STOVER SCHOOL ARTICLE

Miss Joan Dence was not, by nature an impetuous person, but when she visited the dilapidated mansion which was to become Stover School, it was love at first sight.

For several years, Miss Dence had been successfully running The Chestnuts, a small school in nearby Newton Abbot. But frustrated by losing the children at 11 or 12 “just when they were becoming really interesting and rewarding,” she decided to expand.

A parent who was a house agent, told her about Stover, as she later recalled in her 1982 book Stover the Story of a School, “Too big, my friends advised, ‘A Great White Elephant’ was my mother’s remark, when I told her of my appointment to view! But my house agent friend persisted ‘come and see for yourself’. How grateful I am for his counsel – one look was enough! I walked up the portico steps, unlocked the door and entered the splendid Hall, with the Library doors flung wide and the glorious moorland view and I never had a moment’s hesitation.”

Stover estate had been built in 1777 by James Templer. His was a classic, rags-to-riches story: He had left Exeter as a runaway orphan of fourteen, become a cabin-boy on a tea-clipper bound for India and returned sixteen years later as a rich and successful builder and father of four. James bought the estate of Teign Bruer, now the village of Teigngrace from a member of the Courtenay family. The estate included most of the land known as Bovey Heath. It was mostly bog, but contained valuable granite, china clay iron ore and lignite, much used as a fuel substitute in World War Two. The land also contained a mansion house, known as Stofford Lodge, derelict, but with the same stunning views which captivated Joan Dence a century and a half later.

James died at the age of 60 in 1782 and his son, also James, succeeded to the estate. A lawyer, he was Master of the Crown Office in King’s Bench, King’s Attorney and Coroner. He had little experience of managing estates, but built the terraces around the mansion ( still used by Stover pupils) and landscaped the grounds. He also oversaw the completion in 1790 of the Stover Canal, one of the first commercial waterways in England, and crucial for the transportation of clay from Heath field to the port of Teignmouth.

James Templer II died in 1813 and was succeeded by his son, George. He was a gifted man, but enjoyed the high life and was given to throwing extravagant parties. His greatest claim to fame was the building of the Haytor Granite Tramway, which ran from the Haytor Quarries to the Stover Canal. Inevitably, George ran out of money and was forced to sell the Stover estate to the Duke of Somerset in 1829. His descendant, Major Richard St Maur, who lived in the clock house at Stover (now Stover Preparatory School), leased the mansion house to Joan Dence in 1932.

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

1 Stover’s first head girl, Pauline Farrell, (Mrs Cameron Head), pictured in the newly-opened Jubilee Hall at the school’s 50th birthday celebrations in 1982.

2 The first Stover School photograph taken in 1935 and with some of the boys from Miss Joan Dence’s first school, The Chestnuts in College Road, Newton Abbot. Stover School started with twelve boarders and about forty day pupils. The first major purchase was the school bus, painted in the school colours of grey and green. Today, there are four hundred and thirty pupils in the nursery, preparatory and senior schools. Stover School became mixed in 2001 and will become fully co-educational in September.

3 Students hard at work in one of the elegant classrooms in the main house in 1954. Headmistress Joan Dence, wrote: “ The accommodation at Stover House was superb for our requirements. The entrance hall and the library beyond were always used for assembly and prayers in the mornings. For many years, the library has proved a wonderful concert hall, lecture hall and dance floor.” The expansion of the school in recent years has seen the development of a number of purpose-built classrooms in the grounds.

4 The school lacrosse team in 1950. The game was introduced to the school in 1933, by Stover’s first Physical Training Mistress, Irene Hughes, a brilliant, all-England Lacrosse Player.

5 Deputy Head, Miss Lidgate, teaching Latin to the Upper Fifth Form in 1950.

6 Phyllis Dence, Stover’s second headmistress from 1935 to 1963. She took over the reins of the school from her sister, Joan, when she married the clergyman, Maurice Key, who was later to become a Bishop. Phyllis Dence was a talented musician with a passion for the performing arts. She did much to establish Stover’s strong reputation for music and had close links with Exeter Cathedral. All senior school students take part in the annual Phyllis Dence concert, which raises hundreds of pounds for local charities. Phyllis died in 1985 and Joan in 1995. They are buried in Teigngrace churchyard. Their descendants continue to take a keen interest in the school.

7 Her Majesty The Queen at the Royal Agricultural Show held at Stover in 1952.

8 Stover mansion house and park, painted when the estate was the seat of the Dukes of Somerset.

9 The Twelfth Duke of Somerset, who purchased the estate from George Temple. He was devastated at losing his beloved home and continued to live nearby,building Sandford Orleigh, near Newton Abbot. The Templer family retain strong links with Stover.

10 The opening of the new boys’ boarding house in May, 2012. Stover’s eighth Principal, Sue Bradley, has been a member of staff for twenty-five years.

Ends.