

John Clarke

Headmaster of Lincoln Grammar School 1622 to 1640

From the Garton Archive at LCHS

Compiled from Professor Charles Garton's
Draft History of Lincoln School and other sources

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Readers of my articles will recall that Lincoln Grammar School (Lincoln School) was housed in the Greyfriars building in Lincoln following the *Deed of Union* in 1584 (see Note 1) until 1900 when the Middle School moved up the hill to Upper Lindum Terrace to join the Grammar School. Professor Charles Garton (1990) has written that the Greyfriars period in the history of the School produced some interesting and famous sons under the leadership of several eminent headmasters all but one of whom were ordained Anglican priests and Masters of Arts of either Oxford or Cambridge. This article features John Clarke, (Head) Master from 1622 to 1640, who was one of many members of the School community identified by Charles Garton as highly significant in its history and development.

As with so many of my articles on the early history of the School I am reliant upon Professor Garton's scholarly draft *History of Lincoln School* which, sadly, remains unfinished and unpublished. I will make no attempt to emulate his erudite style, but I trust that my selection, summary, and synthesis will do justice to his work and will allow his scholarship to be duly acknowledged and appreciated. All references to his work will be from Garton (1985) unless otherwise indicated. The style of writing is my own unless I indicate that I am quoting or making direct reference.

The early life of Clarke is somewhat sketchy. Garton's meticulous research has found that he was probably born in 1596 and that all his family connections seem to have been on the eastern side of England between Lincoln and London, including the Huntingdon area. In 1615 he went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge where Garton believes he would have probably studied rhetoric, logic, and Latin. He was ordained in 1619 but did not take Priests' Orders until 1625. In the meantime, there is evidence that he was a private tutor to sons of gentlemen or noblemen, and probably lived in the great mansion of Grimsthorpe, near Stamford. In 1621, however, he was ready for a schoolmastership.

Picture the scene as eloquently described in Professor Garton's imagination. The word had gone around that the mastership of Lincoln School was about to become vacant and Clarke, mindful of the fact that the School had received a good reputation as a result of a former master having been awarded a knighthood, applied and was appointed on Tuesday 10th September 1622 subject to a year's probation. It was the year 1622 in Lincoln and Clarke stood on the mud of Broadgate and gazed up breath-taken at the three-towers and twin spires of Lincoln Cathedral, one of the most spectacular views in the world. Then, turning to his left, he sized up the smaller

and humbler yet still dignified Greyfriars to his left, the old stone building that was to become the scene of his joys and sorrows for the next eighteen years.

At the same time there was a vacancy for an usher, or assistant master, and a young recent St John's, Cambridge graduate, William Beverley, was appointed to the post. This was to be significant in the fortunes of the School as the men got on well together and had the greatest respect for each other's work. So, Clarke and Beverley set to work, both young men being on their mettle and keen to make their mark. Clarke himself must have impressed the civic and cathedral 'visitors' (latter-day inspectors) because they approved of his performance during his probationary year and granted him 'tenure' from September 1623. One of the first objectives he achieved was to persuade the city council to purchase textbooks for the boys from homes with low incomes to have their own copies. Apparently, the sum of one pound was allocated which would provide up to forty elementary books on the understanding that they would have to remain in the School 'for ever'. As Garton remarked, that expectation showed an amusing and misplaced optimism about the life of textbooks in schoolboy hands! My mind turned instantly to the defacing of textbooks that took place at Lincoln School over three hundred years later!

Neither the size of the School at the time, nor the number of 'forms' or grades, were clear but Garton pointed out that the size of the city, its suburbs and surrounding villages would have numbered about 5,000, and he concluded, based on that statistic and other predictions including known evidence from comparable grammar schools, that there might have been six or seven 'forms' or grades and eighty to one hundred pupils in total. One hundred would certainly have been the most that the master, the usher, and the monitors (senior boys) could reasonably control, no doubt aided by the range of canes available to Master Hewthwaite described in an earlier article. What is clear, however, is that the School at the time was flourishing and that Clarke himself was 'very famous'.

