

A silhouette of a castle tower with a crenellated top and a smaller spire-like structure to its right. The scene is set against a sunset sky with a gradient from light pink to orange. The sun is visible as a bright yellow-orange glow on the horizon to the right. In the foreground, there is a dark silhouette of a wall or rampart with a flagpole on the left.

The Gower



INTRODUCTION

I initially agreed to compile the history of the iconic Victorian building in Gower Street, St. Georges, known as 'The Board School', or known to more recent residents as 'The Gower'.

However, research into the history of this building was not straightforward, partly owing to the lack of early information on the subject; and a need to dispel many rumours, stories and inaccuracies that were, and still are, instilled in the memories of the history of this building.

My article, 'A History of the Gower', is based on factual documents and information and takes the reader from the 'intention' to build a cottage hospital - through eighty years as a school, and more recent use as a youth centre; to its sad decline, and then, hopefully, to full restoration.

I am indebted to fellow researchers; I.G.M.T, and other information providers for their help.

Kew L →

GOWER STREET SCHOOLS

- 1879 *Opened as 'Wrockwardine Wood Girls & Infants Board Schools'*
- 1879-87 *Weekly fees of 2d.*
- 1895 *Building extended.
Now for 140 girls and 185 infants*
- 1927 *Renamed 'Gower Street Girls and Infants Council Schools'*
- 1933 *Senior girls left (for secondary school) and junior boys admitted*
- 1933 *Renamed 'Wrockwardine Wood Junior Mixed and Infant Council School'*
- 1936 *Had 256 places - but only 111 pupils*
- 1941 *Pupils joined from Donnington*
- 1952 *72 pupils*
- 1957 *36 pupils* *(Pass. 56)*
- 1961 *70 pupils*
- 1961 *Closed as a school*

A HISTORY OF THE GOWER

The building, formerly known as 'The Board School', is situated to the west side of Gower Street, St. Georges, and was built on land parcel no. 384, originally of 1.337 acres, prior to road widening.

The site was steeply elevated, and it would have been necessary to excavate approximately 3250 cubic yards of sub-soil from the southern section, as the building is lower than road level at the Albion Street end.

Gower Street was owned at that time, by The Lilleshall Company, as a toll road, until 1901, when it became the responsibility of Oakengates U.D.C.

The foundation stone of the building was laid on the 25th April 1873 by T.E. Horton, Esq. It is assumed that he was Thomas Ellwood Horton, Principal Manager of The Lilleshall Company's New Yard Works (from 1865-1903).

The Architect was Joseph Fogerty, Esq. (1831-1899) and the Building Contractors were J. Millington and Son; they were listed in Kelly's Directory of 1879 as Rowland and John Millington, Builders of Oakengates.

The Millingtons lived at Ketley, and their family history is listed separately.

The building is of ornate Victorian design, and would have been a lengthy contract for the family firm of builders.

The structure is of lofty single storey construction, with a central two storey section comprising of the main entrance and living accommodation, being approximately 200 feet in length and 20 feet wide.

It is widely believed that it was built as a hospital for The Lilleshall Company's employees, but research has not confirmed that it was ever used for this purpose.

It seems unlikely that a building of this size and structure was built purely for The Lilleshall Company's employees. Later, however, after much deliberation, the Company did build their own smaller Cottage Hospital in Albion Street with a proviso that its costs must not exceed £650. It opened in 1902 and closed in 1928.

Records show that the late 'Schools Board' purchased the 'Hospital Schools' in 1879 for £2,400 including the land, and also took out a lease on the Primitive Methodist School in Wrockwardine Wood, suggesting it may have been a school prior to 1879.

At first floor level, centrally between the two 'snow-drop' windows a (now covered) inscription reads - "Schools of the Wrockwardine Wood Board 1879".

Records show that this was Wrockwardine Wood School - not St. Georges, in fact two schools in one building.

Kelly's Directory for 1885 records that a School Board, consisting of five members, was formed in 1875, when J. Leake of Shifnal was Clerk to the Board, and William Elson was the Attendance Officer.

1885 Board Hospital Schools (Girls and Infants)

Miss A Woodhall - Mistress
Miss Jane A. Ellis - Infants Mistress

Board, Former Principal Methodist School (Boys)

Thomas J. Barlow - Master

By 1901 The Public Elementary Schools Local Committee was six members, including:-

J.W. Littlewood - Correspondent, and
Thomas Wildsmith - Attendance Officer

1901 Hospital Schools, Gower Street (Girls and Infants) for 99 girls and 136 infants

Miss Platt - Mistress
Miss Dunkey - Infants Mistress (see family tree)

Former Primitive Methodist School for 172 boys

William Moss - Master

A deed of covenant was in place to protect the building for the community, but this annulled in 2008.

