

The History of The Royal Merchant Navy Education Foundation

The RMNEF has a rich and detailed history, spanning back across almost two centuries.

1827

A public meeting approved the foundation of the Merchants' Seamen's Orphan Asylum, to be run by a sub-committee of the Port of London and Bethel Union.

1828 - 1834

Three houses in London's docklands, two for boys and one for girls, provided limited accommodation. Candidates for the orphanage were admitted at half-yearly elections, a procedure that lasted for nearly a century. Income did not rise to match growing numbers, and soon the Treasurer was lending his own money so that bills could be paid. Meanwhile, the Bethel Union complained that their income was reduced because of subscriptions to the Asylum and, in 1833, it asked the Asylum to go its own way.

1832

70 children. At one election only 6 out of 43 candidates could be admitted.

1834 - 1862

The Asylum was re-launched as a Church of England foundation with a committee almost entirely of newcomers. A house in Bow, after alterations, had room for 120, with boys and girls under the same roof. In 1835, HM the King and Queen became patrons, and fundraising dinners, the main source of funds, were well supported. Local Anglican churches hosted sermons in aid of the Asylum. Funds permitted a steady increase in numbers, though in the 1840s, the Treasurer often had to lend money to be repaid after the next dinner.

1842

99 children.

1852

116 children. In 1852, 16 of 65 candidates were elected. However, many other applicants were rejected in advance of the elections by admission rules that were deliberately restrictive. The father must be dead; being totally crippled by an accident at sea was not good enough. If the disabled seaman struggled on briefly in a shore job before dying, this also made the children ineligible. Another rule was that not more than two of any one family could be in the Asylum at the same time, and even a second child only when there were six in the family unprovided for.

Education is the Foundation

THE ROYAL MERCHANT NAVY EDUCATION FOUNDATION Mole Lodge, Mole Road, Sindlesham, Wokingham, Berkshire RG41 5DB
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Registered Address: Bearwood, Wokingham, Berkshire RG41 5BR Registered Charity



1862

118 children. The lease at Bow expired in 1862 and the landlord would neither renew it nor sell the house to the Foundation. He hoped to make more by redeveloping the site, and demanded compensation for dilapidation even after the house had been demolished.

George Somers Clarke, Hon. Secretary since 1827, was determined to have a new Asylum built for 200 boys and 100 girls. Fundraising was interrupted by the Crimean War, and general and building funds together amounted to only £15,000 towards the lowest estimate of £19,000. Other board members pointed out that the final cost must be at least £23,000 and most of them at first refused to sign the contract, but Clarke, whose own son had been appointed architect, had already told the contractors to go ahead, else the new building would not be finished in time. Clarke Senior died before the work was completed, leaving his son to admit to an angry board that he had always known the real cost would be £23,000. Fortunately the required money appeared and the Prince Consort laid the foundation stone, with £1,500 raised on the day. A wealthy widow at Snaresbrook, Lady Morrison, gave several generous donations, and ship-owning brothers Richard and Henry Green also gave large sums.

1862-1920 - Snaresbrook

It was many years before the income was sufficient to fill the new building.

1872 - 230 children
1882 - 266 children
1892 - 293 children
1902 - 302 children
1912 - 300 children

With the 1876 Education Act, mothers became more interested in the standard of education provided. At Snaresbrook, girls had many domestic duties. Lessons were mornings only and the most senior girls were taken out of class altogether to carry out domestic chores. Consequently, some mothers withdrew their daughters and there were fewer applications for girls. Henry Green was outraged that recipients of charity should question what was on offer, but eventually improvements were made.

By 1900, inspectors were full of praise for the achievements of both boys and girls. Meanwhile new orphanages for boys were opening and, as the demand for places at Snaresbrook fell, it became necessary to canvass for applications.

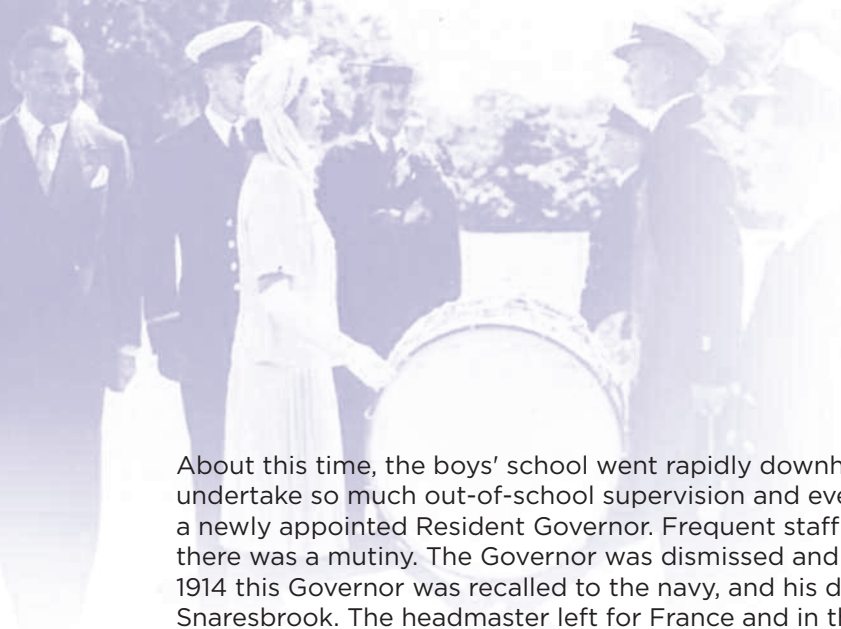
In 1902, the King approved the use of 'Royal' in the name of the orphanage, which was changed, for the first time since 1827, from 'The Merchant Seamen's Orphan Asylum' to 'The Royal Merchant Seamen's Orphanage'.

