

THE INFANT SCHOOLS OF BROADWATER PARISH

by R. F. Drake

At the end of the 18th century Broadwater parish made no provision for the education of poor children. Following the national initiative by the church of England in 1811 the parish had established five day schools by 1818. In 1816 Robert Owen opened the first infant school in Scotland and a short while later similar schools began to be opened in England. After the success of these early schools there was controversy over their origin, with the parish publishing its own claim.

Accounts of the history of Broadwater during the early part of the 19th century, when the parish included the hamlet of Worthing, contain references to a number of schools provided for the education of the children of the poor. Three of these schools were for boys and girls up to the age of seven years. It was claimed by the parish that one or all of these three schools were the first infant schools in England. This claim has been repeated since, sometimes with qualifications, but there has never been any justification of the claim.

Thus the *V.C.H. Sussex* notes that, 'Two Infants' schools were started in 1815, mainly through the efforts of the Revd W. Davison, and were claimed to be among the earliest in England.' The reference for this statement is given as, 'Breads's Guide Worthing (1859), 14, 21.'¹ It is unclear why this guide was taken for the authority on this point, and much else, when earlier guides and other documentary evidence were available, nor why the unequivocal claim in the 1859 guide was not quoted, 'Worthing and Broadwater Infantine Schools were established in 1817; and were the first established in England.'

It is now accepted that the infant schools in the United Kingdom originated in the 19th century from the infant school system, a specialised method of teaching children up to

seven years. This was initiated in a school at the New Lanark mills in January 1816 by Robert Owen as the primary stage of his Institution for the Formation of Character which he had developed from the mill schools run by his father-in-law, David Dale.² In November 1818 Henry Brougham and a group of his friends opened a second infant school in London, the Westminster Free Day Infant Asylum, modelled on the school at New Lanark. The school was relocated and conducted from February 1819 by James Buchanan, the first master of Owen's New Lanark school. One of Brougham's friends, Joseph Wilson, opened a third infant school at Spitalfields, Middlesex in July 1820, and in August, Samuel Wilderspin became master. In June 1824 the Infant School Society was formed by a group of Dissenters, Evangelicals, Unitarians and Whigs, to implement Owen's infant school system including non-denominational religious teaching; shortly after Wilderspin became the Society's Travelling Teacher and opened schools throughout the country.³

These early infant schools had a curriculum based on affection and imagination; their objective was to develop moral principles in the children and habits of order, observation and thought. The children were taught directly by the master in the informal object lessons about the

uses and qualities of common things and natural items, sometimes shown on pictures. There were indoor amusements and games, simple physical exercises, music, singing and dancing; a well equipped playground formed an important element in the design of these schools. There was no elaborate system of rewards for individual merit or coercive punishment.⁴ These infant schools were not just preparatory to the various schools for older children and the teaching of the three R's was a secondary aim, if undertaken at all. In 1825 Wilderspin commented on the fundamental difference between Church of England National schools and the infant schools, 'The National schools, on the contrary, deaden the faculties of the children by obliging them to commit to memory the observation of others, few of which they comprehend: they are never invited to think for themselves, and the injurious consequences arising from this radical defect, cannot but be felt through life.'⁵

The aims and methods of these infant schools were known in Sussex. The success of Westminster school led to a public meeting in Brighton in December 1823 attended by a number of senior clergy and chaired by Robert Carr, Dean of Hereford, soon to become Bishop of Chichester, and reported in local newspapers.⁶ An infant school was opened in Ship Street Lane in January 1824 by Wilderspin. An article in the *Sussex Advertiser* 2 February 1824 about a book on infant schools written by Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, referred to the absence of rewards and punishments in the schools and concluded, 'There are now six infant schools in London, besides one in Bristol, one or two in Liverpool, and some others of which we have not yet received particulars. The King proposes to become patron of one to be opened in Brighton.'

