

Robert Woodhouse**(1772 - 1827)**

(Number five in our series of articles on Old Pastonians).

ROBERT WOODHOUSE, one of the most brilliant mathematicians of his day, was born in Norwich in 1772, the son of Robert Woodhouse, a linen-draper and freeholder of that city. He entered School here, under the Rev. Joseph Hepworth, in 1782 and remained until 1790.

In that year he won a scholarship, which he held for eight years, at Caius College, Cambridge. He graduated B.A. and Senior Wrangler in the Mathematical Tripos in 1795 and three years later M.A. and was elected a Fellow of his College in which appointment he remained until 1823. In 1802 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.

At Caius he was surrounded by his former school-fellows, seventeen of whom were Scholars and nine of whom, including his younger brother, became Fellows between 1790 and 1805. This achievement is a testimony to the excellence of the teaching of Mr. Hepworth, the first mathematician the School had had as Headmaster.

Woodhouse is famous as the leader of a group of mathematicians, among whom was the astronomer Herschel, who adopted the developments in calculus already begun at that time on the continent. Newton's method of calculus had by now become out-moded and inferior, and the use of the Differential Calculus, as taught to-day, was first advocated and taught in England by Woodhouse who adapted and improved the continental methods. He embodied his ideas in several books which included "The Principles of Analytical Calculation," published in 1803 and "The Elements of Trigonometry" in 1809 and "A Treatise on Isoperimetrical Problems, and the Calculus of Variations" in 1810.

In 1820 he was elected Lucasian Professor of Mathematics but resigned two years later to become Plumian Professor of Astronomy and Experimental Philosophy. When, in 1824, the Observatory at Cambridge was completed, Woodhouse was appointed its superintendent, but a failure in health rendered him largely unable to carry out his duties. He published two works on Astronomy.

He died, while still continuing his studies, at Cambridge, on December 28th, 1827, and was buried in the Chapel of Caius College.

J.O.C.