

Beacons of the Future

Introduction

The new Board Schools resulting from the Education Act of 1870 inspired Sherlock Holmes. Gazing up at the new red buildings like "brick islands in a lead-coloured sea," he remarked to loyal Watson, "Lighthouses my boy; beacons of the future; capsules with hundreds of bright seeds in each, out of which will spring the wider, better England of the future!" It was a vain hope except for the aristocracy, upper classes and burgeoning middle classes. For the vast majority, education comprised the 3Rs that also stood for rote, recitation and regurgitation.

Education of the masses was slow to develop as politicians often saw little need, an attitude still persisting late in the century. Lord Salisbury for one questioned why it was necessary to learn about the rivers of the world, and heights of mountains, when your destiny in life was already determined. In his view repetitive, monotonous work characterised the life of poor people, befitting their lowly status.

Peering Through the School Gates

The premier league comprised Eton, Harrow, Winchester and Shrewsbury and four London public schools: Westminster, St Paul's, Charterhouse and Merchant Taylor's. Apart from a few endowments, most admissions depended on a substantial income of a son's parents. Only much later did girls have the opportunity of an academic education. Thomas Arnold, who became headmaster of Rugby in 1828 aged 33, shifted the emphasis from devotion to classics to character building. As A. N. Wilson comments, pupils "could acquire some of the attitudes and speech inflections of the upper class by having the education of gentleman."

From this relatively small pool of privately educated boys, of whom in 1860 only 7,600 were boarders, future colonial governors, politicians, senior clergy, lawyers, bankers and other professions were drawn. Tom Brown's Schooldays, published and reprinted five times in 1857, mirrored a middle class view of public schools devoted to comradeship, games, sport, religious studies and, above all, instilling virtues of team spirit and fortitude, exemplified by boyhood heroes. Thomas Arnold pleaded, "If only he'll turn out a brave, helpful and truthful Englishman and a gentleman and a Christian, that's all I want."

For many pupils, the most vivid recollection was rampant bullying by a Flashman equivalent and occasional depravity. Eton educated William Gladstone, recognised the need for reform and welcomed the remit of the 1861 Clarendon Commission to "investigate the condition" of public schools, resulting in an Act seven years later. At least this was one topic in common with Lord Salisbury who detested Eton, as well as "the old hypocrite" in reference to William Gladstone. New schools began to mushroom with Beaumont in 1861, Clifton and Malvern in 1862 and St Edwards, Oxford in 1863, reinforcing the class system and hierarchy that the schools' system actively promoted and perpetuated.

The growing middle class, keen to embody the ethos and discipline of Christianity, did not always practise these through regular church attendance. This did not escape the attention of Reverend Nathaniel Woodard who established three tiers of boarding school to avoid the trappings and bad ways of home. Boys at a mini-Eton, educated to the age eighteen, were destined for university or a military career. A second group of schools, educated to sixteen, enabled admission to one of the professions whilst a third tranche offered basic schooling to fourteen. Woodard envisaged a wide spectrum from solicitors and surgeons, despatching

their sons to Lancing or nearby Hurstpierpoint, to those in "respectable trades, second-rate retail shops, publicans, gin-palaces and keepers."

All the trappings of the public school would be apparent from cap and gown to chapel and quadrangle. The finest traditions of these public schools from surroundings to diction and excellent manners, were played out in a boarding system, further distancing the poor who could only peer through the school gates. Even Thomas Arnold, in his desire to promote the best of education, chose to close the doors of the free Lower School at Rugby, depriving the poor and needy of any chance of progression to the Upper School and Winchester.

Another option was to be 'taught' at a Dame school, with a distinctly liberal emphasis on the word taught as virtually anyone could practise. This was not lost on Dickens who, in *Great Expectations*, referred to Mr Wopsle's great aunt being woken by a din from her boisterous charges, whereupon she "collected her energies and made an indiscriminate totter at them with a birching rod."

Reasonably wealthy parents, including the lower middle classes and more privileged, might send their sons to an established grammar school with their roots in Greek and Latin. An alternative was one of many private academies such as Dr Blimber's School in *Dombey & Son* and the Salem Academy in *David Copperfield*, run by bankrupt sadist, Mr Creakle. A prescriptive curriculum with an emphasis on Gradgrind facts, immortalised in *Hard Times*, was deemed to equip pupils for the opportunities of Empire, contribution to a better society and a standard of living well above the level of the poor.

