

Schools for the Poor in Early Victorian Exmouth

Introduction

Exmouth is situated 10 miles south east of Exeter and about 167 miles west of London. The town is situated mostly in the parish of Littleham and partly in the parish of Withycombe Rawleigh. Its name derives from its location at the mouth of the river Exe, opposite Star Cross Railway Station. It originated as a medieval fishing village and later a ferry station. As an early watering place, Exmouth had the advantage of some spectacular sea views. A number of sources claim it to be the oldest watering place in Devon, dating back to the eighteenth century.¹ As transport improved many well-to-do visitors flocked to the town to sample the facilities. By 1768 a coach service was running regularly from Exeter.

In the early nineteenth century the population of Exmouth, like many south Devon resorts, grew more slowly, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s. A railway to the town had been suggested as early as 1825, but it was killed by the fear that it might decimate Exeter's trade. This fear was shared by the prominent landowner, Lord Rolle, who had substantial investments in the Exeter Canal. Another scheme muted in 1845 met a similar fate. The battles regarding Exmouth's first railway have been well documented, conflict being the order of the day.² It was not until May Day 1861 that the first train entered the town. In the first five days 10,000 people travelled on the line and property prices increased overnight.³

The foundation of the National Society, with its emphasis on the education of the poor in the principles and practices of the Church of England soon had an impact in Exmouth. In the early Victorian period up to 1870 the town established national schools in the parishes of Littleham cum Exmouth and Withycombe Rawleigh. This section will focus on these particular schools. However, it must also be recognised that lace schools predominated in Exmouth in relation to the education of the poor. Robin Bush noted that in 1818 there were: 'no fewer than 26 lace schools attended by 393 children in the town'.⁴

Early in the nineteenth century, attention turned to the needs of the poor when Lord and Lady Rolle, local landowners, founded a National School in Little Bickton Place, catering for 200

¹ Robin Bush, *The Book of Exmouth: Portrait of a Resort* (Buckingham: Barracuda Books, 1978); W.G Hoskins, *Devon* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2003).

² Eric Delderfield, *Exmouth Milestones: A history* (Exmouth: The Raleigh Press, 1948), pp. 83-8.

³ Bush, *Book of Exmouth*, p.46

⁴ Bush, *Book of Exmouth*, p.75.

children. This school opened on 22 January 1812.⁵ This building was situated at the opposite end of Rolle Street to its present site and probably projected well into what is now Rolle Street. The building was in use until around 1864 when it was demolished to make way for the new street. Annual sermons were preached for the school's support and treats were arranged for the children.

Little information has survived about this school. However, it is known that the first member of the Bannister family was a Master during this period. *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post* noted that John Bannister, senior, had to resign his post because of failing eyesight. His scholars 'presented him with an electro-plated teapot and cream ewer.'⁶ Little detail about other staff members or the curriculum followed has survived from this period. It appears that the numbers of pupil-teachers increased over the years, probably on account of the rising number of pupils attending. In addition, the following entry from the *Log Book for the Exmouth National School* in 1863 paints a positive picture of the school during its last few months. The Inspector's report is summarised as follows:

This is a good school in which the discipline is steady and cheerful, and the elementary instruction soundly and thoroughly given. The Spelling and Reading of the 3rd class, which was weak last year, are now very greatly improved.⁷

Further analysis of the national schools in the early Victorian period will take place under the agreed headings which appear appropriate for any discussion relating to schools for the poor.

Foundation and Governance

Plans for a new Exmouth School were launched in 1860, as the existing building was deemed to be overflowing with 270 pupils. Robin Bush described fundraising activities which included a bazaar, held on the Temple lawns in 1863 with four marquees, including a museum and a post office.⁸

The foundation stone of the new building was laid on Ascension Day, the 14th of May 1863 by the Rev J.T.Boles, a Curate in the parish of Littleham cum Exmouth, who was also a Magistrate for the county of Devon; the school was formally opened on the 8th of January 1864. The new building, including the school master's house cost £1410 19s. 6d. Details about the aim of the school can be found in a conveyance of the site. This document was

⁵ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 22 January 1812.

⁶ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 27 July 1859.

⁷ Exmouth National School Log Book, 20 April 1863.

⁸ Bush, *The Book of Exmouth*, p.113.

signed and sealed by George Mark Kerr Rolle and the Vicar of the parish of Littleham cum Exmouth, Thomas James Rocke. The following extract from the source comes from an earlier history of the school. It provides that the school shall be:

‘for the education of the children only of the labouring, manufacturing, and other poor classes in the Parish of Littleham and Exmouth... according to the principle and in furtherance of the ends and designs of the National Society for promoting the education of the poor in the principles of the Established Church throughout England and Wales.’⁹

The school was to be controlled by a committee of Managers, comprising the Vicar, curates and three others to be elected.

School Finances

There is little information available about the school finances, but fundraising for day to day expenses probably took place. School was not compulsory at this time and scholars paid 2d per week until 1891.

Premises

The building below, named the Beacon School, originates from 1864 is essentially, the one in present-day use, although additions were made in 1904 and 1936. The school is a Voluntary Aided Church of England Primary School and celebrated the building’s 150th anniversary in 2014.



Beacon School (Image reproduced with permission)

Admission Criteria – eligibility and attendance

⁹ J.L.Goodall, *One Hundred Years and More in the Life of Exmouth Church of England Primary School*, [1963].