When the building ceased to be run as a school by the former Shropshire Education Committee, in the early 1960s, it became a youth club, firstly operated by Shropshire County Council, and then by Telford and Wrekin Council.

It was firstly known as 'Oakengates District Youth Club', and later 'The Gower Youth Centre', earning its nickname 'The Gower'.

The name 'Gower' is derived from the Leveson Gower family, Industrialist and Land Owner. Their name is pronounced 'Lewison Gar' or 'Lewson Gar'.

The building closed as a youth centre in about 2005, and has since fallen into disrepair, and was due to be demolished. However, in 2014 it was saved for the community and granted Grade II listing by English Heritage.

The story that The Lilleshall Company built the property as a hospital for its miners, but found it too large and built a smaller one, makes good journalism, but a recently discovered legal document sheds a different light on the matter.

The document, dated 24th June 1879, is a conveyance in the form of a sale of the land and the buildings, adequately described by the owner, Granville George, Earl Granville, to the Wrockwardine Wood (Salop) School Board.

The building was reported to have been 'intended as a hospital', but converted for use as a school; the document confirms that it was sold to the School Board for the sum of £2,400, just a few years after completion.

Although the document does not reveal the cost of construction, the sale value of the property seems low when compared with St. Georges National School, built at a cost of £5,000 in 1861.

The Wrockwardine Wood (Salop) School Board's ownership seemed to be of a transient measure, as the document refers to 'for the time being' and the 1901 Kelly's Directory refers to the 'Late Schools Board'.

Recently, it has been possible to take a closer look at the construction and dimensions of the building, and at that time it was apparent that the building had been extended by about 30 feet at both north and south ends.

The alterations were carried out early in the building's history, as the 1880 (revised 1901) Ordnance Survey Sheet No. 36 shows the building at its present north to south dimensions.

A document dated 9th April 1895, in the form of a contract, has recently come to light, whereby The Lilleshall Company agreed to initially fund the building alterations, forwarding the cost of £400 and 10 shillings to the School Board following completion, being due on the 30th August 1895.

For the following 80 years, it was known locally as 'The Board School', and a few photographs of that era have survived, including a 'Souvenir Portrait' from 1935 of approximately 100 pupils. The photograph was in commemoration of the Silver Jubilee of the King and Queen.

For the boys, it seems that short trousers, long socks and lace-up boots were the order of the day.

A later photograph, taken during the years of the Second World War, shows a class of about 25 girl pupils, including 2 evacuees and 3 members of staff.

Interestingly, the photograph shows some of the ornate ironwork and railings which adorned the front area of the school at that time. The photograph also shows a large height or temperature gauge, having an advertisement for 'Stephens Ink'.

Some older residents can remember the school using slates and chalk for writing.

Many memories and artefacts have survived from the era when this building served as a Youth Centre. These artefacts and photographs are in the safe custody of Mr. Alan Heighway, and have been exhibited at several recent events, drawing interest from former members and local residents.

Following several years of neglect and disrepair, work is now underway on the first phase of careful restoration of this iconic building, hopefully to bring it back to its former glory.

Heritage is something of special interest that has been handed down to the next generation for its safe-keeping.

*Compiled by Mr. Ken Lewis
For the Gower Heritage and Enterprise Group*

Family Histories

1901 census The Lees, Ketley

<i>John Millington.</i>	55	<i>Building Contractor. Head</i>
<i>Sarah Millington</i>	43	<i>Wife</i>
<i>Bessie Millington</i>	19	<i>Daughter</i>
<i>Rowland P Millington</i>	16	<i>Timber Merchant's Clerk</i>
<i>Alice Brown</i>	12	<i>Domestic Servant.</i>

103 Potters Bank, Ketley.

<i>Rowland Millington</i>	62	<i>Timber Merchant Head</i>
<i>Elizabeth Millington</i>	60	<i>Sister</i>
<i>Francis Millington</i>	56	<i>Sister</i>
<i>Rebecca Howells</i>	17	<i>Domestic Servant</i>
<i>Mary Howells</i>	12	<i>Domestic Servant</i>

Eliza Ann wife of Rowland Millington died 6th January 1867 aged 29 years.

John Millington was born at Ketley 3rd August 1845 and died in Lincoln 7th March 1929.

Miss Dunkey – School mistress.

1911 Census, Mossey Green, Ketley.

<i>Enoch Dunkey</i>	73	<i>Retired</i>
<i>Ellen Dunkey</i>	71	<i>Wife</i>
<i>Florence Dunkey</i>	47	<i>Single, Head mistress—School Board</i>
<i>Percy H.E. Dunkey</i>	28	<i>Elementary school teacher</i>

THE LEVESON GOWER FAMILY TREE