In R. Sicklemore's, *History of Brighton* 1827 p. 91, the infant school established in Brighton in 1824 is described:

Its object is to carry the moral principles of education still farther than is done in the national schools, by taking charge of the children of the poor, from the age of two

years till they are six or seven. During that period many evil habits are contracted, which it is impossible afterwards to get rid of. By being placed under proper superintendance during that time, the children are kept out of harm's way, and out of bad company. The system of management is also totally different from that pursued in other schools. A more marked attention is paid to the forming of their little dispositions, and the right culture of the heart is the great aim of the instructors.

In the Autumn of 1825 the *Sussex Advertiser* reported that a meeting was to be held in Lewes to consider establishing an infant school for children between two and seven years, 'instructed on the plan adopted with such great success at Infant Schools at Westminster and Spitalfields, and recently in similar institutions in most of the principal towns in the Kingdom.'⁷

At some time between 1800 and 1804 Mrs Eleanor Wood, wife of the Revd Peter Wood, Rector of Broadwater, opened a school on Sundays in the parish church. The Free School for Boys was opened on 1 January 1813 in the High Street, Worthing, under the management of the Rector, the Chaplain of the Chapel of Ease, the Revd William Davison, and a number of prominent lay persons. Broadwater Village School for Girls was opened on 5 May 1814 at the east end of the village under the patronage and management of Mrs Wood. A Girls National School was opened on 28 June 1815 in North Street, Worthing, managed by the Rector and Chaplain, and assisted by a ladies committee; Mrs Wood was also patron of this school. All these three schools occupied converted barns, an arrangement recommended by the National Society.⁸

The two schools in Worthing taught children from seven years of age. Broadwater Village School taught young children, both boys and girls, and older girls and was later called Broadwater Infantine School, District No. 1, one of the three infant schools in the parish. The earliest reference to an infant school in Worthing

is a minute of the Committee of the Free School for Boys dated 5 May 1817, where it was, 'Ordered: That a Supplementary School, be provided in conjunction with the Girl's School.' This Supplementary School was later called the National Infantine School Chapel Road, District No. 2, until 1854 when a new school was built and opened in July as the Davison Infantine School. The school was sited adjacent to the Girls National School, a juxtaposition that has given rise to confusion between these two schools, especially as the Girls National School was moved to new buildings in Chapel Street, now Portland Road, in 1861 and renamed variously, Worthing Girls School or Christ Church Girls School. Another misunderstanding over these two schools has been caused by the practice for girls to remain in the infant schools until they found work, often as servants, with older boys and other girls transferring to the two senior schools in Worthing.

Local guide books published from 1817 by authors resident in the parish noted only the Worthing Free School for Boys and Girls National School. The first reference to infant schools was in a guide dated June 1832 which stated that, 'There are also two infant schools'. Then in 1857 a guide noted infant education's origin in 1815, 'Worthing—was the first place in the Kingdom where this great work began', but Breads' guide of 1859 gave the date, 1817, for these first schools. Several general directories that include Sussex refer to infant schools at Worthing and the earliest of these in 1823 stated that there were, 'infantine schools for children from four to six years old'. It was not until 1866 to 1874 that the claim was set out, 'The first Infant school in England was founded here in 1817,' and thereafter the item was omitted.⁹

The Parliamentary Select Committee to Enquire into the Education of the Poor circulated a questionnaire to clergymen dated 13 April 1818 and repeated this on 10 July 1818, the results being published in a Digest. Davison retained a copy of his answers to the second questionnaire and in this he recorded that there

were three schools in the parish each with 40 boys and girls between the ages of three and six years, the age group then generally classified as infants, the salary of the mistresses was, 'about £10 a year'. The Digest, which also included other information from the Rector, referred to the three schools for boys and girls but made no mention of the ages of the children.¹⁰

Neither Davison nor the Digest identified these schools as infant schools nor was any reference made to their opening in 1817 although one of the parish schools was stated by Davison to have opened in 1818. This latter school was the third infant school in the parish. A reference to it was contained in a parish survey taken about 1820 where Davison is shown renting a property in Chapel Street although he was then living at North End Cottage, High Street, Worthing. The school was known later as Chapel Street Infantine School, District No. 3, until 1861 when it was moved to new school buildings in Chapel Street and renamed Christ Church Infant School.