Compared to the modern curriculum of secondary schools and academies the curriculum of Lincoln School during the seventeenth century was relatively restricted. The boys would normally have learned to read and to write and to have mastered the basic rules of arithmetic before being admitted to the School and the choirboys, coming down the hill from the Close, would probably have done some preparatory work in Latin, which was at the heart of the curriculum of Lincoln School. Professor Garton assumed that the main Latin grammar text would have been Lily (see Note 2) not only because it was mandatory in such schools but also because Clarke reprinted abridged forms of Lily's rules in the margins of one of his own textbooks. Both master and usher would teach the reading from texts in Latin or excerpts from them to all 'forms' or grades except for the lowest. The study of Greek was probably not begun until the pupils had been in school for about two years. Abell and Chambers (1949) pointed out that because the School taught only Latin and Greek, with possibly some basic mathematics, it was of no use to the very poor as they had no means of learning to read or write. Therefore, only those who were in 'good learning' and able to begin the study of Latin were admitted to the School.

Both master and usher would have taught at either end of the large undivided space which was heated in winter by a central fire grate on the north wall. It is likely that the lower 'forms' would have been under the surveillance of the usher, Master Beverley, who would begin the teaching of Latin grammar, and his most thumbed textbook would most certainly have been Lily, the equivalent of Kennedy's *Latin Primer* universally used in the twentieth century. The first feature that the pupils would have noticed about the new usher was that he had a gammy leg. He may have lodged in Lincoln during the week but would not have been able to walk to his vicarage in Cherry Willingham and would almost certainly have ridden. He also suffered from a chest condition for which in those days little could be done, and he sadly died of tuberculosis in 1628.



A 20th century view of the Greyfriars schoolroom looking east

Clarke's method of teaching, and in particular his somewhat formulaic approach to discourse, caused controversy among his more able pupils and in some cases their parents. John Hutchinson, who later served as a colonel in Oliver Cromwell's army and sat as one of the judges at the trial of Charles I, was among those who had, according to his widow, an 'aversion to Clarke's austere, pedantic, and supercilious' manner. Garton wrote that the adolescent Hutchinson could not stomach anything that savoured of the pedantic or the puerile and Clarke's teaching methods seemed to him to reek of both. Adolescent *sturm und drang*, perhaps? What stuck in his gullet above all was his teaching of Latin by the formulary method which meant, in effect, trying to teach a foreign language by a hugely amplified tourist's phrasebook. Others, however, wrote commendations including one by an equally eminent pupil, William Walker, who later dedicated one of his books to his former master. He also earned the touching affection of Beverley who, on his dying bed, described him as 'My most dear Clarke'. Such contrasting opinions have been echoed during reunions of my own former schoolmates about masters at Lincoln School during the 1950s and it must be the fate of all teachers that their efforts are not always universally

admired for reasons such as personality, temperament, and different teaching and learning styles.

One way in which Clarke chose to publicise his methods of teaching was through Speech Days. Garton wrote that he seized the chance to demonstrate the fruits of his teaching by organising those annual events whose records of have survived from 1624 and 1625. He planned them to take place shortly before the Christmas holidays partly to test the pupils' progress but also to give their minds a focus before the break and to combat the prevalent pre-Christmas indiscipline and rowdiness. It may also have provided an opportunity to impress parents and the 'visitors'.

Presentations by the pupils took the form of orations, prepared in Latin with perhaps some Greek in Clarke's preferred formulaic style (Clarke, 1632) and with evidence that they were in many cases mostly written by the masters in their own fair hand. At the very least there was 'due and arduous coaching'.

We can visualise the scene, thanks to the photograph above and Garton's imaginative reconstruction from the Latin speeches, published by Clarke (1624/1625) and translated into English by Charles Garton in 1972. The proceedings began at the north door of Greyfriars, where a boy was posted to deliver a speech of welcome in Latin which began as follows: 'A thousand welcomes, worshipful dignitaries, to all of you thus crowdedly converging'. The dignitaries, including representatives of the cathedral and the city, then took their seats while the 'rank and file' of the audience comprised fathers and perhaps other relatives and friends of the boys, a congregation not dissimilar from the Speech Days that I remember at Lincoln School during the 1950s. There the resemblance ends, however, as the 'speeches' were given by the senior boys and not by the headmasters and governors of later years.

