

'Guffer' Ashton, 1885–1966

Geoff Spurr and his brother Alan were at Magnus with Godfrey. Geoff Spurr says “(we three) all owe a lot to Mr. Ashton, an inspirational physics teacher at Magnus.” The following notes are based on recollections of Old Magnusians about the teacher nicknamed ‘Guffer’ Ashton and on school records and family history websites.

David Percy Hubert Ashton was born on 31st December, 1885, a few miles north west of Cardiff at Llanwonno. His father Valentine Ashton is shown in the 1891 census as a grocer living in nearby Penrhys. His father and mother Annie were both born in Llanidloes, in central Wales, and all of the family spoke both Welsh and English. The 1901 census shows David as the eldest of five children. In 1913 he married Ada Celia Evans in Aberystwyth. Their son John H. Ashton was born in 1916 and died in Newark in 1938 aged 21. A daughter Marjory C. Ashton was born in 1921.

In 1898, his education began at Howard Gardens Organized Science School, which he left in 1902 and began training for a career in teaching. He spent five years in further education, beginning with a year at the Pupil Teachers' Centre, Cardiff, from where he may have served locally as a pupil-teacher, during 1902–1903. He then studied for four years, 1903–1907, at the University College, Cardiff, where he took his degree. As the note separates his first three years, which it says were in the ‘Normal’ Department of the University, one assumes that he would have qualified as a Bachelor of Science, then in the succeeding year studied the more academic aspects of teacher-training. His final qualifications are Physics to BSc 1st Class Honours (University of Wales), Pure and Applied Maths to pass standard; Chemistry to pass standard. He did not attempt an MSc. He gained a Teacher's Certificate.

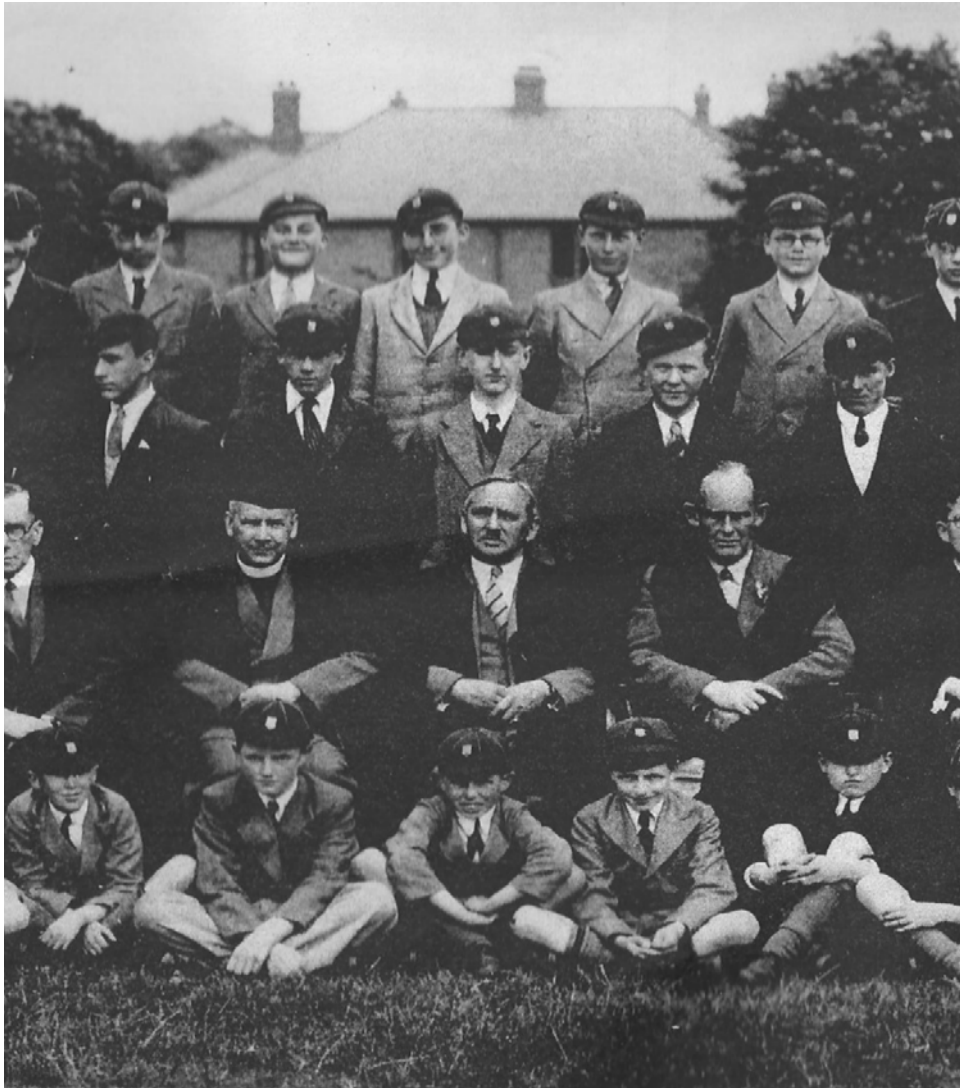
Mr. Ashton's first teaching-post was at Aberystwyth County School between 1907 and 1919, as Senior Physics Master. He may have spent a short time as an Assistant Master under the leadership of another; if so this would have been short-lived and was not noted in the Magnus records. He would have been exempted from military service during the First World War, and presumably continued at the School. His appointment at the Magnus School as a probationer dated from 2nd April 1920. Reverend Henry Gorse, Headmaster of the time, would have been responsible for all staff records. Ashton's job description states that he was ‘to take charge of Advanced Physics in the top forms and to be a Maths Assistant Teacher in the lower and middle forms’. As there seems to be no account of the year 1919–1920, it may be that the dates are not altogether accurate. Anyway, his appointment was confirmed on, or from, 1st September 1920, and he appears on such whole-school photographs as are retained until the 1940s, throughout the Second World War. His seniority on the staff looks to have been recognized from the very start, as he was always photographed at the side of the Headmaster, in the centre of the front row. For most of his years of service, that Headmaster was Reverend Donald Campbell-Miller. There seems, in fact, to have been little change in the ranks of the most senior staff throughout this time. Mr. Ashton became known to his boys as ‘Guffer’. This was a corruption of ‘Gaffer’; presumably an acknowledgment of his leadership ethos.

