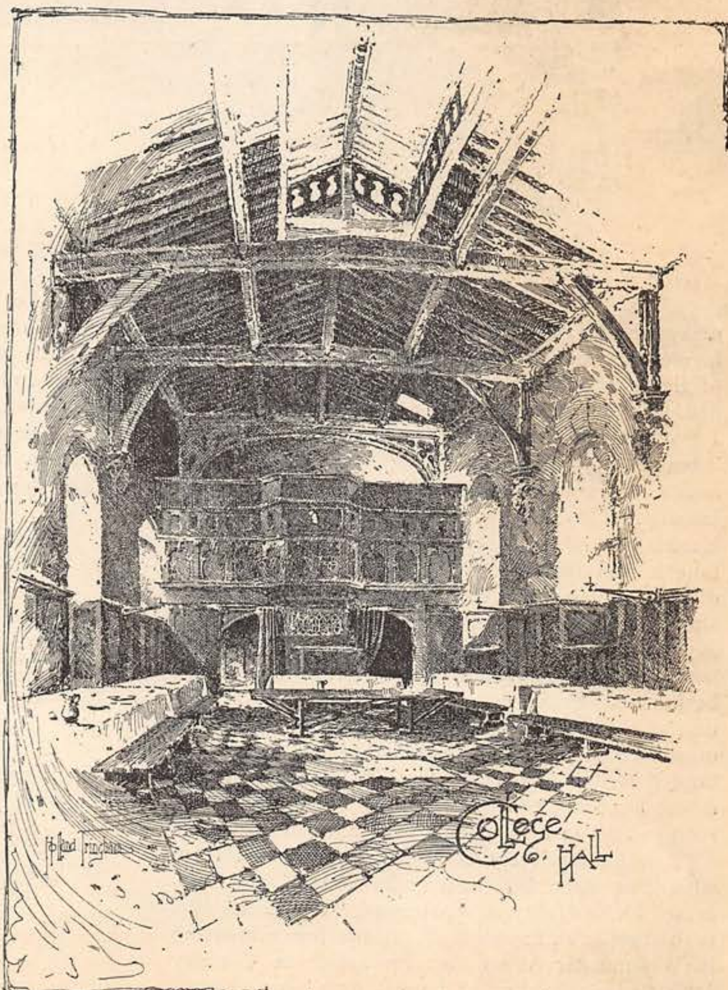
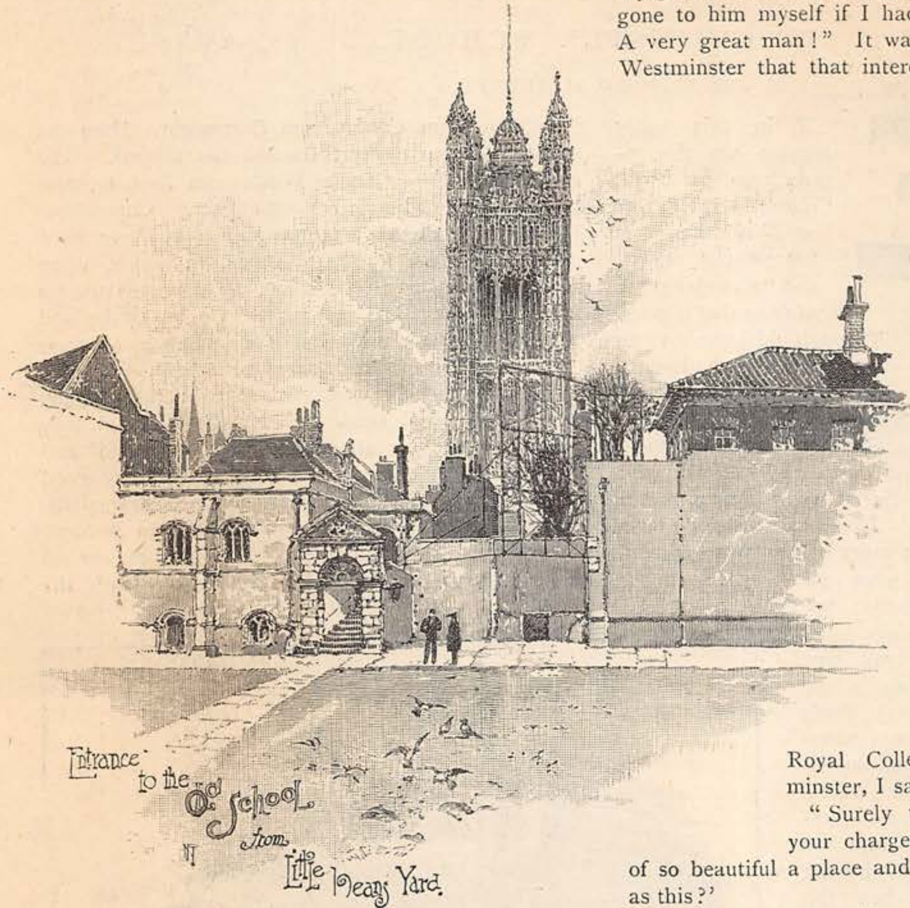
WESTMINSTER SCHOOL.

