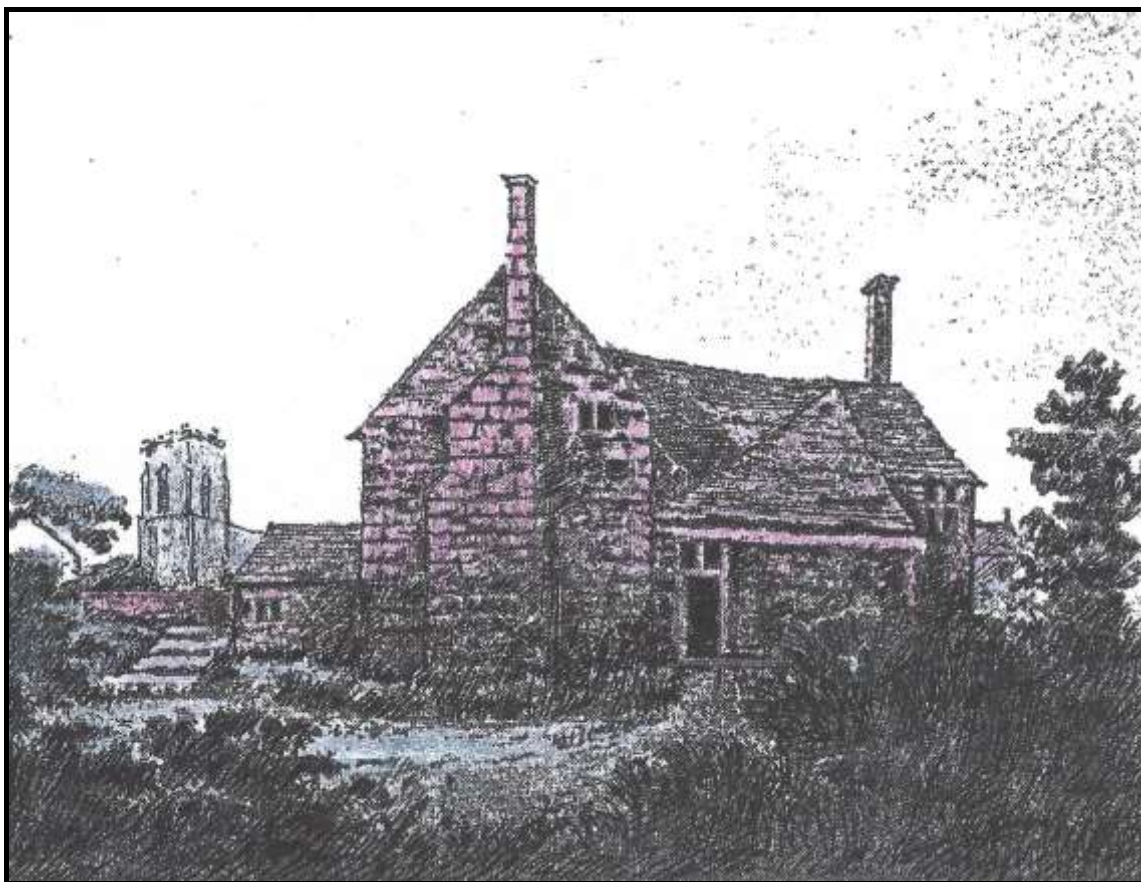


WHERE WAS ST. MARY'S HALL?



The picture above is immediately recognisable as the Old School founded by Bishop Vesey in 1527, which was abandoned after the present Bishop Vesey's Grammar School in Lichfield Road was built in 1728. The picture is part of the Aylesford collection now housed in the Library of Birmingham. In 1792 three Coventry businessmen, Thomas Sharp, John Nicholson and George Howlett, commissioned a local artist and drawing-master, Henry Jeayes, to paint pictures of Warwickshire buildings to illustrate a new edition of Sir William Dugdale's *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*. When Sharp's business failed in 1821, he sold some of the original paintings to Heneage Finch 5th Earl of Aylesford of Packington Hall, who was Sutton Coldfield's High Steward from 1835 to 1859. Lord Aylesford's grandson sold the collection to the London booksellers Ellis and White in 1871, from whom the antiquarian Leonard Lawrie Hartley subsequently bought it. On Hartley's death the collection was acquired by Birmingham Library in 1885. Number 650 in the collection is catalogued as 'Pen & wash: Remains of Sutton Grammar School'. It is to be noted that the name St. Mary's Hall is not mentioned in the catalogue, although the picture is often reproduced with that name in its caption.

Two questions arise:

1. Where was this building situated?
2. Was this building St. Mary's Hall?

The earliest known reference to St. Mary's Hall comes from the 1479/80 accounts of the estates of the Duke of Clarence prepared by the bailiff John Bailly. George Plantagenet 1st Duke of Clarence (1449-78), the younger brother of King Edward IV and elder brother of King Richard III, was the 17th Earl of

Warwick by virtue of his marriage to Isabella, the elder daughter of Richard Neville (the Kingmaker) 16th Earl of Warwick, and as such was the Lord of the Manor of Sutton Coldfield. He was impeached for treason in 1478 and was famously put to death in the Tower of London by drowning in a butt of malmsey wine. The entry in the accounts is in medieval Latin:

“Et de j d. de novo redditu unius parcelle terre in Sutton Magna continentis in latitudine ij pedes et in longitudine xxj pedes, annexe tenemento suo vocato Sayntmaryhull de vasto domini Regis, in emendacione tenementi Beate Marie, sic dismisit Thome Redde et heredibus suis ad opus dicti tenement, solvendo ad terminos ibidem usuales per rotulos curie anni precedentis, ut (etc.)”

