

A SPRING INVASION

UPPINGHAM SCHOOL AT BORTH 1876-7

Nigel Richardson



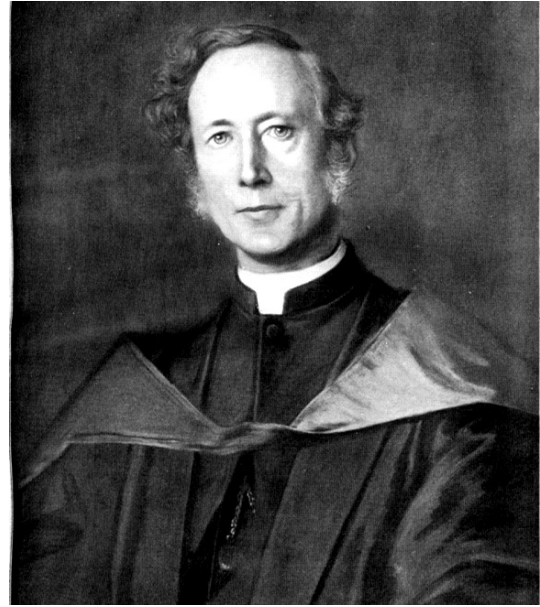
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Edward Thring (1821-87),
Headmaster of Uppingham School 1853-87,
photographed in contemplative mood in 1872 and with
no idea of the challenge he would soon be facing.

He steered the school through its great crisis of 1875-7
and masterminded its year-long removal to Borth.



JH Skrine (1848-1923),
Captain of the School 1865-7, he returned to teach there
from 1873-87.

His book *Uppingham by the Sea* (1878) gave a
romanticised picture of the school's time at Borth.
Later he was Warden of Glenalmond College.

Front Cover: Uppingham School pupils on the shingle bank on Borth Beach, 1876.

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There is a twin publication, *A Great Deliverance*, which describes in more detail the typhoid epidemic in Uppingham in 1875-76 which led to the school's evacuation to Borth: ISBN No. 978-1-9196205-0-3.

With thanks to Uppingham School and *Archifdy Ceredigion Archives* for the use of many pictures from their respective archives, and to others as indicated in the text.

BACKGROUND

‘A Spring Invasion’ was how the *Cambrian News* of 24 March 1876 described the impending arrival at Borth in mid-Wales of over 300 boys and adults from Uppingham School in April 1876.

The well-known boarding school, halfway between Leicester and Peterborough in central England, had been forced to leave Uppingham after suffering three waves of a typhoid epidemic in a nine-month period from June 1875. These had caused the deaths of five pupils and several other people connected with the school.

After the third outbreak, in March 1876 the school’s headmaster, Revd. Edward Thring, and many of his staff faced the loss of their life’s work and their livelihoods. It seemed very probable that there would be a mass withdrawal of pupils by their parents.

Thring therefore looked to the town’s authorities to improve its sanitation and water supply. When they resisted the expense, he decided to force their hand by looking for a temporary alternative location for the school. He hoped this would last for only one term but it ultimately turned into an entire year.

In 1975-6, whilst teaching at the school, I came across a small book by JH Skrine, one of Thring’s masters, entitled *Uppingham by the Sea*: a curious title, insofar as Uppingham is almost as distant from the coast as one can be in England. Written soon after the school left Borth, Skrine’s account gives a vivid and nostalgic account of its time there.

This discovery resulted in research spread over a period of almost forty years. It took me initially to the school archives, various census records, business directories and newspaper collections across the UK.

It also brought me to Borth for the first time in 1976-7. During later visits I found the back numbers of the *Cambrian News* and the *Aberystwyth Observer*, along with other documents in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, and papers in *Archifdy Ceredigion Archives*.

In one respect I was very fortunate: the Uppingham epidemic proved to be an almost uniquely well-documented rural health crisis. Thanks to the *Uppingham School Magazine* and the *Cambrian News*, so too was the school’s remarkable year in Borth.

My research led to a PhD thesis for University College, London, a book in 2008 and a biography of Thring in 2014. The 2008 book focused on events in Uppingham. It is now out of print, but an abridged version, *A Great Deliverance*, describes the events in Uppingham in some detail. It is the twin publication of this one which centres on the events in Borth. There is a small overlap between the two so that each is free-standing, explaining how events interlinked.

150 years after the school left Borth there is still plenty of evidence of its stay there, and many of the buildings which existed then are still very recognisable.

I am very grateful to two former Uppingham colleagues, Malcolm Tozer and Jerry Rudman (the school archivist), Helen Palmer, County Archivist at *Archifdy Ceredigion Archives*, and Hilary Peters at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, for their help with this publication. Ironically, the time to work on it resulted from the weeks of self-isolation demanded by a more recent epidemic: the 2020-21 Coronavirus.

Nigel Richardson
Harston, Cambridge, July 2021.

The story begins - in brief

Extracts from letters written by Thring:

5 March 1876:

‘Campbell (a housemaster) has just come to me with a letter from one of his parents whose boy has gone home, to say that he has typhoid - came home with it. It seems absolutely impossible to hold the school together [here]. The only plan left, it appears to me, is to send out a circular to all our parents asking if they will send their boys to us in three weeks’ time, at the Lakes or elsewhere, and to migrate till the summer whilst things are being set right here [in Uppingham]...’

7 March 1876:

‘We decided to reassemble, probably in Wales, as a place which seems especially appropriate offered itself, and a great hotel-keeper there is eager to get us...’

8 March 1876:

‘We shall reassemble in three weeks’ time. Probably, Borth, near Aberystwyth, will be the place...’

16 March 1876:

‘We came down on Tuesday and reached Borth on Wednesday. The hotel is really excellent... The sea is beautiful, so is the view on the hillside at the back, and there is *plenty of space*. The water and drainage are exceptionally good. So now we have only to work hard this next fortnight and get all things ready, and then may a blessing rest on Uppingham by the Sea...’

Extracts from the *Cambrian News*:

24 March 1876:

‘There is to be a Spring invasion of Borth, which usually has to wait for the summer to bring its army of visitors. Arrangements have been made (says a letter in *The Times*) for transferring the well-known Uppingham School “to the healthy locality of Borth, near Aberystwyth”...’

31 March 1876:

‘Excitement in Borth... caused by preparations for the scholars and teachers of Uppingham School is great. The arrangements for lodging and feeding of more than 400 people will tax the resources of Mr Mytton, lessee of the hotel, but no doubt he will succeed in providing all that is necessary. The main body of immigrants has not yet arrived, but evidences are not wanting of their speedy advent...’

Extracts from a letter from Thring to his brother:

31 March 1876:

‘I see my way here and have got through the heavy work. Things are falling into place better than I dared hope. Every one helps us, and I feel such a sense of freedom and liberty in work, now for a time Uppingham and its abominations are left behind. We shall do well, I hope. The place pleases all of us; a fine sea, and most lovely views.’

‘You never saw such a scene as last Monday and Tuesday: eighteen trucks of bedding and furniture unloaded... We got 150 boys, myself, and family, a master and two matrons into the great hotel. The passage on the ground floor is fitted up with a narrow table for dining and will seat 140. Then we have twenty-two lodging-houses of various kinds occupied by us and our belongings.

We move in nearly 400-strong - such a colony starting at a moment’s notice means no little stir. I arranged where everybody was to go last Monday, after having worked the thing out carefully. I could almost write an inventory of Borth lodging-houses, rooms and prices from memory.’

‘We shall be ready all right on Tuesday next, as far as I can foresee. But you would be amused if you saw our human hive settling down.’

CHAPTER 1: UPPINGHAM - 1875-6

Typhoid is a cruel disease. Modern science has shown that it is an infection caused by a bacterium. Its prevention depends on separating sewage from drinking water - although the bacterium is sometimes carried by flies from infected faeces to food and milk.

Untreated, it lasts 3-4 weeks, killing about 10% of its victims. It can remain in chronic carriers for some years, even permanently. Its source can therefore be hard to trace.

Typhoid was a very alarming disease in the 1870s because knowledge about it was so limited. Even the experts pursued false trails, including foul air, geological faults and water impurity, and person-to-person touch. The key discoveries in bacteriology were still a few years away. These would lead to a vaccine around 1900 and, fifty years later, to treatment with new drugs.

Despite this limited knowledge, by the 1870s there was a growing clamour for better public health, more extensive sewerage and mains water supplies. In 1876 the *British Medical Journal* estimated that around 100,000 people contracted typhoid each year, with another 40,000 cases undiagnosed. *The Times* suggested that this situation resulted in 10-12,000 deaths.

The disease affected town and country, young and old, rich and poor alike, claiming the life of Queen Victoria's husband Albert, the Prince Consort, in 1861 and nearly carrying off her eldest son, the Prince of Wales, a decade later.

Each year, after relatively healthy summers, the coming of autumn coincided with the new school year and posed a special threat. Highly concentrated residential communities such as boarding schools were especially at risk.

Uppingham in the 1870s was a typical market town of just under 3,000 people. It was the second largest community in England's smallest county, Rutland, but its public health was far from ideal. Its incomplete sewerage system had been cheaply constructed and poorly maintained. It relied on water from wells and springs which were uncomfortably close to the cesspits used by many of its properties, including some of the school boarding houses. Minor outbreaks of illness came and went.

Until the 1850s Uppingham School was just a small country grammar school of a few dozen pupils, so it presented no great health issue. However, from 1853 under its energetic headmaster, Revd. Edward Thring, it grew into a sizeable boarding school with twelve large houses spread right across the town, each with its own catering arrangements. In term-time its 300 pupils and around 100 academic and other living-in staff boosted the growing town's population by 15%. This put a severe strain on the sewerage and water supply arrangements.

The school had also acquired pupils from right across the UK and beyond, and was establishing a national reputation. In the process it attracted some powerful and vociferous parents who would not stand idly by if their sons were endangered.

Victorian central government preferred decisions about health improvement to be taken, overseen and paid for locally, through boards of guardians and a system of rate charges which fell on householders and businesses. Town guardians oversaw all aspects of public health, the local elementary school, the workhouse and much more through their various sub-committees. In Uppingham the most important of these groups was known as the Rural Sanitary Authority (RSA).

However, guardians were essentially public-spirited amateurs, all too often overwhelmed by the volume of work and their inadequate technical and financial know-how. In Uppingham they were led by two prominent local clergymen. Many of the other guardians were farmers or small businessmen who, as ratepayers with an interest in keeping the rate levels affordable, had a conflict of interest.

The leading figures on the RSA resented the way in which Thring had allowed the school to squeeze out the local day boys whom historically it had always educated. They saw his repeated demands for expensive health improvements as high-handed and insensitive, given all the pressure they felt from local townspeople to keep rates low, especially in times of economic depression. They resented Thring's powerful contacts in London.

The school's trustees (governors) might have been expected to be Thring's strongest supporters, but few of them lived locally and fewer still had boys at the school. They mistrusted him for his restless ambition and love of expensive building projects. Mostly landed gentry, some of them too had conflicting interests.

Only two board members supported him unequivocally. This was perhaps because they were different from the rest: Thomas Birley and Wensley Jacob were Merseyside businessmen, rooted in one of the school's prime recruiting areas, and they both had sons who were pupils there.

Despite their misgivings, the trustees allowed Thring to increase pupil numbers very fast, and they failed to oversee the development of the complex financial relationship between the school and its constituent houses (run by housemasters for profit, rather as if they were hotel keepers). Thring's own finances became deeply mixed up with those of the school, partly because he and his fellow-

housemasters paid for projects which the trustees would not themselves finance.

All these pressures and tensions were suddenly laid bare in nine months after June 1875 when a nine year-old boy died in the Lower School (for younger boys, but closely linked to the main school) of a fever-related illness. The school took no action, hoping that over the summer the mystery infection would disappear. This exposed it later to charges of secrecy and allegations that its medical officer, a local GP, had been negligent in not identifying typhoid as the true cause of death.

Just before the start of the September term, a local plumber was sent down into the cellars of the same house to investigate a drain blockage. His lighted candle caused an uncomfortably violent explosion. In October, a month after the boys returned, the second and largest outbreak of typhoid began. It affected pupils in several houses some distance from each other, and four more boys died, along with the infant son of a member of staff. Parents became very alarmed and began to withdraw their sons. As a result, Thring felt forced to end the term early in November. He called in the zealous local Medical Officer of Health (MOH) to investigate.

