

THE FIRST BRITISH SCHOOL IN TEWKESBURY

by Rose Hogan

One of the first British schools in the country and one of the few in Gloucestershire, was built in Tewkesbury in 1813. The simple brick building with pointed roof and large front window, now called the Elizabeth Wyatt House, is situated on the north side of Barton Street/Road, a short way from the centre of the town. No longer a school, the premises are now used as a meeting place for the 'Golden Hour' Club.

Before the school was opened children roamed the streets and alleys. Following the inspiration of Robert Raikes, the poor were encouraged to join the Sunday School movement and soon a Quaker Sunday School in Barton Street had 190 pupils.

The Sunday Schools paved the way for the next stage of development - weekday schools based on the Monitorial System devised by Joseph Lancaster, a Quaker, born in Southwark, London in 1778. Even as a young man, he brought poor children home to teach them to read. In 1801, he started his pioneering school in a large room in Borough Road. Not having enough teachers, the elder scholars taught the younger ones. His school was divided into small classes, each with a monitor; a group of these classes was under a head monitor. Lancaster taught the monitors at the beginning of the day before the children arrived and they passed on the information to the various groups. Lancaster claimed that he could teach a thousand children in this way.

His success attracted royalty and encouraged him to tour the country and open other schools. Charitable organisations and private donors helped with finance but Lancaster got into heavy debt. His creditors formed the Royal Lancasterian Society in 1808. This was later known as the British and Foreign School Society. Lancaster was disowned by the Quakers but he continued to hold his Sunday morning silent services, often sitting alone. He decided to go to America but, before leaving, he undertook a lecture tour of the South West and on 24 October 1812 he addressed 'a large and respectable auditory' in a room at The Swan Hotel, Tewkesbury. A local member of the Society of Friends, Nathaniel Hartland, had already given a plot of land at the Upper End of Barton Street for the purpose of building a school for the 'instruction of the Poor on the Lancasterian plan' and after this lecture £7-8s-7d was collected and added to the building fund. A building committee was formed and the land was given, 'on condition that it should revert to Mr. Hartland and his heirs with the buildings upon it, whenever it should cease to be used as a school on its original plan'. Charles Hanbury Tracy also gave £300 to the fund.

THE SCHOOL OPENS

The first master of the school was Isaac Arrowsmith, a middle-aged Methodist who had been secretary of the Building Committee. At a cost of five guineas, he was sent to Birmingham for instruction in the Lancasterian system and to buy the school's first equipment; slates, Bibles and 'rewards', in the form of toys. As the school was not ready in time, Mr. Arrowsmith held his first classes in a room at the 'White Lion'. This cost £6-19s-4½d to hire with coal for the heating. On the register there were 70 boys and 43 girls, between five and ten years of age. At first the school

was known as the Royal Lancasterian School but a subscription was paid to the British School Society from 1816. Isaac Arrowsmith's salary started at £35 and increased to £50. The basic cost for building the school was £535-11s-8d. Most of this money came from donations. The building work started in the middle of October 1812 and was finished six months later.

A committee meeting held at the School Room in 1817 agreed to provide the girls with shifts and extra clothing for those who brought one penny a week to add to the charity funds. Nathaniel Hartland took an interest in the school and on one of his frequent visits, he found 'the children in good order and reading 5th chapter of Matthew'.

Many families lived in the grubby warren of alleys, some of which have long since disappeared; Spiny's, Matty's, Potter's, Rudes, Sun and Crooked. The school log books recall well known local names: Finch, Randall, Warner, Hopkins, Bayliss, Watson and Healing. There was a wealth of business activity in the town; lace-makers, stone-masons, watermen, coopers, bleachers, stocking-weavers, sawyers, breeches-makers, chaise-drivers, tanners, cutlers and many others. The catchment area of the school covered not only the borough but also outlying villages: Deerhurst, Shothonger Common, Bredons Hardwick, Apperley, Kemerton and Twyning. Children spent many weary and wasteful hours travelling.

The small one-roomed school soon became overcrowded. In 1825 the school was enlarged but there was still only one room and one storey. Numbers continued to increase, especially after 1833 when Shaftesbury's Factory Act technically forbade children to work in the mills. By 1838, there were 142 boys and 54 girls all taught in the same room. Some children started school at 5 years old but John Gardiner, whose father was a stone-mason living in Gloster Row, did not get into a class until he was fifteen. The children were tested and moved through eight standards in reading and ten standards in arithmetic. The school relied heavily on charitable organisations to provide necessary funds and was itself granted charitable status in April 1859.