This paragraph was translated by Norman Evans in a short paper entitled *Proof that Saint Mary's Hall was in existence 50 years before Bishop Vesey built the Grammar School* which Mr Evans gave me in 1990:

“And for 1d new rent for a parcel of land out of the King's waste in Great Sutton 2 feet wide and 21 feet long attached to his [the Duke of Clarence] tenement called Saintmaryhull, in order to repair Saint Mary's house (Saint Mary's Hall?), demised to Thomas Redde and his heirs for work on the said building, payable at the usual terms according to the court rolls for years before, etc”

In a 1993 article about the old boundaries of the churchyard at Holy Trinity Church, Norman Evans set out his thoughts on the subject in more detail:

“On [a] plot of land facing the South East corner of the churchyard, stood a building with stone foundations (and probably half-timbered) known as Saint Mary's Hall. It was built at least a century before Bishop Vesey acquired the land for founding his School, for the Record of the Estates of the Duke of Clarence shows that as Earl of Warwick he, in 1480, owned Saint Mary's Hall in Great Sutton [actually he died two years earlier and the property was then owned by his executors] The building was referred to as 'his tenement Saint Mary's Hall', and also as being 'of the Blessed Mary', implying that it could have had connections with the church, especially when it is remembered that the name had been given to it before the Reformation, during the period when services in Holy Trinity would have followed the tenets of the Church of Rome, and also when it is recalled that the owners of Saint Mary's Hall, the Earls of Warwick, had control over the affairs of Holy Trinity in Sutton as its patrons who exercised their rights of presentation to the Church by nominating clergymen to the Rectory. Could it have been used as a Rectory?”

Mr Evans' translation, which appears to be copied from a previous translation by Anne-Marie Powell, mentions two properties, Saintmaryhull and Saint Mary's house ('tenementi Beate Marie' in the original). By adding 'Saint Mary's Hall' in brackets, with a question mark, after 'Saint Mary's house', Norman Evans suggests that only one property is referred to, but it seems to me that if this were the case the Latin original would not have used two entirely different names but would have said something like 'tenementi predicti' (the aforesaid house). This belief is supported by the mention of two properties in a deed dated 20th October 1569, referred to below. The more important point is that St. Mary's Hall was in existence in 1479 (and probably for many years before that date), although it doesn't tell us where the property was, apart from being in Great Sutton, the name given to the area around the Parish church.

The next mention of St. Mary's Hall appears in a deed dated 14th May 1527 whereby Bishop Vesey founded the Grammar School. In it Bishop Vesey gave the rents amounting to £7 a year from twenty-four properties in Sutton to twenty-one trustees to pay a “fit person to teach grammar and rhetoric in the parish of Sutton”. One of these properties was described as “a tenement called Saint Maryhall, late of Sir Roger Moseley, now in the tenure of Thomas Adderley, lying and being in Great Sutton of

the yearly rent of eight shillings". On 1st October 1543, in another of Bishop Vesey's deeds, St. Mary's Hall was described as "now in the tenure of John Savage schoolmaster".

In 1637 St. Mary's Hall was the subject of litigation in the Chancery Court brought by John Mitchell, the Master of the Grammar School, against the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, who had taken over the management of the school from private trustees in 1543. The Court found that on 20th October 1569 the Warden and Society had granted three properties, including St. Mary's Hall and another tenement called St. Mary's House in Sutton Magna to Thomas Blackham, a Sutton farmer who was Warden in 1559 and 1570, "for ever" but subject to a yearly rent of nineteen shillings. Blackham sold St. Mary's Hall to William Colmore who sold it to Francis Wasse, who was Warden in 1631 and 1652. In 1637 Wasse was paying only eight shillings a year to the Warden and Society, although by then the full market rent was £2. The Court ruled that all these transactions were fraudulent and ordered Wasse to transfer ownership of St. Mary's Hall to thirteen trustees on behalf of the school, which was done on 28th August 1639. No further mention of St. Mary's House appears and no order was made in respect of it, which is rather odd; perhaps it was within the curtilage of St. Mary's Hall, more in the nature of an extension than a separate property.

Agnes Bracken made reference to St. Mary's Hall in her history of Sutton (1860):

"He [Bishop Vesey] built a free grammar school, probably that building called St. Mary's Hall, opposite the south-east corner of the churchyard, which fell down at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The dwellinghouse for the master, at the south-west corner of the churchyard, was of stone, and might be of the same date. It was pulled down in 1832, when the churchyard was enlarged over its site and garden."

