

HOMERTON COLLEGE: a brief history by Peter Warner

In **1768** a small academy with just twelve students was established in a large house in a leafy village called Homerton to the north-east of London. Its purpose was to train Congregational ministers; in time it grew into a renowned training College and migrated to Cambridge, but still kept the name of 'Homerton'. It is the only College in Cambridge to originate as a Nonconformist academy - similar to Harris Manchester College, Oxford, with which it is twinned. And it is the only college anywhere to have started out as all male, becoming mixed in 1850 as a training college, then changing to all female on arrival in Cambridge in 1895, reverting to mixed male and female again in the mid-1970's.

Origins:

The Toleration Act of 1689 granted freedom of worship to dissenters – those who could not conform to the Church of England. However, such 'nonconformists' were excluded from the ancient Universities because subscription to the established church was required, either at matriculation for Oxford, or at graduation for Cambridge. Dissenters seeking a higher education or wanting to train for the ministry either had to attend a university in Scotland, or Europe, or choose one of the many small Dissenting Academies then emerging in England.

Homerton can trace its prehistory to **1695**, when the Congregational Fund Board started to train young men for the Independent or Congregational ministry. Students were selected and placed in the more orthodox academies. Care was taken to choose young men who already had a Classical grammar education. But in **1730**, a group of Congregational merchants in London, closely associated with the Royal Exchange, dissatisfied that young men of 'zeal' who did not have a classical education were being excluded from the ministry, established a

society to provide training in '*all branches of necessary and useful knowledge.*'

Called the '*King's Head Society*', because they met at a pub in Swithin's Alley next to the Exchange, they were regarded at first with suspicion by the Congregational establishment. However, the Society promoted a successful monthly lecture at a meeting house in Lime Street; these were subsequently published as the Lime Street Sermons and became a corner-stone of Calvinist orthodoxy. The Society and the Fund Board began working together and, in **1768**, as joint trustees they purchased a former school in Homerton High Street to serve as an Academy training young men for the ministry.



Homerton Academy in 1783 as engraved by Richard Royce. Courtesy of the London Metropolitan Archives

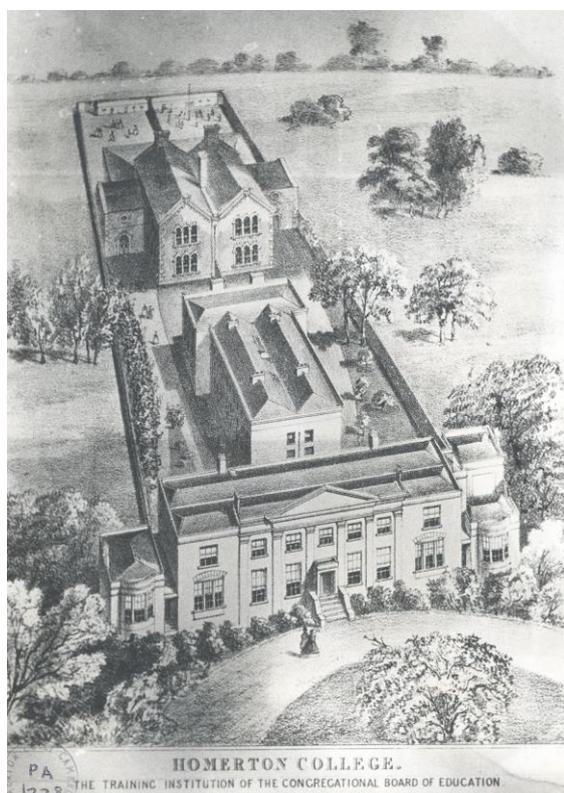
The Training College:

In the first half of the nineteenth century under John Pye Smith, who was both a geologist and a theologian, the curriculum broadened to include natural science and philosophy, but remained essentially conservative compared with a growing number of more radical London academies. The old Academy building having been declared unsafe, was entirely rebuilt in a neo-classical style in **1824** and renamed 'Homerton College Society', soon known simply as 'Homerton College'. In 1840 it was

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affiliated to London University, and on the retirement of John Pye Smith in 1849, Homerton College, Coward College and Highbury College merged to establish New College in Finchley Road, the foundation stone of which was laid by an ageing John Pye Smith in May 1850.

A purpose was found for the old College in Homerton High Street by the newly founded Congregational Board of Education, for the education and training of young men and women for Congregational schools - much needed with the national expansion of elementary education. Homerton was once more largely rebuilt, and a new state-of-the-art practice school was added. The Board was interested in progressive education and under William Unwin set high standards of educational training, combining the ideas of David Stow's Normal Schools in Edinburgh and the teaching of Pestalozzi.