William Kevern was now the headmaster and had the unenviable task of trying to bring some order into a school day which started at 9.15 am and finished at 2.00 pm. Although inspectors made regular visits and reports, they were powerless to enforce attendance. School work was frequently interrupted by social events like the Mop Fair, Tewkesbury Regatta and a monthly cattle fair. The inspector penalised the school by reducing the grant. Mr. Kevern's salary of £60 was augmented by extra-curricula teaching.

Pupils continued to work carelessly in cramped conditions. In 1870, the Elementary Education Act set up School Boards. As is well-known, these were elected by ratepayers and levied rates for building more schools. The 'School Board Man' had to make sure that the school places were filled. The Managers of the Tewkesbury British School transferred the building to a School Board under this new Act.

PAYMENT BY RESULTS

In 1872, after a ten year period of boys only at the school, girls were again admitted. Grants were still governed by progress reports. Drill was introduced to instil more discipline but noise and confusion could not be eliminated. Mixed abilities and ages were always in the one room with one teacher and a few untrained helpers. The Drill of the monitorial system invited a great deal of movement.

A more enlightened report came in May 1877 when the root of the problem was at last recognised. The infants needed a separate room with instruction geared to their special requirements. Some curtains were erected and a raised gallery was built in one corner of the room for the infants. There was still no provision for physical exercise. Ventilation was poor. The coke stove made the room stifling but at least the infants had part of the area to themselves.

In 1885, after twenty-two struggling years, William Kevern resigned. Mr. McCaulay filled in before George Sedgwick Raiton took on the tremendous task of trying to get some order under appalling conditions. The oldest scholar was chosen to assist in



Tewkesbury British School now called Elizabeth Wyatt House. The lane down the side is Mount Pleasant (originally Back Road).

teaching the infant class and was paid 6d a week. Rev. Bishop purchased a Magic Lantern for 10 guineas and loaned it to the school for fund raising. In 1887, the Salvation Army offered to buy the school premises but the terms of the original deed would not have allowed this.

Mr. Railton had a good rapport with the children and his success gained him a Good Merit Grant. There were 94 children on roll; 74 were infants squashed into a very small space in the gallery. Mr. Railton's ambitious schemes received little help from inspectors. In 1888, it was suggested that the erection of a two-storey classroom over the present playground was the only solution to the problem of lack of space.

However, Mr. White agreed to sell part of the land he owned opposite the school at 5s a yard. In 1889, tenders for the new building were accepted from three builders - Collins at £766, Young at £877-14s and Denley, Coates and Howell at £688-3s-3d.

The lowest quote gained the contract and the building was up within the year.

INFANT ACCOMMODATION

Saturday 12 October 1889 was a red-letter day in the history of the Tewkesbury British School. The long-awaited infant school building was ready at last. The inconvenience of the road running through the middle did not become apparent until many years later! Mr. Railton, remembered by people today, encouraged children to attend his bright and cheerful school instead of playing truant. Bazaars, magic lantern shows and concerts were held to try and clear a £400 debt. The staff was increased to one assistant and three pupil teachers. The new buildings had cost £800 together with the furnishings. There were generous subscriptions from parents and friends. Mr. Healing, the corn merchant gave £100.

Two hundred infants were transferred to the new building under the headship of Miss Haffner, a lady of German origin, who looked quite austere in her cap and gown. There were three classrooms with a narrow passage down the left-hand side which led to the playground at the back. At the end of the side passage there was a small room used for a kitchen and store. This led to the playground which was paved with blue bricks sloping to a drain in the centre. Children crowded into a playshed on wet days. Miss Haffner had two staff under her; Miss Bedford and Miss Yarnold.

The original school continued to improve but there were still deficiencies; no provision for boys' hats and coats and very primitive toilet facilities. The first standard was transferred to the infant school in 1895. A sliding partition was erected, making two rooms 19ft-6ins by 10ft. The school was still very overcrowded. Sixty children had no desks. Fund raising continued with lantern shows charging 2d admission or 3d for a front seat. Mr. Railton scored a first for Tewkesbury by producing the new light, acetylene, for the lantern shows.