In April 1820 Davison wrote to the National Society as sole manager of the three infantine schools in the parish to request that the schools should be united to the National Society through the Diocesan Society at Chichester, the Western Division of the Sussex Society for the Education of the Infant Poor, in the principles of the Established Church, and in justification he confirmed that, 'In these schools, the National System is adopted as far as practicable.' No mention was made in the letter of the claim that these were the first infant schools in England, nor in the accompanying application for financial aid for one of the schools.¹¹

The role of the parish infant schools in relation to the two senior schools is indicated in the 1822 report of the Sussex Society which referred to preparatory schools at Worthing while the 1824 report stated 'The preparatory schools at Worthing continue to prosper. "Of the benefits of these Schools," says the report from that place, "it is impossible to speak in too high terms. During the last year 39 children were

promoted from them to the two upper schools, all able to read words of one syllable, and to write, and in good discipline.”’ The report later gives the attendance—preparatory, daily 66 boys and 64 girls, total 130. The annual reports continued to refer to preparatory schools in Worthing until 1828, no reference was then made until 1832 when the report recorded a daily infant school at Worthing.

The Worthing Permanent Society for Bettering the Condition and Improving the Morals of the Poor was formed in April 1817 and Davison was the Secretary. Only one annual report has been traced, the eighth, published in the *Sussex Advertiser* 27 June 1825. One of the functions of the Society was to provide support for the infant schools of the parish and the report gave the attendance of three National Infantine Schools and the number of children promoted to the two upper schools. The origin of the schools was set down, ‘These infantine schools were established in 1817 and were the First infantine schools established in England—The Westminster Infantine School was established in 1819 and the Spitalfields school in 1820. See Wilderspin on Infant Schools page 23 and page 30 2nd edition.’ This annual report is the earliest record found so far of the claim that the parish established the first infant schools in England. The claim was later repeated in this form and no other evidence was ever offered in a public statement.

Samuel Wilderspin’s book, *The Importance of Educating the Infant Poor*, second edition (1824), pp. 23 and 30, stated that the infant school established in Westminster in 1819 was the first infant school in the country and was followed in 1820 by the school in Spitalfields. A list of infant schools subsequently established was given on p. 23: Islington, Whitechapel, Brompton, Blackfriars, Putney, Bristol, Worthing, Liverpool and Wandsworth. The claim by the parish that it opened the first infant school was thus based on the selective use of Wilderspin’s book to establish the dates of the Westminster and Spitalfields schools as later

than 1817 while ignoring that Wilderspin considered the Worthing schools opened after 1820. In Wilderspin’s third edition (1825) p. 8, he again placed Westminster as the first infant school, established in 1819, and included Worthing as the eighth in a list of ten schools opened shortly afterwards; however on pp. 21–2 and 46 there were further short lists of infant schools recently opened without any reference to Worthing while on p. 284 Worthing was omitted from a comprehensive list of 55 infant schools already formed. Thus Wilderspin considered that the first infant school was opened in Westminster and constitutes an unsatisfactory basis from which to claim that Worthing had such a school.

