

Booker School 1898 – 1939

By Roberta Wilson

Introduction

We will start by looking briefly at how education for all spread throughout this country and then see how Booker followed this pattern.

Sunday schools were the first widespread means of education for many poorer children. High Wycombe had a head start with the opening of Hannah Ball's Wesleyan school in 1769 but it was from the 1780s onwards that Sunday schools really spread around the country in particular among non-conformists.

The early 1800s saw the introduction of British and National Schools. British Schools were non-denominational. They were founded by Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker. National Schools were run by the Church of England. Both types of school were organised on the basis that the main cost of education was teachers' salaries. Hence these schools had one room and one teacher who was helped by monitors or older children who had the dual role of keeping the other children in order when the teacher addressed the whole room and at other times passing on their knowledge to the younger children in small groups. Amazingly these schools could accommodate upwards of 300 children.

By the second half of the century these schools had spread to such an extent that the government could begin to contemplate the idea of compulsory education. Princes Risborough had a British School, Lane End School was a National School and is still a CoE school. W. Wycombe also had a National School but something happened to that which I hope someone will explain to me sometime.

The 1870 act introduced Board Schools; schools run by boards of local people to fill in the gaps. Any community that felt that it was not sufficiently well served by an existing school could apply to the Dept of Education to set up a Board and the Board could then apply to set up a school. Boards could run one school, or a few schools, West Wycombe Board eventually ran W Wyc., Downley, Wheeler End and Booker, while some city Boards ran hundreds of schools just like the Education Authorities that



followed them. The Act also introduced the idea of compulsory education. It mentioned children aged 5 to 13 but left the actual age range and other conditions to local bye law.

The 1902 Act did away with local boards, bringing in Local Education Authorities and education as we are all familiar with it.

As far as Booker is concerned we will start the story in 1844. Ray introduced us to George Seymour last year. George was born in 1844 at which time he said, 'Booker was ... then and for some time after a benighted place. There was no school, no church, no chapel.'

George didn't have to wait long for the chapel which was built in 1848 when he, then aged 4, became one of the first Sunday School pupils. At 7 he went to work minding pigs. He had to work on Sundays which meant that he could no longer go to Sunday School. From there he became a shepherd boy. At 12 he went to work in a chairmaking factory and

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from then on was able to be a more regular attender. When he was 16 he was appointed a teacher at the school which he said showed how short they were of teachers. To improve his own reading he read a sermon from Christian World each week and looked up the words he didn't know in a dictionary. The emphasis of the teaching in Sunday schools was on reading. Some Sunday school teachers taught the children to write as a charity but this could get them into trouble with the authorities. Reading was essential for studying the bible, writing was not. I am sure that George learned to write somewhere along the line.

West Wycombe School Board

When the 1870 Education Act introduced Board Schools, West Wycombe parish, led by the vicar, was one of the first communities to apply to the Dept of Education to set up a School Board.

Permission was granted in 1872, local bye laws were published in 1873 and by the end of December 1874 the school was built and ready for opening. Next time you pass the school look out for the date chased into the brickwork above the first window. Above the next window it says 'Elementary School'.

The 1870 Act referred to children aged 5 to 13 but left it up to the local board set the age range between which school was obligatory.

The West Wycombe School Board set the age range for compulsory attendance as wide as possible; 'children not less than 5 years or more than 13 years shall attend school'.

However, very significantly for Booker, any child was exempted from attending school if they lived more than a mile from school and were under 8 or more than 2 miles from school for older children.

James was a community minded man, a member of West Wycombe Parish Council. James, as his obituary put it, 'saw the great need there was for the rising generation in the village to have a thorough education'. Not being an educated man himself, James asked his friend Stephen Plumridge to go up to Whitehall to put the case for a school in Booker to the Education Department. It was presumably as a result of this visit that in April 1888 the West Wycombe School Board received a letter from the Education Department pointing out that there was

'a deficiency of school supply' in that part of the district known as Booker. The rules of the Board, it said, excuse all children living more than 2 miles from school and children under 8 living more than 1 mile from school from attending school. Under these rules the Booker children, or most of them, do not, or are not compelled to, attend school'. It went on to say that, according to the school attendance officer, a school in that area would command an attendance of at least 60 scholars and numbers could shortly increase to 100.

