

Local Education since 1800 : I

# THE TOWN'S FIRST SUNDAY SCHOOLS

By 'BEORCHAM'

THE RECENT DISCOVERY of the first annual report (1810-11) of the town's oldest Sunday school provided a sharp reminder that a subject of much historical interest has been neglected in these pages. From time to time articles have been devoted to Berkhamsted School, the Bourne Charity School and the old elementary schools, but only short, passing references have been made to Sunday schools, some of which have been in existence for over a century and a half.

Naturally, we associate Sunday schools with religious instruction. That has always been their function. But today very few people know that in the twenty or so years before day-schools were provided, boys and girls were taught to read and write in the course of receiving religious instruction on Sunday. Meeting in church, chapel or cottage, they came under the discipline

of teachers and superintendents for the first time.

The standard of teaching may have been low, but heavy concentration on the first two of the 'three Rs' helped to reduce the very high rate of illiteracy. For the first time in history large numbers of poor children were reading books and tracts.

## SCHOOLS IN 1800

To set the scene for this short series of articles, let us go back to the year 1800. The Grammar School was flourishing, with up to 100 scholars, some but by no means all of whom were local boys. The Bourne School, started in 1737, provided places for twenty boys and ten girls. In addition there were small private schools, charging fees that were beyond the means of most of the inhabitants. As the total population of Berkhamsted and Northchurch was

2,425, it will be seen that several hundred children received no schooling whatever.

Bad though the situation was in 1800, it deteriorated shortly after Thomas Dupré succeeded his father as master of the Grammar School in 1805. Thomas was 22 years old; he and his usher neglected their duties to such an extent that eventually there were no scholars at all. Apart from Dupré and his usher, who continued to receive their stipends, the only people to benefit from this state of affairs were the owners of private schools, or academies, as they were rather grandly described in directories.

## FIVE 'ACADEMIES'

Pigot's Directory for 1824 mentions three academies for boys, kept by George Hodson, Charles Lambert and J. Sewell, and two for girls, kept by M. and H. Bainbridge and E. Halsey & Co. It is known that one of these academies charged higher fees than those demanded by the Grammar School when it was still flourishing. With the exception of St. Albans, Berkhamsted had more private schools than any other town in Hertfordshire.

By the early 1830s, when the population of Berkhamsted and Northchurch was approaching 4,000, there were probably 800 children who, on weekdays, received no schooling at all. But there was one bright spot. The Sunday school movement, started in the late 18th century by Robert Raikes, of Gloucester, reached Berkhamsted in 1810.

The Rev. Joseph Hobbs, pastor of the



Baptist Church, which stood at the bottom of Water Lane from 1722 until 1864, was largely responsible for the town's first Sunday school. Always keen to work with men of other denominations, Hobbs was supported by the minister of the Congregational Church, then a quaint little Gothic style chapel in Castle Street.

Thus the first Sunday school was promoted jointly by the Baptists and Congregationalists. It is said that at first the classes were held in a cottage. It must have been a very large cottage. On the first day, 11th June, 1810, 73 children were admitted.

#### REQUEST TO THE RECTOR

Ten days later the committee made it known that they wished to 'extend the advantage of this institution to the poor inhabitants of the adjacent villages as well as the town of Berkhamsted.' The committee also decided to write to the Earl of Bridgewater, the rectors and curates of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, and important landowners, requesting their co-operation in 'the enlargement of the plan by the formation of parochial schools on the principles of Christian union.' This was one of the first proposals that had to be considered by the new rector of Berkhamsted, John Crofts, whose ministry lasted from 1810 to 1850.

The Church of England promptly established a Sunday school, causing numbers at the Nonconformist school, which had quickly risen from 73 to 150, to fall to 90, though by 5th April, 1811, the number rose to 145. Then a parochial Sunday school was started at Northchurch, and the combined Baptist and Congregational school reported a slight fall in the number of scholars from 145 to 141.

The important fact is that within a year, three Sunday schools were started in Berkhamsted and Northchurch, with perhaps a total of over 300 scholars.

#### THE CHILDREN'S 'PLEASURE'

Joseph Hobbs' first annual report, presented in July, 1811, states that the children had made progress; they attended with 'apparent pleasure' and the change in their conduct and behaviour had been noticed by many. The report continues: '141 children residing in Berkhamsted, Northchurch, Nettleden and Frithsden, rescued from numerous evils to which they would be exposed while breaking the Sabbath and living in a state of ignorance and vice, are . . . instructed not only to read the word and sing the praises of God, but receive those admonitions from their teachers and superintendents . . . which it is presumed will leave lasting and profitable impressions on their tender minds.'

In its first year the Nonconformist Sunday school received £46 from subscriptions, donations and collections. £11 was spent on books, £21 on teachers' fees, and £1 16s. 2d. on clothing, presumably for poor children who other-

wise would not have been able to attend school. The report adds that any subscriber of 4s. per annum 'shall have one child of his or her own appointing constantly in the school.'

As numbers increased, it became necessary for the Baptists and Congregationalists to hold separate Sunday schools, and schoolrooms were provided when their churches were rebuilt in the 1860s.

#### BARREL-ORGAN IN CHURCH

There was no need for the Church of England to provide special accommodation for Sunday schools; church day-schools were built and the classrooms were used on Sundays as well as weekdays.

Before the church schoolrooms were built, however, the Sunday school was held in the north transept of the parish church. A depressing description is given by Henry Nash in his *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (1890). The only teachers,

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## 5 WAY S

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## BEORCHAM *Continued from page 7*

Nash says, were senior boys from the Bourne School. Children were sent as a duty by their parents without much regard as to the kind of instruction they received; they were expected to assemble at nine o'clock in the morning, when they were kept standing on the cold stones for two hours and then required to remain for the service, which kept them nearly two hours more through a dreary service that had no meaning to them. The prayers were long and monotonous; the singing, accompanied by a barrel-organ, was of such a dismal character that it would not be tolerated today.

### THE FANATICS

Nash was scathing about the Church of England at this period; he was certainly not an admirer of John Crofts, a man I dislike for a very special reason: he pulled down the old rectory which, if it had been preserved, would have become a major tourist attraction as the birthplace of William Cowper, the poet.

One more quotation from Nash: he said that the people who started the first Sunday schools were 'greatly misunderstood and were consequently misrepresented, often called fanatics; but what would England be today without its Sunday schools?'

Whatever doubts and misunderstandings existed in 1810, it seems that there were no anti-Sunday school fanatics in 1834. In that year the first day-school was opened, and it was available to children of all denominations, provided that they belonged to a Sunday school.

*(To be continued.)*