Homerton Training College in 1852

Established in buildings regarded as 'sacred to nonconformity', the new training college soon developed a reputation for producing the best male and female teachers in London; they came out after a rigorous two-year course combining a strong Christian ethic with high academic achievement. But the character of the site in Homerton High Street was changing. In the late eighteenth century it had been a leafy fashionable suburb, a century later it was enveloped in bricks and mortar, the whole area becoming heavily industrialised. The East End had been a magnet for migrants from European countries for three centuries, poverty and overcrowding was rife. Every year one or two students teaching in local schools died from diseases, such as typhoid, smallpox and tuberculosis that were endemic in the slums. College accommodation was overcrowded and there was no room to expand, so the Trustees decided to look for a new more healthy and spacious site outside London. They chose the buildings of Cavendish College, standing vacant since 1890 in fields outside Cambridge.

In Cambridge:

Under John Horobin the students moved to Cambridge in January **1895**, with the generous assistance of Samuel Morley, philanthropist and Treasurer of the Congregational Board of Education. Almost immediately the decision was made to accept only women, partly because of pressure from the University, to which a mixed college was anathema, and partly because of financial pressures - women teachers were less expensive to train than men. The Trustees applied to the University for recognition of the type that had been granted to Newnham and Girton, but the Council of Senate refused - Homerton was a two-year training college and the academic standards were not then up to degree level. However, academic standards improved and after 1898 the more able

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students took intermediate and degree examinations in the University of London.

By 1903, under the principalship of Mary Miller Allan, the College began to take advantage of its new location. Seven highly qualified Newnham graduates were appointed to lecture in the sciences and humanities. Another five female lecturers were appointed with degrees from other universities. A new Chemistry Laboratory was built and the facilities were extended to include purpose-built art rooms and a theatre. Students were drawn to Homerton from a higher social standing and were taught by Cambridge women graduates who had all come from independent schools. Strict rules protected the girls from scandalous associations with Cambridge men. So Homerton became infused with Cambridge female collegiality and middle-class etiquette.



South Front of the Cavendish Building.

The College continued to build on its reputation for producing excellent practical, committed teachers of high academic standing. Fifty new study bedrooms and three classrooms added in 1904 enabled student numbers to increase from 144 to 200. A new constitution in 1909, together with gas lighting, central heating, drainage, better furnishings and competitive sport all added to aspirations of upward mobility. The Board of Education prescribed both the curriculum and the qualification until 1929, then the Cambridge University Local Examinations

Syndicate, in line with government policy, became the awarding body. Lecturers from the University were invited to give courses and heads of other Colleges sat on the Board of Trustees so that direct comparisons could be made. By 1927 the more gifted Homerton students were sitting borrowed Tripos papers in the University of Cambridge; some also took the Cambridge Diploma in Geography under the guidance of a highly respected Homerton Lecturer, John Jones.

Post-War Expansion:

World War II had a significant impact on Homerton as elsewhere in Cambridge. Early in May 1941 incendiary bombs fell across the grounds setting fire to the roof of the Bursary wing. Student and staff fire wardens were quick to act and damage was limited to a small part of the roof. Early in the War, Homerton hosted two evacuee training colleges from Portsmouth and London, together with the Department of Education from Hull University. The Women's Land Army for the Fens trained in the grounds using excellent horticultural facilities that were part of the teaching curriculum. A few young female Jewish refugees were taken in to assist students and staff.

A nursery was also established in 1939 by the Principal, Alice Skillicorn, for evacuees and orphans of service families, some of whom were adopted by the single female lecturers. Students assisted the War Effort in nearby refugee centres and in the Homerton Nursery. Trumpington House was a local Red Cross Headquarters and a Physical Education course was established for armed-service PE instructors. After the War the College took mature ex-service students, both male and female. More than other Colleges, Homerton was changed by the War – gone was the cloistered all-female institution.

In the 1950s the student number stabilised at around three hundred until a third year was

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added to the course in 1962. A large wing was built in **1956** embellished with a new coat of arms that had been granted two years earlier. With the third year, student numbers rose steeply after **1962** to reach five hundred in 1967.



Queen's Wing was added in 1956, by Seeley & Paget, Architects.

A post-graduate training course, beginning with small numbers in 1950 remained at around twenty, and then jumped to one hundred in 1973. By then the total Homerton student population was seven hundred and fifty, most of whom were non-resident. Responding to the demands of government for more highly-qualified teachers, Dame Beryl Paston Brown, then Principal and active on several national education committees, commissioned a new library and teaching rooms in a distinctive 'black and white' modernist style. A brave new world of education had dawned.



Science Block completed in 1961 by the Cambridge Architects, Gardner & Ellis. Replaced by the Faculty of Education building in 2005.

Education Degree:

A new four-year Cambridge degree course, the B.Ed., was negotiated in **1969**. The number of full-time lecturers increased from forty-six to seventy-three - by 1974 forty-three of them were men. Work was shared by the University Department of Education, the regional Institute of Education based in Cambridge and the College. Homerton functioned as a higher education institution (HEI) in its own right – a university in miniature, admitting its own students, maintaining a registry, and drawing directly on government funding. But historical prejudice against professional teacher training and the distinctive nature of the B.Ed. degree prevented it being accepted as a full College of the University. For Homerton students to receive their degree they had to be presented by arrangement with Newham College. Eventually, after a concerted campaign led by Alison Shrubsole, Principal, and Paul Hirst, Professor of Education, 'Approved Society' status was won in December **1976**. For the first time Homerton was able to present its own students for the Cambridge B.Ed. Degree.