Over the next few weeks, four separate experts combed through the school and the town, compiling lists of recommendations for improvements. One was commissioned by the school to examine the houses: the housemasters implemented his report in full. The RSA and the Local Government Board (LGB) in London (which oversaw RSAs nationally) brought in two more specialists to concentrate on the state of the town. The MOH provided a fourth report: very wide-ranging and highly critical of many aspects of the school, including the accommodation and feeding arrangements in the houses and the way in which the sanatorium was run. He also fiercely criticised the school doctor.

The four reports unleashed a storm of bitterness between warring parties, and plenty of coverage (including many anonymous letters) in the medical and national press. The school complained of grossly unfair treatment by the MOH and inactivity by the RSA over many years. The RSA echoed the MOH's criticisms and revived its long-held grievances about the school's growth and its change of identity. The LGB struggled to lower the temperature but proved to be distant and indecisive. The school doctor and the MOH became engaged in a bitter, prolonged and very personal war of words.

Despite this, and fearful of a collapse in parents' confidence leading to a sharp loss of pupil numbers, Thring persuaded his trustees that the school could safely re-open at the end of January. Within weeks, typhoid broke out a third time, in a house not previously affected. Other cases followed, including one in Thring's own house. The MOH returned, leading to a fresh round of charge and counter-charge. It was all too evident that the source of the infection had not been eliminated.

Thring and his housemasters now had to face the threat that the school they had worked for two decades to build up could disappear. This would cause them personal financial ruin through the loss of their livelihood as housemasters. There would be little or no alternative use for large (and, in some cases, heavily-mortgaged) boarding houses in a town economically depressed by the school's closure.

There was no alternative to ending term early once again. On 12 March 1876, described by Skrine as 'a day of wild winds and pitiless snows', Thring told the boys in chapel that 'difficulties become tests of willingness and strength; all hardship, when overcome, strengthens life'. As he sent the boys home, he felt sure that 'some marvellous divine purpose will come out of it all'.

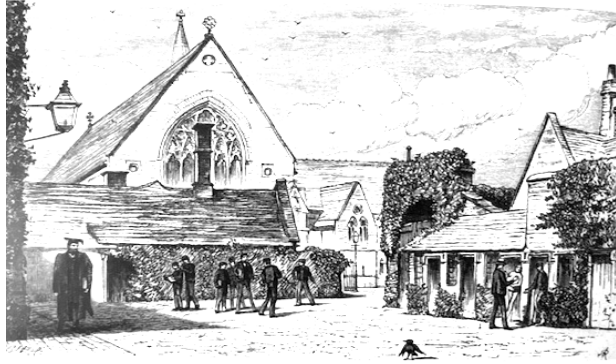
He might perhaps have expected some large-scale protest against the RSA by town ratepayers, alarmed at the prospect of the loss of business and work generated by Uppingham's largest employer, but at that moment they did little more than petition for improvements without specifying any timetable. With the latest outbreak of typhoid apparently confined to the school, the RSA therefore saw no need to accelerate improvements in the town merely to satisfy Thring.

Knowing that Uppingham was much more vulnerable than better-known boarding schools such as Marlborough and Winchester, Thring realised that unless improved sanitation and a mains water supply in the town was secured very urgently, the school would never reopen. He had to force the RSA's hand.

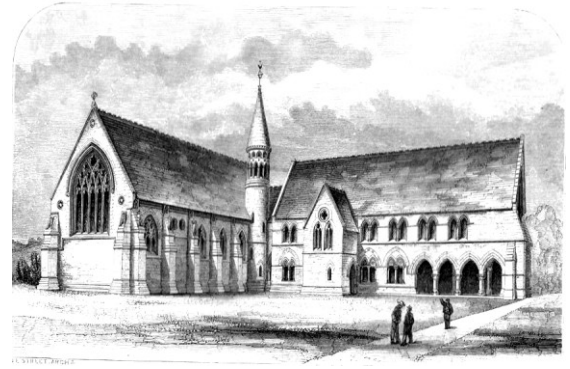
The idea that the school might temporarily leave Uppingham seems to have originated with William Campbell, whose boarding house was affected by the latest typhoid outbreak. He asked at a housemasters' meeting: 'Don't you think we ought to flit?' The idea of some form of temporary migration began to take root amongst the housemaster body.

Thring, a man given to imaginative flights of fancy and never one to do things by halves, seized on the idea. In the same week, as the remaining boys headed to their homes, he visited his two trustee allies, Birley and Jacob, in Manchester. They showed him local newspapers containing advertisements from parents looking for private tutors or other schools. This confirmed his worst fears and made him determined to seize the initiative.

His diary for 12 March continues: 'On Tuesday I start out for Borth and other places in North Wales. Borth seems likely to suit'. The reference to 'North Wales' suggests that he had only a vague idea about Borth's precise location.



Engraving showing the scene outside Thring's boarding house (on the far left).



The new chapel and schoolroom built by Thring and the masters in the 1860s.



New boarding houses were built by their housemasters on a grand scale: Fircroft on the London Road in 1877, shortly after the school's return to Uppingham.



Thring and the masters in the 1860s. Contrast this with the picture of those at Borth on page 29.



The (Old) Lodge, 1862. The boys are outside their individual studies. Taken together, the photographs suggest a school which was confident about its future - until typhoid struck.

CHAPTER 2: BORTH - MARCH 1876

Borth had not originally been at the front of Thring's mind as even a possible location for housing his uprooted school. He did not know Wales well, and his first instinct was to find a property in the Lake District. It was an area where he loved to go on holiday, and one to which a famous headmaster of an earlier era, Dr Thomas Arnold of Rugby, had once taken some of his pupils during a similar epidemic crisis.

At his meeting in Manchester with Birley and Jacob, Thring stated his intention to have the school up and running again within three weeks 'in some healthier place'. He assured the two trustees (hardly truthfully) that the housemasters were unanimous in backing the idea of a short-term migration. He also promised that the trustee body would be kept fully informed.

Every possible venue had to be explored, and before travelling north, Thring had sent one member of his staff to look for possible sites in mid-Wales. After returning from Manchester, he and two housemasters immediately set off by train again to Llandrindod Wells, one of several places which had been recommended to him. He quickly ruled it out: 'the bleak moors round it were uninviting and there was insufficient house-room in the place'.

From there they travelled on to Borth. It was the ever-supportive Birley who had pointed Thring in that direction, telling him he knew the keeper of the 120-room Cambrian Hotel, a Mr Mytton, who was 'very keen to get us'.

Thring and his small party arrived during gale-force winds, demonstrating (if they needed to be told) that in the winter Borth suffered the extremes of Atlantic weather. They were joined by the school doctor, hastily summoned to give them an assurance that the village would be medically suitable.

The hotel, with its large number of bedrooms, offered them many possibilities. It is hardly surprising that Mr Mytton was indeed anxious to talk to them. It had been a speculative property development, built as the railway opened a decade earlier, along with the adjoining large houses in Cambrian Terrace. However, its scale was proving to be far too optimistic: in winter all these buildings were largely unoccupied.

Borth at that time was relatively undeveloped. In 1840 it had been described in Nicholson's *Cambrian Traveller's Guide* (1840) as 'a miserable fishing village' and in 1908 in the *Welsh Gazette*, 'An Old Schoolboy' remembered it from his youth as 'a village, laid on a ridge of sand and shingle. A peculiarity... is its long street. If the buildings on each side of it were bigger it would be the finest looking street in the world. It is said that it was made straight so that the people at one end could see what people at the other end were up to, and so that one policeman can keep an eye on them all at the same time'.

Even so, Thring was exhilarated by what he saw. His diary for 16 March records: 'Altogether I feel we are as we could be... The sea is so beautiful, so is the view on the hillside at the back, and there is plenty of space'. Straining optimism to the limit, he wrote to Birley and Jacob that the 'the water and drainage are exceptionally good... So now we have only to work hard this next fortnight and get all things ready, and then may a blessing rest on Uppingham by the Sea'.

He quickly struck a deal with Mytton for accommodation for his family, two masters and 160 boys, for £1 a head per week, which included board, bed and laundry (but not other items of washing). The remaining boys and others would be boarded out in the houses in Cambrian

Terrace, and in two dozen cottages spread through the village. He arranged short-term lodgings for his family for three weeks (pending the boys' arrival), bade farewell to his fellow-travellers, and headed home by train from Aberystwyth.

He must have been aware that Borth posed many challenges, even as a temporary location, for his large boarding community. There would be a significant language difficulty: Borth was deep in the heart of Welsh-speaking Wales. In Uppingham the school relied on a large range of goods and services, but Borth had few, and they would be very stretched by the increased demand on them once the school more than doubled the population.

The 1871 census shows that in Borth itself (as opposed to the string of villages and houses stretching up the valley) there were 142 people in 36 family households. Of the residents, 51 were under 21, but only 26 were aged 15 to 40, partly because of the impact of youthful migration to other places. It was far less developed economically than Uppingham. In 1876 Borth boasted its station, a nearly-completed church, and a number of cottages along the main street which were mostly occupied by peat-cutters and fishermen. Although the arrival of the railway had made it much more accessible, it was not yet sharing the new-found economic activity of Aberystwyth. Most of the inhabitants were employed in farming or on the sea. It was well-known for its shrimps: 'the fishing being carried out by sailors' wives and widows and superannuated sailors in about twenty small boats'. Cargoes of coal came up the coast from time to time. Some families took in holiday makers.

Slater's *Business Directory* for 1880 (see page 52) lists a post office, whose postmaster, the ubiquitous Abraham L Lewis, fulfilled many other roles, a variety of shop-keepers and two hotels. It makes

no mention of painters, plumbers, glaziers, tailors, clockmakers or solicitors. The census also lists four public houses and 36 lodging houses, of which we know that the school took over at least 27.

Its sanitation was less advanced than Uppingham's. but because it was on the coast, Thring probably guessed that it was rudely healthy. However, while the incidence of typhoid appears to have been low, he was probably unaware of four local cholera epidemics between 1832 and 1866, and of the very high incidence of tuberculosis (which lasted well into the next century, partly because few houses had damp courses).

The wider area had also suffered a severe scarlet fever outbreak with 100 deaths in 1872 (like Uppingham), and 56 in 1873. Jenkins and Jones' *Cardiganshire County History* (pp. 437-440) records that until the 1939-45 war, the county had an unenviable reputation for high infant mortality, deaths of mothers in childbirth, rotten teeth, hearing defects, blindness, imbecility and madness...' There was no doctor, although the 1871 census includes a nurse.

Borth also had severe problems with water supply. There were standpipes in many streets, and water could be obtained for only about 2 hours per day at the height of the season, despite local petitions for improvements (see page 24).

It was alleged locally that the construction of the railway in 1863 had cut into a good spring, which had subsequently been piped to bring a limited water supply to the Cambrian Hotel, the houses in Cambrian Terrace and the station. However, the pipes were narrow and inclined to fur up. There had been demands for at least two more street taps to be provided from the main pump, but nothing had been done. Not surprisingly, in Borth (as in Uppingham) local ratepayers were reluctant to pay for improvements which

they expected the Cambrian Railway company to provide.

There was already much talk about foul smells in Borth during the summer months. Less than a year before Thring arrived, the inspector of nuisances had complained to the local guardians about the accumulation of stagnant water in drainage ditches around the railway, claiming that 'the climate of Borth is considerably damaged by such sources of dampness and malaria'. Furthermore, concerns had been expressed over the lack of an analyst of food and drugs in the area.

Aberystwyth was larger and more developed. Its population had grown by nearly 50% in the previous 25 years, boosted further in the holiday season. Its building boom had brought public services to breaking point. Despite being the largest community for miles around, it had a very small hospital with barely a dozen beds. Refuse collection was haphazard and sewerage provision very patchy.

If he knew of all these problems, Thring chose to ignore them. He delegated responsibility for the school's safety and sound health at Borth to one of his former pupils: Christopher Childs, a newly-qualified doctor who had recently joined his staff. Childs would be the school's sanitary officer while there: a title intended to reassure the school doctor (an Uppingham GP) that his role would not be under threat when the school returned.