In 1908, 40 out of 48 boys were elected, but only 16 out of 40 girls. A boy with 50 votes might get in, but a girl would require at least 1000. The design of the building made it impossible to admit a fair proportion of girls.

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About this time, the boys' school went rapidly downhill. Younger teachers were unwilling to undertake so much out-of-school supervision and even less willing to accept naval discipline from a newly appointed Resident Governor. Frequent staff changes unsettled the boys and eventually there was a mutiny. The Governor was dismissed and a new Governor did much better. However, in 1914 this Governor was recalled to the navy, and his day duties at Greenwich left him little time at Snaresbrook. The headmaster left for France and in the middle of the war the Governor moved to the new Nautical College at Pangbourne (1917), taking the best staff with him. A new Governor was appointed, but collapsed and died within a few weeks, leaving a widow who did her best to take charge.

Coupled with the fact that London had by then expanded well beyond Snaresbrook, Sir Thomas Devitt decided the only way forward was to make a fresh start in a new location. He bought Bearwood and presented it to the charity, hoping that this building would solve all the problems on the building front and enable the board to recruit and retain better paid teachers and so raise educational standards.

1921 - Bearwood

Sir Thomas's plan did not work out. The cost of alterations, nearly £100,000, was far more than expected, leaving the Foundation seriously in debt, and Bearwood, being the same age as Snaresbrook, was bound to need similar repairs. For several years there were dreadful problems with sewage. The slump in the 1930s badly affected the shipping industry and greatly reduced the Foundation's income, meaning that the teachers could not be paid proper salaries. At first, war orphans maintained numbers though elections were no longer required, but in the 1930s numbers began to fall.

1921 - 311 children
1931 - 311 children
1935 - 287 children
1938 - 252 children

1935 - 1981

Merchant Navy fee-payers were accepted and, when World War II broke out, there were 50 of them. Several parents protested when admissions had to be suspended to make room for war orphans, but an inspector had told the board that they were not offering value for money except where boarding was essential. At this time, the Governors changed the school's name to 'The Royal Merchant Navy School'.

During the war the annual income doubled and it was at last possible to pay the teachers according to the national scale. Numbers rose again and, in 1947, a junior school was opened at Bexhill. Demand was also boosted by the closure of Southampton and Liverpool Orphanages, though an influx of reluctant teenagers did create disciplinary problems.

1947 - 295 children (161 war orphans)
1948 - 278 (203 Bearwood, 75 Bexhill)
1951 - 311
1954 - 297 (234 Bearwood, 63 Bexhill)

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With fewer war orphans, numbers now fell rapidly.

1957 - 269 children

1958 - 203 children (Bexhill now closed)

1959 - 180 children (116 boys, 64 girls)

In 1959 it was decided to close the school but, at the last moment, it was learned that the Government was looking for boarding places for children of armed forces serving overseas. The new plan was to retain Bearwood as a school for Foundationer and fee-paying boys, and educate Foundationer girls and younger boys elsewhere.

1964 - Bearwood - 241 children (83 Foundationers) + 29 Foundationers elsewhere

1967 - Bearwood - 283 children (52 Foundationers) + 20 Foundationers elsewhere

1970 - Bearwood - 317 children (29 Foundationers) + 29 Foundationers elsewhere

Bearwood was flourishing and boy Foundationers enjoyed greater opportunities with a much wider choice of academic subjects and out-of-class activities. But the Foundation was again in difficulties. The 1976 report referred to the devastating effects of inflation. Only the most urgent cases could be accepted and active recruitment of eligible children had ceased. The 150th Anniversary Appeal helped, but Foundationer numbers continued to fall and, to try in part to offset this reduction, the Governors changed the school's name to 'Bearwood College', which it remains to this day.

1981 - 2012

Historically, Foundationers were educated at the school primarily to provide board and lodging but demand for this has, for a variety of reasons, lessened in recent years. Consequently, since 1981, the numbers of Foundationers at the school has declined but, because Trustees have enlarged the areas where they can offer support which still has to be directly to do with education, the overall level of charitable disbursement and the overall number of Foundationers has risen.

In the 1970s, the Labour Government's declared education policy was to expropriate the assets of all independent schools and, by doing so, to force them into the maintained sector. The Trustees decided that, were this to happen, their charitable work would have to stop. The key issue, therefore, that occurred in the early 1980s, was the issue by the Charity Commission of a scheme that was meant to separate the charity's assets from the school. This was the start of a difficult relationship with the school that lasted until 2012 when a prolonged legal dispute was ended by the Foundation selling about 110 acres of the Bearwood Estate, including the Mansion, to the school.

Foundationer numbers continued to reduce until, in 2013, only one attended Bearwood College.

2013

The Royal Merchant Navy School Foundation is renamed The Royal Merchant Navy Education Foundation and undergoes a complete rebrand in time for the 2013 Annual General Meeting.

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