A HISTORY OF KIRKBY FLEETHAM –
ROGER ASCHAM
Researched by KEITH PROUD

ROGER ASCHAM

When Roger Ascham died in 1568, Queen Elizabeth I is reported to have cried: '*I would rather have cast ten thousand pounds into the sea than be parted from my Ascham'.*

As a young woman, Elizabeth had been one of Ascham's pupils. He was never, technically, a schoolteacher, but found lasting fame as a brilliant linguist, a man of widely-acknowledged sound and unshakeable values who could negotiate politics without compromising his beliefs. In a book about Ascham, Giorgio Miglior described him as '*the humanist on the margins of political power'*. Ascham lived in dangerous times and throughout his adult life he mixed with and served royalty but was always unswervingly careful in his dealings with kings, queens, princes and princesses.

Ascham, pronounced Askam, was born in 1515 in the ancient North Yorkshire village of Kirkby Wiske on the west bank of the River Wiske four miles north-west of Thirsk. The third son of John Ascham, steward to Lord Scrope of Bolton, Roger was educated not at a school but in the house of the barrister Sir Humphrey Wingfield who in 1533 became Speaker of the House of Commons. Wingfield allowed a number of young people to be educated in his home under a tutor now known only as R Bond. Sport, particularly archery, played a significant role in their curriculum and later provided Ascham with material for his first book in English. Its title was the Latin word for archery – *Toxophilus*.

In 1530, when he was 15 and at time when there were only two English universities, Ascham went up to the finest of their colleges, St John's, Cambridge. He read Greek and Latin and received his degree four years later, followed by his masters in 1537. While at Cambridge he became interested in music, lectured in mathematics and Greek and taught a number of pupils. He astutely wrote his book on archery in 1542-43, after King Henry VIII made the playing of some sports illegal and had decreed that, by law, every man under the age of 60 had to practise using the long bow. He followed this with an early example of self-publicity by dedicating his book to the king. He even presented a copy to Henry at Greenwich as he returned from France where he had captured Boulogne. Henry must have been pleased with Ascham's gestures and the content of *Toxophilus* since he gave him an immediate pension of £10 a year. The fact that it was written in English for Englishmen must have been particularly pleasing to the monarch.

By that stage in his life, Ascham was official letter-writer for Cambridge University and soon declared himself openly to be a Protestant during a period when most people hedged their bets on such matters, choosing instead to sway with whatever might be the prevailing religious wind. When, in 1548, the tutor to the 16-year-old Princess Ellizabeth died, she asked for Ascham as his replacement. Her wish was granted. He taught her for two years and was impressed by her intelligence and personal attributes, her '*beauty, stature, wisdom and industry'* and the fact that she spoke, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin and, 'moderately well', Greek.

After working with Elizabeth for two years, he argued with her steward and, leaving her service, returned briefly to Cambridge before going, with the young King Edward VI's permission, to Europe to serve as an ambassador's secretary. Just before crossing the Channel, he travelled to Yorkshire to see the place where he had been born.

When King Edward died and was succeeded by Queen Mary, Ascham was appointed her Latin secretary with a pension of £20 a year. Whether his Protestantism was concealed from the Catholic Mary or just conveniently ignored is unclear, although there were attempts to have his appointment blocked. One thing which weighed in his favour was the fact that, wisely he had never taken holy orders.

In June 1554, he married the socially well-connected Margaret Howe and the pair had two sons Ascham was always complaining about the poor state of his finances, which suggests that he was probably living beyond his means by trying to keep up with his neighbours, although his income cannot have been small.

In 1555, he resumed his tutoring of the Princess Elizabeth, concentrating on her Greek and, four years later, after she had become queen, she rewarded him with an appointment as canon and prebend in York Minster.

In 1563, he began work on his great book, *The Scholemaster,* destined not to be published until after his death. The event which is supposed to have inspired him to tackle the subject of education was a meal he had at Windsor with Secretary of State Sir William Cecil. Sir William told Ascham that some masters at Eton School had fled from the premises for fear of being attacked by pupils they had beaten too harshly. Cecil expressed his opinion that there should be no flogging in schools while others round the table disagreed with him strongly. Ascham sided with Cecil. Sir Richard Sackville explained that one of his teachers had been so brutal to him that afterwards he wanted nothing at all to do with learning. Sir Richard and Sir William not only asked Ascham to find a non-violent tutor for their sons but also suggested that he

should write a book about what he believed to be the correct way to educate children.

The result was not about education in general. Ascham described it as '*a plaine and perfite way of teachying children to understand, write and speak in Latin tong (tongue), specially prepared for the private brynging up of youth in gentlemen and noblemens house'.*

It was never a book intended for use in schools, where it would have been incredibly boring, but used on a one-to-one basis it was useful. Ascham was not the first to advocate kindness instead of beatings. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey had put such principles into practice 40 years before and Winchester College had been founded on such an idea as early as 1400.

One of the book's selling points was that it contained a picture of Lady Jane Grey, who had been educated, eventually, in a kind way. Aged only 16, she had been Queen of England for six days following the death of Edward VI in 1547.

The Scholemaster, well-written in English instead of the more usual Latin and Greek, also showed how useful and effective the language could be, in the right hands, in conveying logical thought and information.

Roger Ascham died on December 23, 1568.

During the 18th century, that great man of letters Dr Samuel Johnson wrote a biography of Roger Ascham in which he explained:

'*Ascham never had a robust or vigorous body, and his excuse for so many hours of diversion was his inability to endure long continuance of sedentary thought. In the latter part of his life he found it necessary to forbear any intense application of the mind from dinner to bedtime and rose to read and write early in the morning. He was, for some years, hectically feverish and never obtained a perfect recovery of his health. The immediate cause of his last sickness was too close application to the composition of a poem which he purposed to present to the queen on the day of her accession. To finish this, he forbore to sleep at his accustomed hours till he fell sick of a kind of lingering disease not accurately described. The most afflictive symptom was want of sleep, which he endeavoured to obtain by the motion of a cradle'.*

As to Ascham's nature, Johnson wrote: '*His disposition was kind and social; he delighted in the pleasures of conversation and was probably not inclined to business'.*

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