The Early History of Poltimore School

1833-1870

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This paper was written as part of the Devon History Society Early Victorian Schools Research Project. The project aimed to investigate how schools had developed in different communities in Devon between the date of the first comprehensive enquiry undertaken by Parliament via the overseers and the date when the first legislation for compulsory elementary education was passed.

The Bampfyldes in Poltimore Village in the first quarter of the nineteenth century

Sir George Bampfylde, who was to be made Baron Poltimore in 1831, was the principal landowner in Poltimore parish, owning all except one farm in the parish that belonged to the neighbouring landowners, the Aclands of Killerton. The village, which had a population of 264 at the census in 1841, was primarily an agricultural community, although a few residents worked at the paper mills in neighbouring Huxham. Sir George had been an intermittent resident of Poltimore since his marriage in 1807 but the member of the family who lived there on a permanent basis was his uncle, Richard Bampfylde, Rector of Poltimore. Richard Bampfylde lived at Poltimore House (regarding the Rectory as too dilapidated) until his death in 1834 at the age of 75. Sir George is recorded as saying that he was 'desirous that a perfect reciprocity should exist between landlords and tenants' and 'anxious that honest industry in early life should afford comforts to age and a proper provision for their respective families.'[1]

The 1833 Parliamentary enquiry and the first Poltimore School

The evidence given by the overseers to the 1833 enquiry Parliamentary about the availability of education in Poltimore (whose population was recorded as 282) was that there was one daily school which had commenced in 1832, containing 40 children of both

[1] *Bath Chronicle*, 2 Nov 1826, recording Sir George's speech local tenantry at a birthday celebration in the Bampfylde Arms, Pinhoe.

sexes, supported by private subscription.[2] There is no evidence for any earlier school, and indeed the Rector had responded to the Bishop's Queries in 1821 by indicating that no provision was made for the instruction of youth in religion, and also that there were no Papists or Dissenters in the parish.[3] (This pattern of total Anglican conformity appears to have remained the case for the rest of the nineteenth century.) Children who were orphaned or whose families were in the poor-house were normally assigned by the parish overseers to farmers as apprentices in husbandry (boys) or housewifery (girls). Although the farmers received a premium for taking on a child, the overall charge on the poor rate paid by the better-off was less than if the children had to be housed in the poorhouse. The last group of such apprenticeships seems to have occurred in 1832 and the change in practice may be linked to the establishment of the school.[4]

It is likely that the establishment of the school in 1832 was a secular rather than a clerical initiative. The Rector was by that time in his seventies, Sir George was often in London where his wife was an invalid, and the driving force for change in the village was John Gould, the tenant farmer at Hayes, who was also Lord Poltimore's steward. Gould was committed to making farming more profitable by the ploughing out of hedgerows and the improvement of drainage. He reorganised the Poltimore farms into larger holdings to secure greater efficiency; and was involved in other contemporary movements for change, such as the redemption of tithes and the improvement of turnpikes. He also had strong views on how labourers and their families should be treated, which he expressed to the charity commissioners in 1843.[5] This included not only his belief in paying a 'living wage' and in the importance of allotments, but also the claim that he had initiated the abolition of the apprenticeship system in Poltimore and the statement that the poor are 'well provided for in moral and religious instruction'. It seems likely that he was the person who initiated the establishment of the school paid for by private subscription ten years earlier. Bovett[6] suggested that Lady Poltimore had been responsible for the 1832 foundation, but the Lady Poltimore of that date (George's first wife) was an invalid and resident in London, so her direct interest is unlikely. Lord Poltimore might, however, have agreed to pay for the school

[2] *Education Enquiry, Abstract of the answers and returns made pursuant to an address of the House of Commons*, (1835), Vol I (Bedford to Suffolk), London, House of Commons, p. 200.
[3] *Responses to Bishop's Queries, Exeter Diocese*, (1821), Vol. IV, Exeter, Devon and Cornwall Record Society, p.146.
[4] Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) 2811A. James Cowley aged 9, Richard Rugg aged 9 and Thomas Stark aged 10 on 8 June 1832 and Emanuel Ford aged 12 in September 1832.
[5] *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the employment of women and children in agriculture*, (1843), London, HMSO, p.106.
[6] Bovett, Robert, Historical Notes on Devon Schools, Exeter, Devon County Council, 1989, p.252.

at Gould's prompting. It would perhaps have been regarded as a suitable extra responsibility to take on when he assumed the dignity of a Baron.