In July 1897, the annual report stated that part of the grant would be withheld because of a lack of local support. Only £39-2s-6d was collected in voluntary subscriptions. For a school giving free education to over 300 children, more money should have been raised. Not many were willing to donate more than a few shillings. Even the Strickland Trust reduced its grant from £10 to £5 in 1897.

In September 1897, scarlet fever struck and whole school was closed for three months, reopening in January 1898 by permission of the Sanitary Authority. The school entered the Bristol and District Federation of British Schools and gained a grant of £87 which provided more teaching staff and apparatus. The school was enlarged and a scheme for shorthand and typing was introduced.

MODERN TIMES

In February 1900, Rev. W. Davies, the honorary secretary of the British schools, announced that the Tewkesbury British School had won the largest grant ever because of increased accommodation and more regular attendance. A playground was long overdue. The street was not the proper place for drill. All British Schools became council schools after the Education Act of 1902. The Tewkesbury British School was conveyed to the Council in 1907.

In 1906, George Sedgwick Railton retired and William Eccleston became head, inheriting all the old problems. The strain of the job brought him ill-health and he died in 1917. During the First World War, boys were released from school to follow 'blind alley' occupations. Unqualified teachers were employed for the

young classes and economies made by increasing the size of the classes to between 40 and 70 pupils. The children of the Tewkesbury British School (now called Barton Road Council School) did their bit for the war effort and went blackberrying. They picked 104lbs, selling them at 1¼-2d per pound. The money went to the forces.

Julia Lewis took over the headship of the Junior School in 1917. The children worked from 9 to 12 in the mornings and from 2 to 4.30 in the afternoons. Conditions were noisy and the fixed partitions of wood and glass did little to reduce the sound. The children were poorly dressed; there was no school uniform. Some girls wore smocks and boys from better-off families came in sailor suits. School was an ordeal for many. Miss Lewis had three staff to help her; Miss Bedford, Miss Fletcher and Miss Pates. There was now a new school for the Upper Standards in Chance Street and the children from Barton Road went there at nine years. In the 1920s school life was regimented but children made their own amusements, playing hopscotch, rolling hoops or having a game of tip-cat.

The head of the Infant School was Mrs. Lilian Chapman. She was young, talented and progressive. Her staff were Miss Yarnold, Miss Neal and Miss Page, who was uncertificated and looked after the baby class.

In 1927, the Junior head retired after 21½ years service. Charlotte Stewart became the new head. There was no facilities for the staff. They made cups of tea in the girls' cloakroom and used the outside toilets. The big iron school gates were kept shut when the children played outside.

In the early 1930s school started for some at the age of three. Every afternoon the little ones would sleep on canvas beds, rolled out on the floor. The children left the infant school between the ages of 6 and 7 and progressed through three classes in the juniors going on to senior school at 9. This pace was much too quick for the less able children. P.T. instruction was given in the small yard. No one fell over; they were too cramped!

Special occasions were always celebrated and the school would be closed. On Empire Day, the children assembled in the playground round the flagpole, sang an Empire song and saluted the Union Jack. In 1933, £50 was spent on a new flag. It was important to develop feelings of patriotism among the children. On Queen Victoria's birthday, May 1933, Miss Morris, the head of the infants, dressed her children to represent countries of the Empire and they all danced around the maypole.

Corporal punishment was much in evidence. A local man, Mr. Brian Devereux, remembers being reprimanded for allowing his sister to fall in the brook. But he was given a penny for dragging her to safety! Mr. J.H. Griffiths, a stocky Welshman, became head of the junior school. He fashioned his cane from ash sticks and used it frequently on the backs of legs. The dunces were made to stand in the waste paper basket. Three years prior to the Second World War saw much unemployment in the area. Conditions and housing were still very poor.

Children got used to gas mask inspections. Any child forgetting his mask would be sent home for it. There were safe houses around the town. When the siren went, the older children would collect their younger brothers and sisters and go to their allocated house. Evacuees caused more overcrowding. One class had 56 pupils! Thus, classes were still large with limited space. The children sat in double desks, copied from the blackboard and



The infant school built in 1889 on the opposite side of Barton Road. Now it is the Tewkesbury Youth Centre Annexe and used by Barton Road Playgroup.

shared reading books. All work was done on loose pieces of paper. There was always a smell of waxy crayons and chalk dust pervading the classrooms.

There was still no washing facilities and the outside toilets froze up in winter. There were about 40 to 45 children in each class. Miss Hewlett entered many musical competitions with her percussion band and also won prizes at the Cheltenham Festival. Conditions in the infant school continued to deteriorate and in 1938/39 the school was closed. The building remained empty for a number of years.