Perhaps surprisingly, the proposal to build a school in Booker was not met with immediate enthusiasm. The attendance officer was asked to conduct a further census and came back saying that there were 57 children between the ages of 5 and 13, 30 of whom were attending Lane End Wesleyan School, an estimated 10 of this number being exempt by virtue of having reached the required standard, 17 lived outside the parish of W Wycombe. This was easy as the boundary between the parishes of West Wycombe and Great Marlow crossed Limmer Lane by Limmer Farm, ran approximately up Newmer Road, along the edge of the recreation ground and on to new Road.

This the Board said left only 10 children and these could be accommodated in the schoolroom in the chapel.

Back came a letter from the Education Dept whose figures seemed to differ a bit from those of the Booker Census. 'I find that 27 of these children are at the Lane End School but I also find that, in consequence no doubt of the distance, their attendance is very irregular and can be of little benefit either to themselves or the school. But on the Board's own showing there are no less than 39 children not attending any school. I know from enquiry that only one child at Booker belonging to Great Marlow is attending school. ..I have no hesitation in saying... That a good case has been made out for requiring suitable and special school accommodation at Booker.

Unlike the West Wycombe Board, the Dept of Education saw no difference between children who lived in West Wycombe parish and those who lived in Great Marlow. They were all children who needed education. There were administrative difficulties however, Gt Marlow Parish Council objected to having to pay towards the cost of running the school and there had to be a Gt Marlow representative on the Board which, I suspect made the arrangement

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less comfortable. Not surprisingly, when you think how scattered they were and the distances some of them had to walk, there continued to be complaints about poor attendance from the Gt Marlow pupils. Within living memory, children walked down from the cottages by the Blacksmith's Arms at Handy Cross. Imagine doing that every day when children had no wellingtons or waterproof clothing. To top that we have two people here this evening whose father used sometimes to drive cattle from Handy Cross down into Wycombe before setting off to school in Booker

Still the Board were not to be persuaded. They decided that the chairman, vice-chairman and clerk should go up to Whitehall to put their case to a Secretary. They might as well have saved the train fare. The best the Dept would offer was that they could use the chapel schoolroom for two years. So having accepted the situation they got on with the task of building a school.

School building

Within days, the clerk with James Crook had selected half an acre of land which Mr Thomas Phillips was willing to sell for £50.

By February 1889 plans had been approved and a tender of £418 7s accepted for the building of the new school designed to be 'as simple and plain as it could be', and by July it could announce that the school would open on September 2nd. In fact, the opening had to be delayed for 2 or 3 weeks due to an epidemic of measles in the area.

The Dept of Education kept a surprisingly firm grip on how schools were working. Inspectors visited each school annually. The 1896 report dropped a bit of a bombshell 'The school accommodation is at present insufficient for the average attendance. The attendance should be reduced or the accommodation increased'.

The School Board sprung straight into action. This included taking a census of the population as a whole. This came out at a surprising total of 605, which was a pity as in order to qualify for a grant it needed to be less than 500.

By December that year plans had been submitted to and accepted by the Dept of Education for an increase capacity of 71 pupils, requiring an increase

in floor space to just over twice the original size. A tender from J T Harris of £359 had been accepted and work was expected to be completed by March 1897.

Even then, less than 10 years later the school threatened to burst at seams when the roll reached 140. The Board decided to move 20 children from Booker to other schools but by then Sands school was about to open so that reduced the numbers.

1902 was in any case a significant year since the administration of the school was about to be transferred from the West Wycombe School Board to Bucks County Education Committee.

One good thing as far as we are concerned is that BCC sent a surveyor to check on the building that it was now responsible for

The comprised two rooms, Infants and Mixed.

The infant's room was separated into two by a moveable glass partition. The boys and girls playgrounds were separated by a high wall but once inside it was all in together.

The surveyor commented that the rooms were well lit with plain glass windows. Artificial lighting was by oil lamps. These don't appear to have been replaced with electric lights until 1935/6 when Mr Milner won the contract for a quote of £14 11s 6d

Heating was by Tortoise stoves which were in need of repair and were not guarded. They were more or less immediately replaced at a cost of £6. Presumably the new stoves had guard rails. I read a memory of a similar two-roomed school where the children hung their clothes, including their socks, on the guard rail to dry in wet weather – which can't have improved the atmosphere.

The toilet block was here and housed earth closets. I'm not sure when they were upgraded to something we would recognise today.