There followed a number of 'controversies', staged by the senior boys who assumed the roles of historical personae and enacted scenes from mythology in the form of debates in Latin. The controversies followed Clarke's formulaic style mentioned earlier. Garton summarised the most characteristic format as follows:

1. Exordium (introduction, preface, or preamble)
2. Proposition (theory, argument, or premise)
3. Exposition (explanation, elucidation, interpretation)
4. Proof (summary of evidence or argument supporting the proposition)

Garton's favourite of the Speech Day controversies was one composed by Clarke himself that touched on the relationships between teachers, pupils, and parents. The proposition was that Alexander owed more to his teacher Aristotle than to his father Philip. The pupil who took on the role of proponent appealed to the audience through an impassioned speech to recognise the debt they owed to their own teachers. His opponent then came forward to present the alternative view that the child owed more to his parent. Readers will have noted that parent was in singular form and there was no mention of the mother, a sign of the times of course. Once both opponents had had their say it was the moderator's turn. His role was to support the proponent while being careful to give the parents their due, which he contrived to achieve through somewhat flowery and obsequious language, appealing to his audience to recognise schools as 'bulwarks of bronze' against the 'scowling and mischievous minds from

whose most perverse judgements, sarcasms, and asinine clamouring' schools had taken a beating. Clarke was clearly using the occasion to defend his own profession which was under attack as it has been throughout history. At that point the proponent was declared to have won and the proceedings ended with a prize-giving ceremony to school-leavers going on to university. On that evidence, Clarke would no doubt have rested his case! They would have been his star pupils and what we would deem these days as good 'prospectus fodder'.

Speech Day in the following year, 1625, followed a similar pattern although there were opportunities for contests in poetry, music, and art in addition to oratory. The debate that year was on the age-old subject of heredity and environment. Two brothers contested whether or not a child could be properly educated in the humanities irrespective of his mental endowment. Two brothers were the opponents, the younger arguing that heredity played the larger part whereas the elder brother argued in reply that a child could be effectively educated regardless of his mental endowment. A moderator summed up and decided, as was the tradition, in favour of the proponent's viewpoint. His script, of course, had been written by Clarke himself who showed his disillusionment with teaching and in particular with those who sought to denigrate the profession by recalling the famous complaint of Leonidas (see Note 3) that the province of teaching was obscure, thankless, ignoble, and despised. He used the speech to seek sympathy and empathy from the audience by inviting them to imagine the futility of the task of attempting to educate 'dullards and laggards'!

We can imagine the solemn and dignified scene as another boy then read the valedictory from his 'high perch'. This was almost certainly the great high pulpit which was known to have graced the floor of the schoolroom near the east window. At his side Clarke would have been seated on a podium facing the boys, their parents and friends, and the dignitaries.

Clarke was the first headmaster under whose reign the 'Assizes' is known to have taken place. This was a recurring event or 'rag' whose origin and precise format has been lost in the mists of time but was referred to as 'the pretended custom of playing at the assizes' which suggests that it took the form of simulated trials and punishments parodying the city's real-life assizes and possibly stocks and hangings. The real assizes took place four times a year during each season in Lincoln between 1409 and 1971. It is unlikely that the Lincoln School 'mock' assizes would have taken place more than once or twice a year as they tended to last for several days and would have caused a serious interruption to the work of the School. It seems that the events were tolerated rather than repressed and that both Clarke and Beverley might have been expected to attend them. The 'assizes' must be distinguished from another custom described in an earlier article, the 'barrings-out' (see Note 4) which took place once or twice a year when the masters were barred from the building and the accompanying rowdy behaviour by the boys often resulted in serious damage to the property, including the vulnerable windows.

During Clarke's headship the School benefited, albeit temporarily, from benefactions from the Wray family. Lady Frances Wray, daughter of the Lord Chief Justice,

endowed fellowships and scholarships to Magdalene College, Cambridge for the benefit of schools in Lincolnshire including Lincoln School. Thus began a fruitful period during which Lincoln School sent no fewer than sixty-one boys to the College between 1631 and 1751 when the bond between the two became very strong. The *Lincoln Date Book* (see References) recorded the death of the 'pious and charitable' Frances Wray, daughter of Sir Christopher Wray, Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench. She was described as a person of 'a shining conversation and eminent bounty' who was a great benefactor to Magdalene College, having added three Fellowships and six Scholarships to others initiated by her father.