Girls of wealthy parents would be looked after by a nursemaid or nanny in infancy, and then taught by a governess or by highly educated parents. Several pioneering schools emerged mid-century including: North London Collegiate School, founded by Miss Frances Mary Buss in 1850, Cheltenham Ladies College in 1854, and later the Girls Public Day School Company founded in 1872. The redoubtable and strict Miss Buss kept an 'appearance book' in which the slightest of misdemeanours and transgressions warranted an entry. At the end of term all these entries were copied out into the school report. Parents could then see what their girls were up to and how their fees were being used, or squandered as the case may be.

Molly Hughes, taught at home by her well educated mother, typified home education, whilst Florence Nightingale was taught by her Cambridge educated father. Occasionally, specialist private tutors of renown would be drafted in. Fluent in French at an early age, Florence was proficient in Latin and Greek, excelled in mathematics and had a love of science and history. She was not only proficient in these subjects but could debate them in considerable depth and apply principles, but all thoughts of a career were frowned upon. Little wonder Florence felt she was "a bird in a gilded cage."

A Poor Education

Disdain for educating the poor was rife. Scientist, David Gilbert, argued in the Commons in 1807 that education "would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants to agriculture and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them." He was hardly alone in his views.

At the dawn of the century, Sunday schools led the way thanks to Robert Raikes and Hannah More to "train the lower classes in habits of industry and piety." Not all were convinced as concern was expressed about writing and arithmetic on a Sunday that would only encourage

a boy to work in a shop, or elsewhere. From 450,000 attendances in 1818 this spiralled to over 2.5 million in mid-century, a five-fold increase.

As early as 1789 Joseph Lancaster opened a non-denominational school in Southwark that offered education using the monitorial system, with older children teaching younger ones. From this developed the British and Foreign School Society that dates from 1808, under the rather grandiose title: Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution for the Education of the Poor of Every Religious Persuasion. In 1817 rather more suitable premises were found in Borough Road, Southwark. An appeal raised several thousand pounds, including £1,000 donated by Robert Owen of New Lanark. The new buildings could accommodate 500 boys and 300 girls. Teacher training was also provided from 3-6 months. The school was ahead of its time.

Concerned perhaps that the B & FSS was stealing a march, in 1811 the National Society was formed with the intention of a school in every parish. Their aim was the "Promotion of the Education of the Poor in the Principles and Practices of the Church of England." By 1851 there were 12,000 such schools.

Poorer parents might send their children to a charity school of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) or to a Ragged School, a safe haven for desperately poor and sometimes destitute children, stigmatised by tattered clothing and often no shoes. In 1844 the Ragged School Union was formed with Lord Shaftesbury as chairman. From just sixteen schools the number rose to 176 by 1861.

In 1877 Dr Barnardo set up a Ragged School at Copperfield Road, Stepney. There was an increasing realisation that children could not learn on empty stomachs. David Livingstone had noted this point, commenting that "Ragged Schools would have been a failure had not the teachers wisely provided food for the body as well as food for the mind." A destitute child between seven and fourteen years of age might appear before the courts as a vagrant and be sent to a residential industrial school, such as Fareham Industrial Home where trade skills were taught. The 1857 Industrial Schools Act was extended four years later to include those convicted of begging, beyond control or who had committed an offence.

The government view was that schools were necessary in urban and industrial environments to inculcate personal and collective virtues among the labouring poor, to benefit them for their place in life, their work, roles and rewards. The pioneering Dr Kay-Shuttleworth was greatly enthused: "Supervised by its trust teacher, surrounded by its playground wall, the school was to raise a new race of working people - respectful, cheerful, hard-working, loyal, pacific and religious." The problem was insufficient school places and the government having an agenda for the curriculum, and how it was to be taught and enforced, at minimum cost.

Attitudes were changing as reformers, philanthropists and royalty expressed their views. An enthusiastic Prince Albert commented, "We need not dread the over-education of the people; the better they are educated, the better men and better citizens they will become." Those in wider society with wealth and privilege begged to differ. So did some politicians.

In 1846 a Teacher's Certificate was introduced by the Government. Promising boys and girls were indentured as 'pupil-teachers' at the age of 13 in schools of approved standard, for a 5 years apprenticeship. They were examined annually by Her Majesty's Inspectors. Successful candidates were awarded a scholarship to a Normal College to be trained for a minimum of one year.

The Newcastle Commission was established in 1858, concerned about the large number of children still not receiving an education, and by low standards. Only 13% of the population was covered by government funding for schools. Aims were modest in reading a newspaper, writing a letter and adding up a bill but even these intentions were beyond the ability of many children.

Three years later in 1861 the Education Department issued its Revised Code of Payment by Results. Robert Lowe, educated at Winchester and Oxford and Vice-Principal of the Board of Education, was a proponent. He was famed for saying "if it is not cheap it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap." Lowe held trenchant views too on the curriculum and more especially purpose of education. "Elevating ambition in the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour would render them discontented and unhappy with their lot."