Thring's enthusiasm reveals the extent of his desperation at the school's plight, which forced him to draw on all his reserves of energy and optimism.

At this stage he envisaged the school being there only for the summer term. Borth's limited facilities also explain why, when news of Thring's plans reached them, his opponents in Uppingham were confident that he would never carry his plan through.

More pressingly, Thring had to convince not only his staff but also two other key groups that his plan would work. Would the school's parents send their sons to a place of which they had probably never heard? They had little knowledge of Borth's potential hazards, which was just as well from Thring's point of view, but at a time when boarding schools were expanding all over the country, if parents decided to seek an alternative school, they would have plenty of choice.

The other group was his employers, the trustees. They became resentful that they had heard of the Borth proposal through the Press before he told them formally of it. When he put it to them, they eventually agreed that, while they would not actually forbid it, they were responsible only for the school *at Uppingham*. They would give him no financial support while it was elsewhere, other than paying the masters, and underwriting the tuition fees of any day-boys who accompanied him on his foolish venture. He would be on his own.

However daunting this appeared, Thring was buoyed by a sense of predestination about his Uppingham project over the previous twenty-five years. Barely three weeks after the first suggestion to 'flit', and after only a few days to pack up the essential possessions, papers and equipment that would be going with them, arrange for their houses to be looked after and organise further tests to be carried out on water supplies while they were away, Thring and the first group of staff families left Uppingham. Others quickly followed.

Although Thring had seen Borth so fleetingly on his earlier visit, he revelled in its views and sense of space: it was like 'an escape out of prison...Tomorrow begins real hard work, but liberty', he declared on 26 March. As he let parents know the place and date of the new term he had no real idea what his venture would cost or how long it would last.

SEA BATHING.



CAMBRIAN HOTEL, BORTH.

BORTH is a rising Watering Place, in Cardigan Bay, midway between Aberystwyth and Barmouth. It is conveniently situated for the most attractive places in North Wales, commands beautiful mountain scenery, has a very fine beach of five miles in length, of firm sand, and there is no safer place for bathing in the kingdom. The air is pure and light, and the climate most salubrious; so much so that this place was selected by the authorities of Uppingham School when it migrated here in 1876 and 1877, while the necessary sanitary improvements were being made at Uppingham, in Rutland.

THE HOTEL,

Which is situate on the Beach, is one of the finest and most conveniently arranged in Wales; it has been recently *redesigned and refurnished*, is now under entirely new management, and may in every respect be termed a First-Class Hotel. Terms moderate either by the day or week.

TABLE D'HOTE DAILY.

Billiards, Bowling, Croquet and Lawn Tennis Ground; Hot, Cold, and Shower Baths, &c. A handsome little Church has also been recently erected for the accommodation of Visitors.

All communications to be addressed to

THE MANAGERESS,
CAMBRIAN HOTEL,
BORTH, R. S. O.,
CARDIGANSHIRE.

The place which Thring chose to be his new headquarters: the Cambrian Hotel in Borth.

CHAPTER 3: BORTH -MARCH AND APRIL 1876

Two days before Thring's return to Wales, the *Cambrian News* carried a report that 'there is to be a Spring invasion of Borth, which usually has to wait for the summer to bring its army of visitors. Arrangements have been made (says a letter in *The Times*) for transferring the well-known Uppingham School 'to a healthy locality near Aberystwyth...'

On 27 March, a chartered goods train of eighteen trucks arrived at Borth station with all the bedsteads, tons of bedding, tables, chairs, bookshelves, musical instruments, sporting equipment and much more. 'If anyone wishes for a new experience', Thring wrote later in *The Times*, 'let him try unloading eighteen railway trucks and distributing their contents among twelve or fourteen houses in a fierce march against time'.

In fact the number of cottages in which rooms were eventually rented was twice that number, and securing them involved some hectic bargaining with local women, one of whom 'shook me affectionately by the shoulders. How we laughed'. Skrine described 'the features of the coaxing Mrs David Jones as she follows [us] to the door after the bargain struck, and while we are sourly drawing the purse strings, pats him on the back fondly and wheedles: "Won't you give me a little more, Mr Thring? Poor widow, Mr Thring, poor widow" '.

Although Thring was a clergyman, he had many of the qualities of a good military commander. He began to direct the work of distributing all the transported items to the various properties and oversaw the allocation of rooms to staff and pupils (see page 16), after which his wife and daughters helped to assemble the beds.

The room allocation may well have been a more sensitive operation than it might appear. Even if the masters and their

families enjoyed the novelty of their new surroundings (like Thring himself), it is easy to underestimate the anguish and stress that the sudden move away from Uppingham may have caused. The Thrings had five children; one other housemaster had six. Homes, familiar surroundings, possessions and friends had been left behind; only a proportion of their living-in servants had come with them.

An emergency order was sent off to the Potteries for what Skrine described as 'bedroom ware' (presumably chamber pots and china washing bowls) because 'the world of school [had] moved forward since the days when three or four basins sufficed for the toilet of a dozen boys'. Most other necessary equipment was bought locally. Local workmen were mainly used, despite the language difficulties. At the hotel, a large amount of plastering and cleaning was done, a washroom of thirty basins was constructed, and yards of trestle tables were erected in the corridors and larger rooms so that the whole school could eat at one sitting.

Plans were rapidly drawn up for a large wooden building, 80 feet by 20, to be built on a patch of rough ground at the rear of the hotel for assemblies and other large-scale events and activities. Provision was made for a sick room; the old stables became the school carpentry shop, and the coach house was turned into a gymnasium. Other buildings had to be found for music practice and for a standby sanatorium.

The search for a cricket ground began soon after Thring arrived, so that, in his words, 'Uppingham by the Sea can do something besides throwing stones into the water'. There was an initial offer from the Bishop of St David's of a plot of land not far from the hotel (see page 26), but it was bumpy, poorly drained and large enough only for five or six nets rather than a full game.

Thring then received an approach from a local landowner who lived a few miles away, Sir Pryse (Loveden) Pryse of Gogerddan. Pryse had been at Eton (where it is said that he wore a coat of wool taken from Gogerddan sheep), and he was a former officer in the Royal Horse Guards. A keen huntsman, and an eccentric giant of a man at twenty stones in weight, he was generous to his tenants but local rumour had it that he kept his own children so short of money that they had to sell fruit in Aberystwyth market.

Gogerddan, his country house, had stuffed peacocks on the staircase, birds, animals and fish in glass cases in the entrance hall and a collection of van Dyck paintings and family portraits. He did much to support the building and upkeep of local churches including St Matthew's, Borth.

Pryse and Thring struck up a good friendship over the year that followed, after Pryse asked if the school would like to use a six-acre field which had once been a race-course for cricket practice and matches on half holidays. The rent would be only £1. Pryse later waived this because regular rolling work by the boys had levelled the once-bumpy ground so much.

The roller which the boys used to 'reduce a piece of raw meadow land in a few weeks to a cricket field which left little to be desired' was the most striking piece of equipment on the goods train from Uppingham. Cambrian railway employees struggled to unload it at Bow Street station, 'but [when] once again on *terra firma* it worked with a will and achieved wonders'.

By 4 April, nearly everything was ready. Thring wrote to his brother Henry: 'Things are falling into place better than I dared hope... I could almost write an inventory of Borth lodging houses, rooms and prices from memory'. It had been an exhilarating

experience for him: 'One short week saw all this done. It was like shaking the alphabet in a bag, and bringing out letters into words and sentences, such was the sense of absolute confusion turned into intelligent shape'.

Meanwhile the *Cambrian News* reported on the unfolding events: 'Excitement in Borth and neighbourhood is great. The main body of immigrants has not yet arrived, but evidence is not wanting of their speedy advent'. The biggest question at that point was how many of his pupils would actually turn up.

Any doubts about this were dispelled on the afternoon of 4 April by the arrival of the boys on a series of trains from different parts of the country. Thring described how '[At] about half-past six in the evening a long train was seen winding along the flat, and as it drew near to the station, which was crowded with masters and spectators, it might be supposed to turn into a gigantic poultry train, so thick were the heads thrust out of the coops all along. Soon it ran up and out-poured the garrulous mass, and Babel began'.

The anxious masters were waiting on the platform to count the boys in. They were very relieved to find that only a few were missing. Better still, 17 new boys had joined the school that term, providing proof that, despite recent criticisms, Thring enjoyed a strong personal following among parents and that their confidence in him had revived dramatically since the recriminations of the previous autumn.

Masters sent the boys off for tea, which proved to be a successful first test of the hotel's catering arrangements. Then the young new-arrivals were given free time on the beach until bedtime. Meanwhile the masters and their local helpers sorted out trunks, hampers and book-boxes, which were delivered around the village until nearly midnight.

Borth's early impressions of Uppingham (from the *Cambrian News*, April 1876)

'Borth did not know what to make of it. When the news first came to the bold women who eke out a hard life between the sea and the parish they shook their grey heads, and said - in Welsh - it would make a difference somewhere.

Old sailors, who stand day by day and look wistfully seawards, as if still expecting their ship to land, rolled their quids (i.e. tobacco lumps) in their mouths and their eyes in their sockets, and spat as expressively as they could on the level sands.

The station master was told that 400 scholars and teachers were coming to Borth, and he said "All right," and the train moved forward, as *he* thought, bearing with it the most mendacious (he thought of some word other than mendacious) railway guard he had the misfortune to know.

An old farmer's wife was told that the plague was coming into the country (see daily papers) and she said, "Ah, so I hear, 400 of them to Borth, what in the world will they do with them?"

Everybody heard about it, and everybody pretended not to be astonished....

At last the preparations were completed. They came - hundreds of them. They brought their luggage with them - tons of it. They laughed and joked and filled the platform. They swarmed everywhere and were a marvel, as only three or four hundred youths burning over with humour can be a marvel. They took to Borth and all belonging to it as if they had bought it and paid for it.

They were perfectly natural and never for a moment thought that nobody knew what to make of them. There they were - from ten years of age to twenty - hundreds of them. The old sailors, porters, professional and amateur, wheelbarrows, trucks, carts and all sorts got at the luggage - while the boys laughed and talked, and greeted their masters and were as jolly as sand boys. Remember your own experience and lend a hand!

Don't you youths take a dislike to the Welsh language, nor to the rugged country, nor to the sand hills, nor to the rocks, nor to the sea, [nor] the mountains, which shall be your playground. Listen at nights to the sea when it roars just as old Homer heard it roar thirty or forty centuries ago. Watch it in its changeful moods.

Take an old man's loving greeting (advice). Thousands of tender thoughts that used to hover over Uppingham are now turned towards Borth. For your sakes in hundreds of English homes the most trivial details about Borth and the bay, and the mountains and the level sands, and the restless sea will be welcomed.

I hope you will play many a game at cricket, sing many a boating song, whose echoes shall reach my bit of a place on the coast, and enjoy many a pleasant excursion before the day comes when you leave Borth. Before you go I hope the lot of you will be entertained to some sort of a spread, and that I may be there to see you all and give you an old man's farewell.'

The Coast

Perry Winkle

(see also page 39)

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Thring was involved in all the detail of room allocations. This list of rooms in the houses along Cambrian Terrace was scribbled on a piece of hotel notepaper. Christian, a housemaster, was the school chaplain.



Houses along Cambrian Terrace, leading from the seafront to the station building, which is just visible in the background. The main entrance to the hotel is on the left.

CHAPTER 4: BORTH - SUMMER TERM 1876

Thring was fortunate that the first week of the new term was dry and warm. The classroom accommodation proved good, but the wooden schoolroom was not yet complete. On the very first day, many last-minute details, including the teaching timetable, were still being drawn up, so there were no lessons.

In an effort to prevent any early homesickness, the boys were kept busy exploring the area; fishing; swimming; looking for snakes; starting an aquarium. From then on, after lessons and tea each afternoon until near sunset 'the school flocked down for plenty of amusement on this broad reach of sand and shingle. Some are groping for shells or for pebbles; others are playing ducks and drakes on the waves'.

