

A beastly sticky history of *The Portsmouthian*

1883 was an eventful year in Portsmouth. The town's first public library, infectious diseases hospital and communal baths were opened, and an armoured cruiser, *Imperieuse*, was launched from Portsmouth Dockyard. Meanwhile, a nine page publication named *The Portsmouthian* was launched with considerably less pomp and splash at Portsmouth Grammar School.

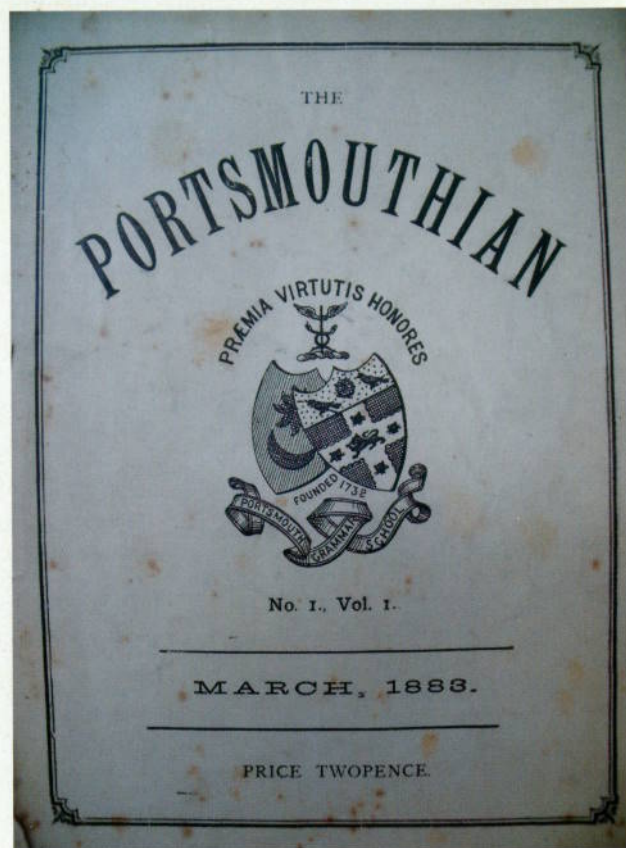
The new school magazine superseded *The Record* and Portsmouth Grammar School Chronicle, a publication produced by some of the older pupils which very soon sank like a stone through lack of support. This started as a hectographed paper in 1881 and, because of this technique, must have had a very small print run. Otherwise known as a jellygraph, it was evidently a messy and unsatisfactory business. One P G Wodehouse character, who used this technique to run off a school magazine, declared, "This jelly business makes one beastly sticky. I think we'll keep to print in future." The editors of the *The Record* came to the same conclusion, and some later editions were properly printed, but this did not prevent its demise through lack of interest. Unfortunately, no copies survive in the PGS Archive.

The new magazine, then, was a brave venture, launched against the tide in a sea of apathy. But, unlike *The Record*, this publication had the approval of the Headmaster, Mr Jerrard, who put the Classics Master, Reverend C D Williams, on the Editorial Committee. With this endorsement, authority and perhaps intimidation it was considered that pupils might be more encouraged to contribute.

The idea for a school magazine is thought to have originated with C P F O'Dwyer, a scholarship boy who joined the School in 1879 and left in 1884 having obtained an Open Exhibition for Classics at Wadham College, Oxford. He played a leading role in the editorial team of *The Record* and appears to have been the primary editor of *The Portsmouthian* during its first two years.

The aim of the new publication was stated in its first editorial: "We ask you to support *The Portsmouthian*, because it may be a means of spreading useful information, of suggestings (sic), improvements, of ventilating ideas, of encouraging good deeds and censuring bad ones". Then came a plea which countless editors have expressed in different ways, and with varying degrees of desperation over the years, "Write for it, or it will perish of inanition. Buy it or it will die of debt."

According to the accounts, the first issue sold 208 copies, possibly a ten-fold increase on the circulation of its ill-fated predecessor. As there were 300 boys and 12 Masters at the School at the time, a good majority appear to have taken an interest. Given that some boys' sole purpose in buying it was probably to see their names in print, the number of copies sold happily exceeded the number of names printed.



The Portsmouthian 1st edition

Around a half of the first edition was devoted to sports, including a report on a rugby match played by the School 2nd XV against the Royal Academy at Gosport. The School was "completely overweighted and overmatched", wrote the kindly reporter, whose kindness took precedence over his duty to report: "We will spare their feelings and refrain from giving the exact score".

Whether anyone felt that the tuppence (2d) they had handed over for the new magazine deserved a fuller account of the rigger, or at least the score, is not known, but in the first editorial came a question: "Has anyone a grievance?" "If so," the editor wrote, presumably hoping to get some easy copy for the next edition, "let him exercise his British faculty for grumbling by writing to us".