There were only two regular collections taken each year at the Chapel of Ease when sermons were preached for the benefit of the Worthing Free School for Boys and the Girls National School; these sermons were advertised by the distribution of printed handbills. The first reference to infant schools was in a handbill dated 8 September 1825, ‘there are also 183 children in the Three National Infantine Schools, which are supported by another Fund’. From August 1836 the handbills contained a reference to, ‘the Three National Infant Schools’; in November 1840 an exceptional sermon was preached by Davison in aid of the three National Schools for Infants in the parish and this handbill included the statement that, ‘These Schools were the First that were established in England for Infants;’¹²

In an application to the National Society for financial aid dated 23 May 1828, Davison stated that there were three infant schools in the parish united with the Society in 1814, 1815 and 1817 although the individual schools were not identified. The National Society records show that the schools united to the Society in these three years were, respectively, Broadwater Village School, Girls National School and Free School for Boys, Worthing. Davison was thus seeking to exploit the status of the three existing National schools in order to obtain a grant for

the three infant schools. However one of the infant schools was not opened until 1818 and Davison was ignoring his earlier, successful application in 1820 for the schools to be united to the National Society through the Sussex Society and the handbills advertising sermons.

Confused, misleading and at times, incorrect statements were made by Davison in promoting his schemes. Thus in an application to the National Society in 1848, he stated he was, 'but a poor curate with £40 a year' when his salary as Chaplain of the Chapel of Ease had been fixed at £120 a year by Act of Parliament in 1809, revised by an Act in 1824 to £150 which he received as Chaplain until his death in 1852; further, he had placed donation books in the libraries which provided him with another £50 a year income.¹³

A letter dated 1 December 1828, written out by the Chaplain and signed in the Rector's name by his wife, supporting the application of May 1828 to the National Society said:

The Infant Schools we consider of vast importance both in themselves and as they furnish a constant supply of well trained children for the Upper Schools. Many Infants admitted into these Schools are thus attached to the Established Church who if left at large till the age of 7 years might be associated with Schools of Dissent. The oldest of these children regularly attend Public Worship at the Chapel of Ease.

It might not be thought proper on me to give a character of these Schools, but I may venture to refer to such of your Committee as have at any time visited them. Sir Jas. Langham and Archdeacon Watson have done so; and so too has Dr Bell, who was pleased at the time to express himself in terms of strong approbation.

The National System is adhered to in the upper Classes and as far as practicable in the lower ones.

Worthing being a place of great public resort the Schools are much visited and several Schools have in consequence been

established at other places, in which has been introduced the same observance of the National System as is here adopted; and it is not questionable that but for these examples many Schools are now waiting for admission into Union with the National Society which would otherwise have been in connection with the lately established Infant School Society.

These reported visits to the schools accord with Revd Dr A. Bell's movements in the Autumn of 1826 when he made a short tour along the south coast inspecting schools. He arrived at Hastings in December and later went to Ryde; at the end of the year he stayed at the Sea House Hotel, Worthing with his friend Sir James Langham. The Archdeacon of St Albans, J. J. Watson, was the brother of the Treasurer of the National Society and preached at the Chapel of Ease in Worthing in 1817.¹⁴

Davison's description in this letter and earlier in 1820, of the infant schools adhering to the National System, is the only evidence of the method of teaching in these schools but this establishes that they did not practise the infant school system of the Westminster and Spitalfield model; the parish schools were National schools for very young children, using Dr Bell's monitorial system. The salary of the school mistresses in 1818, about £10 a year, compared with Wilderspin's recommended salary of £25-£40 in 1825, indicates that the mistresses were similar to dame school mistresses without any specialised training.

For the *Education Enquiry of 1833* the questions were addressed through the Overseers of the Poor to the school masters and mistresses of the parish, and Overseers making their returns were asked to make any observations relative to the questions. It might be expected that the Broadwater return would make some reference to the origin of the infant schools; however the Broadwater entry in the published Abstract makes no such comment.¹⁵

In November 1836 Mrs Louisa Arrowsmith, a widow staying in Brighton

recorded in her diary a visit to Worthing where she saw an infant and parish school; she gave the curriculum and the ages of the children of the latter but made no comment about the infant school.¹⁶

The publication of the parish claim in the 1857 guide book followed the setting up of an association for various parish charities by the Rector, now the Revd Edward Elliot. The first annual report was issued in December 1854 and stated that, 'The Schools in this parish, interesting as they are in themselves, are rendered still more so by the fact of their being among the first established in the Kingdom.'