However, the challenges facing Thring had only just begun, and in some respects he and his staff would have to improvise and think on their feet. He had to manage a large school in a very small community which had never experienced anything like this before. The school could hardly be inconspicuous, and the behaviour of its pupils would be carefully observed, even though the interaction of school and local people was limited by the language barrier and the fact that the school had brought its own matrons and domestic helpers.

Thring and Skrine recorded how 'A group of villagers is clustered around the water-fountain a few yards away; the children chatter about us as they fill their pitchers; and the old women, creeping homewards, cast a look under their bonnets at the boys, and exchange muttered comments'.

The poverty of many Borth people jolted the staff and boys, who were used to a more privileged existence: 'Some of our party tasted the painful pleasures of the poor in the scant and naked simplicity of

cottage lodgings'. The contrast between the opportunities available to Uppingham boys and the limited educational facilities for Borth children for whom full-time education was compulsory only to the age of 11 must have been stark.

Skrine described the scene at an early football match at Bow Street, in phrases which would appear deeply patronising to a modern reader: 'We heard the unintelligible cries of the Welsh rustic children and the village boys in corduroys, fired by the novel example [of athletics], scrambled down the street in a foot race, jerking their awkward little limbs over a roadside ditch. Our boys looked on as men look at monkeys, half-amused, half-indignant at the antics, which imitated humanity so abominably'.

Thring was only a little more restrained in his observations than Skrine, as he described the final round of house football matches which had been postponed when the term in Uppingham had ended so suddenly a month earlier. A large crowd of school spectators went down with the teams to Bow Street, thanks to reduced fares negotiated with the Cambrian Railway. They were accompanied by some curious local children:

'The sight of the school swarming into railway carriages, which carried us to the four-mile distant ground, and then the mimic war of the red and white jerseys contrasting the grey Gogerddan woodlands which overhang the meadow, and the shouts of the English boys blending with the excited but unintelligible cries of the Welsh rustic children, who were rapt spectators of the game, brought home to us the piquant contrast between our unchanged school habits and the novelty of their framework'.

There were some inevitable teething problems. Despite the kindness of their landladies, boys (accustomed at school to having a degree of privacy through the existence of partitioned dormitories and individual or shared studies) now found themselves six to a small room with one fireplace and one table.

The language barrier caused some misunderstandings. After one old lady complained about 'those very wicked boys who foolish (made fun of) me', the teacher from the Borth school was engaged to teach basic Welsh to the wives of two housemasters who then acted as mediators.

One elderly landlady cherished the 'pianass' (piano) from Uppingham that she was asked to house - perhaps because she had never seen one before. However, its presence added to a cacophony of noise from violins and pianos echoing through the thin internal cottage walls at music practice time. This prompted one joker to suggest:

'Let two hundred bathing machines be brought together from Llandudno and other watering-places within reach, and ranged along the beach. Let one machine be assigned to each boy, and let them be filled up with book-shelves, tables chairs etc. Thus the whole difficulty will be solved in a moment. And the plan has this further advantage, that when the time comes for returning to Uppingham, the bathing-machines would simply be formed in line, and driven across the country to Rutlandshire, and all further trouble in the way of furniture-vans and families-removing be cut away at one stroke.'

One group of boys ignored a ban on lighting fires in their cottage. Thring summoned them for a fierce dressing down, ordering them to return two days later, but he understood their frustrations and he was wise enough to temper his wrath with leniency. According to one of

the miscreants: 'It was an awful interval, we did not know what was in store for us, but when we came into his presence a second time, he was so gentle and appealed to our sense of the influence for good that we might exercise [so much, that his] words went right to our hearts and I believe we cried'.

Thring had to waive his strict no-smoking rule for the elderly local man who swept out the hotel. Local ladies were reduced to tears by the volume of hotel laundry: 'When the bales of laundry came pouring in, heaping every table and piling all over the floor and still flowing faster than room could be found, laundresses, brave workers though they were, felt that the game was lost... Such misery could not be permitted, and we transferred half the task at once to the laundries of Aberystwyth'.

Despite the caterers' best efforts, the variety of food was limited. Two anonymous boy-writers in the *Uppingham School Magazine*, *Grumbler* and *Cheerful*, protested in an editorial about a shortage of butter, green vegetables and any meat other than Welsh mutton. Another boy wrote a letter calling for Baines or Love (the two bakers in Uppingham) to be sent across to make hot rolls in the morning, as the sole Borth baker lived five miles away and came over to the village only twice a week. The magazine also published a running satire which poked gentle fun at what the boys saw as Borth's remoteness and insularity.

The second week of term brought a rapid change in the Atlantic weather: a new experience 'especially for boys not used to the west coast', as Skrine observed on 13 April when 'the East winds suddenly blew in, fortunately on the same day as the arrival of the school's supplies of coal.

With distances of over a mile between the hotel and schoolroom and the outlying cottages, timekeeping proved difficult.

Lessons often began late, until a flagstaff was put up in front of the hotel, to call pupils to lessons from all over the village by raising a flag. It was hard to get members of the various societies together in the evenings, and the school library was greatly missed.

However, these were relatively minor issues compared with all the compensations of the educational programme which gradually but rapidly took shape, taking full advantage of what the area offered: walking and bird-watching, and the collecting of shells from the beach.

The shore also became used for athletics afternoons, as well as for less formal exercise. A large number of the school turned out to follow the local hounds. Shooting took place on the land of friendly neighbours. Groups went off to climb Cader Idris and to visit Devil's Bridge. Science and archaeology expeditions were organized, and an aquarium (including an octopus) flourished for a while. Stuffed sea-fowl were collected into a museum. One boy had to be stopped from shooting at a seal while out on a fishing trip. Some of the masters started to teach boys a form of golf on what Skrine called 'the long strip of rough ground along the shore'.

Cricket matches were arranged against local teams, and with traditional school rivals from within a reasonable distance such as Shrewsbury and Repton (see page 26). The Old Boys sent a team to play the traditional July game: always a major event in the school's calendar. This time the post-match gathering included speeches expressing sympathy for the school's plight, to which Thring replied that from the calamity 'the school would issue with quickened vigour and life'.

Sir Pryse Pryse raised a local cricket team himself to play against the school. He was a somewhat individual cricketer, and

(according to a local report) before one match he walked through the neighbouring village in his cricket whites, to the consternation of some distant locals who thought that he was stark naked, causing 'a general stampede into the houses: blinds were hastily pulled down and the doors were locked. Indeed, if it had been anyone but Sir Pryse Pryse, we would have killed him for coming out like that without his clothes'.

In Thring's new makeshift wooden schoolroom the choir performed Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, held over from the previous winter and now five months later than planned. No Christmas tree could be found for the occasion, but: 'All the members of the choir might be seen flocking [there] with candle and candlestick in hand. The candles were arranged in sevens on wooden shelves all down the sides of the room, and although the spectacle had its laughable side, the effect was far from bad. But the music sounded dully in the timber walls and the experiment was not repeated'.

In June, on Trinity Sunday, the choir also sang at the first service in the newly-completed church, and Thring preached the first sermon in it. This showed him at his most eloquent: '[This] house of prayer stands today, fresh out of your hands, between the mountains and the sea: the mountains, those earthly thrones of God; the sea, that eternity'. After that, the school used the church twice each Sunday, as well as for some impromptu concerts.

There was the occasional drama, too. A new boy, brought over by his father from Ireland, wandered off (possibly suffering from homesickness), and search parties, including police, were sent out. According to the *Cambrian News*, 'he slept rough over a Saturday night and was then found in the company of a farm labourer next day' (see page 25).

The school was careful to cultivate goodwill through the local press. A stream of news items from *A correspondent* was sent to both local papers, the *Cambrian News* and the *Aberystwyth Observer*, some of it with the distinct intent of good public relations.

The *Aberystwyth Observer* reported on 12 March: 'The school enjoys Borth very much... most of the boys confess that Borth is the best place they have ever visited', along with the unlikely claim that 'they keep away from public houses that are in the place: not one boy has yet been seen entering any of them'.

It also warned them to 'watch out for snakes as you cross the river'. Early on in their stay, a letter from a local inhabitant, *Perry Winkle*, praised the boys' behaviour and pointed out what they might learn about the natural world from their stay (see page 15).

Life at Borth offered Thring the best possible testing-ground for his belief in collective responsibility and trust. On the day after the boys arrived, Thring addressed them about the great experiment on which they had all embarked: they were making history and they had a responsibility to make life harmonious for themselves and the people among whom they were now living.

Because they would enjoy great freedom of movement they must 'show to all England that boys can be trusted, and need not have prison walls and bars and bolts to prevent them from going wrong, but can be self-governed, trustworthy, genial companions'.

Some housemasters and a group of parents based in Manchester were suggesting that he might even consider setting up the school permanently elsewhere, although there was no obvious way of raising the finance that this would entail.

Thring greatly enjoyed that summer term. Always a man needing vigorous exercise to work off his anxiety, he took long, energetic walks as he revelled in his new surroundings. 'It is curious how the venom diminishes with the miles', he wrote in his diary on 28 May. 'We have now been half our time here; what a blessing!'

On 13 June he wrote in a letter: 'I feel a sense of freedom I have long been strange to in being away from the choking atmosphere of Rutland and its narrow and petty antagonisms'. A month later, describing a visit to Sir Pryse Pryse's splendid gardens, he observed:

'He certainly is the most genial fellow I ever saw. The pleasant surroundings here of friendly people and glorious country do make this life with all its troubles and deadly chances at the moment often enjoyable, sometimes really delightful, and I feel healthy and strong'.

On the night in July before the summer term ended the Borth inhabitants decorated the streets with flags and streamers bearing the words *Au revoir* (the French term for a temporary farewell, rather than *Adieu* for a permanent one). They expected the school to be back again with them in September, despite its original intention to stay for a single term.

Next morning was a glorious summer day. As the boys prepared to board their trains, Thring addressed them, telling them 'to come back with the soldier spirit to face whatever remained'. They too knew that 'back' meant another term in Borth.

He then set off on his own annual holiday to his beloved Grasmere in the Lake District. Although he had put a brave face on the situation with his staff and pupils while he was in Borth, now that he was away from there he became pessimistic, raging at what he saw as the 'blindness' of the leaders of the Uppingham RSA.



Boys outside one of the rented cottages.



The back of the hotel, looking towards the sea.
Thring's wooden schoolroom is on the right. Cambrian Terrace is out of view, to the left.



The house on the right, Efelwen, is where it is said that Thring had 'the best bedroom'.
Shingle piled up to the first floor window during the great storm of early 1877.

Extracts from Thring's first article in *The Times*: 14 April 1876

He was commissioned to write it after the first week of the summer term.

'There is a comical side to most disasters, and the sudden uprooting of the school at Uppingham has been no exception to the rule. Four hundred people were turned loose, with just three weeks given them to hunt for a place to settle in, to find it, and to settle in it when found. So the school was adrift, sent out its pioneers, explored, discovered its haven, and then straightway found itself, with a curious sense of relief, the temporary master of a goods train running through to Borth in Cardiganshire. Not that hearts were not heavy with anxious fear of the work and the risk of the experiment. Sorrow, too, there was in the last looks at the homes, gardens, flowers and fields that had to be left. Nevertheless, there was a freshness in the new opening; a quickening sense of freedom and escape in the possibility of being able to work once more in peace...

.... A beach, four miles long, with splendid sands, stretches away in front of the hotel, with plenty of pebbles, and a sea to throw them into. An aquarium will be started this week. An octopus has already been caught.

The beach is closed on the south by the hills, on the north by the river Dovey and the hills beyond it. These hills seem to form an amphitheatre behind, round a broad stretch of peat which lies between them and the sea. The views are lovely, and the place is suggestive of shells and aquariums and sea-birds in front, and of botany and rambles in the rear, while Aberystwyth, with a railway running to it, forms a good base of operations for the colony to shop in and fall back on...

... There were many of the old resources at Borth, but there were two sources of enjoyment unfailing here and unknown to the school in its Midland home - the mountains and the sea. The boys wander out from the hotel doors, swarming like bees round a beehive, down to the broad reach of shingle and sand. Tea is over, and all the school is flocking to enjoy the sunset and watch the rising tide...