Educating Our Masters

Following passage of the Reform Act of 1867, Lowe sighed cynically, "we must educate our masters," concerned that twice as many males were entitled to vote in urban areas. There was unease too about an unchallenged way of life with the inclusion of artisans, excluding of course unskilled workers and residue, otherwise known as the feckless, work-shy, disabled, destitute and criminal poor. They were hardly a threat to the preservation of privilege.

Three years later in a landmark Act drafted by William Forster, philanthropist, Liberal and son of Quakers, elementary education was to be provided for all children between the ages of five and ten. Economy was the byword. The intention was for all children to attend school regularly but not all were compelled to for a further ten years. This was the dawn of mass education to sit alongside fee-paying public, private, grammar, and voluntary schools. This expanded provision of education gave hope to millions who yearned to improve their meagre lot in life.

Polymath and educational philosopher Herbert Spencer sought to avoid prescription and to minimise rote learning. The acquisition of knowledge was to be enjoyed. His voice in the wilderness was supported by John Ruskin. He envisaged a system of national education with the State taking a leading role to develop physical well-being, moral character and vocational efficiency. The view was certainly not shared by Robert Lowe or Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. What mattered was an ability to repeat the times tables to at least twelve, memorise and regurgitate relatively useless facts and pass a basic test in the 3Rs.

Robert Lowe admired Darwin's "survival of the fittest" as education was deemed efficient only if results reflected the investment made. This meant prescription for the passive and obedient poor "where time is so limited that we may fix upon a few elementary subjects." Payment of grant was based on attendance and yearly examination to uphold standards. Dr Kay-Shuttleworth, by now not so quite so optimistic, protested saying this was a recipe to limit instruction to "the mechanical rote learning of reading, writing and arithmetic at the expense of moral and religious education."

Kay-Shuttleworth illustrated two types of children familiar to him. The family in the North, migrants to a manufacturing town, had never seen a book. Such children barely knew how to wash, comb their hair and exercise obedience. School attendance was spasmodic and brief. Rather different was the London artful dodger, sharp-witted, adept at thieving and begging, and on the lookout for the police or an unsuspecting victim. For both groups their

education was measured by proficiency in the 3Rs and that alone, assuming they attended school.

Where a grant was in jeopardy because of too few attendances, the great temptation was to add a few marks to the register. Pressure for pupils to pass was immense. One inspector "considered it is his duty to pass every child who can read correctly and reasonably fluently." It mattered not if a child was unable to comprehend a sentence or most words, the content of the lesson or how correct answers were arrived at. The dull ritualistic grind of embedding rote learning was taking its toll, not just on pupils but teachers and inspectors too.

A thorny issue was school attendance. An inspector recalled an epidemic of scarlet fever in a thickly populated district with children brought in for 'examination' to avoid being absent. This was not exceptional as instances of whooping cough and smallpox testified. The system was in tatters as it was neither efficient or cheap. For Mathew Arnold it was a "game of contrivance" with teachers trying to outwit inspectors, who in turn might tweak the system for their own benefit. An end of term report for the late 1860s can be summed up as a state of mediocrity prevails, though the abysmal and grossly unfair system of payment by results did not end until 1897.

In six years following the 1870 Act, the churches provided 1 million of the 1.5 million extra school places. Voluntary schools, including many run by religious organisations, continued broadly as they were. Boards were set up to establish new schools, meeting the cost from rates. Lord Sandon's Act of 1876 sought to enforce attendance by prohibiting employment under the age of ten and limiting it to those between ten and fourteen who had passed Standard IV, alias a "Dunces' Certificate." This meant attending school on at least 250 occasions for each of five years but absence and truancy remained thorny problems.

The 1880 Education Act, making attendance compulsory between the ages of five and ten, only served to increase truancy as poor parents were loathe to give up a precious source of income. A huge factor also was the payment of fees that were abolished only in 1891. The problem was exacerbated with raising of the leaving age in 1893 to eleven and in 1899 to twelve as children worked before or after school, and sometimes both, as their income was vital to impoverished families. This was born out by government statistics that showed an attendance rate of just 82% in the 1890s. In 1901 a Parliamentary committee estimated that 300,000 children were working beyond the school day.