During the 1980s the College continued to enhance its national reputation for producing some of the most highly qualified teachers not only skilled in practice, but also with high academic standards. Every effort was put into the teaching provision and there was very little government funding for maintaining buildings. The Trustees purchased houses in the surrounding streets to serve as student accommodation. By the late 1980s a survey revealed that more than £11 million was needed to bring the College buildings up to standard. Alternatives were considered, even the possibility of building a supermarket in the grounds, an idea that caused outrage among alumni and local residents alike. It became

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apparent to the Trustees that a radical estate strategy was needed together with a new Head of House who understood the workings of the University and who could bring the institution more in line with University teaching.

Rebuilding:

Dr Kate Pretty was appointed Principal in 1991, having been Senior Tutor of New Hall (now Murray Edwards). The decision was made to remove the 'black and white' buildings of the 1960s and replace them using a modest government grant. The Library and Mary Allan Building were opened in 1997, and the old sixties buildings were taken down in February 1998. All the college-owned houses off-site were sold and West House, a large new hall of residence with en-suite facilities was completed in the following year. This enabled the College to take large residential conferences during the vacations generating a new income stream. The Trustees also purchased the Homerton School of Health Studies (SHS), a free-standing nurse training provider, which became established in refurbished accommodation adjoining Fulbourn Hospital. As a company it was highly successful and enabled Homerton to build more student accommodation. SHS was eventually sold to Anglia Ruskin University where it now serves as the main training provider for nurses in the region.



The Dining Hall

Changes in government funding for professional teacher education led to a new three-year Education Studies Tripos, which incorporated much of the old B.Ed course, to be followed by a one-year PGCE. As a consequence some subjects, such as Fine Art, Gymnastics and Landscape History, which had been taught at Homerton for many years, were dropped because there were no equivalent Tripos papers available in the University. This gradual process of academic convergence with the University was formally recognised in a Trust Deed of 2001, whereby most of Homerton's Education staff became employees of the University. Homerton's teaching staff had been research active for some years and, as an HEI, the College had participated with increasing success in the national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The University therefore gained from an influx of well published Education Lecturers.

In a complicated deal and by way of reciprocation, Homerton leased to the University Trumpington House and the land where the Black and White buildings had stood on a pepper-corn rent for 99 years. Here a magnificent new Faculty of Education - the Donald McIntyre Building - was built by the University. The Mary Allan building now also serves as offices and teaching rooms for the Faculty during term-time. The Education books in Homerton's library were then transferred to the new Faculty Library on its completion in 2005 making it one of the largest Education research libraries in the world, but Homerton retained and continues to build on its unique collection of children's literature.

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The new College Library, by the architects Sibley Robinson, opened in 1997 by HRH Prince Philip, Chancellor of the University of Cambridge.

In the 21st Century:

The new Trust Deed of **2001** permitted Homerton to function in the same way as any other College, even though it was still governed by Trustees. The aim was to build up a fellowship, create an endowment and diversify academically to meet the criteria set out in the Oxford and Cambridge Act. Homerton had to demonstrate that it would never be a burden on the University. It was then and is still the largest College in terms of student numbers, but gradually over ten or more years under the direction of Dr Kate Pretty, as Principal, Commodore Gale Bryan as Bursar and Dr Peter Warner as Senior Tutor, Homerton diversified into all the triposes apart from Medicine, Veterinary Medicine and Architecture – the ‘quota’ subjects, and built up a fellowship to reflect the new subjects being taught.

By prudent management of its estate, particularly through its conference business at which it excels, Homerton built up sufficient endowment to satisfy University and Privy Council requirements. The Royal Charter arrived in March 2010 and, after 242 years of governance, the Trustees formally handed

over to the new Fellowship. Homerton took the unusual step of moving from Approved Society to Full College without ever being an Approved Foundation.

Now the governing body is the Fellowship, with executive powers devolved to the Principal and College Council. Its new Statutes and Ordinances are drawn from good practice in other Cambridge Colleges. The Fellowship reached ninety in 2014 and will continue to grow to match the student/fellow ratio of other colleges. Currently there are 580 undergraduate members and over 277 full-time higher degree students, mostly Ph.D. and M.Phil. and 226 part-time graduates, mostly M.Eds. It also has about 280 one-year PGCE students some of whom continue as part-time M.Eds. In total the College supports 1,400 students.

In 2012 the College purchased six acres of industrial land adjoining the site to the North-West. This was the largest extension of the estate since 1965; in total the whole site is just under 30 acres. This will provide additional housing for Fellows, commercial offices and student accommodation on what was once a stone-mason’s yard. In 2013, Professor Geoffrey Ward, a scholar of American poetry and literature, and former Vice-Principal of Royal Holloway College, was appointed as Homerton’s new Principal.



The South Front at dusk.

Peter Warner, June 2015