The 1833 Enquiry lists separately in Huxham, also land owned by Lord Poltimore, '[o]ne Daily School, containing 6 males and 7 females, whose instruction is paid for by their parents.'[7]

III Poltimore and Huxham School, 1832-1871

There is no detailed information available about how the school founded in 1832 was funded or managed. The statement in 1833 that it was funded by private subscription indicates that the parents of the scholars did not contribute: in villages where they did this Is recorded in the return, as shown above for Huxham. By 1850, White's Directory stated that 'Lady Poltimore maintains a school here for 36 poor children'.[8] Lord Poltimore's second wife, Caroline Buller, demonstrated her interest in schools both at Poltimore and in the other Poltimore village, North Molton, throughout her life. It was reported at North Molton in 1839 that Lady Poltimore had 'instituted a charity school for the instruction of twenty boys and as many girls',[9] and there are continuing references in the newspapers to the treats she organised for the children there. No such information was recorded for Poltimore, but this was a much smaller community, about which less 'news' was recorded.

The site of the 1832 school is not known and there is no irrefutable evidence for the location of any school before the present buildings were erected in 1860-1. However, in 1838 Lord Poltimore bought what had been the old village poorhouse, made redundant by the creation of the central workhouse for the St Thomas Union (to which Poltimore and Huxham belonged) in Exeter's western suburb of St Thomas. According to the school's historian, Alan Foster, tradition in the village was that the school was located beside the church[10], and it is likely that Lord Poltimore arranged to use the poorhouse building as a replacement for the earlier school. The only written description of the pre-1861 school so far discovered suggests that it was 'ivy-covered' (therefore presumably not recently built)

[7] *Education Enquiry,* p.188.
[8] William White (White's) History, Gazetteer and Directory of Devonshire, 1850, p.201.
[9] North Devon Journal, 3 Jan 1839.
[10] Foster, R.A. *The Story of Poltimore School, 1861-1972, privately published,1972*, p.5.

and stood close to the church.[11] It is likely to have provided a single room for teaching, perhaps with accommodation for the teacher above, as it was described as 'The Schoolroom' in an advertisement for vaccination stations for the St Thomas Union in 1858.[12] (Smallpox vaccination had become compulsory in 1853.) It is possible that the purchase of the poorhouse as a school house was the first Lord Poltimore's contribution to developing education in Poltimore as a thanksgiving for the birth of a son and heir in 1837. It may also be from this period that the expansion of the Poltimore school catchment area to Huxham should be dated.

Although the school was referred to as a 'charity school'[13], no evidence exists of any charitable foundation in Poltimore with the object of applying funds to the education of parishioners, and it seems that once refounded it was entirely dependent on direct funding by the Poltimore family. In 1859 it was reported that: 'The school in the village is maintained at her ladyship's sole cost.' The outlay made by the Poltimores was not purely on premises and the wages of the teacher, but also on clothes. The report quoted above continued: 'Those who need it are supplied with clothing … The girls have a green frock, scarlet cloak, with hood, and a straw bonnet neatly trimmed. The boys have a green tunic fastened with a black leather belt and a cap with a scarlet band'[14]. Such distinctive costume had been a feature of charity schools of the past, like the Blue Boys and Blue Maids in Exeter, but was probably a rather archaic form of dress to institute in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is not known when this costume ceased to be used: the last references to them are to the issue of 'new clothes' at the celebration of the christening of the son and heir born to Lord and Lady Poltimore II in 1860 and black clothes to be used when the children attended the funeral of the first Lady Poltimore in 1863.[15]

The same account of the christening of Coplestone Bampfylde refers to the second Lord Poltimore's intention to build new schools as a thank-offering for the birth of his son. At the end of March 1860 tenders were invited from local builders for 'a new schoolroom and cottage' which, when completed, was described by the *Western Times* as showing 'the presence of pleasing and tasteful patronage.[16] This school, although subsequently altered,

[11] 'It would be difficult to find a prettier or more picturesque group than these children … grouped together near the ivy-covered school house on an Sunday morning', *Flying Post* (FP) 1 Dec 1859.
[12] FP, 16 Dec 1858.
[13] White's 1850, p. 201 and FP, 29 Jul 1868.
[14] As in (10) above
[15] FP, 21 Mar 1860; 10 Jun 1863.
[16] Western Times (WT), 31 Mar1860; 2 Aug 1867

remains in existence today (2017) and is the community centre for the village. It was built on what had formerly been an orchard, directly across the road from the church.