The recorders neglected to note of his date of leaving the Magnus, but those who remember him assert that this was in 1946. He would then have been aged 61, and have taken retirement. Mr. Frank Heath was appointed as Senior Physics Master on 1st May 1946, and was in this post until 1980. ‘Guffer’, then, was succeeded by Frank. The years 1939–45 saw many staff adjustments, generally short-term, to cover for voluntary armed-service, and 1946 brought an influx of new masters who were destined to stay throughout the next three decades. Not all data was rigorously recorded, an understandable situation in view of the global turmoil. Following his retirement, it is understood that he emigrated to Australia. Contacts then appear to have been broken, both with the School and with the Old Magnusians' Association. His contemporary, ‘Dicky’ Dwyer, the usual resource for news of past contacts, makes no mention of ‘Guffer’. Four of his 1940s pupils have been approached, with no further success. No staff contemporaries survive.

The deaths of David Ashton and his wife Ada are shown in the Australian death index in 1966. The 1949 Electoral Roll shows them a few miles south west of Melbourne in Bendigo Street, Cheltenham, Australia. Probably they moved to Australia to be near to their daughter. Marjory C Ashton married Ronald G Tamblyn in Newark, Nottinghamshire in 1944, and Marjorie Celia Tamblyn

subsequently appears in electoral rolls a few miles south west of Melbourne (in the Kooyong district).

Normally, an obituary would appear in *The Novarcensian*, or school magazine, on the passing of a notable previous master but no such article has been found to date. Seemingly no-one back in England, not even his employer of 26 years, was deemed to merit notification. The magazine is usually the main source for staff biographies, but to cater for each case would, of course, be impracticable.



Teachers, left to right:

Rev. Donald Campbell-Miller, headmaster, wearing an academic cap, gown and clerical collar.

Mr. David ‘Guffer’ Ashton, who taught Physics at the School from 1920 until 1946.

Mr. ‘Dicky’ Dwyer, who taught Geography and Divinity until 1962.

Information and report by Roger Peacock: 7th November 2013

With grateful thanks to Old Magnusians Chris Grant, Bill Lawton and Mike Jobson
and family history research by Jean Waltham.

Geoff Spurr sent the following comments on this photo: “I recognise them all and remember how and what they taught us. Dicky Dwyer for climatic geography, inventing continents in certain latitudes with their coast lines, mountain ranges, plains, rivers and mineral deposits. We had to determine the weather, seasonal rainfall, works of man, possible positions of towns and their industries, and estuaries suitable for ports. I found this fascinating stuff. We had an excellent maths master, not shown here. He owned a fast sports car. At the end of each geometry rider we had to put QED, quad erat demonstrandum. I added in small letters to turn this into quite easily done. He picked up my work, looked at it and remarked ‘I don’t think so’.”