Water from the roof was collected in a tank in the girl's playground. There had been a problem a few years earlier when residents were found to be taking water from the tank. The Board had to restrict such activity to between 8 and 9am and

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only when the water wasn't required by the school.

The surveyor mentioned that there was no school house which we will come to later.

Teachers

The advertisement for the first head teacher was specifically for a head mistress. Caroline Hulett was 23 when she was appointed. She was born in Bedfordshire but had previously taught at a board school near Devizes in Wiltshire. She didn't live in Booker. The 1891 census tells us that she rented 2 rooms in West End Road and presumably walked up to Booker each day.

Imagine her arriving at the school on the first morning to be faced with some 60 children aged 5 to 13 and of totally mixed ability. There is no evidence that she had any teaching help until November when one full-time and one temporary monitor were appointed. My guess is that Miss Hulett struggled to cope and it is not surprising that in April 1891 the Board received an application from her for a testimonial on the grounds that she could not find suitable accommodation in Booker and 'did not care to face another winter'.

Caroline Hulett was replaced by Matilda Rattue who moved to Booker from Hawridge where she lived in the School House. Just why she chose to make the move is a not known but she was a more mature and experienced teacher than Miss Hulett. Miss Rattue also battled on for a year with only monitors to help her until Miss Gray was appointed assistant teacher. Miss Rattue was probably luckier than Miss Hulett in finding local accommodation and began to pull the school around. By her last year, 1894, the inspector was able to say that 'the general condition of this out of the way little school is most satisfactory'.

That she proved popular as demonstrated by the fact that when she left in 1894, James Crook and Miss Gray organised a collection which raised sufficient to present her with a 'very nice' easy chair and a coal vase. She in turn said that she 'should ever look back with pleasure on her stay in Booker'.

When she left the Board again advertised for a school mistress but this time the advertisement was unsuccessful. A second advertisement, not specifying gender and offering an additional £5 pa (£70pa) resulted in the arrival of James Holden

James Holden certainly lived somewhere in the area and really entered into the life of Booker. He played cricket for Booker and stood, unsuccessfully, for election to West Wycombe Parish Council.

He received praise from the inspector and was responsible for Hilda Crook's initial training as a pupil teacher.

He married at the end of 1901 and moved to Bow Brickhills now a part of Milton Keynes but then a small village where there was a school house that went with the job

Board School curriculum

Teaching was very much geared to the fact that school grants were dependant on children reaching satisfactory standards in the '3 Rs'. There were 6 standards in all.

The first standard was as you would expect simple reading and writing together with addition, subtraction and up to 6x tables.

I have skipped standard II but am showing Standard III which was significant in Booker because, according to the W. Wycombe bye-laws children aged 10 or above could cut their hours at school to 15 a week if they reached Standard III

However other subjects were also taught. We know that children at Booker learnt drawing both because the school was awarded an additional grant for drawing and because it did particularly well at it. In 1894 local papers reported on their excellent results over the previous 3 years and that in one of those years Booker was rated among the top 5 schools in the county.

In Miss Rattue's time the school inspectors particularly commented on the children's sewing.

We also know from the inspector's reports that Miss Rattue introduced Geography. I was surprised to find that up until 1890, geography was far more widely taught than history. Although this changed through the decade and by the turn of the century history was taught in almost all schools

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School leaving age was somewhat complicated. Although the West Wycombe bye laws set the upper leaving age at 14, both these bye laws and the 1880 Education Act said that no child aged 10 or above could be compelled to remain at school if they reached a certain standard, that standard being decided locally.

The West Wycombe bye-laws only required that such children reached Standard IV.... BUT in 1898 there was a curious line in the Board Minutes which asked why Booker children were being allowed to leave having attained Standard IV which led me to wonder whether other schools in the area had somehow adopted the more usual leaving Standard V.

There was also a Standard VI which was required in some areas and involved reading with fluency and expression, writing a letter or similar and fractions and decimals.

Board School becomes a Council School

The 1902 Education Act transferred the running of the school to the local education authority – Bucks CC in the case of Booker School.

Although the Act was published in 1902, it didn't come into effect until the summer of 1903 and the West Wycombe School Board seemed to carry on as normal right up to July 1903 when the Parish Council was asked by Bucks County Education Committee to nominate members of a school management committee. The meeting became somewhat heated as councillors expressed their opinions of the Act. Non-conformists across the country were unhappy about the Act because it gave support to church schools. West Wycombe Parish Councillors supported this view – Councillor Youens for example described the Act as 'diabolical' and saying that it would be much better to teach children to live 'pure just and genuine lives' than teaching them 'creeds and ceremonies'.