Caroline, Lady Poltimore, widowed since 1859, died in 1863 and the schoolchildren, suitably dressed in black, were part of her funeral procession.[17] Her daughter-in-law had already begun to take an interest in the school, and the new Lord and Lady Poltimore retained overall control of the school until 1875 when a Board of Managers was created and the school recognised as a Public Elementary School under a certificated teacher in accordance with the Elementary Education Act of 1870.

The Children and their Education

The 1841 census does not indicate whether or not children in the parish were at school.. The numbers of children being educated are referred to in directories as 36 in 1851 and 54 in 1868. Analysis of the census entries for 1851, 1861 and 1871, however, shows 58, 59 and 52 children listed as scholars living in Poltimore village alone. Children so listed in Huxham were fewer in number, but still between 10 and 15. It is unlikely that schools in neighbouring villages provided for any but a very few, so probably those attending regularly were fewer than those whose parents described them as scholars to the enumerators. That the enumerators did not merely enter every child of the appropriate age as ‘scholar’ is shown by the omission of the term against some children, for example the daughters of the farmer at Hornhill in 1851.

Poltimore school was established as a ‘charity’ school, and the children of the Rector, and those of some of the farmers, did not attend. Those of Lord Poltimore’s heads of functions, the head gardener, the bailiff, and the head keeper did often attend, however. William Manning, son of the head gardener, for example, was still at the village school in 1851 at the age of 12. Progress up the social scale may be indicated by change of practice over time: in 1861 the children of one of the local farmers (Franklin) and of the bailiff (Hews), who a decade earlier had sent their elder children to the village school, were listed as boarders at schools elsewhere.

[17] FP, 29 Jul 1863.

The age of starting and leaving school seems to have been flexible. The youngest age at which a child is shown in employment in 1841 was 10, with one boy identified as a male servant on a farm. Children as young as three are recorded at school on later censuses, often where their mothers were working as laundresses or agricultural labourers, but five seems to have been the normal starting age for school. At the upper end, children aged 11 are split between school and work, with more boys working than girls, but from age 12 onwards staying at school became more unusual. Girls tended to stay later than boys, and some remained until they were 14.

There is little evidence about the curriculum at this period. John Gould told the Charity Commissioners in 1843 that the poor were 'well provided for in moral and religious instruction', suggesting that this was the emphasis of the curriculum, and the *Flying Post* reported in 1859, in a similar vein, that 'Lady Poltimore devotes a great deal of her time to … endeavouring to improve the minds and characters of the young'.[18] Instruction would have included religious education, probably undertaken by the full-time curate for Poltimore and Huxham as Rev John Fortescue, who succeeded Richard Bampfylde, held a number of different offices and livings and often lived away from Poltimore. The 1851 religious census shows 25 children attending Sunday School in Poltimore][19] The pen picture written by the reporter in 1859, however, sketched the children assembling in their picturesque uniforms, grouped together near the schoolhouse on a Sunday morning suggesting a direct link between the day school and the Sunday School.[20]

The other element of the curriculum to which there are references is the emphasis (for the girls) on 'plain needlework'. The Poltimore and Huxham Cottage Garden Society held annual shows in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and 'Children's Work' featured as a category in the exhibitions, with prizes awarded for making garments and for darning.[21] As many as ten or twelve girls would be awarded prizes, or highly commended. The evidence of the 1911 census appears to demonstrate that handwriting was taught, and taught well. In 1911 householders filled in their own census forms, and a neat and uniform handwriting can be recognised amongst Poltimore natives, demonstrating the teaching of Miss Watts, schoolmistress for thirty years until the mid-1870s, and so teacher to many of the householders of 1911.

[18] See reference 4, above; FP, 1 Dec 1859.
[19] Michael J. Wickes (ed.), *Devon in the 1851 Religious Census*, Wickes, Appledore. 1990, pp?
[20] FP, 1 Dec 1859.
[21] For example, see FP, 29 Jul 1868, *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* (EPG), 29 Jul 1869.