They are doing what boys always do on the sea-shore: dodging the waves, hurling pebbles at them as they come in, burrowing in the sand for shells, cracking stones in the vain hope of finding jewels inside, or poring over the wooden reefs that rise so strangely from the sand, as the tide is not yet up - the long buried fragments, so says the legend, of the lost Lowland Hundred. Those clear colours in the west where the sun sets in the sea, the rippling light beneath the clouds, the scattered groups of figures moving in the twilight somewhat darkly, with a pleasant freshness of boyhood all round, form a scene not easily forgotten.

The dusky headlands stand out to seaward, with a white gleaming of broken waves at their feet; and landward shadowy mountains beyond the purple still catch a little glory from the sun. The low talk of pensive strollers, the rattle of pebbles, the laughter of those who chase each other in merry vein, all mixed with the roar of the sea, and some strains of music from the choir at practice thrown in, give sights and sounds that may make the school, if not unfaithful to Uppingham it has left, yet more than half-reconciled to the new land...

New, indeed, and strange enough it all is. The whole scene and circumstances, both in and out of doors, have to be readapted to the old familiar ways. A partial shaking down has been accomplished; and, as if to make the first week truly represent the old school life, the last football match of the season, a broken-off fragment of the Uppingham left behind, was played out on the Saturday half-holiday; and the champion cup of the year awarded to the winners.

Thus ended the first week, and its evening closed on a quiet scene of school routine; as if doubt, and risk, and turmoil, and fear, weary head, and weary hand, had not been known in the place. The wrestling match against time was over, and happy dreams came down on Uppingham by the Sea.'

CHAPTER 5: UPPINGHAM AND BORTH - SUMMER 1876

Despite being elated by the new experiences that Borth offered, and glad not still to be in Uppingham ‘sitting like Job, scraping boils on a dunghill’, Thring found it deeply frustrating to be ‘waiting quietly for one’s doom’. All through the final weeks of the summer term the full implications of a further term or even more away from Uppingham had been preying on his mind.

He was especially concerned about his accumulating debts. As early as 26 May the arrival of his bank books was ‘a heavy weight. I don’t quite see how my expenses should be less, but very likely I am wrong. But I have seen such strange things in my life experience, and I so fully believe that modern martyrdom is a loss of money’. Even though some Liverpool parents had started a fighting fund which raised £200 in the first week, and two of the more affluent masters offered him loans or gifts, it was nothing like as much as he needed.

His worries were made more acute by the realisation that he had also been drawn into a tactical battle of wits with the Uppingham RSA. Back in March its members had expected that he would pull back at the very last minute from leaving the town. With the Uppingham ratepayers still relatively calm (publicly, at least), the guardians were confident that within a few weeks he would be forced to make a humiliating return, his money having run out. All they had to do was to sit tight whilst showing townspeople that they were working gradually towards sewerage and water improvements and explaining that these could not be rushed because they involved big legal complexities and the need to phase the costs over a reasonable period to protect the ratepayers.

Their attitude enraged Thring, who believed that ‘Uppingham has turned us out of house and home amidst a torrent of lies and abuse’. His anger filtered down to

pupils, one of whom wrote for the *Magazine* a play on words, matching the surname of one of Thring’s principal RSA antagonists, the Rector of Uppingham Revd. William Wales, with the location in which the school now found itself. The poem was entitled *How I came to Borth*:

‘Leave bickerings and cesspools far behind,
Take thy stern future with a quiet mind.
Better are herbs and peace, be well assured,
Than all the Local Sanitary Board.
Weigh dilute sewage ‘gainst pure mountain springs,
Weigh unflushed drains ‘gainst air the salt sea brings,
Weigh all the chances well with equal scales,
Since Wales won’t come to you then go to Wales.’

The early weeks of the term brought at least a token victory for Thring. He needed to grasp any opportunity to increase the number of members of the RSA who were sympathetic to his plight, and the annual elections to the boards of guardians gave him an opportunity. It would also provide a litmus test of whether opinion in the town might be moving in his favour.

However, he was at a big disadvantage insofar as he and the masters were now far from Uppingham. Voting slips had to be returned within a strict time limit, and the RSA tried to exploit his problem by sending out the voting papers at the last possible moment, making it hard for the absent housemasters to vote.

Undeterred, friends of the school took up the challenge, quickly collecting up the slips from the empty boarding houses and passing them to Charles White (a local ironmonger) who was rushed to Rugby station to catch the evening train. On

arrival at Borth early next morning he found Thring and the masters on the station platform with voting tables set up.

Thring's wife served White with breakfast as the train carried on to Aberystwyth and back, and within minutes he was on his way home, handing in the votes with fifteen minutes to spare and ousting several opponents of the school in favour of, amongst others, the school doctor.

The trustees, Thring's employers, represented another difficulty. Having effectively disowned the Borth venture at their March meeting, not a single one of them visited him during summer the term (other than Birley and Jacob who came to see their sons). However, they had the legal power to order the school's return by September.

By June it was becoming all too clear that progress on the town's sewerage improvements was being slowed down by all the legal, tendering and construction issues, despite a visit from a central government inspector on a very hot summer day when the deficiencies of the existing sewers became all too obvious.

Frustrated by similar delays over the water supply issue, Thring set in motion the formation of a private water company. However, this required an Act of Parliament, the raising of share capital and the choice of a site for the water works. Trial borings proved problematic, and there were fierce disputes over possible locations. In addition, the school doctor and the MOH were still fighting each other over this and many other issues.

During the final weeks of term Thring struggled to keep the masters unified. Ahead of the June trustees' meeting he told Birley that they were unanimous in supporting his desire to defy any order to return before the key improvements had been completed. In fact, many of them

harboured great doubts about a second term in Borth, realising that winter there would be far less attractive than summer. Their doubts seem to have reached the boys: the magazine alleged that they 'looked forward to wintering in Wales as much as they would to hibernating in Greenland'.

The trustees were unimpressed by Thring's arguments for staying away, and they summarily ordered the school back to Uppingham for the autumn term. It seemed briefly as if there would be a major confrontation, but the deadlock was broken by a new outbreak of typhoid in the town. It was low-level, but enough to convince trustees and sceptical staff that the school would have to return to Borth for the September term after all.

Meanwhile, those who lived in and near Borth had taken a leaf out of Thring's book. That summer they began to agitate for better water supplies of their own. In Borth a spirited meeting took place at the house of a Captain Delahoye on 15 August 1876 to orchestrate a demand for more taps from the existing main pump, and for the Cambrian Railway Company to restore a supply which it had allegedly disrupted when the railway was built.

In Borth as elsewhere the local ratepayers were very resistant to paying for improvements themselves, but there was much talk about inconvenience and foul smells during every summer. The school's presence had concentrated local minds on these issues, in light of the circumstances which had brought the school to Borth and the pressure which it was now putting on water supplies there.

The *Aberystwyth Observer* reveals that for much of time when the school was at Borth, a fierce debate was also taking place within the Aberystwyth town council about the need for a better water supply there, and how to obtain it.



Borth station platform from the south - where boys arrived from all parts of Great Britain and beyond.



Another view of Borth station platform – from the north.

The down loop platform was not added until 1894. Note the elaborate ironwork supporting the roof.



Boys standing outside the temporary wooden schoolroom built behind the Cambrian Hotel: a detail from the photograph on page 21.



Masters, as well as the boys, took full advantage of their new surroundings in discovering new pursuits. Etching by Charles Rossiter, art master, 1873-97.

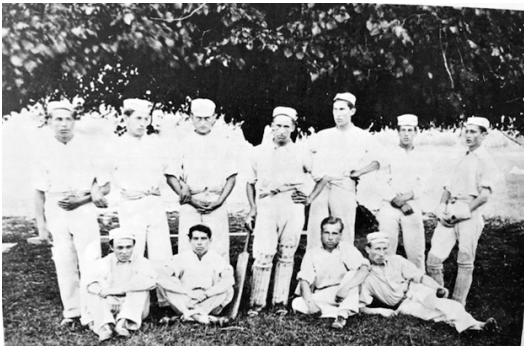
News report: *The Cambrian News*, (19 May 1876): 'A boy lost'

'On Saturday 13 May a young boy named Blakeney was brought by his father to the school at Borth from Ireland. The youth was seen in the village during the afternoon and at about 8 o'clock in the evening. After this, nothing more was heard of him and consequently there was a good deal of anxiety as to his whereabouts. Searching parties were sent out and some continued all night looking for the missing lad. PC James with some of the school authorities went to Superintendent Lloyd who telegraphed to Machynlleth and sent the town policeman to join in the search. PC James returned to Borth from Aberystwyth over the rocks...

... A boy answering the description had slept at Kerrigterrann Farm the previous night and enquired if there were any trains on Sunday. On being told that there were not any that would take him towards Ireland, he asked if he might stop another night. The farmer said that the lad was down in one of the fields with a labourer. PC James went in search of the truant, who was taken back to the school, everybody being very glad that the youth had found no worse quarters than a Welsh farmhouse.'



Boys playing on Borth Beach: etching by Charles Rossiter.



Cricket on Sir Pryse Pryse's field at Gogerddan. In the photograph below, the marquee suggests a match against another school or, more likely, the Old Boys.



The cricket practice ground at Borth: lent by the Bishop of St. David's, but somewhat rough (from the Uppingham Rovers' scrapbook).



Sir Pryse Pryse of Gogerddan (1838-1906), who proved to be a generous and enthusiastic supporter of the school, lending Thring one of his fields as a sports ground.

CHAPTER 6: BORTH -AUTUMN TERM 1876

In July 1876 Thring hoped to be back in Uppingham by Christmas, but before he went on holiday there was much to do. Well before the trustees made their reluctant decision to permit the school to remain in Borth for a second term, Birley had been urging the upgrade of key buildings in preparation for winter. He warned Thring that this should remain secret from other trustees for the moment: if they found out, it would give them the pretext to dispute any further requests for a contribution to his costs, and maybe even enable them to dismiss him.

Once the decision to remain in Borth was made and term had ended, the accommodation agreements were renegotiated. The porch and other exposed parts of the hotel were weather-boarded and a covered walkway was built between the hotel and the wooden schoolroom. 'Sanitary Tom', a local navvy, widened the drainage channels from the hotel to the beach to prevent flooding after storms.

Not all the additions proved effective. Skrine recorded that 'a long lean-to shed, like a cloister without windows, was run along two sides of the bowling green wall. [but while] it afforded some shelter for chapel roll-call, and for a few minutes' loung[ing] before evening prayers - except when it rained hard and the water poured through the contractor's felt roof - it was too narrow to be used for games; unless, indeed, we had turned it into a skittle alley. But then skittles is a game of low connections'.

Thirty-three pupils had left at the end of the summer term, but after the school returned on 15 September Thring recorded that 'the entries exceed the leavings by one: a refutation to the prophets of evil'. The *Cambrian News* reported that there was an increasing proportion of boys who had never known the 'real school'. The

adults strengthened their local ties: The *Aberystwyth Observer* reported Thring's sermon at the harvest festival service, for which his wife and sister-in-law decorated the church.

Inevitably, the boys faced the second term with less enthusiasm than in the heady days of April. The days shortened and the weather closed in: one housemaster described how 'we learned what the wind on the west coast could be... in our houses, when the street door was opened, the carpets blew up in every room'.

Afternoon lessons were rescheduled later, to make maximum use of light in the early afternoon for games and outdoor pursuits. There were new evening societies and a lecture programme so that the dark hours did not hang as heavily as they might have done.

With no courts for playing Eton Fives - a popular game in Uppingham - and no with fields level enough for most ball games, the school's own brand of football (which had aspects in common with modern rugby) was popular. Sir Pryse Pryse sent his hounds over to Borth to hunt twice a week, and the boys ran with them and went hare-coursing. However, even with all these diversions, Skrine had to admit that pupil discipline began to fray, with 'bullying and mischief'. Halfway through the term Thring reminded the boys about 'the experiment in self-government which our special circumstances are affording'.

Suddenly, in the last week of October there were seven cases of scarlet fever. With no hospital and no isolation facilities there was talk of yet another early end to a term, but Thring rose to the challenge characteristically, finding within an hour a remote house big enough to become a makeshift sanatorium with 25 beds. Workmen put in doors and windows, and

the matron, together with nurses speedily brought in from London, scrubbed it out with disinfectant and carbolic soap overnight, causing the owner to fear for his carpets and the boys to complain that the deep-clean gave them sore throats.