BY RAYMOND BLATHWAYT.

EVEN in this sadly prosaic age the approach to the Royal College of St. Peter at Westminster is full of the beauty and the tender grace of a day that is gone. Through old Dean's Yard, and under the shadows of the great Benedictine Abbey, he who seeks the School must pass. Hard by is the madding crowd, the noisy street, the tramp of the wayfarers, the roar and bustle and strife of life; but here, within these walls is perfect peace, and a stillness is over all things. The shouts of happy boys at play, the pealing of the great organ in the Abbey-church, the footstep of some passer-by re-echoing through the old courtyards; but this is all. And in the days when first the monks came here how lovely it must have been: the gleaming river, the breezy fields wherein the boy, who was afterwards the Abbot Ingulph, on his return from the school at Westminster, would meet and be questioned by Queen Edgitha and her maidens as they wandered by the beautiful river and watched the gradual nearing to heaven of the Abbey of St. Peter.

To the wayfarer who would chance to pass the old Abbey in the days of Edward the Confessor there would be presented a charming spectacle. In the North Cloister, close by the entrance of the church where the monks usually walked, sat the Prior. In the Western Cloister sat the Master of the Novices with his disciples : this was the first beginning of Westminster School. A picturesque and suggestive spectacle this, and one that seems to bring before our eyes the sweet old England we seem now for ever to have lost. One hundred and fifty years later the School was formally annexed by Papal decree to the Abbey. But the School, as it now exists, was really founded by Queen Elizabeth. Few schools have such distinguished names upon its roll as the School of Westminster. Here were educated the poets Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Cowper, Matthew Prior, Abraham Cowley, and Cartwright. Here the saintly George Herbert learned his lessons. The two hymnologists, Charles Wesley and Toplady, were both boys at school in Westminster. Christopher Wren's first ideas of architecture may have been gained from the adjacent Abbey, in which, when a boy at Westminster School, we may be sure he loved to roam. The philosophy of John Locke and Jeremy Bentham was but the outcome of their boyish studies in this celebrated school. Gibbon, in the last century, and Hakluyt in the dreamy past, all gathered ideas here for the histories they were to write in after-years. Cumberland and the two Colmans found in the yearly play good preparation for their chosen profession of dramatists. Trelawney and Atterbury, two of the Seven Bishops, were pupils of Dr. Busby, once head-master of Westminster, and the only head-master, with the




Entrance to the Old School from Little Deans Yard.