The response was far from overwhelming, suggesting that pupils at the School were either happy, happily indifferent, or scared of the consequences of grumbling aloud. The editors published regular reassurances that noms de plume were acceptable, though all correspondents had to include their real name with submissions to demonstrate good faith. Perhaps having a member of staff on the Editorial Committee had something to do with the lack of take up.

The Portsmouthian appeared twice a term but very soon expanded to 12 pages, despite the lack of response to appeals for reports, articles and literary contributions. In 1891, a poem with the title, *The Editor*, appeared, evidently written by a harassed pupil who lived in fear of the persistent and slightly menacing editor who lurked around corners, demanded copy and wouldn't take no for an answer.

'A plea which countless editors have expressed in different ways, and with varying degrees of desperation over the years, "Write for it, or it will perish of inanition. Buy it or it will die of debt."

A grand opportunity to grumble came in the 1890s, when there were suggestions that The *Portsmouthian* name should be changed. The *Portusian* was advocated by one correspondent and dismissed with a scholarly snort by another. In 1894, the Science teacher H T Lilley found an inscription on an ancient seal belonging to the Mayor and Corporation which included the Latin version of the town's name, "Portemutha". As a result of his research, the editor declared that "the name of our magazine has been changed to *Portmuthian*, which is certainly far more euphonious than the old title of *Portsmouthian*". It also suited the classical academic aspirations of the School but was not appreciated by some: "The name change is a great change for the worse and not for the better", penned one anonymous writer with utter conviction and clarity.

But the name change was not all. The versatile Mr Lilley also designed "a new and most artistic title page" which upset another correspondent who ridiculed the design of the crest for its perceived heraldic inaccuracies, incorporating what he described as a "worm-eaten butterfly on a pin".

Many articles and letters appear to have come from staff and Old Boys. By 1896 the magazine was described as "flourishing", not least because "the pecuniary support received from the Old Boys is more substantial than it has been of late". Not unconnected with this support was an expansion of news about former pupils in a column called "Old Boys' Chronicle", a precursor of the *Old Portmuthian* magazine and *Opus*.

Over the years, the loudest and most persistent grumbling came from the editors themselves. One, new in post and writing for the December 1901 issue, embraced the festive spirit with a world weariness beyond his years: "Although the prerogative of editors from time immemorial has been to indulge in frequent grumbling, and although we, in this, our first editorial, feel strongly tempted to follow the example set by our illustrious predecessors, nevertheless, in view of the near approach of the festive season of Christmas, we will refrain from enlarging upon the many trials of an editor's existence...".

To be fair, the attempt to fill six editions that year had failed and the writer was clearly feeling the heavy burden of responsibility.

By 1933, the magazine was being published once a term, but the message was unchanged. The editor posted an appeal for contributions on the school noticeboard and, eight weeks later, complained that only four articles from members of the school had been received. "Is this good enough? The success or failure of any issue depends not on the boy sitting next to you, or on any other person, but on YOU."

The first photograph, a formal portrait of the First XI Cricket Team, appeared in 1898, but it was to be several decades before pupils' photographs and artwork were to appear. As well as giving pupils the opportunity to share their interests, hobbies and artistic talents it was a godsend to editors anxious to fill space. And so, by the 1950s, amid erudite essays, cartoons and humorous poems, Deane Clarke was able to share his passion for photographing steam trains while Alan Scaife contributed prize-winning ornithological studies. The *Portmuthian's* lively "magazine" content was, according to one editor, "leaven to the reports", which often made for very dry reading.

Inevitably, perhaps, some boys' humour and comment went beyond acceptable limits. Whether the *Anti Portmuthian* magazine, was made up of the work of spurned contributors or was a parody is not known, but an extract was reproduced in *The Portmuthian* aimed at demonstrating its shameless character involving the printing of a four-letter word (which was censored). Fifty years later, the editor was positively encouraging subversiveness, but not on his watch: "So many things go on beneath the unruffled surface of the School that this magazine cannot report them all: and, being an official publication, it cannot describe what really happens. May we suggest that someone assumes a nom de plume, and writes - in an entirely unofficial and unsubsidised publication - the behind the scenes story of school life". Unfortunately, if this suggestion was taken up, the account didn't make its way to the PGS Archive.

But there has always been an occasional dash of mild subversive humour in *The Portmuthian* to rub against the prevailing conservatism of the School. As early as 1895 the following advice was offered: "Always cut your name on every desk you use... it will probably be the only way in which you will give the school a chance of remembering you." Ironically, it is the record of pupils' achievements and talents in *The Portmuthian* that survives, rather than the desks.

The Portmuthian archive offers us a unique and valuable record of life at PGS, a treasure trove of facts, arcane, trivial and fascinating. Its references are sometimes obscure, the history bitty and incoherent, but each edition reflects the time it was written, both in content and in design. If there is one constant it is the PGS spirit that, notwithstanding the occasional grumbling editor, shines through in its grim determination, ever since its launch in 1883, to keep the boat afloat and to proudly show in its pages what PGS has achieved and is capable of.

John Sadden