The source of the outbreak was never discovered, but it was over in ten days and all the boys recovered. Skrine reckoned that the best disinfectant proved to be strong winds 'which arrived ten days after the first case; all windows and doors were opened wide, and the boys were directed to bring down their rugs, great-coats, and dressing-gowns, and spread them out for purification on the beach'. Fortunately the parents had learned to remain calm about such things. One father wrote to his new-boy son: 'stick to your work and don't mind such a trifle'.

However, when news of the fever reached London the *Lancet*, the well-known medical journal which had persistently criticized Thring during the previous year, ran a very hostile editorial: this time (it stated) he would not be able to blame the RSA. It emphasized the need for eternal vigilance, comparing Uppingham's disease record and medical arrangements unfavourably with those of Marlborough College. The allegations were robustly answered in a letter from Dr Childs, giving details about the number of cases, refuting rumours that the school was 'entirely devoid of medical supervision', assuring parents and the world at large that he was fully qualified and ever-present at Borth, and that the outbreak was now over.

Thring continued to believe that all the difficulties the school had faced would finally end in triumph. His Advent Sunday sermon in Borth church spoke of the opportunities which marked the start of the church year: they were 'a testimony that we are going to meet the coming Saviour'. Term ended with a concert in the Assembly Rooms in Aberystwyth and a

performance of Handel's *Messiah* at the Temperance Hall, after which the boys departed not yet knowing where they would reassemble in January. Skrine described how 'in the darkness before dawn, the special train carried them (home), to await with curiosity their next marching orders'.

For reasons explained in the next chapter, Thring was secretly resigned to the fact that they would again be in Borth in January. Perhaps reading the state of mind of both staff and pupils, he chose (in contrast to his decision in July) not to show his hand before the boys left.

It was the lowest point in his year at Borth. Even the loyal Skrine criticised him for the strained relationships of this moment, contrasting the way in which he rallied the boys 'to endurance and cheerfulness' with the 'timidity and sulks and even cross-purposes' which staff perceived he meted out to them.

There was no doubting how much the masters yearned to be home again. As a number of them headed back to Uppingham for the holidays, Thring joined them only for a single day just before Christmas (see page 32). He was exhausted by the long term just ended, which had been marred increasingly by low staff morale and frequent arguments with housemasters over financial matters and the best way forward for the school.

'I am so tired, and so worried', he wrote on 20 December. 'I shall want a secretary for the next three months and a lawyer at the end. My letters are such a heap... I write from 10 to 1 daily without stopping. The inside of my head feels as if I was growing a fleece there'.

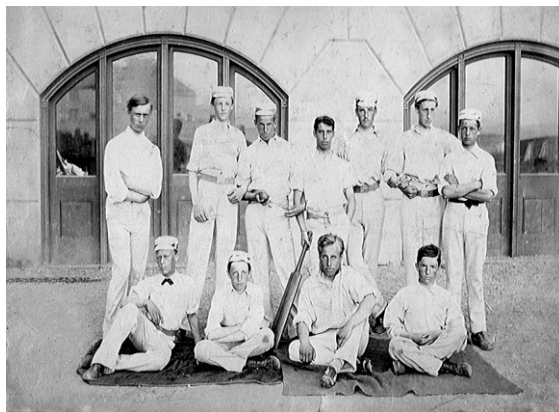
He and his family spent Christmas in Borth, and on Boxing Day he was back at work, writing to the parents that there would be no return to Uppingham yet.



The Masters, photographed outside the hotel, 1876.
Compare this with the group photograph on page 8.



A group of boys on the steps of the hotel: compare with the photograph on page 59.



The cricket XI of Thring's own boarding house
outside the hotel, 1876.



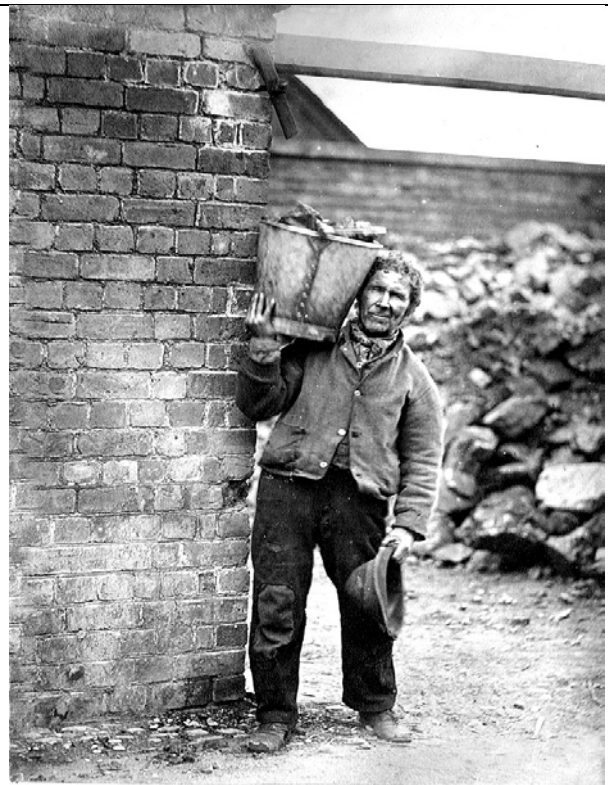
The boys of Fircroft (their house in Uppingham)
photographed, outside one of the
properties in Cambrian Terrace.



Football team at Gogerddan, Winter 1876



The Parish Clerk - Borth



The Coalman - Borth.

Photographs of two well-known Borth inhabitants (1876).

CHAPTER 7: UPPINGHAM -AUTUMN 1876 AND SPRING 1877

With the benefit of hindsight, Thring's original aim of being away for only four months would seem to have been naively optimistic.

All through the late summer, autumn and early winter, while he and the school were battling with the elements in Borth, improvement work in Uppingham remained painfully slow, despite the best efforts of the school doctor and one housemaster who spent his entire summer holiday there to force the RSA to speed things up.

After feeling the economic impact of the school's absence through the summer term, and alarmed at the prospect of this continuing for many months ahead, the town's ratepayers asserted themselves at last, at a stormy meeting in August 1876 when they demanded much more urgency from the RSA.

However, gathering in the tenders for the sewerage work and then awarding the contract proved to be more difficult than anticipated. This was not only because the RSA was still determined to stop Thring forcing the pace, but also because the processes for getting the necessary approvals for work to begin, as well as a loan at an agreed interest rate from central government, proved to be so complex.

Sewerage construction finally began in mid-September just as the pupils were returning from their homes to Borth. Before long the contractor was asking for an extension. As winter approached, the deteriorating weather inevitably slowed his activity down.

Progress on the water supply suffered similar setbacks. The parliamentary Bill took longer than anticipated. At a time of local economic hardship because of the school's continuing absence, the take-up of shares in the water company was slow.

Some townspeople who might have been expected to become shareholders harboured a suspicion that the private company, a venture led by Thring and the school, was designed to thwart the RSA from carrying forward a scheme of its own. The strength of water supply from the company's initial boreholes proved to be to be disappointing.

The continuing enmity between the school doctor and the MOH was a complicating factor. This centred on a large number of disputes: whether the doctor had been secretive or negligent during the 1875 epidemic; the insistence of the MOH that he had the legal power to visit the doctor's patients without permission; a disagreement over the siting of the waterworks, and disputes over the state of sanitation at the school sanatorium and the town's workhouse and national school. The two men complained formally about each other to the central government authorities in London.

Anonymous charge and counter-charge also continued in the medical and national press. This was mostly about whether the RSA was as incapable or calculating as the school believed it to be, in its slowness to get the improvements completed.

All through the autumn term, Thring hoped for a return to Uppingham by Christmas. He felt reassured by the fact that the Lower School (still in situ) had experienced no problems since the departure of the older boys back in March. As the weeks went by, however, typhoid reappeared in the town and the date of the school's return was again postponed.

At the beginning of December, while still being upbeat with the boys and careful not to show what was in his mind to any of his staff at Borth, he began discreetly to test opinion elsewhere for the idea that a third

term at Borth would be necessary. He considered the pros and cons of bringing in the most expert adviser whom he could find, to advise on whether or not it would be safe to return to Uppingham in January. There was a risk that this might alienate the members of the RSA, who would see it as a ploy to undermine them, but it might convince the trustees that they should again draw back from any attempt to order the school back prematurely.

Having weighed up all these arguments, as term ended Thring invited Professor Acland, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford and a member of the government's ground-breaking sanitary commission six years earlier, to visit Uppingham.

On 18 December Acland made a thorough tour of inspection of both the school and the town. He met all the leading parties involved, including the Chairman of the RSA, the MOH, the school doctor, and Thring (who made a very brief return from Borth for the occasion). Acland was adamant that the school should not yet return, and the trustees reluctantly fell into line just before Christmas: once again Thring's brinkmanship had proved right.

If any further stimulus was needed for getting the work in Uppingham done, it came just after Christmas with the dramatic news of the death of the chairman of the town's board of guardians. Most ironically, the cause of his death was typhoid.

The news reached Thring on 1 January 1877. He was regretful but unyielding: 'Poor fellow! He has fallen a victim to his own obstinacy and delusions... It is fearful to be suddenly taken away whilst doing wrong. God help us all'.

Despite new leadership in the town, some of the old controversies around sanitary issues at the sanatorium and the workhouse continued to ebb and flow, and a new one arose concerning the state of the town's national (elementary) school. However, even with all these disputes, the prevailing view was that opposition to the siting of the water company's new works should be dropped, however much the MOH might object. From then on, as winter moved towards spring, the work continued more or less as planned.

The return would not be a moment too soon for many people in the town. Few businesses had been bankrupted by the school's absence, but the economic downturn had been marked. The *Stamford Mercury* described the March Spring Fair in Uppingham: 'This year, despite the usual accompaniment of steam-horses, swing boats and rifle galleries etc... not much business was done'.

A week or two later, however, it was confirmed that the school's return had been fixed for 6 May. The works were complete; mains water was flowing, and the new sewer drains were functioning.



Victorian Aberystwyth, viewed from the south, where the school performed several of its concerts.
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CHAPTER 8: BORTH - SPRING TERM 1877

The start of the new term gave the school a further rude awakening to the realities of Atlantic coastal life. The boys returned on 19 January 1877 during a howling gale. There followed nearly a month of fierce storms which must have tested cheerfulness to the limit.

Overall numbers had increased again, and there was a general feeling that this really would be the final term away from Uppingham. The air of despondency amongst some of the staff had lifted following their holiday.

Some masters had moved their families out of Borth and into warmer accommodation in Aberystwyth, but some of the wives and children had decided not to return at all from Uppingham after Christmas, anticipating the school's return within a month or two. They sent a regular stream of flowers, fruit and vegetables to Borth from boarding house gardens when spring began. The extent of this traffic eventually drew protests from the railway company, after a school servant travelled to Wales with no fewer than fourteen hampers and boxes in addition to his own luggage.

Thring was conscious of the need to keep a sense of unity amongst the boys and in those staff who remained, and he was determinedly cheerful. 'Though naturally sorry that Uppingham is not ready to receive us, it is an unspeakable relief to me that we spend another term here', he wrote to an old friend, 'this year has been to me a year of wonderful deliverances'.

He added an analogy which he would use many times in later years; the parallels between the school at Borth and the peripatetic existence of the Old Testament Israelites. 'I [now] understand the book of Exodus in a way I never did before'. In his diary, however, he observed that 'as far as

the boys are concerned, there are so many advantages here that they are great gainers [even though we, the masters,] are the main sufferers...'

A week into term two new boys went off on a ramble one afternoon on to Borth Head, a mile to the south. They were still missing at tea time; search parties went out again, recalling the similar incident some months before, to search both marsh and coastland. At 9pm the boys were located, cut off by the tide and perched on a rock halfway up the cliff, where they had apparently told stories to each other for five hours to keep their spirits up.

A few days later (29 January 1877) the *Aberystwyth Observer* recorded 'the most violent hurricane that has ever been known in the district'. According to the *Borth Infant School Logbook*, 'the waves, mountain-high, were breaking upon the houses so that the poor people were in imminent danger. The houses were flooded, and the furniture floating about the houses. The roads and fences were entirely destroyed. Never has such an event occurred in the memory of any man living in the village'.