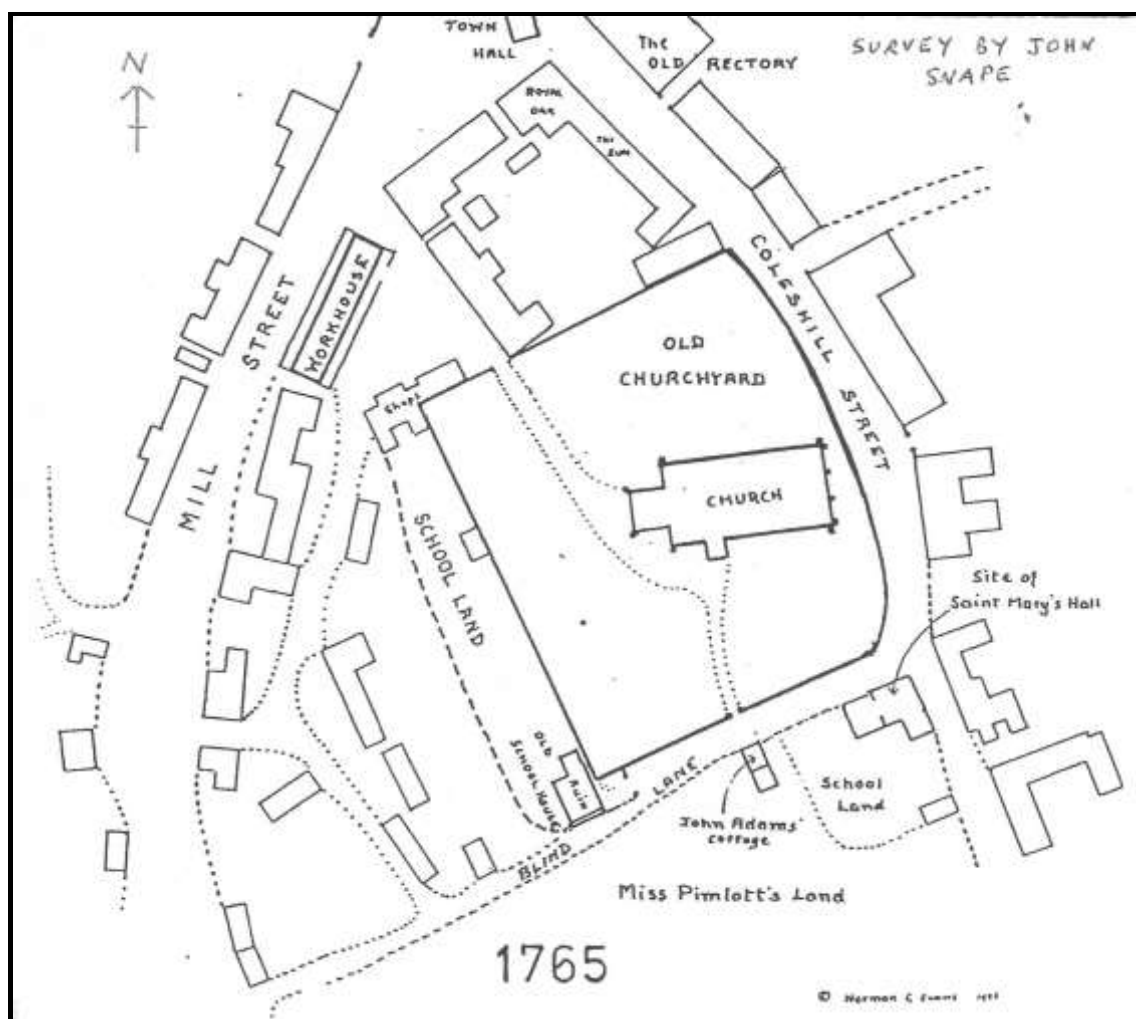
It is clearly incorrect to suggest that the property built by Bishop Vesey in the first half of the 16th century was probably called St. Mary's Hall, since, as we have seen, that property was in existence in the 15th century. Despite this mistake, Miss Bracken's paragraph is of interest as it identifies two separate properties, the school opposite the south-east corner of the churchyard and the dwellinghouse for the master at the south-west corner of the churchyard. The comment that both properties might be of the same date is also mistaken.

In his article about the old boundaries of the Holy Trinity churchyard Norman Evans included a map (shown on the next page) taken from John Snape's survey of 1765, on which he marked the site of St. Mary's Hall, the Old School House and two parcels of School Land. These two buildings, opposite the south-east of the churchyard and at the south-west corner of the churchyard, coincide with Miss Bracken's account, except that she mixed the properties up. Her paragraph can be corrected as follows:

"He built a free grammar school at the south-west corner of the churchyard, made of stone. It was pulled down in 1832 when the churchyard was enlarged over its site and garden. The dwelling house for the master, probably that building called St. Mary's Hall, was opposite the south-east corner of the churchyard."

The building which Miss Bracken says fell down at the beginning of the 18th century is neither of the properties she mentions, but an entirely different one, mentioned below.

It will be noted that on Norman Evans' map, there appears to be an extension on the west side of St. Mary's Hall. I wonder if this was the property referred to as St. Mary's House in the bailiff's accounts of 1469/70 and the fraudulent transaction dated 20th October 1569?



Geoffrey Fryer, in his 1997 biography of Bishop Vesey, says:

“His [John Savage, the first recorded master] house was known as St. Mary Hall and was at the top of Blind Lane, now named Trinity Hill. It was a stone house similar to the Vesey houses in Maney and Wylde Green Road, but larger. The rent was eight shillings a year. The adjacent St. Mary House at the corner of Coleshill Street was used for boarding pupils. Another nearby house, ‘The Old Grammar School’, was used as the school. Vesey presumably provided these buildings.”