There is little information about eligibility and attendance. Until the early 1870s the school was only for boys. One can glean a few details from the log books held at the school of this period. John Bannister had established a set routine and the pupils were rewarded by the managers for regular attendance and good behaviour. However, it seems that attendance at the school rose and fell throughout the year. Pupils were regularly kept at home or undertook temporary employment. The following entries in the log books are an indication of the scale of the problem: 'Edward Skinner's mother sent word that he will be wanted for a few weeks to dig potatoes. Several boys have asked for leave for the week, on account of sickness, want of shoes or being required at home. Several boys absent again and others are getting into a bad habit of running errands for tradesmen and habitually coming late.'¹⁰

Curriculum and the school day

Spelling, reading and arithmetic featured in the curriculum. As one would expect Religious teaching and education in the principles and practices of the Established Church were also important. Flogging was the standard treatment for pupils who misbehaved or played truant. One Richard Davey was regularly in trouble for unacceptable behaviour. He was eventually expelled for, 'irregularity and non-attendance at Sunday school.'¹¹

Teachers

The first Master was Robert Elworthy, who served in the post until 1868. He was assisted by three pupil teachers: George Berry, John Agnew and Charles Roberts, who served apprenticeships of four or five years. They progressed yearly by examination, eventually becoming certified teachers. The three were taught outside school hours, usually before school began between 5 30 and 8 am.

Elworthy appears to have been a successful master, who managed to combine tact towards parents with firmness towards their children. Little detail has survived about the individual pupil teachers. However, Charles Roberts who served for five years must have been a rather

¹⁰ *School Log Books*, 13 September 1871, 26 January 1874, 21 September 1874.

¹¹ *Log Book*, 3 November 1866.

colourful character who on one occasion fell off the sea wall and in a later incident, injured himself in a pistol accident.¹²

Robert Elworthy was replaced by Henry Chudleigh, a certified teacher who appeared to have the appropriate experience. However, his time at the school was not a happy one. Within a year of his appointment standards at the school had fallen dramatically. The Inspector's report confirmed this:

‘This School has fallen off in every way... Discipline appears to be loose attainments much below the standards of previous years. Arithmetic in the 2nd standard is very poor.’¹³

After this unfortunate appointment, when staff and pupils were left demoralised, John Bannister, junior, became Master. He was in the post for 37 years. His first entry in the *Log Book* has provided a rare personal assessment of the task ahead:

‘I entered on my duties today. The schoolroom, children, and in fact everything connected with the school bore evident marks of neglect. The teachers have not the least control over their classes and it has been one continual uproar...’¹⁴

Over the years we are provided with a picture of a devoted and successful school master with a strong personality. The process of restoring the school to its former success was clearly long and arduous. Inspectors' reports were often highly critical.

This assessment of the national school for the parish of Littleham cum Exmouth has only covered the period up to 1870. Girls were not admitted to the school until 1872 when a separate girls department was formed. Bannister's wife Ellen was in charge. The couple lived in the school house until they retired in 1906. Any assessment of this later period is outside the scope of this assignment. However, log books do exist in the Beacon School.

A national school in the parish of Withycombe Rawleigh has existed since around 1840. It was built on the site of the former St Michael's church. We are fortunate that some primary source material has survived from The National Archives as well as the national society. However, this basic material provides details about the structure and staffing of the school. No log books seem to have survived to flesh out details. As before, analysis will be undertaken under the various agreed headings.

¹² *Log Book*, 21 November 1866.

¹³ *Log Book*, January 1869.

¹⁴ *Log Book*, 27 May 1869.

Foundation and Governance

The school was formed under the auspices and in union with the national society. The chief promoters of the school included landowner and magistrate Mr W.T. Hull, several gentry, Mr Rowe, a retired surgeon, Captain Williams, Lieutenant Burch and a significant number of widows. There were three trustees, namely: Archdeacon Rev J.M.Stevens, Vicar of Otterton, J.M. Philipps and the Curate of Withycombe Rawleigh Rev J.A.Moorhead. The above trustees worked with a school committee.

School Finances

The school was supported by an annual subscription and payments from scholars. The instruction would cost 1d per week for each child. The estimated annual charge for a mistress and books was estimated to be £40; repairs were estimated at £1 10s. pa and fuel £2 10s. pa. Help with the finances would come from the Community of the Council of Education and the national society. The salary of the Schoolmaster was to be £30 pa. and the Schoolmistress £26 pa.

Premises

The school was to be located on the site of the old St Michael's church in Withycombe Road, adjoining the north boundary fence. The illustration of the church below dates from 1835. However, no images of this particular school building appear to have survived.



Details of the school building, which cost £200, have been obtained from original documents at the Church of England Record Centre.¹⁵ The building was of stone with a wooden floor and thatched roof. There were to be two schoolrooms, one for boys and the other for girls. Each room was 24 feet by 16 feet and had two windows. The windows were four feet by five.

¹⁵ NS-1 - 14067

Admission Criteria – eligibility and attendance

Little information has survived about admission criteria. We know that the school was built to accommodate 60 boys and 60 girls in separate schoolrooms. The average attendance was 70. Scholars were to be admitted from Withycombe village and the parish of Withycombe Rawleigh itself.

There is little information about the curriculum or school day. We can reasonably assume that the pupils were taught the three Rs as well as the principles of the Church of England. A mixed method of instruction was in place. However, there are no details of what this meant in practice.

Teachers

We know that the school employed a master and mistress and that there were three monitors to each class. The master and mistress both trained at the training school in Exeter. Therefore, one can reasonably assume both were fairly local.

We do not know what happened to this building and when it was demolished. However the present Withycombe Raleigh Church of England Primary School celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2015.

This assessment of education for the poor within Exmouth in the Victorian period up to 1870 reflects school provision from an Anglican perspective. There was little evidence from the available sources that non conformists were running day schools at this period. Lace schools predominated in the town, but any analysis will form a separate section. The two parishes attempted to provide elementary education for the children of the poor. This was at a period when seaside towns in south Devon grew and developed.