

The **Old Town Gallery** in the High Street is the name now used for the building which for over three hundred years was the **Old Free School** of Gillingham, established in 1516. The building was used as a school until 1876, since when it has had mainly commercial occupiers. It is now a private residential property. The frontage was probably rebuilt around this time but conceals part of an older building behind.

The building is included as a monument in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments volume on North Dorset (1972). It is a Listed Building Grade II.



A blue plaque on the frontage commemorates the use of the building as a Free School. The school is considered to have been founded in 1516 when a group of copyholders gave land to form a trust 'that out of the issues and profits thereof, there might be perpetually maintained within the said town, a schoolmaster, for instruction of youth in good literature, for the better discharge of their duty towards God, the King, and the Commonwealth...'

The school was run by trustees or feoffees who were subject to a lawsuit in 1598, after which the body of feoffees was reconstituted. The feoffees were also responsible for the maintenance of bridges and thoroughfares in the town. The school is mentioned in Hutchins, *History of Dorset*, who describes it as 'a large, old building near the Church' and tells us that in the 17th century the school was 'full of the sons of loyal gentlemen.' Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon (1609-74) is thought have been a pupil. Robert Frampton (1622-1708), was once the schoolmaster; he was an ardent Royalist who is remembered for his confrontation and scuffle with a Roundhead Quartermaster, and later went on to become Bishop of Gloucester.

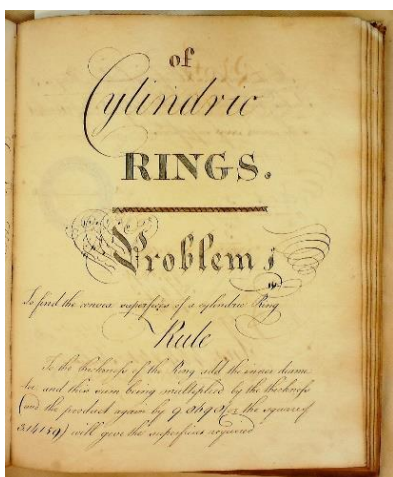
In the early 19th century the schoolmaster was Hugh Hansford. His school occupied the upper floor of the building, with the lower floor being used as a Sunday School. A rear window on the upper floor has initials etched



Left: The old Free School, a recent view. Right: The rear yard, adjoining the Phoenix.

into glass evidently carried out by pupils. Behind the school the yard included the parish lock-up (see separate leaflet). In 1841 the feoffees agreed to allow a passage by the side of the building to be used for keeping the parish fire engine.

In 1830 it was reported that the school feoffees were paid a rent of 10s 6d per year for the use of 'a small room in the school yard ... used as a bar at the Phoenix inn.'



Left: A page from Hugh Hansford's schoolbook. Right: Old beams from inside the Free School.

In the library of the Science Museum at Kensington is a small book which belonged to Hugh Hansford. It is handwritten and contains many worked examples on arithmetical and geometrical topics. The title page reads 'Hugh Hansford, Free School, Gillingham, 1810.'

The last master of the Free School was James Sheppard. He was assisted in his work by pupil teachers, and was also the town's postmaster. He resigned his headship in 1876 with the closure of the school, and became a governor of the new Grammar School which succeeded the Free School. There is a brass plaque dedicated to him in St. Mary's church.

Right: James Sheppard and his schoolboys