The south-westerly gale howled for four days, coinciding with extreme spring tides. On the fifth morning the sea wall was breached, causing widespread flooding and damage as shingle piled up to first-floor window level outside some of the cottages. Thring later described this as 'playing the housemaid in all the houses at the lower end of the village, washing out the rooms thoroughly. Peat stacks mistook their vocations and scattered in all directions, and much real damage was done'.

Huge stones were flung up on to the main street; the railway embankment was breached and 150 sheep drowned. Boys' books and trays of food blew away as soon

as the hotel doors were opened. Men in waders rescued people trapped in their homes, along with the matron and one lone patient in the isolation hospital. According to Skrine, for an hour at high tide:

‘The narrow ridge on which the village stands was swept by a storm of foam; [waves] exploding against the crest of the ridge would leap in through the intervals between the houses, and carrying along a drift of sea-weed and shingle, splintered timber, and wrecked peat-stacks, go eddying down into the drowned pastures beyond. Yet when the dawn came, and men counted their losses, there were but a few to record. The embankment at the south end of the village had been beaten flat, and the road behind it buried under shingle. The nearest houses had been flooded and threatened with collapse.’

Thring found it all curiously exhilarating: ‘It was a very fine sight to see the sea come in like a great wild beast, twisting and swirling and foaming under the fierce wind’. He acquired old railway sleepers for a makeshift path between hotel and schoolroom and ‘I set all the school at work to help the people [clear up. It] was a grand thing for them to do’.

The boys seem to have played their part to the full in this clearing-up operation. With another high tide due that evening, they were organised into gangs of workers by houses. Much of the afternoon’s daylight time was spent passing large stones from hand to hand and carrying new wooden stakes to and fro, helping to repair breaches in the sea-wall. The road was cleared of shingle, and peat-sods were taken round to each cottage. It was to be a fortnight before trains could run again, and coal and oil were soon in short supply.

The school’s efforts were certainly appreciated. Mr Lewis from the post office sent a warm letter to Thring on 2 February praising the efforts of both staff and boys,

following a motion, carried with acclaim, at a public meeting to demand long-term improvements to the sea wall.

A further storm blew up on 19 February, ripping tiles off roofs and causing boys in attic bedrooms to retreat downstairs. Thring kept some of them company with as large a supply of biscuits as he could find. The *Cambrian News* (23 February) described a scene of more dead sheep, bathing machines overturned, and battered-down haystacks, but compared with the earlier one, this storm was mild.

By the end of March and with term coming to an end, it was agreed without dispute that the summer term would begin in Uppingham on 6 May. A staged reading of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with Mendelssohn’s music was given to a pupil audience on 6 April, with a second performance for local people.

On 20 March the school gave a farewell concert in Aberystwyth. It was ambitious (including works by Bach, Beethoven, Handel and Mendelssohn), but probably under-rehearsed. The pupil who reviewed the concert observed: ‘We returned home by special (train) to Borth, with the happy thoughts of a lie-a-bed next morning. There was uproarious merriment in some of the carriages on our way...’

Thring gave a long lecture to students of the new University College of Wales on 28 March (reprinted in full in the *Cambrian News* on 3 April) in which he expounded one of his favourite themes: the link between education and life. He drew repeated cheers as he emphasised that giving children ‘inward power’ was more valuable than cramming them with facts and pleasing governments. The school was still in session over Easter, and his sermon reflected on its time in Borth as one of renewal, with the anticipation of ‘new life that is to come [with its] fresher, greater power’.

A week after Easter, as the school prepared to break up at Borth for the last time, Thring preached a final sermon in Borth church. He declared: 'A last day has come, a day of judgement such as never has come to this school before, and methinks will never come again... never more shall we worship together in this little church'. Reflecting on the 'circle of death' from which they had escaped a year earlier and their deliverance at Borth, he wanted 'this last day to be also a day of birth to the truer life with our risen Lord'.

On the final day of term he wrote a long letter to an old friend. With farewell celebrations only a few hours away and his sixth form doing their English exam in front of him, he described his complex feelings about the prospect of leaving Borth, still worrying about his debts and concerned at the prospect of engaging more closely with the trustees again:

'I was never more puzzled in my life to know what my real feelings are. Such a confusion of feeling as cannot be described ebbs and flows in my breast. Sorrow predominates, at going back to my prison at Uppingham... leaving this free bright shore, these glorious hills, the hearty welcome and the helping hand of the people here.... [but we have] brought this wonderful year to a successful close, and been permitted *a great deliverance*... I hope to hunt for shells on the beach with Mig (Margaret, his daughter) this afternoon; we have a beautiful spring day'.

The entire village turned out in front of the hotel for the formal ceremonies of songs and speeches on the evening of 10 April, firstly on the sea front and after dusk in the wooden schoolroom (see pages 37-38).

The next morning (11 April) at 6.30 the first special train left. Crowds gathered again and sang the boys off, with Thring later recording how 'as the long line of carriages moved out heads, thick as

carriage windows hold, cheered again and again, not without some slight touch of sadness beneath their joy'.

Skrine added that an elderly collie dog which the boys had christened 'Old Borth' followed the departing masses to the station and 'poked his nose into the carriage to take his leave... His master lived two miles away, but soon after our arrival, he had come down from the hills to attach himself to us and henceforth was the pet of our regiment... he wagged his tail for every boy who wore the image of the school upon his cap, but if he met him bare-headed or in indistinctive headgear, he would cut that boy dead'.

'And so the grand page of life is turned,' wrote Thring two days later. 'The chapter come to an end. But it has been glorious'.

Skrine added: 'Some [masters] have lingered on for business, and a few from reluctance to have done with it. All is over and the place is very silent, except for the ever-present seagulls and the chink of hammers where they are breaking down our wooden walls (i.e. the schoolroom)... The village seems even quieter, the people at their doors, sorry now that the stirring social year is over and the little fishing town has returned to its old solitary nothingness... The one permanent monument of our settlement is... a grand engineering work: the extended culvert into the sea beyond low-water mark'.

Before his departure Thring gave Sir Pryse Pryse one thousand salmon for his streams. He also wrote a second article for *The Times*, (see page 40) noting all the kindnesses the school had received.

Like Skrine, he observed with some wistfulness 'the shore [now] silent of boy voices, a great stillness out on the sands, the campaign over and a strange struggle closed'.

Group photographs at Borth



Thring at Borth, with his wife and members of their boarding house.



Boys and their landlady at one of the cottages before their departure.

The Farewells

(extracts from a report in the *Cambrian News*, April 1877)

‘On Tuesday evening, 10 April, the inhabitants of Borth almost to a man turned out to take part in a farewell demonstration to the masters and scholars of Uppingham School. Shortly after seven o’clock a procession of the inhabitants was formed, and headed by a flag bearer, made its way to the square in front of the Cambrian Hotel, where several songs were sung under the schoolmaster’s (Mr Jones’s) direction; and at the conclusion a hearty round of cheers was given for the Uppingham School, who immediately responded by making the place ring again with three enthusiastic cheers for Borth. The assembly then adjourned to the wooden building in the hotel yard, where Mr Jones, Bryn Bowen, was voted to the chair on the proposition of Mr Lewis, Post Office, seconded by Mr Jones, Neptune Baths.

The CHAIRMAN said he was exceedingly glad to see such a popular demonstration [so] that the people might have a chance of giving public expression to the respect they entertained for Mr Thring, the masters and scholars (Cheers). When some twelve months ago a rumour came to Borth respecting [their] advent, a few old women and nervous people, in the innocence of their hearts, were afraid that they would be swamped by an inundation of Goths and Vandals. (Laughter.) The meeting would, however, agree that kinder hearted gentlemen than the masters, and better behaved boys than the scholars, could not be found. (Hear, hear.) There had been no town and gown feeling existing similar to what prevailed in places of greater pretensions. The people of the village and the school had pulled together in a friendly manner, and everything had gone on quite smoothly. (Hear, hear.)

After referring to the progress of the school under the head-mastership of Mr Thring, and remarking that older schools would have to look to their laurels, as Uppingham was treading closely on their heels, the Chairman said that in some fifteen or twenty years to come many of the boys would be in Parliament, some of them officers in the army or navy, others would no doubt be eminent merchants, some of them would be barristers, others would no doubt be surgeons, like Dr Childs - (loud cheering) - and physicians. They would therefore exercise an influence over the destinies of the nation. (Cheers.) The people of Borth were exceedingly sorry that the school was going away. Its members would be missed very much indeed. He owed the Uppingham people no ill feeling, but if a case of smallpox, the cholera, or some other virulent disease broke out in that place, and prevented the return of the school, he was sure that the Borth people would not feel at all sorry. (Laughter and cheers.) He referred to Dr Childs (applause) who had earned the gratitude of the Borth people perhaps more than anyone else, acting the part of the Good Samaritan thoroughly, responding as readily to the call of the sick and suffering at midnight as at noon. (Cheers.)

MR LEWIS, (Post Office), said he had very great pleasure in reading the resolution, because he knew it would be heartily responded to by everyone present: “We, the inhabitants of Borth, beg to tender our most sincere thanks to Dr Thring, the masters and scholars of the celebrated Uppingham School, for [their] many generous acts and kindly feelings exhibited towards us during their sojourn here.” Mr Lewis commented upon the excellent discipline which evidently ruled the school, judging by their exemplary conduct. He was not aware of any shabby, mean, or ungenerous act committed by any one of the young gentlemen during the whole twelve months. (Applause.) The meeting would remember the assistance rendered in the terrific storm in February. Even the ladies came out and helped the people in their distress - (Loud applause) - thereby setting an excellent example to the women of Borth. (Cheers.) They had not only worked as hard as they could, but subscribed money which they distributed to the most needy of those who had sustained loss by the storm. (Applause.) The kind feelings of the act engendered would last for ever. (Applause.) He hoped that each and all connected with Uppingham would enjoy long, prosperous and useful lives. (Loud applause.)

Mr JONES, The Baths, expressed the fears he once entertained, in common with others, that the Uppingham School would take Borth by storm, an opinion entirely changed after the boys had been there for a week, for instead of laughing at the quaintness of some of the Welsh costumes or the peculiarities of the nation, they had obtained the goodwill of the inhabitants by their gentlemanly demeanour and completely won their hearts... (Cheers.)

(continued on the next page)

(continued from previous page)

Speeches were also made by Mr Thomas G Thomas and Mr R Pritchard Roberts, Garibaldi House.

The Revd. E THRING MA then rose amid cheers and said - "Mr Chairman and our friends at Borth, I have made many speeches on my life... Two and twenty years of school mastering gives a good deal of exercise for the tongue from time to time, but never have I stood up to make any speech which I feel so little capable of making as I do tonight because it is impossible for me to tell you the value we set on living here, and the welcome we have received. (Applause.) I never heard anything sweeter to my ear than your singing tonight. The time it must have taken, and the good will manifested in the songs and the way they were delivered, and we on our last day here, made them go down into all our hearts with peculiar power. (Cheers.) Never have I had such testimony to the school which I cared so much for, as the testimony you have given tonight. We get our reputation in the English world, but what is that compared to the inner life to which you have borne witness. It is life answering to life across all those ties, both of nationality - for I grieve that I cannot speak in your native tongue - and also of distance which sets gulphs (*sic*) between man and man but cannot separate life when it is true. (Hear, hear.) We meet tonight one body of living men. (Cheers.) We came among you as strangers; we stayed among you as friends, and we depart from you still as friends. (Cheers.)

There is an old saying that "stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage". No, the life within can make any place enjoyable - nay, happy. Yet I think it is better to be in happy surroundings too. Of this, however, you may be sure: those glorious hills of yours, this sea, and all the happy hours we have spent wandering about, will not easily pass out of our minds. The jewel of a friendly spirit has also been set in very bright surroundings. We do rejoice in the life we have had here and all that we have found. (Cheers.)

You have spoken tonight of the good conduct of the school, and have said that we have caused no trouble. That, like many other questions, has two sides. Is it not a credit to this place that when between 170 and 180 strange boys have been put into your cottages and your homes, there has not arisen a difficulty the whole year? I say it is quite as much a feather in your caps as in ours. I am very proud of it. (Applause.)