They were also upset that a Board which they saw as doing a good job and which had had the power to hire and fire teachers was being replaced by a committee which as one put it would only 'examine the registers and see that the w.c.s were alright'. A 'privy committee' as one wit put it. However, once they had calmed down they did put forward four names, including that of James Crook.

Theodore Walker seems to have been a lively young man. He instituted an evening continuation class for

those who had left school but wanted to continue to improve themselves. The age of the students ranged from 12 year old Jim Crook who was proud to have passed the exam that allowed him to leave at the age of 12 but then came back for more up to 22 year old Alec Burnham. Alec Burnham would go on to become a school manager but, perhaps more important as far as the school history is concerned is the fact that he married Florence Baker. Florence was a young, newly trained teacher at the school at the time of the evening classes. It was some 10 years later that Alec travelled down to her home county of Somerset to marry her and another 10 years later that she rejoined the school staff as the Mrs Burnham that many people remember. Whether it was for rapping girls over the knuckles with a knitting needle when they misbehaved or for randomly throwing a bean bag at children at spelling bees or table tests or just as a particularly well-liked teacher. Theodore Walker was rewarded for his energy by being appointed head of the new Sands School where his new wife joined him as assistant mistress.

Mr Heath applied for the Sands headship but accepted the position at Booker. He lodged in Gordon Road and married a teacher who also lodged in Gordon Road. He enquired about school accommodation in Booker. The Education Committee approached G H Gibson, who owned Booker brickworks but whose primary business was as a building contractor in HW but they couldn't come to an agreement and the couple moved to Hambleden where there was a school house.

Stephen Long rented one half of the semi in Limmer Lane, the other half of which was owned and occupied by James Crook and his family. Mrs Long worked as his assistant thus being a thoroughly modern woman as both a working wife and mother.

Then came Mr Williams who remained at the school until he retired and so brought a long period of stability. Most of the rest of this talk will relate to his tenure.

Finally Mr Trendall who taught some people here and oversaw the closure of the school.

School House

When Mr Williams joined the school he at first occupied the semi-detached house in Limmer Lane formerly rented by Mr Long. Like Mr Heath,

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he approached the Education Committee about accommodation, and this time the Committee came to a rather curious arrangement with Gibson's. Gibson's would build a house which they would let to the Committee for £20 p.a and the Committee would sub-let the house to Mr Williams for £13 p.a. Initially this was on a 21 year lease. Gibson's sold the house a year later. We are not sure what the arrangement was when the lease was up but in 1931/2 the house was sold to Charles Jeskins and Mr Williams moved to West Wycombe Road.

School strike

A crisis that Mr Williams has to deal with in his early days was the so-called school strike.

In the early 1900s when they heard that Wycombe Town Council was planning to build a fever hospital in Booker the people were not happy. They got up a petition, they lobbied town councillors but all in vain. They ended up with two hospitals, one for the urban district, on the now Beechlands site, and one for the rural district on the Catherine Court/Booker Place site.

The so-called strike started because Mr Springell who was caretaker at the Town Council isolation hospital and who lived in a cottage in the grounds, wanted to send his two children to Booker School.

He had tried to send them to the school two years previously but Mr Williams said 'no' but this time the Education Committee said he had to accept them. So the Springell children started school along with around 20 others while parents kept some 70 to 80 children off school. BCC sent a medical officer to reassure the parents. Parents asked if there was NO risk. He could only say that the risk was minimal. Not good enough.

This must have gone on for some time because it was a weekend in October when a rumour went round that the Springells would not appear on the following Monday. So on Monday 100 children gathered on the Common to see if they would turn up again – they did – so 70 or 80 children returned home but not before there had been some rather unpleasant scenes involving a band that included a dozen tin cans and the chanting of some highly uncomplimentary rhymes. Monday evening there was a meeting of Hospital & Health Committee of Wycombe Town Council at which it was announced that Mr Springell was withdrawing his children from the school and

sending them to board with their grandmother in HW. This message was conveyed to the Education Committee on Tuesday. The children were given a day's holiday on Wednesday, principally, it was said, because the circus was in town and school began again on Thursday. The children were entertained to a tea party on the following Saturday.