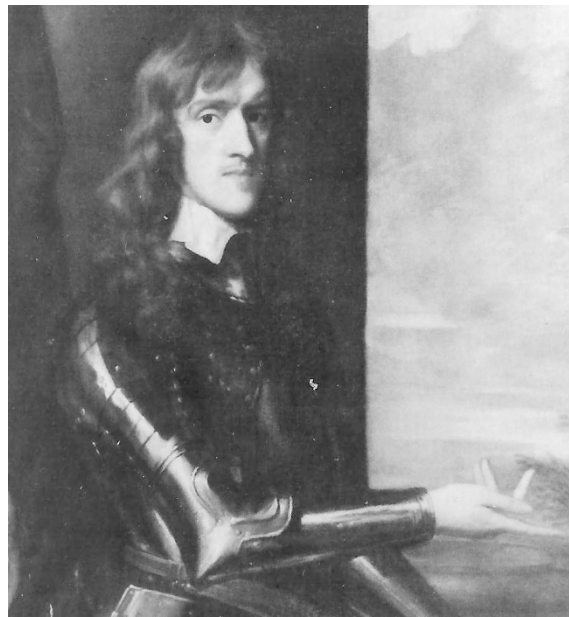
To summarise Clarke's headship, the picture painted by Garton (1985) is that Lincoln School was in the hands of a youngish man of character, vigour, and commitment. He was not without his critics and was derided, despised, and even vilified by some while being loved and admired by others. The records are sufficiently complete to show that he was on the one hand energetic, scrupulous, conscientious, and serious-minded person yet not without a few bees in his bonnet and with a certain almost puerile and pedantic streak in his personality. Added to this was a tendency to a somewhat constricted judgement and an occasional intemperateness of expression. If not a paradox or an eccentric, he was without doubt his own man. Despite his heart being in the Church and being both learned and pious, he was what Garton described as a 'quintessential schoolmaster' and through his highly regarded textbooks he was influential both nationally and internationally and a household name in many schools equivalent to those who published the seminal textbooks that we remember from our own education.

What cannot be denied is that Clarke's legacy at Lincoln School was assured. It is clear from Professor Garton's research that he was an innovator and chalked up a number of 'firsts' against his name. He was the first Head known to have served an official period of a year's probation after which he was examined by the school 'visitors' under the bishop. He was also the first who used the full and formal title *Schola Lincolniensis* as the official name of the School. Previously it has had been known as *Scholae Lincolniensis* (the plural form in Latin) to indicate that it was in fact two schools albeit with a close relationship: the one in the Close where the choristers were taught and the one downhill in the City. He was also the first headmaster of Lincoln School 'proper' to have combined the post while holding a prebendary or canonry over an extensive period. He was the first to have published not only works of his own but also a specimen of some of the work of his usher.

Moreover, Clarke was the first known to have kept a systematic record of choirboy absentees who presumably left the Close but failed to show up at the Greyfriars. One wonders what 'playing hooky' involved in those days! He was the first to leave surviving records of Speech Day proceedings, and orations written in Latin and translated for us by classicist Professor Garton. Most significant as far as the curriculum was concerned, he was the first headmaster known to have stood up for the rights and status of the English language as a 'competent and dignified vehicle of expression'. The innovation of the 'Assizes' was first known to have been celebrated during his headship, and he was the first known to have sent as many as twenty boys to university. Described by Garton (1994) as a prolific writer of textbooks, he

was the first since the invention of printing to have compiled a textbook of his own which 'went viral' as they would say these days and became a national academic bestseller which was even on sale in America in later years. Other recognition in the field of publishing followed, including editing a seminal schoolbook and having another noted textbook dedicated to him. By 1632 he boasted a sales figure of seven thousand textbooks.

Clarke was also the first to have appointed an army veteran as 'drill master' to supervise the boys' exercise and athletic activities. This proved to be useful during the Civil War (1642-1651) when three Lincolnians, including Hutchinson, became Cromwellian colonels.



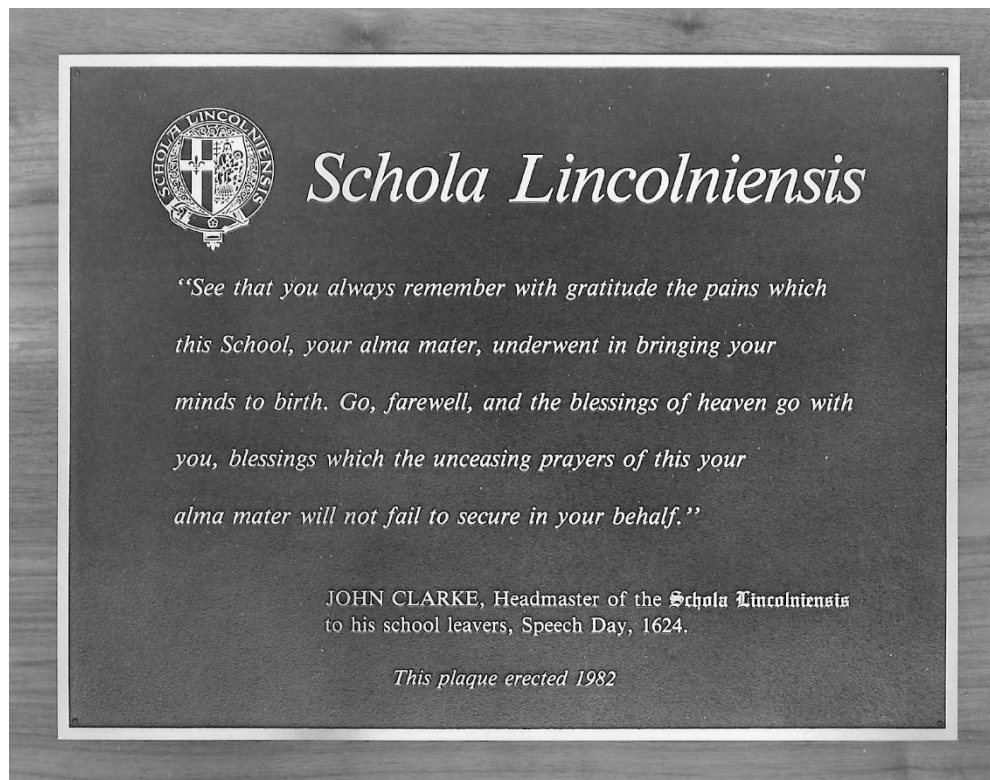
Colonel John Hutchison by Robert Walker (In: Lucy Hutchinson, 1973)

