

AT HURSTPIERPOINT

From VICTORIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL by MARTIN WILLIAMS.

With the name Baring-Gould we come to a member of the Hurst staff whose reputation was ultimately to be of the highest in the world of fiction and imagination. Like Pennell, BaringGould was of good Devon stock, A Cambridge man, he was noted for his piety and devotion. Having been in charge of the choir school at S Barnabas, Pimlico, he was recommended to Woodard by Lowder, the senior curate there. He had already been in contact with Woodard in September 1853, expressing his desire to be ordained. He tells us in his Reminiscences how he taught for ten days at Woodard's 'first-grade' school at Lancing, and how because his Latin was not really of a high enough standard he moved to Hurst, where he was to stay for about eight years (1858-66), Initially he was paid £25 a year - "and was pretty hard worked for that payment".

At Hurst he was responsible for several subjects, especially languages and science. But he was more renowned for the stories which he would tell, often completely impromptu, to groups of boys in his room. Such stories were frequently printed in the Hurst Johnian to which he was a regular contributor while at Hurst. Some of them, like 'The Fireman' and 'The Dead Trumpeter of Hurst Castle', are still well worth reading. He enjoyed going on country walks with his boys, too, and on one Sunday afternoon in 1861 one of them reported meeting the first survivors of the Clayton tunnel railway disaster, when a signalling error had resulted in the loss of 23 lives on two trains. Baring-Gould did not seem to have been too concerned about 'bounds' for his walks, but no-one appeared to mind.

He was also involved in much early art work at Hurst. He painted scenes for the Boys' Library, designed the ironwork for the brackets and bookshelves, and helped with the sets for the early plays. On the walls of his study still exists a fresco of S Nicolas which he painted. On his revisiting Hurst in 1894 he was to look at that picture again and murmur, so we are told, "Crude, crude!"

He also acted in some of the plays, especially in the farces that were put on after the main performance - possibly because of his admitted inability to remember any speech of more than two or three lines. One pupil with great delight remembered years later his portrayal of Annie Babbecombe - "a wig of long curls under a broad-brimmed sun-hat, a pink silk dress, short petticoat, white stockings, and sandled shoes".

As already mentioned, one of his holidays away from Hurst was spent in Iceland, and this of course stimulated his great interest in the Norse sagas. He returned with a little pony called 'Bottlebrush', whom the boys would ride whenever the opportunity arose, legally or otherwise. It was on the return journey from Iceland, so he tells us, that the dim light on board the little ship 'Arcturus', and the small print of Rob Roy which he was trying to read, together combined to ruin his eyesight.

Stories associated with Baring-Gould are legion. The most famous is probably linked with his work for Macbeth. To make the witches' cauldron especially effective he positioned himself carefully inside it and thence could light a whole series of explosive substances to suggest a

steaming witches' brew. Unfortunately, everything seems to have been set alight at once, and it was with some difficulty that he extricated himself, slightly burnt and considerably dishevelled - and without his trousers!

On another occasion he let a bag full of insects and crawling creatures fall open in a railway compartment, and it was some time before the compartment was cleaned up sufficiently to let an elderly couple enter.

At Hurst he also kept a bat, which generally hung by his fireplace (except when it came into class with him, perched on his shoulder!). One day when the maid came in to stoke up the fire she accidentally trod on it and killed it.

He obviously had a boyish sense of humour, which perhaps made him especially popular. He enjoyed teasing his colleague John Gorham, whose study was opposite his, and he even placed a huge ammonite fossil in his bed one day (Gorham's reply was to set a series of clocks off in Baring-Gould's room at differing times). His humour could get him into trouble though - as when he was late for roll-call on the day he was on duty, and then, when a prefect had been twice sent by the Headmaster to announce that the whole School was in Chapel awaiting his appearance, he sent down his nightshirt as a token of the fact that he was at last getting up!

He shared with a friend an extravagant taste in clothes. He tells us how, under the influence of Ruskin, they went round "dressed aesthetically in knee-breeches and stockings and brown or claret-coloured velvet coats frogged with braid, and with a tie to match the ecclesiastical season". He was cured of this foppishness when he went to a local squire's for dinner and had to wear a green tie with his dinner jacket - he had forgotten to pack his black one.

Stories such as these are recorded in his Reminiscences which throw considerable light on some of the personalities connected with Hurst, or of visitors there, and also on the organisation and ceremonies of the school. He also reports that at Hurst he saw some really beautiful sunsets from the terrace in front of the main buildings.

It would not seem possible that Baring-Gould would remain at Hurst. In August 1859, he suggested to Woodard that he might be apprenticed to the Architect, and then eventually become Clerk of the Works. This suggestion was made a few months after his father had made the unpopular recommendation that he should join the staff of the Public Records Office. And in late 1860 he confessed to Woodard "the whole desire of my heart is to take Holy Orders and work at Hurst".

Ultimately he was ordained: presumably his father, who had expressed opposition to this in 1853 "on the grounds of my religious opinions, and of not seeing in me any signs of my preferring the things of Christ to those of the World", was now agreeable. Perhaps the death of his mother in December 1863, hastened his decision. He went as curate to Horbury Brig among the coal miners of the West Riding for a time. He came back to Hurst to preach on behalf of his missionary parish, describing his work there, and also in 1894 (by which time he had become Squire and Rector of Lew Trenchard, the family seat), on the occasion of the dedication of the Chapel panelling.