This paragraph, although wrongly implying that St. Mary’s Hall was built by Bishop Vesey, supports the theory that St. Mary’s Hall, the master’s house, and St. Mary’s House, used as a boarding house, were adjacent properties, but says that the former was at the top of Blind Lane and the latter was at the corner of Coleshill Street, which appears to be the wrong way round according to the 1765 map.

Thus far, it would appear that St Mary’s Hall was in Coleshill Street, on the corner of Blind Lane, and the School House was further down Blind Lane, but the question still remains, which property is shown in the Aylesford collection painting? The building in the painting is certainly similar to the Vesey stone houses, and if St Mary’s Hall was half-timbered with stone foundations this does not accord with the painting, which shows a completely stone-built property. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the building in the painting is the school built as new by Bishop Vesey, not the ancient house which was owned by the Duke of Clarence in the 1470s.

In his articles for the Royal Sutton Coldfield Observer, Roger Lea makes several references to St. Mary's Hall. In a May 2013 article about a local court hearing in 1416, he says:

"The court roll does not mention the building in which the court was held, but it may have been St. Mary's Hall on Trinity Hill (later the Schoolmaster's House, demolished c 1830)".

Because of the date of the court hearing, the building referred to can mean only the Duke of Clarence's property, although, as we shall see below, it was the school house lower down Trinity Hill which was demolished in about 1830, not St. Mary's Hall.

In another article, in February 2009, about the inventory of goods belonging to John Elly, Master of the Grammar School, on his death in 1659, Roger Lea writes:

"The inventory shows that the house he lived in had four upstairs rooms and an attic, with a parlour, an old kitchen and a new kitchen on the ground floor. This was no doubt the Schoolmaster's House, which was a medieval building once known as St. Mary's Hall standing on Trinity Hill. The next Master did not live at the school house, which was rented out, and the school moved to new premises in Lichfield Road in 1727. Shortly afterwards the old school building was knocked down to make way for the Workhouse which stood in Mill Street."

It makes no sense to say that a building standing on Trinity Hill was knocked down to make way for the workhouse in Mill Street; perusal of the 1765 map shows that St. Mary's Hall was separated from the workhouse by Blind Lane and Holy Trinity Church. It must have been an entirely different property which was knocked down to make way for the workhouse, one to which no reference is made by Agnes Bracken, Norman Evans or Geoffrey Fryer.

Roger Lea's suggestion that later schoolmasters did not live at St. Mary's Hall is supported by a Rental of the school properties, which is undated but was most likely prepared between 1687 and 1706 (it mentions William Saunders who became the schoolmaster in 1687 and John Addys who died in 1706), which shows that St. Mary's Hall was let to John Cartwright, a cordwainer or shoemaker, at an annual rent of £3.6.8d.

The inventory includes the following items:

"Ten chaires and stooles £1.6.8d."

"13 stooles & Chaires 2 tables & a Court Cubbord £1.14.0d."

"A table and a schreen a Cubbord a forme and 6 stooles £1.0.0d."

"Tables, desks, pales & writings belonging to ye schoole £10.0.0d."

[The meaning of 'pales' is obscure; perhaps pens?]

This suggests either that St. Mary's Hall was used for educational purposes as well as the master's private residence, or that the building Elly lived in was not St. Mary's Hall.

Roger Lea's February 2009 article goes on to say:

"At that time the School owned a strip of land (known as Schoolmaster's Garden) next to the Churchyard, so it is reasonable to suppose that the school building stood at the Mill Street end and the Schoolmaster's house at the Trinity Hill end of the land."

The strip of land referred to is marked 'School Land' on the 1765 map. Roger Lea was aware that his theory that the school building was at the Mill Street end of the schoolmaster's garden was open to question, as he concluded his article:

"But other writers have suggested that the school building stood on Trinity Hill, or that the house and school were in one building, or that St. Mary's Hall stood on the other side of Trinity Hill at the Coleshill Street corner. Only one illustration survives, and it has been used to support each of these theories!"

The illustration referred to is, of course, the Aylesford collection painting, which is used to illustrate the article and mistakenly described as 'St Mary's Hall (the Schoolmaster's house)'.

Norman Evans, in his 1993 article, had no doubt on the matter:

"John Snape's surveys of this part of Sutton in 1765 show the Old Grammar School House in an elevated position on the 'cliff' immediately overlooking the site of the present new Baptist Church, its entrance from the north side of the Blind Lane being through double gates – probably up steps – facing the Lane towards Coleshill Street. This location is confirmed by an old etching in the Aylesford Collection which shows the position of the School relative to the church tower."

I now give consideration to Roger Lea's comment that the old school building was knocked down to make way for the workhouse. Mike Hinson, in a 1997 article about the relief of Sutton's poor summarised the Warden and Society's response to the 1723 Poor Relief Act, which empowered parishes in England and Wales to build or acquire workhouses, as follows:

"In 1727, the Sutton Corporation allocated £400 to build a workhouse, but it was not until ten years later that a resolution was passed to demolish the old Almshouses and to utilise the materials to build a workhouse on the site of the old school (St. Mary's Hall) in Mill Street."

Perusal of the minute book of the Warden and Society confirms that on 27th November 1727 it was agreed that:

"the Free Schoole of Sutton lately fallen down shall be rebuilt at a publick Expence by Fall of wood in Sutton Park or otherwise. The same being for a publick use and benefitt."