As far as Clarke's personal life is concerned Garton could find no evidence that he had married before 1633 when he was about thirty-seven and during that year he married Rose Williamson with whom he had three sons and six daughters. He took good care to ensure that his daughters as well as his sons received a good education, albeit probably informal. Although ordained as a priest, it seemed likely that Clarke had postponed marriage until he was able to secure a church living and in 1634 he accepted a living with a substantial additional income in Fiskerton, close to Beverley's former parish in Cherry Willingham, on the understanding that he should remain in full-time employment as headmaster of Lincoln School. Garton recorded that he conducted his ministry with the same energy and singlemindedness that he had shown as a headmaster through all the upheavals leading up to the Civil War.

Forty-five seemed to be the going age for the retirement of headmasters and in 1640, Clarke would have been about that age when, as a rector and a canon with an

income sufficient to support his growing family, he felt the attraction of a country life and the dignity of a more exclusively clerical one.

One of Clarke's most noted and tangible legacies was his famous message spoken at the close of the Speech Day in 1624 described above. As Garton recorded, it may be taken as Clarke's message to all Lincolnians, past, present, and future which, over three hundred and fifty years later, was displayed on the plaque shown below at Lincoln Christ's Hospital School in 1982.



Clarke had good reason to look back on his career with satisfaction. He had put Lincoln Grammar School more prominently on the map than any other post-medieval headmaster and was noted for his many publications on education and religion. In Professor Garton's words he was a schoolmaster *in excelsis*. Some of his most able pupils also achieved fame and distinction, but that is another story.

Note 1

The *Deed of Union*, referred to the agreement in 1584, when Lincoln Grammar School took over the Greyfriars building on Broadgate, that the cathedral boys would be educated in part at the School as indeed they were throughout its future history. Part of the agreement was that the School would be supervised by a committee of senior members of the Cathedral Chapter and the City Council. They were known as

the 'visitors' under the chairmanship of the bishop. Little is known about their role, but they might be seen as a latter-day *Ofsted* committee charged with inspecting the School and ensuring high standards of teaching and propriety.

Note 2

Grammar School boys during medieval times learned their Latin from *Lily's Latin Grammar* which was of Tudor origin.

Note 3 Leonidas

Leonidas was a warrior king of the Greek city-state of Sparta who apparently did not possess a very high opinion of educators.

Note 4

A widespread custom in schools up to the 19th century was the 'barring-out' of the schoolteacher by his pupils. On a day sanctioned by custom (but varying from place to place), the pupils contrived to bar the door with the teacher outside, often with his connivance, and refused to let him in until he agreed to their terms, which were usually for a half-holiday, or something similar. By the 19th century the custom was relatively controlled, but in previous generations had been much rougher. On at least one occasion, in Scotland in 1595, a magistrate who was helping the teacher gain access to the school was shot dead by one of the pupils. Not surprisingly, local authorities waged a continual war against such activities and gradually succeeded in taming and, eventually, eliminating the custom (Oxford Reference). According to Leake (1906) it was the custom at barrings-out at Lincoln School at Christmas and on Shrove Tuesdays for the boys to break all the windows, a custom which the common council understandably sought to discourage.

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(Picture of Hutchinson by Robert Walker)