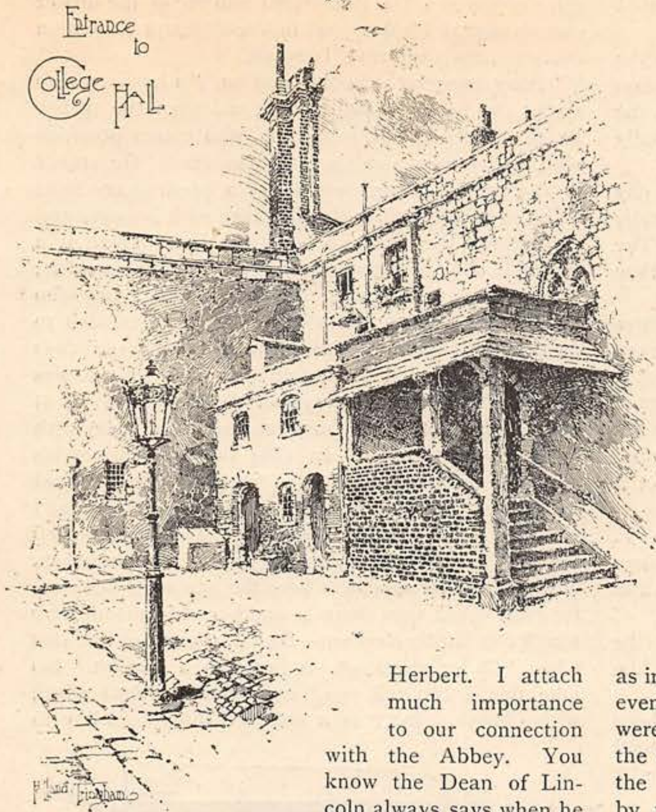
exception of Arnold of Rugby, whose name has been handed by fame to be cherished by posterity. And of the head-masters of this School—of whom the first recorded name is that of John Adams in 1540—I would mention Howell, who wrote the Catechism. Then in 1555 Nicholas Udall, who was also the author of *Ralph Royster Doister*, the first English comedy. Then there was Camden, the antiquary and historian in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in whose time it was that the great dormitory of the Benedictine Abbey was first used for school purposes. Years after came Busby himself—Busby who reigned there as head-master for fifty-seven years, who kept his place even in the days of the Commonwealth, although he himself was a strong Royalist, and who, at one time of his life, was actually able to boast that fifteen or sixteen of the bishops upon the bench had been flogged by him. His bust now stands in a little alcove in the head-master's study, gazing upon the ancient room where so long ago he may have prepared his scholars for the Holy Communion and given them what that stern but simple-minded man, the celebrated Philip Henry, so well termed, "their instruction in the best of all knowledge." It was before his tomb in Westminster Abbey that Sir Roger de Coverley exclaimed—"Dr. Busby, a great man! he whipped my grandfather! A very great man! I should have gone to him myself if I had not been a blockhead. A very great man!" It was here in this school of Westminster that that interesting figure in English history, Warren Hastings, received his early education. In short, the whole place is redolent of the past; the very air is filled with the memories of the long dead great ones of the earth who once were boys in this dear old school.

A few weeks ago it was my good fortune to spend an afternoon going through the beautiful old buildings in the pleasant company of Dr. Gunion Rutherford, the present head-master. As I looked about me and noted the stately dignity that is inseparable from the Royal College of St. Peter, Westminster, I said to Dr. Rutherford—

"Surely the most thoughtless of your charges must feel the influence of so beautiful a place and one so full of traditions as this?'

"Yes," he replied, "and I like to keep up the old poetic traditions. The Abbey, you know, is our chapel, and we go there for our own private service every morning. Here is our special Prayer-book, compiled by Dr. William Bill, who was Dean here in the time of Elizabeth. The hymns in it are written almost entirely by Old Westminsters—Dryden, Cowper, the Wesleys, Toplady, and George

The Oak Chair used by Dr Busby.



Herbert. I attach much importance to our connection with the Abbey. You know the Dean of Lincoln always says when he comes here, speaking of his old days at the College—'The river taught me endurance, the play confidence, the Abbey history. I learnt nothing else.'"