And on 8th December 1727 it was agreed that:

"the Summe of twelve hundred pounds shall in some convenient time be raised by Fall of wood out of Sutton parke (viz. Four Hundred pounds part thereof for the rebuilding of the Free schoole house and Eight hundred pounds residue of the said twelve hundred pounds to be laid out in building of a workehouse for Imploying the poor of the parish of Sutton."

And on 11th March 1728 it was recorded that 3664 oak trees in Sutton Park had been marked for sale for the sum of £1,200.

And then, on 6th March 1737 a resolution was passed:

"That the Almshouses belonging to the Parish (which are become very ruinous and much decayed) shall be taken down and all Timber, Bricks and Materials which shall arise therefrom shall be applied towards building a Workhouse where the old School stood for the maintenance of the poor belonging to this parish as soon as conveniently may be And that what money shall be wanting for

completing such Workhouse shall be paid out of the money that will come from the late sale of Timber in Holly Hurst.”

It will be noted from these minutes that the initial proposal appears to have been to rebuild the old school rather than to build a new school on a different site, that the £400 mentioned in Mike Hinson’s article was for the school, not the workhouse for which the sum of £800 was allocated, and, most pertinently for the purposes of the present article, the minutes do not mention St. Mary’s Hall as the name of the old school. Mike Hinson has added this detail in the mistaken and common belief that that was the name of the school property built by Bishop Vesey on the west side of Holy Trinity churchyard and not the name of the medieval house in Coleshill Street.

In another comprehensive article on the history of Sutton’s workhouse, written in 2017, Mike Hinson mentions *Sutton in the Past – Disconnected Jottings* by Albert Fentiman:

“In his book Fentiman refers to an entry in the minutes of the Warden and Society concerning the Old Grammar School. The Schoolmaster had approached the Corporation because the accommodation in St. Mary’s Hall had become untenable.”

I have searched the Warden and Society’s minute book for the 1720s and 1730s for confirmation of this approach by the schoolmaster, but without success. There is certainly no mention of St. Mary’s Hall in the minutes.

The same assumption was made in my own 1990 history of Bishop Vesey’s Grammar School, in which an illustration of the Aylesford collection painting is given the caption ‘St. Mary Hall (the Old School)’. This was the general belief at the time, but is now disproved by the Duke of Clarence’s accounts.

The resolution dated 6th March 1737 continues:

“And the said Corporation shall pay to the Schoolmaster for the time being the yearly rent of four pounds for such part of the Old School House as is now remaining and the land where the same stood and the Barn and all appurtenances thereto belonging.”

This minute supports Roger Lea’s theory that the school was at the Mill Street end of the schoolmaster’s garden, but goes contrary to Norman Evans’ map taken from John Snape’s 1765 survey. However, it could well be that considerable changes had taken place in the thirty years before John Snape’s survey. The workhouse did not exist in 1735 and it could be that the shops shown on the map at the north end of the schoolmaster’s garden also did not exist, and that the school land extended to Mill Street. If this was the case, there must have been two buildings belonging to the school, in addition to the medieval St. Mary’s Hall and St. Mary’s House, one off Blind Lane and the other off Mill Street.

At least one of these two buildings, unlike St. Mary’s Hall, was built by Bishop Vesey as one of his stone houses some time in the 1520s or 1530s. Philip Chatwin and Edgar Harcourt in their account of the Bishop Vesey houses (1941/42) say that:

“The houses built by Bishop Vesey, though varying in size, are all of one type: they were built with quoins at the angles and with doors and windows of well-dressed stones. These are built into walls consisting of roughly squared stones in fairly even courses, not always constructed with the same care. The inside divisions are made of upright timbers framed into a head and sill with an intermediate horizontal beam, these upright timbers are about 9 in. by 3½ in. thick, placed 15 in. apart, the filling between seems to be of wattle and daub. The floor joists are about 9 in. by 4 in., placed flat and about

15 in. apart, notched into the sides of the beams. The roofs appear always to have been meant for tiles The collar beam (there is no tie-beam) is mortised and pegged into the principal rafter close to the point where this is deeply cut to receive the end of the purlin, with the result that the principal was much weakened and in every case they have shown signs of failure or have actually split and cracked, and they have had to be propped."

The question remains, which of the two buildings is the one in the Aylesford collection painting? Going back to the commissioning of the painting in 1792, it is instructive to consider on what the artist Henry Jeayes based his depiction of the building. Assuming that he didn't conjure it from his own imagination, either there must have been an earlier painting, which has since been lost, or, more likely, he painted it from life. So, which property was standing in 1792?

Norman Evans, in the 1993 article previously quoted, tells us:

"When St. Mary's Hall became dilapidated in the 1720s it was partly taken down and a Georgian house was erected upon its stone foundations. It remained thus until 1959 when it was completely demolished to widen the corner of Trinity Hill and Coleshill Street."



So the painting cannot have been of the original St. Mary's Hall. The picture on the previous page of the brick-built Georgian house which replaced St. Mary's Hall bears no resemblance to the Aylesford collection painting. Incidentally, it appears that the name St. Mary's Hall was no longer used after this time.

The evidence of the Warden and Society's minute book is that the workhouse in Mill Street was built where the old school stood, and that the old school referred to was demolished by 1739. This means that in 1792 the only school building which Henry Jeayes could have seen on which to base his painting was the one named as the Old School House on Norman Evans' map, notwithstanding that the word 'ruin' is also added.