THE POST-WAR YEARS

When Mr. Godwin joined the staff in 1948, conditions had little changed. He had a class of 52. Numbers continued to increase as children came in from the villages. Miss Davies had 46 pupils in her class; five of them went on to university. Iris Jones came to teach at the school in 1954. Teachers and girls shared the same toilets. The large gap under the door made it possible to see who was in there!

Mr. J.R. Griffiths took on the headship of Barton Road Council school in 1955. One of his first attacks was on the unsavoury toilet conditions. They were moved across to the infant side. He also managed to secure a good-sized piece of land which was tarmaced for a playground. A Terrapin was erected at the back of the infant school. This had to be hoisted over the building from Pitts yard.

Mr. Griffiths remained the headmaster for 12 years. He always stressed the importance of travel and groups of children were taken to France, Belgium and Holland. He said of the school; 'As a school, it had no place in the modern education world, yet it served generations of local boys and girls for 154 years.'

Barton Road Council School was officially closed on Friday, 21 July 1967. The old school was part of Tewkesbury's history. The old buildings stayed empty while legal difficulties were resolved.

In October 1968, applications were made for the use of the building for other purposes, but the Education Committee could do nothing. Alderman Frank Knight though it would provide suitable accommodation for other activities and in February 1969, the infant school building on the South side became a craft centre. The sale of the premises on the North side - the original building - which belonged to the County Council, was on terms to be negotiated by the county valuer.

NEW OCCUPANTS

In November 1969, the Golden Hour Club showed interest in the property. The Tewkesbury Old Peoples' Welfare Committee stepped in and bought the former junior school building from Gloucestershire County Council. The estimated cost was £3,500-£4,500 which included conversion. In February 1970, a public appeal was launched but it wasn't until May 1970 that the old school was finally purchased at a cost of £2,500 with £1,200 needed for the alterations. The existing screen was removed to make a large room; there was also a smaller lounge and at the rear, a kitchen and cloakroom. The members held regular whist drives and bingo sessions in the bigger and brighter rooms. Now the building is rented out to many different clubs and societies. Luncheon clubs meet on Mondays and Wednesdays. A new name had to be chosen for the old school. Elizabeth Wyatt was a Borough Councillor and had done much in the war for P.O.s through the Red Cross. Because of all her work for the town, it

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS

For the Year Ending December 31st, 1896.

TREASURER: MR. G. WATSON.

Dr.		£	s.	d.
To Government Education Grant	...	257	5	0
" Fee Grant	...	141	10	0
" Endowment	...	22	0	0
" Voluntary Subscriptions	...	39	12	6
" Strickland Trustees' Grant	...	10	0	0
" Collection in Congregational Church	...	3	3	7
" Science and Art Grant	...	8	8	0
" Children's Concert	...	14	15	10
" Balance (due to Treasurer)	...	303	8	5
		£500 3 4		

Part of the School Accounts for 1896

was considered appropriate to choose her name. In 1975, the Old People's Welfare Committee proposed to pull down the wall round the outside yard, to make room for vehicular access. On 1 December 1981, the Lions Club helped the demolish the wall and the cast iron gates were stored away.

Entering the Elizabeth Wyatt House today, there is still the feel of an old school, with the narrow corridor and the line of coat-pegs in full use. The desks have been replaced with tables and chairs. The coke stoves no longer fill the air with stifling fumes. At the far end of the main hall, a large clock looks down on proceedings. This clock was made by J. Watson, whose family had a clock business in Tewkesbury High Street. It had been made for a large kitchen in a house in Kemerton. Mr. Gibson bought the clock with money collected at the time of the Queen's Coronation in 1953. From this commanding position, it has kept time for many generations of pupils. Under the clock, there is an inscription which gives a brief history of the school.

"This building was erected and opened as a school for the 'education of the children of the poor' by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1813. Mr. William J. Gibson, headmaster, purchased this clock to mark the accession of Queen Elizabeth 2nd in 1952. The Premises ceased to be used as a school in July 1967 and the clock was later presented to Elizabeth Wyatt House by Mr. John R. Griffiths, the last headmaster of the school which had served Tewkesbury children for 154 years."

This simple brick building has come full circle with many ex-pupils now using the club facilities and being a part of Tewkesbury's history.

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