Meanwhile, cheap private schools continued to prosper. In Greenwich alone there were 240, often run by elderly women using a sparsely furnished back room with "a cracked piano and couple of mouldy globes." A brass plate emblazoned with 'Juvenile Academy' was designed to impress parents. An emphasis on memory, repetition and passive listening still persisted. In four years one inspector said he had never heard a child ask a single question about the lesson subject. Children of ten years and upwards would often be taught in the same room as six year olds. But, if measured by numbers, there was progress with 20,000 schools by 1900 and nearly 6 million pupils, a 50% increase in 20 years and a 10% rise in attendance.

An assistant teacher might have a class size up to 100 and a raw recruit aged fourteen a class size of 40 pupils. The system of pupil teachers came in for heavy criticism as in many schools they were merely appointed as an extra pair of hands. It was recommended a pupil teacher should be at least 15 years of age and be provided with instruction and guidance.

By virtue of the 1891 Education Act, almost all elementary education was now provided free and, even in the remainder, the cost was greatly reduced. Singing and dancing were added

to the curriculum whilst geography, history and science were more widely taught, together with cookery and domestic economy for girls and gardening, much to the dismay of Lord Salisbury. In 20 years following the 1870 Education Act, the average time spent at school was now seven years compared with two and a half, due not only to increases in the school leaving age but higher attendance.

In spite of best efforts to limit the technique, learning by rote continued. Professor Frank Smith cites the example of a teacher relying on tests of memory and tabulated lists of the late 1880s that still continued to be used nearly 40 years later. The Elementary School Code of 1900 recognised higher elementary schools in providing a four year course of instruction with a proposed leaving age of thirteen. The Education Act of 1902 established elementary, secondary and technical education under local authority control. School Boards were swept away.

Introduction of the mass printed word, and a national press with daily newspapers, helped improve literacy. This was the catalyst for knowledge, learning and social integration to give hope and opportunity, rather than enduring a dismal life of illiteracy and poverty. Those working in factories somehow got by as they learned by observation, listening and doing and replicating instructions until the desired quality of output and speed were achieved. At one Manchester sewing school in the 1860s, only 21% of girls could read and write which was a fairly typical figure in low-skilled work.

For England as a whole, by 1865, about 70% of all working people could read though rates varied by geography and industry. The low rate of literacy was of no surprise. Only slowly did the education system improve for many children whose parents were too impoverished to pay until elementary education was made free in 1870.

Striving for Equality

The all-female Langham Place Group, founded in 1857, campaigned about suffrage, property rights and education. Membership included the pioneering Frances Mary Buss, and Dorothea Beale but the main driving-force in equality for university education was Emily Davies. She helped set up Girton College, Cambridge, in 1869. The breakthrough at Oxford came after founding of the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women (AEW). This led to founding women's colleges. Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville opened in 1879, followed by St Hugh's in 1886 and St Hilda's in 1893.

Equality did not mean subject equality. Neither did passing examinations as degrees were not awarded. Hitherto male bastions were an issue, especially mathematics, with luminaries such as Herbert Spencer claiming female evolution placed them at a disadvantage. In 1890 a direct academic assault began to change chauvinistic attitudes! Mathematics was regarded as an elite degree and in that year Philippa Fawcett of Newnham College, Cambridge, came first in the maths tripos but still no degree was awarded! At Oxford, female students had to wait until 1921 for parity with men and Cambridge 1948, almost 80 years after the founding of Girton College.

By the end of the century, equality of opportunity of a basic education up to the age of 12, and explosion of cheap literature from books and magazines to papers and comics, meant almost all children could read but not necessarily their parents. How well children read, and their writing ability, were open to question. So was attainment generally.

Lacking is precise and consistent measures over many decades and mechanisms to monitor and validate findings. It is for these reasons that statistics should be treated with caution. So too should relying on significant averages as regional variations are likely, further split into urban and rural areas with sub-divisions too. In spite of this, the inescapable conclusion is that huge leaps forward in the education of children and adults took place in a century of monumental and unprecedented change.

Thanks to the sterling efforts of businessmen, scientists and financiers, Mechanics Institutes blossomed. In 1821 Edinburgh opened a Mechanics Institute, followed by Glasgow, London and Manchester in quick order. The Industrial Revolution gave Britain a head start in world trade but the government saw little need to intervene in training. This was left to the efforts of trade bodies, employers and philanthropists. By 1850 there were 610 Institutes. Lit and Phil societies were popular too, such as in Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle.

As the century progressed, there was a dawning realisation, if not awakening, that education was vital to economic success. Britain's pre-eminent place in the world was under increasing threat. Unlike the USA, and Germany in particular, there was little emphasis on vocational education to support and augment a more liberal curriculum for those aspiring to technical and industrial careers, though some towns and cities had technical colleges. The absence of formal workplace training was apparent, other than apprenticeships, but in many the quality of provision was patchy. Britain was to pay a heavy price.