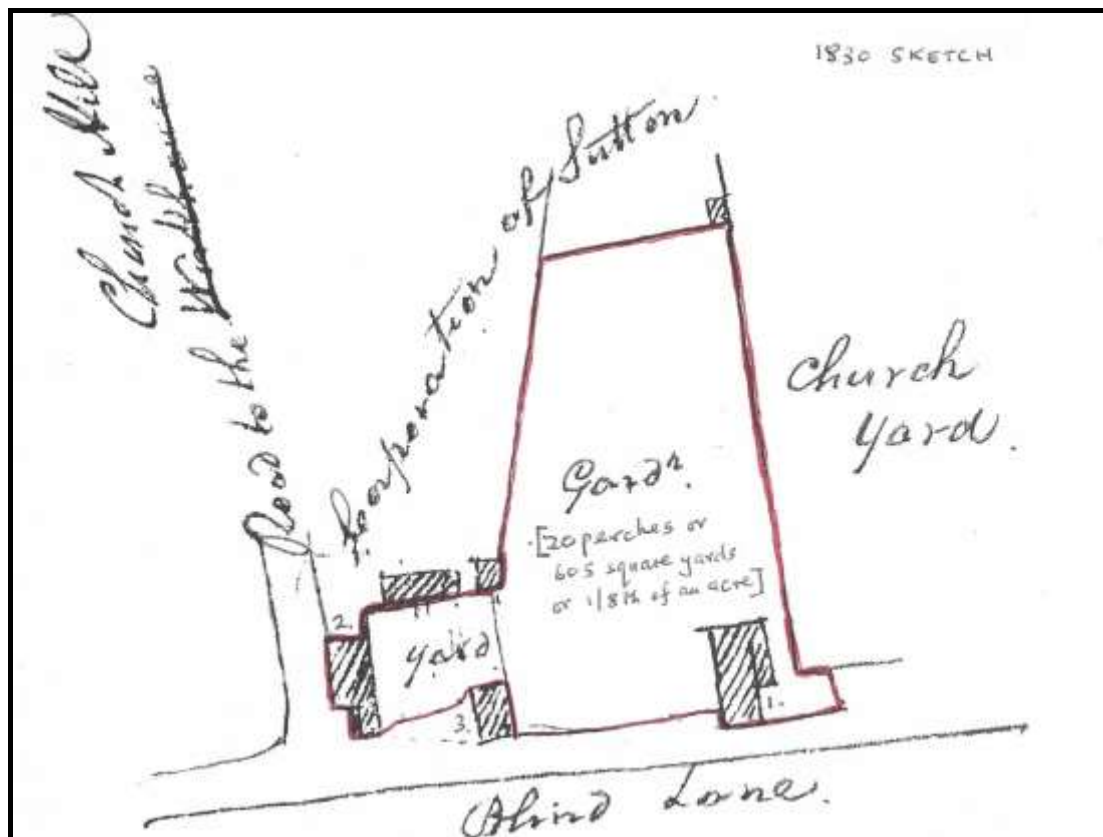
We now move to 1830, when Charles Barker, the Headmaster of Bishop Vesey's Grammar School, came up with the brilliant idea of an exchange of properties with the Warden and Society, who owned the freehold interest in the new school in Lichfield Road. The deal was that the Warden and Society would convey the freehold of the new school to the Governors (then known as Trustees) and the Trustees would convey their remaining properties off Blind Lane to the Warden and Society. An Agreement dated 22nd May 1830 made between the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield and the Trustees of the Free Grammar School of Sutton Coldfield describes the property taken by the Warden and Society as:

"ALL THAT Messuage or Dwellinghouse commonly called or known by the Name of the Old School House (lately divided into two Tenements) with the Garden adjoining and belonging thereto containing by admeasurement Twenty perches now in the occupation of James Langley and Mrs Sandon AND ALSO All those two Tenements or Dwellinghouses formerly used as a Barn and Stable with the Yard belonging thereto adjoining and lying below the Garden belonging to the Old School House now in the occupation of the Widow Wilkins and the Widow Heath AND which said Hereditaments and Premises are situate and being in the Parish of Sutton Coldfield aforesaid and in the said County of Warwick and are adjoining to and bounded on the East by the Church Yard of the Parish Church of Sutton Coldfield aforesaid on the South by a Lane called Blind Lane and a Small Dwellinghouse in the occupation of Thomas Stringer on the West by a Road leading out of the said Lane called the Blind Lane to the Church Hill and on all other parts thereof by Lands and Buildings belonging to the said Warden and Society."