"Shall you imitate Charterhouse, and go into the country?" said I.

"No," replied Dr. Rutherford; "I think it is too late to do so now. A perverse loyalty to the *genius loci*, to old traditions, has kept us here. And so, as parents won't send boys from the country to school in London, we have an increasing day element, in which, however, I endeavour to preserve all the best features of a resident public school, especially with regard to games. We have ten acres of playground in Tothill Fields, where the boys play cricket and Association football."

"Can you give me something of an idea of a boy's day here?" I asked the head-master.

"Well," he replied, "it's much as in other schools. The boys assemble for prayers at nine o'clock in the Abbey. Then there's forenoon school till 12.45. All the boys dine here at one o'clock. They play games from two o'clock till afternoon school at 3.30. At five o'clock the boarders have what is called "occupation," during which they go to the library or to the gymnasium, or they have drawing and music. Then comes supper, and preparation for an hour and a-half."

The evening was drawing on fast. High up in the vaulted roof of the magnificent school-room there lingered one last ray of sunshine; but all around us as we stood, Dr. Rutherford and I, upon the raised daïs beneath the great window, the gloom was gathering fast. Old historic names—the names of scholars who themselves have long since crumbled into the dust—glimmered here and there upon the walls around us. Dryden, Hakluyt and Cowper, Christopher Wren and Warren Hastings, Locke, and Cowley, and Gibbon—by so great a cloud of witnesses were we surrounded. At one side stood a little worn bench upon which, in small, ill-deciphered characters, John Dryden had carved his name—the name that, though he knew it not then, he was afterwards to make so famous. And in front of us was the old "Rod-drawer," relic of a past and a crueller day. And as we stood and talked of that past, of which the storied walls above us spoke so silently and yet so eloquently, a little gowned figure passed rapidly through the room, and just as Dr. Rutherford said to me, "There is a curious relic of the Old Era, the old monastic days: that boy is still called the 'monos,' we heard a cry—now loud and clear, now falling into a whisper—in the long corridors, "Quinta Hora!" The hour of prayer sounded forth, as in the East at sunset men are summoned to their evening devotions, and in a moment more the boys were flooding into the room. Almost unconsciously the Old Era was blent and lost in the vividness of the New. There was a moment's stillness, broken by the single word, "Oremus," and then the old Latin prayers—much as they must have done in the

bygone days of the Benedictine monks—reverberated through the splendid hall.

After prayers Dr. Rutherford took me up into the quaint old dormitory where the Queen's scholars sleep and in which, according to a certain writer, the accommodation up to recent years was decidedly limited :—

"In one long room the forty boys lived by day and slept at night. The windows were continually broken, and never repaired but in the holidays. The beds were far from luxurious, and the rats at one time almost disputed the right of occupation."

The writer from whom I am now quoting also states that "Leather braces had to be hung up somewhere out of reach, or there was only a mangled remnant and a buckle or so to be found in the morning. A nobleman awoke one night with a rat hanging to his ear; and a future Archbishop of Canterbury, missing his surplice just before early prayers, found one small corner of it sticking out of a rat-hole."

So uncomfortable did all this appear to George IV. when, as Prince Regent, he was one day being taken through the College, that he turned to a friend and said—

"You don't mean to tell me that Henry Paget" (the then Marquis of Anglesey) "ever slept in a bed like *that?*"

But when I saw the dormitory all that had been changed ; for in 1860 it was divided into forty distinct sleeping places or "houses," ranged on each side of a central passage.

"But do you know," said Dr. Rutherford, "that the rough life has always been very much prized here ? The boys are so conservative that when in 1847, by Dean Buckland's order, they were served with puddings at dinner, they threw them at the cook's head."

It is here in the dormitory that each December the Westminster Latin Play takes place. I asked Dr. Rutherford if the play was of any literary benefit to the boys.