1914-1918

Generally, reading the Minutes Education Committee life in schools carried on more normally than I expected. There were Dept of Agriculture initiatives that allowed older children time off from school to help on the farms and one can imagine that some Booker children would have been involved in this way.

However for some families this was a time of tragedy. I had a quick look through the information that Ray has gathered so far and very few of the men who fought in the war had school age children. Looking down the list, the families most affected were probably those of George Pepall who died leaving two children and William Stevens who had 10 children in all 5 or 6 of whom would have been school age during war time.

After the war, Mr Williams was ideally placed to oversee the construction of the Memorial Hall.

Booker celebrated Peace Day with enthusiasm on July 19th 1919. The school children were prominent in the Peace Day celebrations of July 19th 1919. The report said that Mr Williams and Miss Croxford trained the children for the procession. Miss Croxford together with Mrs Burnham also organised the sports.

After 1918

The information that I have for the rest of the life of the school comes partly from memories but largely from inspectors' reports.

When Elsie Allerston was in her nineties she would still giggle about the day when Mr Williams tried to cane one of the bigger boys and two of the others grabbed him and shut him in a cupboard.

A related story was told by Bill Tilbury, about the time when they took the canes into the wood and

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set fire to them.

Generally memories of the cane seem to be memories of resentment such as George Hatt who was wrongly accused letting down the tyres on a girl's bike or Bill Tilbury who thought it unfair that when he was small was caned for damaging the beetroot skin when he harvested them in the garden so that they bled.

Inspectors' reports

The inspectors' reports of the 1920s and early 30s are more wordy than those of the Board School days although sometimes one sees the old times shining through. To quote from the opening remarks of one inspector 'the application of the children to their studies and their well-mannered behaviour all combine to make this a pleasant school to visit'.

The 'classification' was often mentioned as a problem. It took me a while to associate the word 'classification' with classes. To me classes were like rungs in a ladder that you stepped up year by year until the system tipped you off at the top. It became clearer to me when one inspector commented that it was 'a mistake to classify scholars on arithmetic', this, he said, meant that some scholars were in a lower group than they should have been. On the other hand some children were said to skip too quickly through the classifications only to languish in the top class waiting to escape. It is only in the last report, in 1935, that there are signs that the school was moving to a more age related classification.

The other recurring topic is the need to more fully stimulate the children and make greater demands on their powers; less copying from the blackboard, more encouraging them to think and ask questions. One can imagine teachers struggling with limited staff and facilities responding to this through gritted teeth.

As always the 3 Rs were the core subjects. Drawing was still a strong subject with one inspector referring somewhat poetically to 'capable execution with both pencil and brush'. History and geography were now standard subjects. Other subjects mentioned included elementary science and music and singing. Sewing didn't get a mention although I am sure girls still had sewing lessons, nor did cookery but then we know that girls walked to Lane End for cookery lessons.

The last author of the last report, 1935, was

particularly impressed with the garden mentioning that it had been laid out with a lawn with herbaceous borders. The garden is I think the feature that more than any other provided people with happy memories of the school. Ken Edwards had a particularly memory of the time that he and Ada Mason, the two pupils considered the best at art, were set up with easels in the garden to paint the flowers for a competition.

Mr Williams is often described as a practical man or a craftsman. The 1920 report mentioned that light woodwork had been introduced but the space had subsequently to be given up for infants. Mr Williams' dream was that the school should have a handicrafts room. At first the authorities turned down the suggestion on the grounds that it would take up playground space and Eventually they allowed him £30 for materials and he set about constructing the building with the help of some of the boys. The author of a report for the Dept of Education was delighted with his enterprise, pointing out that the amount the boys learnt during its construction had been sufficient in itself to justify the cost.

School closes

As a result of boundary changes in 1934, Booker became a part of High Wycombe rather than West Wycombe. High Wycombe was very unusual for a town of its size in that it continued to be responsible for its own schools rather than them coming under Bucks County Council until 1945

When Mill End School opened in 1937 the older Booker pupils were transferred to the new school.

Two years later Castlefield Junior School opened and the younger pupils who had remained at Booker transferred there and Booker School closed.

During the war it was used as a youth club and afterwards Crooks Coaches wanted to bought the land with a view to using the building as a coach garage. The council would not give planning permission for this. The building fell into disrepair and was eventually demolished.

The site is now the site of Glade View