I would also refer to the power which lies in a great school. It is quite true that these boys whom you have looked on with interest will be leaders in every part of the world. (Applause.) There is not a quarter of the globe where we have not our representative. I may venture to say that there is no part of this globe where men are to be found where Borth has not been heard of this year. (Cheers.) These 300 pens of our school are busy day by day giving to their friends their own views of our pleasant life here. (Cheers.) I hold that where life is working well with life it is a real power that goes out into all lands, a sort of missionary force traversing this earth, speaking of the welcome you have given us. (Hear, hear.) That, however, would be a slight thing of we did not leave behind us, as I am sure we do, that feeling of happy life that we take away with us. (Cheers.) For my own part, I hope it is not the last time I hope to spend in Borth. (Applause.) I know of no place that has been more attractive to me and where, if I can, I shall more readily come back to, -not I hope next time as an exile, but from home to happy holiday to spend it pleasantly amongst my friends here. (Applause.)

Mr LEWIS proposed a hearty vote of thanks to Dr Childs, [who] referred to the pleasure experienced in doing a kindly action, and afterwards humorously added that at one time he thought of setting up in practice at Borth, but finding the place so healthy, he had given up the idea. (Laughter and cheers.) He would know where to send his convalescent patients in future. He should recommend them to take the first train, and spend a week on the sands at Borth, with an occasional dip in the Neptune Baths. (Loud laughter and cheers.)

Three cheers were then given for the ladies of Uppingham School and the assembly separated after singing the National Anthem. *(It seems that no photographs have survived of this occasion.)*

Farewell to Uppingham School

(from the *Cambrian News*, April 1877)

‘I welcomed you a year ago, and now you are going to leave Borth. You will not be sorry to get away, but years hence, when the work and sorrow of man-life has surged into mind and heart, you will long to come back once more to Borth to look at the long stretch of shore, and as far as may be to recall the thoughts and feelings you will associate with this youth time. The world will lay hold of you in the years to come, and it may be that some evening in the distant future you may pace thousands and look at yonder distant hills with much vain longing for the quietude and freedom you are now leaving.

I knew when you came it would be a pleasure to me to see your little forms and hear your fresh voices. I also know that your going will bring sadness and a stillness that is akin to sorrow.

You have seen much that you will never forget. The great storm when the waves rushed over the houses will be described by some of you in quiet inland homes half a century hence to wonder-eyed grandchildren. When the unpleasantness of your sojourn here drops away from remembrance, and nothing is left but a memory of breaking waves, gorgeous sunsets, strange stilly evenings and misty mountains, you will be glad of this incident in your life.

An old man bids you farewell, and all he asks is that when you need it you may have sympathy as unselfish as that he feels for you. Your life grows to its strength; his wanes to its close. If one would only grasp it, how strangely different must be your view of life and mine. The very sunshine has meanings for me that as yet you know nothing of.

From my bit of a place on the coast I send you this farewell. Sometimes in winter you may think of the roaring sea, and in summer you may dream of sunbeams sparkling on the smooth surface of the deep; but you will never perhaps give a thought to the old man who now takes leave of you.’

The Coast

Perry Winkle

(see also page 15)

Extract from Thring’s final sermon at Borth: *The Rebel Island*

‘And now brethren, a last day has come, a judgement day, such has never come to this school before and never, methinks, will come again. Through three hundred years of school life, summer and winter brought in turn year by year their last days, and each last day much like the one before, a judgement on a common working life, to begin in the same way in the same place before long. But nevermore shall we worship in this little church; nevermore, after this week, will our footsteps as a school be by the chime of waves on the sea shore, or our paths on the hillside... We pass out of this camp of refuge with a *Great Deliverance*. A year has barely gone by since, day by day, a danger, from which there seemed to be no escape, kept closing round the school... we seemed shut in on all sides by an invisible circle of death...

Then we came here and found at once safety, ay, much more than safety. A Great Deliverance brought joy and life to us, and had gone with a power of life through many hearts and many lands. A great deliverance that has made us, for good or evil, a portion of school history. Yea, let it be for good.

And now, our judgement day has come. This eventful year is closed, yet its records are not closed. They shall thrill through many a generation of school life; and you, who have been actors in it, will remember; and what you know not now shall unfold of good to come. This year, of deliverance and trial mingled, is a year of joy.’

Extracts from Thring's second article for *The Times*: 23 April 1877

‘When we first came to Borth what a new world it seemed, how fresh, how brisk!

Surely never school during working time had such days as when a holiday morning dawned, and the sun shone bright on the Borth station, thronged with boys and masters ready to start for the mountains... At every station parties were let loose and all the roads for miles were dotted with the familiar faces looking curiously dream-like and strange among the mountains, instead of in the class rooms and cricket fields.

Fifteen months ago a mountain was just as likely to have walked into a classroom as a class to have walked up a mountain. Cader Idris specked with 60 or 70 school boys is a novelty and must have been astonished at himself. Certainly boys and masters never tired to watch how the amphitheatre of hills encircled the dark marsh till it reached the sea, and then a larger amphitheatre of promontories and headlands took up the lines, and, stretching in two great horns till the tips vanished on the horizon, embraced the blue world of waters...

Truly it was a pleasant place.

Then there was the never-ending interest of ... the birds, many always on shore and marsh; but when the herring fry passed up the bay the birds positively possessed it... How often from the marsh or somewhere, dreamland or ghostland, came the plaintive wail of the curlews; then the dotterels would run and flit about the sands, and, not least, the herons...

All this was a new revelation to many boys whose sole ideas of birds had been sparrows, thrushes perhaps, and ducks at so much a couple, and a duck pond. Very quaint and fresh too was the boy life in the cottages which were used as studies.

The aquarium, from which we had hoped much, was a failure. The masters could not, and the boys would not, attend to it enough; and our best octopus, after coming to the top of the water, and spitting a last farewell at sundry lookers-on died; and with him died the attempt.

So sped [by] month after month, each with some fresh interest, bringing a crisp, bracing sense of escape. No place could be more happily framed; there is not within the four seas a spot with greater natural gifts of space, and climate, and beauty.

Inside the camp only such trials were found as better heart and limb. Some few, indeed, there are who, like sea anemones, are helpless lumps of jelly off their own bit of rock, any change is hateful to them. But in the main all went well. The camp life, with its rough and ready devices, had an infinite charm...

Now, however, the end has come.... How often by far off river or sea that quiet evening will come back with its songs and its farewell to men well tried in the work of life. Borth, also, will not forget, the warm Welsh heart will not forget.

So near Taliesin's grave legends perchance may arise again, and memories haunt the shore, and a thousand village stories pass on and on, and still linger lovingly round the home of Uppingham-by-the-Sea.’

CHAPTER 9: UPPINGHAM - AFTER THE SCHOOL'S RETURN

Thring returned to Uppingham on 24 April 1877, to welcome back all those boys for whom it was familiar. They were joined by no fewer than sixty-six others (almost one-fifth of the total pupil body) who were experiencing life there for the first time, having been recruited to the school over the previous three terms.

The three flags, made by Thring's wife and other ladies and used throughout the year in Borth, went back to Uppingham with the school, and hung for the next 120 years, first in the chapel and later in Thring's schoolroom.

Even after all the celebrations and optimism of the farewells to Borth he was going through his familiar mixture of optimism tinged with foreboding: 'Thankfulness to God for a page turned and closed; intense dislike of the place, mixed with a feeling of being home, and master once more in my own house; the old constriction of stomach and feeling of dread, mixed with a sense of no longer being at the mercy of others, and subject to the racket and disturbance of hotel life'.

As term began, relieved townspeople celebrated the school's return by hanging streamers, bunting and evergreen arches across the streets, along with banners bearing messages such as 'Welcome Home' and 'Flourish School: Flourish Town'. There were two evenings of processions, bands and speeches. Thring was presented with an illuminated address, to which he responded with a speech declaring: 'We are united now as never before'. In his diary it was 'a grand demonstration... a new start in life here'.

Even so, his relationship with the trustees remained very difficult during the ten years between his return from Borth and his death in October 1887. For the first eighteen months his time and energy were

sapped by financial arguments over who should bear the costs of the migration.

By 1878, he was frantic with worry: 'Things are very bad now, but I have had that wonderful Borth miracle, that passing of the Red Sea, and am strengthened. Yet I fear stripes don't make an apostle, and St. Paul would have looked at my bank-book with calmer eyes, and better digestion than I can bring up to it'.

The town guardians were proved right in one respect: the improvements to the town proved to be very expensive, and as local property-owners themselves, Thring and his fellow-housemasters had to pay their share of sharply increased rate charges. The sewerage problem had largely been solved and there were no more major epidemics, although it was some years before water supplies became completely sufficient. The cause of the outbreaks of typhoid in 1875-6 was never discovered.

Beyond Uppingham, the year at Borth cemented Thring's reputation as an educational thinker and writer. He was in great demand as a lecturer and preacher for the rest of his life. According to one historian: '[Borth] was a remarkable testimony to the spirit which Thring and his staff had developed: there were few schools in England at that time which could have survived such a test'.

The Borth commemoration on St Barnabas' Day each June became a fixed event in the life of the chapel, with Thring and others preaching sermons comparing the year in Wales to the providential journeyings of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Skrine made a distinctive contribution of his own: a hymn 'written for the Thanksgiving Service in memory of the School's stay at Borth, and safe return to Uppingham, A.D. 1876-7.'

The Borth Hymn

Lord, our fathers have declared it,
How Thy mighty works befell,
When in Pharaoh's hand Jehovah
Brought in peace His Israel
Safe between the heap-ed waters,
Safe before the lifted sword,
Came the sons of the great promise,
Came the chosen of the Lord.

None might touch the Lord's anointed,
None might do His prophets wrong,
For His angel went before them,
And his promise made them strong,
And His right arm, bared to help them,
Drove the Red Sea waters back,
And the fire and cloudy pillar
Led them forward on their track.

Not today the cloudy pillar,
Guards the marching hosts of God;
Not for us the fiery banner
Flames, as once where Judah Trod;

Now God sends no more His tokens
Written plain on sky and deep;
Comes nor sign nor open wonder,
Since the fathers fell asleep.

Yet who work His purpose, trusting
In the high defending arm,
They shall see their God deliver
Out of darkest hour of harm;
Still their eyes behold His banner
Beckoning on through waves unknown,
And there stands Jehovah's angel
'Twixt the foeman and His own.

Praise we God, the strong Redeemer,
Praise Him as they praised of old:
Whoso holdeth fast the promise
Him the promise shall uphold;
Still the eternal purpose conquers
Now as by the Red Sea wave:
God hath said, and He will do it,
He hath sent, and He will save.

BORTH HYMN TUNE

P. David 1877



(Original Key C)

Extracts from Thring's Borth Commemoration sermons
at the service held each year in the school chapel after its return from Borth

'There was a day when our eyes looked on these great walls, and we doubted whether we should ever worship here again. Utter and absolute ruin had come to the life here. We had to go out and live or die as a school. Very few know what it is, day by day, to see the giant, deadly force of an irresistible, invisible ruin drawing closer and closer... You know it ended in deliverance. Christ the Deliverer gave it safely to Borth in that dread year...

In one week's time this present school would have been no more, [and] I, who speak to you now, and others with me would have been taking our last looks at these walls, never more to set foot within them again, and all our life here would have been scattered and gone... You may forget, men may not believe - yea, as time goes on the story may be scorned, and the words that tell it sound fantastic and feverish and unreal. Be it so; but let none who has not tried [it] think he knows.

One thing is certain, whatever we felt, this school came to its end; and even as it ended, the deep waters parted, and it was saved, and it is here. It is also certain that *a great deliverance*, whether of a man or of a society, is a great claim on the life that is saved. I do also claim for this school, that the very deliverance is a grand inheritance for those who come after: a certainty that a truth, which God thought it worthy of delivering, is here; it is entrusted with a special mission of life., with a precious germ of holy work which it is bound to carry on.

That year at Borth stands alone in the history of schools...The school died and is alive again. Do not betray that life.'

A facsimile page from Thring's first Borth Commemoration Sermon, 1878, showing vertical single and double lines where he intended to pause briefly or for longer.