"No, none whatever," he replied. "Terence is thin and washy. It gives them confidence, tone, but further than that I don't think it does much good. And the costumes are always a trouble to me. Garrick, who saw the play in 1765, was so delighted with the acting of John Echersall, that he presented him with a free admission to his theatre. I must say also that I think it helps to keep up the *esprit de corps* for which we have always been famous. And now, if you will come with me into Ashburnham House, I will take you into the Scott Library, of which we are very proud. Ashburnham House, you know, was purchased by the Crown in 1730 as a repository for the Royal and Cottonian libraries. A few years ago it came into the possession of the School under the provisions of the Public Schools Act."

We glanced into the library which was full of bright-faced, intelligent, and gentlemanly little lads. The head-master told me that they were allowed to come here whenever they liked. As we walked away from the library and through a room where the boys are taught modelling, which is quite an evidence of the spirit of the age, Dr. Rutherford told me of the quaint custom that still holds good in Westminster School on every successive Shrove Tuesday.

"After morning school," said he, "a bar is put up across the big schoolroom roof, and then the Abbey Beadle ushers in the man cook, who comes provided with his frying-pan and a putty pancake. He stands in the middle of the room, takes a preliminary swirl with the pan, measures the distance with his eye, and then flings the pancake over the bar. There is a scramble of boys immediately to gain possession of it; it is generally broken in the *mêlée*, but the boy who may be lucky enough to secure it whole is entitled to demand a guinea of the Dean. In the old days if the cook missed getting it over the bar, he was "booked"—that is, the boys all threw their books at him. That custom has, however, been done away with for nearly thirty years. In 1864 the cook missed his aim, and he was so severely "booked" that he lost his temper, and he threw the pan amongst the boys and wounded a monitor on the head. The boy reported the cook to the Dean, who, by way of compensation, granted him permission to keep the pan as an heirloom for ever. And then there is another old custom here which has hardly died out—that is, tossing candidates when "under election" six times in a blanket. No joke this, I can tell you," continued Dr. Rutherford, with a laugh, "for it is a common thing for a boy to

The rod Drawer

be thrown up twenty feet in the air, whilst the boys who throw him chant the fourth line of the first book of Martial, 'Ibis ab excusso, missus ad astra sago.'"

Dr. Rutherford then took me into the dining-room, round which are hung the portraits of the head-masters of Westminster for at least three hundred years. The sight of Dr. Busby's stern features suggested to me the remark that flogging was very much on the decline at Westminster, as elsewhere.

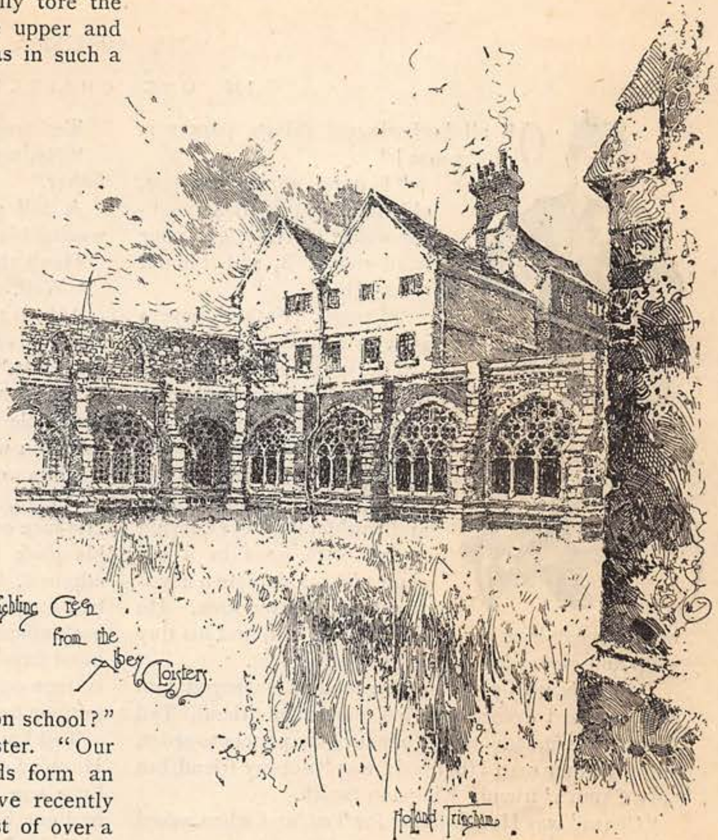
Dr. Gunion Rutherford smiled as he replied :—