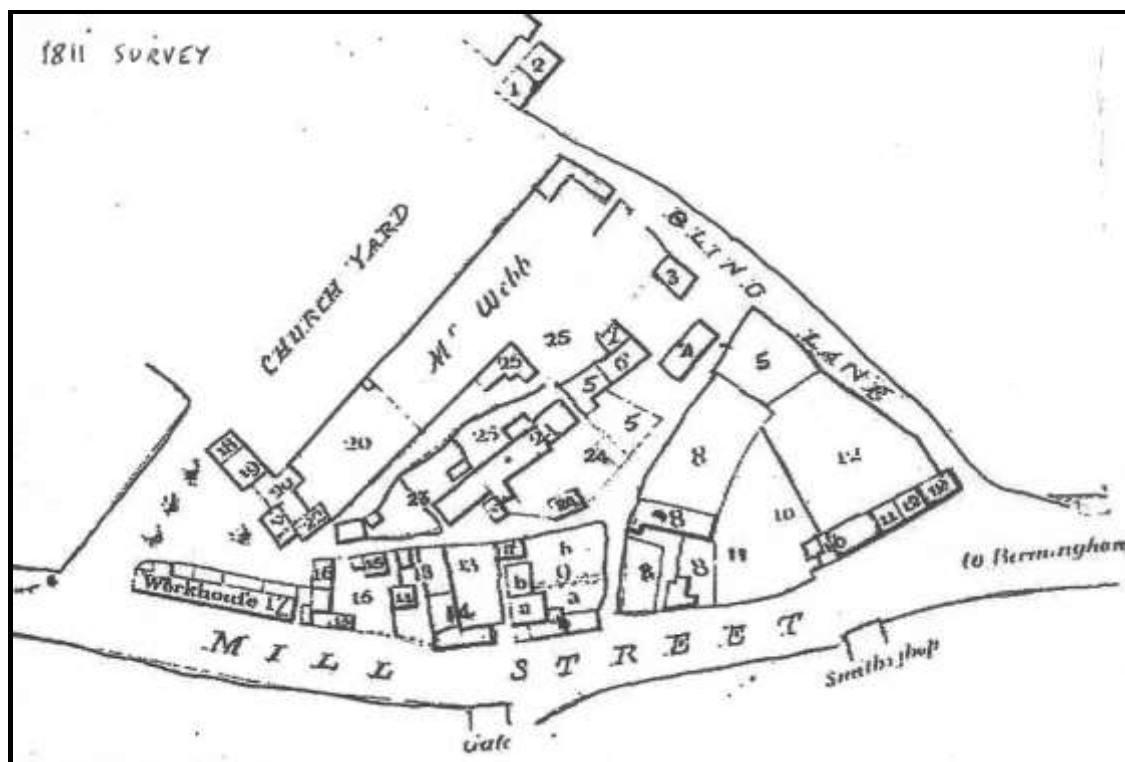
There is no plan attached to the Agreement, but fortunately during the negotiations for the exchange Charles Barker drew a rough sketch of the property to be given to the Warden and Society headed 'Mr Barker's property at Church Hill', although strictly speaking it was the Trustees' property, not his.

This sketch (shown on the next page) is dated 2nd January 1830. The red edging, the words in square brackets and the numbers 1 to 3 are my additions. The building numbered 1 is the Old School House, now two tenements occupied by James Langley and Mrs Sandon; the building numbered 2 is the two tenements, formerly a barn and a stable, occupied by widows Mrs Wilkins and Mrs Heath; the building numbered 3 is the small dwellinghouse occupied by Thomas Stringer.

It will be noted that St. Mary's Hall was not part of the exchange. The Old School House, which was described as a ruin on Norman Evans' map, has by now been repaired and divided into two tenanted properties. It is somewhat confusing that the name the Old School House given to this building is the same as was given in the 1737 minute to the building which stood on the site of the workhouse, but it appears that the terms the Old School and the Old School House were used indiscriminately, without necessarily meaning that the latter was the schoolmaster's private residence.



The accuracy of Charles Barker's rough sketch plan is confirmed by a plan attached to a survey of Mill Street carried out for the Warden and Society in 1811.

