

Local Education since 1800 : III

ROYAL GIFTS TO THE COURT HOUSE SCHOOL

By 'BEORCHAM'

MUCH ILL FEELING was caused by the establishment of a National (Church of England) school only a few years after the British school of 1834. Fifty years after the event, Henry Nash, our entertaining and usually kindly chronicler of Victorian Berkhamsted, did not disguise his dislike of the way the 'opposition' school, as he called it, was introduced.

It seems that all denominations worked together to promote the first school. The committee consisted of the rector, curate, parish officers, ministers of the Baptist and Congregational churches, and Quakers.

LARGE FAMILIES

The rift came when the rector and curate ceased to attend the committee meetings. As soon as others had taken up the cause of educating poor children, Nash says, the rector (the Rev. John Crofts) wanted things done his own way.

'This gave rise to the opposition school where the clergy would have the entire control of both secular and religious teaching.'

Nash was not without prejudices of his own. He failed to state an obvious truth: that there was room and a need for both schools. The town was growing, families were large, and if the church school had not been provided it would have been necessary, at a very early date, to enlarge the British school.

THE RECTOR'S FROWNS

What hurt many Nonconformists was the way generous subscribers switched their enthusiasm and gifts to the National school. An exception was Augustus Smith. With some of his colleagues, he remained a liberal supporter of the British school, which, again to quote Nash, was successful 'despite the rector's frowns.' But the National

school was even more successful, and, as will be seen, was the first of several schools provided locally by the Church of England.

Classrooms and a house for the master of the National school were built beside and behind the Court House at a cost of £1,403. Donations to the building fund included £100 from William IV (shortly before his death) and £100 from Queen Victoria (shortly after her accession). Another £100 came from the Treasury. An outstandingly generous subscriber was the Countess of Bridgewater, of Ashridge, who gave land as well as money. The building fund was further helped by a collection (£40 18s.) taken after a sermon preached by the Bishop of Lincoln; Berkhamsted was still in his vast diocese. Collections for the school were also taken after sermons preached at Berkhamsted and Northchurch by the Bishop of Newfoundland, the amount being £40 1s. 6d.

THE FIRST REPORT

Most of the gentry and many tradesmen gave donations. It is pleasant to find that Mary (Polly) Page, the celebrated hostess of the King's Arms Inn, subscribed 10s.

The National school opened its Gothic oak doors (another gift from the Countess) on July 16, 1838, almost exactly four years after the British school was opened. The first annual report, dated August 16, 1839, shows that 238 children had been admitted: 136 boys, of whom about 100 attended regularly, and 102

girls, of whom an average of 50 attended regularly.

The boys, says the report, had been taught to read their Bibles with understanding minds, and were acquiring considerable proficiency in writing, an accurate acquaintance with the chief rules of arithmetic, and a general introduction to the rudiments of geography.

The girls were daily instructed in religious knowledge, were taught to write, and every day were successfully employed in needlework. As many parents had large families to maintain, a small portion of each day was devoted to straw-plaiting, the finished product being taken home and sold to swell the family income.

TEACHER'S SALARIES

Moving on to the year 1860, we find that the National school's largest source of income (£101) was the interest on the Countess of Bridgewater's endowment of £3,500. Subscriptions totalled £47 2s., including £10 from the Prince of Wales and £10 from guardians of Earl Brownlow. School pence (the coppers paid weekly by parents who could afford to do so) totalled £19 3s.

Teachers were poorly paid. Here are a few extracts from the payments column:

	£	s.	d.
Charles Gorham, Master, and for Coal	55	0	0
Mary Wallace, Mistress, and for Coal	45	0	0
Three pupil teachers	15	0	0
Books and school furniture	3	18	6
J. Greedy, books and stationery	7	7	0
Rev. J. W. Cobb, for Evening School at Northchurch	2	12	0
Berkhamsted Evening School- master	2	0	0
Gardener	1	1	2

The references to evening schools at such an early period, and to our historian rector, John Cobb, then curate, are especially interesting.

INFANTS' SCHOOLS

By 1862 the annual subscription of £10 from the Prince of Wales had been replaced by a similar sum from 'Guardians of Earl Brownlow, on account of the Duchy Estate.' This was a sequel to the purchase of the Duchy of Cornwall's vast Berkhamsted property by the owner of Ashridge.

A note at the end of the accounts for 1862 states: 'Of the £125 due from the assignees of Smith & Whittingstall's Bank, £50 1s. 6d., has been received, and with this sum various debts have been paid, which were incurred before the failure of the bank.'

Only six years after the National school was opened, a Church of England school for infants was built at Gossoms End. The oldest surviving church school building in the district, it bears the date 1844 and the coat of arms of the Countess of Bridgewater. This school, strategically sited to serve the two parishes of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, became the Bridgewater Domestic Science Centre for

Continued on page 12

ROYAL GIFTS TO THE COURT HOUSE SCHOOL *from page 7*

local girls' schools between the two World Wars; now the building is used by Boy Scouts.

An additional C.E. infants' school was built in Chapel Street. A remarkable feat was the re-opening of this school exactly a month after a fire, on August 12, 1886, which left only the walls standing. The school was closed in September, 1957.

VILLAGE SCHOOLS

The parish did not neglect its outpost—now a separate parish—beyond the Common. Potten End was given a school before it received a church; in fact, the school, erected in 1856, was used for services until Holy Trinity Church was built in 1865, three years before it was consecrated. The original school building was pulled down a few years ago.

The oldest part of Northchurch C.E. school was built in 1864. It was a mixed school. But in 1880 the boys were transferred to a school almost opposite the infants' school at Gossoms End. From 1917 Northchurch boys were again attending the old school at New Road corner, and their former classrooms at Gossoms End became a woodwork centre for local boys' schools.

With the provision of the two original schools and two infants' schools in Berkhamsted, and schools at Potten End and Northchurch, local educational facilities were reasonably good by mid-Victorian standards. The illiteracy rate had fallen, but 18 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women still could not write their names. Absenteeism was still rife and most children left school by their eleventh birthday.

On the other hand, infants were taken at a very early age—in some parishes when only 18 months old—and squalling babies constantly distracted older children. Teachers must have found the din almost intolerable. As late as 1877, at the Board (formerly British) school, 150 infants and girls of all ages were taught in one room by one mistress, two pupil teachers, and one monitress.

And that was seven years *after* the famous Education Act of 1870!

(To be continued).