"I don't believe in flogging boys myself, and it was carried to a great extreme at Westminster in the old days. The poet Southey was expelled from this very school because he wrote an article in the school magazine against flogging. Time has avenged him. I have only once flogged a boy here. He is now an M.P. The effect of flogging on both boys and masters in the old days was hideous. Old Lord Albemarle, who died a year or two ago, told me himself that he was flogged one month at Westminster and fought at Waterloo the next. Dr. Busby, for all his saintliness, was dreadfully severe. There is a pretty

story told of a boy who once accidentally tore the curtain that used to hang between the upper and under school in the Great Hall. He was in such a terrible fright at the prospect of the punishment he knew Dr. Busby would inflict upon him, that a schoolfellow offered to take, and actually did take, the flogging for him. Years afterwards, in the time of the Protectorate, the brave boy, having taken part in Penruddock's rebellion, appeared for trial at Exeter. The judge who tried him was the very person whose back he had once saved. He recognised his old companion in the dock, but said nothing at the time. As soon as the Court rose, he saddled his horse and rode day and night till he reached London, where he obtained pardon from Oliver Cromwell for his brave but erring companion.

"No," said Dr. Rutherford, "the old cruel days of flogging have passed away, I hope, for ever."

"Are your athletics in good condition?" I asked. "Is there not a tendency to neglect them in a London school?"



The Fighting Green from the Abbey Cloisters.

"Not in the least," replied the head-master. "Our ten acres of playground in Tothill Fields form an excellent cricket ground, in which we have recently erected a handsome new pavilion at a cost of over a thousand pounds. Although for three or four years at the beginning of this century we used to play on 'Old Lords' ground—where Dorset Square now stands—nowadays we never play any public school except Charterhouse; that match is now an annual fixture, and it is played alternately at Godalming and on our own ground here in London. Our football is good; we play the Association game, both in 'Green' and 'upfields.' They used to play it in the Cloisters," went on Dr. Rutherford with a smile. "Don't you remember that Addison complained that his meditations were disturbed by the King's scholars, who *would* play football while he was walking up and down the Cloisters? We have got two or three good fives courts, and both 'wooden' and 'wire' racquets are popular with our boys. We have a good 'gym.,' too, which was fitted up by Dr. Scott when he was head-master here, and who was himself very fond of practising on the cross-bars. We also used to be great at rowing on the river. As I told you just now, the present Dean of Lincoln always says that 'The river taught him endurance.' But, of course, nowadays the traffic on the 'silent highway' is too great, and we have had to give up 'water,' as it used to be known."

"Have you a special school slang?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," replied the head-master. "The sailors' phrase, 'Douse the glim,' was originally a Westminster saying for 'Put out the light.' A bootjack is always called 'Edom,' having special reference to the 108th Psalm. 'Mill,' which is now the universal term for a fight, had its origin here. 'Skee' means jolly. It is supposed that it is derived from the French word *exquis*, which the boys must have heard their sisters use in holiday time. 'Greaze' means a crush, a crowd; and there are, of course, many other words."

"I suppose you know," said Dr. Rutherford as we bade each other "Good-bye," "that the Queen's scholars still retain their ancient privilege of attending the Parliamentary debates. And you must not forget to mention that we are specially proud of the massive tables which stand in the Hall, and which are said to be relics of the Spanish Armada."