

## Somasters Topsham National School

### *Foundation & Governance*

Established with a legacy from Anglican Clergyman, Joseph Somaster in 1767 to provide free education of poor children of Topsham. The fund was administered by the United Somasters Charity and included the legacy of a Mrs Bridget Osborne.<sup>1</sup> By 1863 the school was supervised and in effect managed by Rev Leakey.<sup>2</sup>

### *School Finances*

At a meeting of the trustees in 1773, it was agreed to appoint John West as a schoolmaster. At a further meeting in 1776 it was ordered that an immediate subscription be opened towards the support of the charity and also to advertise in the Sherborne paper for a master and mistress to teach 10 boys and 4 girls.<sup>3</sup> By 1850, 20 Children attended free out of a total number of 150 pupils on the register.<sup>4</sup> Money was raised for the new school building which opened at Parkfield Road on church land in 1863. Additional funding was provided by members of the established church. The Somaster, Elliot & Greenfield Educational Charities together paid the fees of some 40 children between 1863 and 1870.

### *Premises*

Original building was in Monmouth Street, Topsham, followed by a new school building in Parkfield Road.<sup>5</sup> It was known as the National School and was transferred to the school board in 1873; the premises being leased from the church authorities.<sup>6</sup>

### *Admission criteria – eligibility – and attendances*

Admission was by recommendation to the Trustees. Children were accepted from the age of 2 years and in 1859 a few boys and girls were still on the register at the age of 11. About 12% were children whose fathers were labourers.<sup>7</sup>

### *Curriculum and the school day*

Scripture, singing or nature study together with reading, writing and arithmetic.<sup>8</sup>

### *Teachers (Masters)*

1863-65 Henry Pinder

1865-72 Edward Webber

### *Education as a means of upward social mobility*

A study was carried out to try to identify whether or not attendance at the Somasters School had benefitted the children in gaining a higher status job than that held by their fathers. The admission registers for the years 1837 and 1838 gives the names of the pupils, their dates of admission

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<sup>1</sup> 'Schooldays in Topsham' by B G Rogers (DFHS)

<sup>2</sup> Topsham National School Log Book, 1869 (DRO)

<sup>3</sup> Somasters Charities 1417A add Topsham PF1 and PF2 (DRO)

<sup>4</sup> Whites Devon Directory (DRO)

<sup>5</sup> 'Schooldays in Topsham' by B G Rogers (DFHS)

<sup>6</sup> Robert Bovett, Devon County Council 1989

<sup>7</sup> Somasters National School Admissions Register (DRO)

<sup>8</sup> 'Schooldays in Topsham'

together with their fathers' occupations. The 1851 census returns of Devon showed those former pupils' occupations. Although many boys followed their fathers in their chosen professions, the sons of labourers had taken apprenticeships that would presumably have given them a better-paid and secure future eventually. Most of the girls who were unmarried in 1851 and remained in Devon held the position of servant or remained at home and it is therefore difficult to come to a conclusion on social mobility without further study.<sup>9</sup>

### **Other Schools**

Presbyterian school called Elliott's Church School – a free school founded in 1768

Infants school in Victoria Place connected with the Independent Chapel, established 1847; remained until at least 1852

Wesleyan school built 1852 in Majorfield Road – became a board school in 1873<sup>10</sup>



Former Topsham Wesleyan Schools 1993

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<sup>9</sup> Topsham Admission register 76/8/2/1 (DRO)

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bovett, Devon County Council 1989