

Education in Elstow. Part one - from the 1700s to 1873

During the early 18th century, three visitations by the Bishop of Lincoln reported on educational provision in the Parish of Elstow:

1706: *"There is no Lecture, School, Almes-house nor Hospitall in this parish"*

1709: *"No Public or Charity Schole, yet the cheife Inhabitants voluntarily pay for all poor children that are willing to learn. They are taught the Church Catechism".*

1712: *"There is no school".*

In 1802, James Lilburne reported to Samuel Whitbread II:

'Buckle's Sunday School consists of between 25 & 30 Boys who are taught to Read; & is pretty well attended. The expence [sic] of it per Annum is about £5/12/-. Prigmore's Sunday School consist of between 25 & 30 Girls who are taught to Read; & is pretty well attended. The Expence of it per Annum is about £5/12/-.

Both of the above Schools are generally well attended, &, there being no other school in the village, are of service.'

In 1818, a Select Committee enquired into educational provision for the poor. This was prompted by the recent foundation of two societies which promoted education and the building of schools. These societies were supported by a number of prominent nonconformists and sought to teach a non-sectarian curriculum.

In answer to this perceived nonconformist takeover of local education, in 1811 the "National Society" was formed to encourage the teaching of poor children along Anglican lines, including the catechism. The Select Committee sent a questionnaire to all parishes and the reply from Elstow stated that there was neither an endowment nor a school, the parson noting ' that Several of the children of the parish resort to day schools at Bedford, which is one mile distant.'

Over the next 15 years, the number of schools built in England continued to grow and in 1833 the government agreed to supplement the work of the two societies and local benefactors, by making grants of £20,000 per annum available to help build schools. They sent another questionnaire to each parish, asking for details of local educational provision and the return from Elstow noted: *'Four Daily Schools (chiefly for Lace-making), wherein 16 males and 27 females are instructed at the expense of their parents. Two Sunday Schools, one (commenced 1833) in which are 28 children of both sexes, supported by the minister; in the other are 30 of both sexes; it is supported by the Dissenters. The number of children in these Sunday Schools include those attending the Daily Schools.'*

In those days, a 'Sunday School' was just that, a school which met on a Sunday, usually in the church or nonconformist chapel or other similar building, teaching more than the religious topics with which Sunday Schools are associated today.

The dissenting Elstow Sunday School was run by the Bunyan Meeting, in Moot Hall.

In 1846/7, the Church of England made an enquiry as to all its church schools. This was against the background of a new Whig government, which championed secular education and the increasing importance of nonconformists (particularly Wesleyan Methodist) and Roman Catholics in providing schools. Elstow reported that there was only the Sunday School [at Moot Hall], with an average attendance of 30 boys and 34 girls, and commenting, somewhat pompously: "A Daily school is a great desideratum". Yet an article in the Northampton Chronicle in 1847, reported that the Anglican Sunday School met in the Vestry of the Abbey church.



England's first Education Act ("The Elementary Education Act") was passed in 1870. This was a milestone in Britain and demonstrated central government's unequivocal support for education of all classes across the country. The Act sought to secularise education, by allowing the creation of School Boards - groups of representatives, elected by the local ratepayers.

Boards had the powers to: raise funds: to form a local rate to support local education: build and run schools: pay the fees of the poorest children: make local school attendance compulsory between the ages of 5 and 13. Boards could support local church schools but, in practice, they replaced them, turning them into Board-run schools. The Act required a questionnaire of local schools in 1870, to which Elstow replied that it had 'no efficient school' and it 'required a school for a hundred in the village'. Also that 'If the school, for which application for a building grant has been made, be built and a certified teacher appointed, no further accommodation will be required.'

Directories later call this new school a 'National School' and there are references to it in the vestry minutes for 1870, suggesting that the application for a grant had been made to the National Society.

A School Board was formed for Elstow on 29th May 1873 and the school opened later that year as a Board School. It had cost £1,600 to build and had space for a hundred scholars. In 1874, the buildings and land were conveyed by Samuel Whitbread to the School Board.

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Part two of this article, covering 1873 to 1933, will follow in a later edition.