

## The School Houses

### III.—BROOKS.

IN giving biographical sketches of the great contemporaries of William Palmer who have given their names to four of the five School Houses, the previous articles in this series have served to focus our attention upon the era of the inception of our School and the comparative antiquity of the foundation. It is fitting that Brooks House should provide us with an exception. For the late Alderman Herbert Edmund Brooks, D.L., J.P., has a double claim upon our remembrance. As a distinguished administrator in a distinctive and recent era in the development of the school, he was one of the builders of the institution we know today; as the historian of the school, he provides us with the link between the past and the present which is the source of our pride in it.

Born at Surbiton, Surrey, in May, 1860, Herbert Brooks came with his family to live at Duvals, Grays, in 1869. His father, the late Mr. E. W. Brooks, was a pioneer of the cement industry on the north shore of the Thames; and Herbert Brooks, after being educated at the Friends' School, Ackworth, Yorkshire, and Bonn University (where he was a contemporary of the ex-Kaiser) joined the family business. After its merger with the Associated Portland Cement Manufacturing Ltd. in 1900, he became a director of the firm and was closely associated with the industry till his retirement from this and subsidiary undertakings in 1924.

His life, significantly, covers the period of the rapid expansion of Grays, and it was his close association with its development that made him such a prominent figure in the life of the town and district. He was the last survivor of the first Grays Local Board elected in 1886. When this was superseded by the creation of the Urban District Council in 1894, he was its first chairman and held this office till 1914. The elections of that year took place during his absence from the country on an extensive business tour of India: but it was felt that a strong effort should be made to retain his services on the Council, and a campaign was undertaken on his behalf with the result that he was returned at the top the poll, though he was displaced, in his absence, as Chairman of the Council. Elections were suspended during the war, and when his term of office expired in 1920, he was one of the victims of the growing change in local outlook which had manifested itself during the war.

So ended 34 years' continuous service in the local government of Grays, during which period Herbert Brooks was associated with all the improvements that accompanied its rapid growth. "One of the most progressive of men," as a colleague described him, he proved himself a strenuous advocate of schemes put forward for the benefit of the town and its inhabitants. Thus his efforts in obtaining grants for the Public Library, and the Park and Beach Schemes, were principally instrumental in securing these amenities for the town; and his enthusiastic support of the Electric Lighting Scheme gave Grays one of the first undertakings of this kind in Essex.

His connection with the local council severed, Herbert Brooks's main work lay in a wider sphere. He was one of the original members of the Essex County Council, being elected to represent Grays at the age of 29. He rapidly became a prominent figure in its administration and in 1909 was raised to the Aldermanic Bench. In April, 1929, he became Vice-Chairman of the Council, and a month later, its Chairman. Unfortunately his health began to fail at this time, but with unflinching courage and accustomed energy, he kept in close touch 'with the work of the County, even when, as in the last six months of his life, he was unable to attend a Council meeting.

It was generally acknowledged that Herbert Brooks had a remarkable gift of public speaking, and the eloquence with which he emphasised his arguments made him a powerful ally in any cause. When in later life he found it necessary to contest the Postmaster-General's right to erect telegraph poles on his land, he conducted his own case against professional opposition with such skill as to win the day and earn the compliments of the President of the Court for his successful pleading. His memory, too,

served him well and we are indebted for much local lore to the fact that in later life he was able to draw upon his own vivid recollections of the early days in reminiscent articles or speeches. He had, in addition, carefully preserved relics of Local Government life, many of which he gave to the Grays Free Library, including the result of the election of the first Grays Local Board and the official summons to him in January, 1889, by the High Sheriff of Essex, to attend the initial meeting of the first Essex County Council, "couched," as he put it, "in the peremptory form of a jury summons."

Education had always made a great claim upon the attention of Herbert Brooks - he was a member of the Essex Education Committee and its District Sub-Committee - but this was especially in evidence when, having relinquished other local activities, he became Chairman of the Governing Body of Palmer's School in 1921. For ten years the school had the benefit of his wide administrative experience and is indebted to him for so ably championing its cause before the County Authorities and the Board of Education. The project nearest his heart was the erection of the new girls' school and a rearrangement of the older buildings to accommodate the boys' school as a separate unit, and it is sad to reflect that his death occurred but a month or two before the official opening of the girls' school.

Much, however, as he accomplished from the administrative point of view, we shall remember him principally as the historian of the School. His versatile ability led him to make sundry researches into the Palmer foundation, and these were embodied in an article "William Palmer of Grays Thurrock," published in October, 1925, in the "Essex Review." His original enquiries served but to stimulate his interest and curiosity and he pursued the subject with such diligence that in 1928 he published the volume: "William Palmer and his School," dedicated to "the memory of the Founder of Palmer's School and to the youth of both sexes who now and in the years to come enter its portals and enjoy the benefits of the Institution of which he laid the foundation" and dated 5th November (Founder's Day). This work is a mine of information, not only upon Palmer and his Charity, but upon old Grays, its worthies and its antiquities. "I must confess," wrote Mr. Brooks in his preface, "that when I embarked upon this research, I had no adequate idea of the time it would occupy or of the extent of the work it would entail, but if the result - meagre as it may be - gives to the reader but a tithe of the interest and pleasure it has afforded to myself, I shall feel that time and effort has not been wasted." Few who share his affection for the school can examine the volume without sharing his enthusiasm, as facts painstakingly sought, illuminated by imaginative conjecture, untold for us the story of the School.

The volume that invites inspection in the School Library is a worthy memorial to its author and our benefactor, whose portrait in oils, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Abbott, hangs in the entrance hall of the School.

Herbert Brooks resided during his married life at Stifford Lodge, and it is in the beautiful little churchyard of Stifford Church, which he served as Warden, that he was laid to rest a few days after his passing on 13th March, 1931.

The name of Brooks is still, happily, associated with Palmer's School. Mr. Alfred Brooks J.P. C.A., succeeded his elder brother as Chairman of the Governors and still holds that office (July 1948), and Mrs. Alfred Brooks is a member of the Governing Body.

Boys of Brooks House are drawn from Little Thurrock, Chadwell-St.-Mary and Tilbury and their house colour is maroon.