Miss Catherine Watts, Schoolmistress

It is not known who instructed the children in the school before 1851. No teacher is listed on the 1841 census either in Poltimore or in Huxham. Miss Catherine Watts was listed as schoolmistress in Poltimore on the censuses for 1851, 1861, and 1871.The census entries record that she had been born in Exeter in 1823-4. She was, it appears, one of the daughters of Michael Watts, landlord of the Axminster Inn in Paris Street. Her father died in 1829 when she was only five or six and by the census of 1841 she and one of her sisters were living with the postmaster in Honiton. Catherine was assistant to the postmaster's wife, a milliner. The needlework skills her millinery developed would have provided useful background for teaching the girls in the village school. It was also noted that she had composed a song herself for the children to sing at the coning of age celebrations for the Poltimore heir,[22] but it is not known how she came to the attention of the Poltimores. In the censuses of 1861 and 1871 her sister's daughter, Louisa Palmer (b. 1853-4). is shown as resident with her and described as 'scholar' on both occasions.

It is not known precisely where in the village Watts lived at the time of the 1851 census, although it was possibly over the schoolroom. When the new school was built in 1861 she moved in to the new schoolhouse and is recorded there in the 1871 census. She evidently appreciated its garden, as she won prizes at the Poltimore and Huxham Cottage Garden Society shows for honey, gooseberries, and hollyhocks.[23]

Miss Watts retired probably in 1875, as the last land tax reference to her at the schoolhouse is for 1874/5, when it was recorded as £5 per annum. She continued to live in the village, in one of Lord Poltimore's cottages. As with many such teachers she had no direct entitlement to any pension, and had invested her savings with the West of England Bank, on whose list of investors her name appears in 1875. A few years later the Bank failed, with the consequence that shareholders lost all their savings. Lord Poltimore wrote to describe her plight and the action he intended to take to a meeting to discuss the setting up of a fund for the relief of the shareholders: '*The calamity to the poorer shareholders, more especially widows and spinsters, who relied on their bank dividends as their only means of support, is overwhelming. I am personally acquainted in this very parish with a*

[22] FP, 15 Apr 1858.
[23] EPG, 1 Sep 1865, WT, 2 Aug 1867.

case in point in relation to an elderly woman, who, for a great number of years, was a schoolmistress of Poltimore, and who was now living on an income derived principally from her savings. She is left utterly destitute, and I feel that I would rather relieve a case like this one – when I have been for so many years acquainted with the sufferer – by subscribing a sum towards buying her an annuity, than contribute towards a general fund, of which this lady would possibly receive but a very small sum. For these reasons, and not from any want of sympathy with the unfortunate sufferers, I must decline subscribing, preferring to reserve the amount I can afford to contribute for the case above mentioned.'[24] Watts stayed on after retirement in the village and is recorded on the 1881 and 1891 censuses, finally dying in 1901.

In 1861 and 1871 two other women are named as teachers on the censuses, both of them married women with families. Sarah Stark, wife of Robert, an agricultural labourer, was named in 1861 and Mary Lot, wife of a gardener and listed as gardener/infant school mistress in 1871. In view of the numbers of children aged three and four their role was probably as much related to child-minding as to instruction

Conclusion

Poltimore was a parish owned almost entirely by a single landlord, Lord Poltimore, and its population was entirely Anglican by observance. During the 1830s its first school was founded by the first Lord Poltimore, though probably at the instigation of his energetic steward. The school was expanded to incorporate provision for the neighbouring parish of Huxham and completely rebuilt in 1861. Lord Poltimore's second wife took a personal interest in the school and the Poltimore were personally responsible for its maintenance throughout the period, seeking no support from the National Society for Promoting Religious Education which offered grants for the development of education in Church of England establishments. No formal reports or tests were therefore required, and there is little information about what the young people learned and how effectively they were taught, although there is evidence that the intention was to provide youngsters with a sound moral foundation for life, and that handwriting was well taught and girls instructed in plain needlework and darning. Most children in the village appear to have attended, though some possibly on a part-time basis; those who did not attend were the children of well-to-

[24] FP, 4 Jan 1879.

do tenant farmers who were sometimes placed in boarding establishments. The school was able to continue in the same form after the 1870 Act and it was not until 1875 that a board of school managers was created. In all these ways Poltimore School was very like those in other small villages with single or majority landlords within the county.