town, but I am not aware that this idea progressed further.

Harry’s naval background surfaced after School Assembly one morning, when he had sung “Eternal Father, strong to save...for those in peril on the sea” with great gusto, and afterwards rebuked the pianist, Barry Leahair, for not playing the piano with more fire and passion.

Quite unknown to me before I began the enquiries for this article was the interest which HFM displayed in amateur dramatics. We have seen that this surfaced in Wellington, Exeter, Truro and Leeds. The Granta Amateur Dramatic Society was a collaboration of Old Scholars of The Kesteven and Grantham Girls’ School and The King’s School. In 1936 they gave four performances of *The Admirable Crichton* by J. M. Barrie, at The Theatre Royal in George Street, and Harry Marks was the Producer. Before that, he was performing, with the same group, and is remembered as “a gifted amateur actor who performed memorably on the stage in School”. Which members of the 1950 Remove would not have been intrigued to see him in the role of Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt, K.C.B. in 1934 (the year of their birth)? This was in *The Middle Watch*, by Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall. In the same year he played the title role in Hackett’s *Ambrose Applejohn’s Adventure*. HFM and his wife were also active in the Grantham Music Club.

In 1942 he performed well on the panel of a public Brains Trust session at the State Cinema. Such events were associated with the Grantham Stay-at-Home Holiday Week, and his involvement illustrates Harry’s developed social conscience. The stresses of wartime in the 1940s revealed other aspects of his public-spirited character, and *The Granthamian* magazines of that time indicate some facets of this. He was an Air Raid Precautions (A. R. P.) Warden. He took a lead in such organisations. He was Head Warden of Post B in 1943, and Treasurer of the Civil Defence Club, and by 1945 he was Deputy Chief Warden for Civil Defence in Grantham. He lectured to Fire Guard parties. Perhaps more surprisingly, from March 1941 to June 1942 he served in the R. A. F. Volunteer Reserve, and he was officer in charge of training for No. 47 Squadron of the Air Training Corps. First he was an Acting Pilot Officer and then Acting Flying Officer, and on 8th March 1942 he was commissioned as a Pilot Officer. He resigned this commission on 22nd June 1942. I do not know the reason for his apparently abrupt departure from an organisation which flourished in Grantham until the end of the war, and whose

activities are described by Vic Hutchinson on pages 19 to 21 of his *Memories of Youth in Wartime Grantham*. Also during the war he was consulted by Aveling Barford about integrals and other calculations, and by R. A. F. Cranwell about route planning.

In 1945 he stood for election to Grantham Council, as a Conservative candidate in the strongly Labour St. John's Ward, but he was defeated. It seems rare for him to have been associated with setbacks. The Grantham Permanent Benefit Building Society was incorporated in 1875, and in 1935 it changed its name to The Grantham Building Society. Harry Marks became its Chairman and, in 1953, for example, he signed an optimistic Annual Report on behalf of the nine Directors. The total assets then were a record £76287, and there were 199 Share Investors and 93 Borrowers. In 1978 The Grantham Building Society, with assets of £1 million, was taken over by The Nottingham Building Society, having assets of over £90 million.

I am very grateful to all those many people who have generously responded to my requests for information during the preparation of this article. I have taken particular care to find out something of the first thirty years of Harry Marks' life, because they were obviously so relevant and also, perhaps, not previously known to Old Boys of the School.