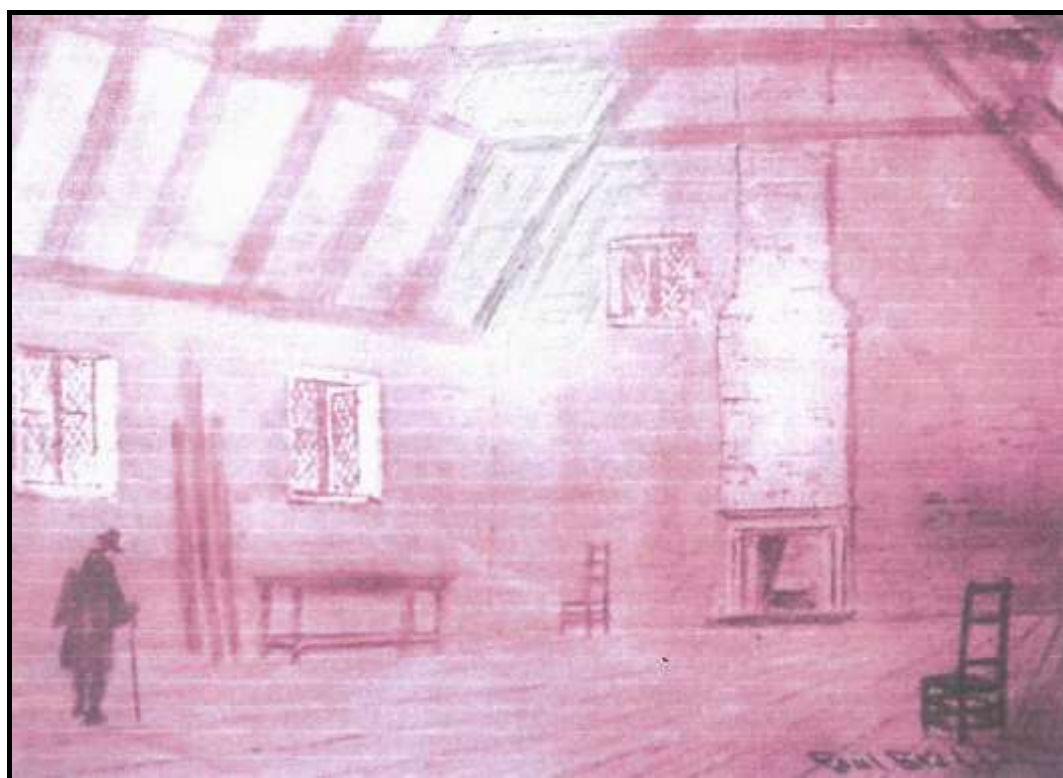


'Mr Webb' shown on this plan is William Webb, Charles Barker's predecessor as Headmaster of Bishop Vesey's Grammar School. The building numbered 3 is described in a schedule as a stable belonging to Daniel Stringer; the building numbered 4 is a barn belonging to William Webb (on behalf of the Grammar School Trustees); item 20, which was part of the School Land on Norman Evans' map, is now described as garden land belonging to the Warden and Society, let with a house and shops to Charles Ball.

After the Warden and Society acquired the Grammar School properties in 1830, the Old School House was demolished and the churchyard was extended westwards over the site. In the article previously quoted, Norman Evans added some details:

"The Old School House projected half-way across and partly obstructed the view down Trinity Hill, so, had the extension of the burial ground followed the outline of the school land precisely, it would have resulted in an irregular shape of the churchyard boundary along its southern edge. To avoid this, it was decided to straighten the upper part of the Lane on the Church side by extending the churchyard over a narrow strip of the roadway and, at the same time, widen the Lane by taking in land on the opposite side."

There is another, but less well-known, painting (shown below) of the interior of the Old Grammar School by Paul Braddon (1864-1938). Braddon was a prolific water colourist who specialised in painting churches, manor houses, inns and public buildings.



It will be seen that the chimney-breast in this painting and the window to its left correspond with these features in the Aylesford collection painting, and it is likely that Braddon took his inspiration from the earlier painting, since the building had long since been demolished by the time Braddon was working (the exact date of his painting is not known).

As regards the property formerly known as St. Mary's Hall in Coleshill Street, it was sold by the Grammar School Governors in 1878 to Charles B. Hodgson, who lived next door, for £550.

And now, to answer the two questions raised at the beginning of this article, I believe it can confidently be concluded that

1. The building in the Aylesford collection painting was half-way down Trinity Hill.
2. The Aylesford collection painting is not of St. Mary's Hall.

To this can be added, by way of summary, that there were four properties used by the school for some purpose:

1. St. Mary's Hall in Coleshill Street, built before 1479, acquired by the school in 1527, demolished and rebuilt in the 1720s, sold in 1878, demolished in 1959.
2. St. Mary's House adjacent to St. Mary's Hall, recorded in 1479 and 1569 but not subsequently, probably demolished in the 1720s.
3. The stone building erected by Bishop Vesey between 1527 and 1540 standing in Blind Lane (Trinity Hill), conveyed to the Warden and Society in 1832 in exchange for other property, then demolished and the site incorporated in the churchyard (the building in the painting).
4. The 'old school' demolished in about 1737 to make way for the workhouse in Mill Street. Although I suggested earlier that this property may have been built by Bishop Vesey, there is in fact no evidence for this and it is equally possible that it was one of the twenty-four properties which he owned, the rents of which he gave to found the school in 1527. In fact, it could be argued that if this building was one of Bishop Vesey's stone houses, it was unlikely to have 'lately fallen down' by 1727, unless badly neglected; but see the architectural description by Messrs Chatwin and Harcourt above.

One final question still needs to be addressed, which property was the actual school and which the schoolmaster's residence? There may be no definitive answer to this question; nothing is known about the building which was demolished in about 1737, and the fact that the minutes of 1727 and 1737 refer to it as both the old school and the school house does not assist. This double nomenclature also weakens the argument that the description of the building in Blind Lane as the Old School House implies that this property was the schoolmaster's residence, or the boarding establishment. Of course, once the new school was built in Lichfield Road both the school and the schoolmaster's house came under one roof. It is possible that over a period of two centuries before that (1527 to 1728) the uses to which the properties were put changed from time to time. We know that John Savage, the first recorded master, lived at St. Mary's Hall in 1543, and it seems likely that John Elly, a later master, was living there when he died in 1659. However, thirty years later the property was let to a private tenant.

Although Bishop Vesey founded the school for the benefit of his native town, it had a wide reputation as a boarding school in its early days. Known boarders include Robert Burton (1577-1640), the author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, his brother William Burton (1575-1645), the author of *The History of Leicestershire*, Francis Willughby FRS (1635-72), a pioneer ornithologist and ichthyologist, and Rev Dr John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683-1744), scientist, inventor, writer and Grand Master of the Masonic Grand Lodge of England. These and other boarders may have been accommodated in St. Mary's House, or in the school house near Mill Street; nothing is known for certain.

In conclusion, it seems likely that St. Mary's Hall was the schoolmaster's residence to begin with, but that property was subsequently let out, and the schoolmasters then lived in one of the properties built on the school land to the west of the churchyard, and that the boys had their lessons in the building shown in the Aylesford collection painting half-way down Trinity Hill. Amongst all the uncertainties, one thing is quite clear: that the building in the painting is not St. Mary's Hall.

Kerry Osbourne
November 2023

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