Later the report referred to:

The following interesting Tablet, which is hung up in the Infant Schools, will explain their origin:

Worthing and Broadwater Infantine Schools were established in 1817; and were the first established in England. Westminster Infantine School was established in 1819; and the Spitalfields School in 1820. See Wilderspin on Infantine Schools, Pages 23, and 30, Second Edition. Lord Brougham and the Bishop of London have frequently, both in Parliament and elsewhere, complimented each other, as the originators of these institutions. If there be any merit in such a matter, let it be given to whom it is due: namely to the inhabitants of Worthing and Broadwater. Render to all their dues.

In 1903, Elliot, still Rector, stated that this notice, framed, was formerly hung on the walls of each of the five parish schools.

Wilderspin's second edition of his book, *The Importance of Educating the Infant Poor*, was published in 1824; H. P. Brougham was created Baron Brougham and Vaux and entered the House of Lords in November 1830 as Lord Chancellor; C. J. Blomfield, Rector of St Botolph, Bishopsgate from 1820 to 1828 and Bishop of London from 1828 to 1856, was acknowledged as a zealous promoter of infant schools but was not attributed with the origin of this type of school, however he was patron of the

London Infant School Society, founded in 1825 to rival the Infant School Society, and which opened a model and training school in 1828. From the reference to Lord Brougham it follows that the text of the tablets hung in the schools was written after November 1830 as an elaboration of the statement made in June 1825 in the Permanent Society report.

A similar tablet was placed in the Boys National School after it was rebuilt in 1834 as suggested by the National Society when issuing its grant. The text was drafted by Davison in January 1835 to give public acknowledgement to the subscribers and for donations that had helped to finance the new school. The need for the National Society to ask for the exhibition of such information suggests that this was not common practice in the parish schools, that the provisions of the tablets in the infant schools followed from the example of the Boys School and that this did not occur prior to 1835.

In the application for aid from the National Society in December 1848, already referred to above, Davison stated, 'in this Parish was established the First Infantine School in England. For some time Lord Brougham contested this point; but upon his Friend, Mr Hume, examining our Documents, he admitted the priority of our establishment.' Lord Brougham may well have accepted that a Worthing school had opened before the Westminster school in 1818 but there is no evidence that Davison repeated his statement or that Brougham subsequently agreed that a Worthing school was the first infant school. Davison did not enter the debate over the origin of the infant schools that had been taking place.

Due to a lack of agreement in the evolutionary stage of the infant school system as to what constituted an infant school, the opening of the first schools became the subject of a public controversy until the 1850s between Owen, Brougham and Wilderspin. Brougham, as a member of parliament in the Commons and from 1830, in the Lords, and of the Infant School Society, although claiming initially to have

opened the first school then repeatedly stated his view of the origin and development of infant schools in England: that Owen had founded the first infant school at New Lanark mills while he, Brougham, with others, later opened the first urban infant school based on this system at Westminster, from which the infant school movement had grown, promoted by Wilderspin.

Wilderspin was inconsistent, generally claiming to have opened the first infant school at Spitalfields but finally, in the 1850s, accepting Brougham's claim to have opened the first school in England. In a letter to Brougham dated 2 April 1852, Wilderspin referred to Brougham and Owen as founders of infant schools in England and left it to Brougham to settle which of the two had opened the first school in England. Clearly Wilderspin was not aware of Davison's claim that Brougham had accepted that the first school had been opened in Broadwater. Owen, in his autobiography of 1857, referred to the founding of the Westminster infant school by Brougham and others, after the New Lanark school, and quoted Brougham in 1835 and Wilderspin in 1825 to justify his view that the first school in England was established in Westminster.¹⁷

There is evidence that there were parish schools for very young children in Broadwater before November 1818, the date that the Westminster infant school opened. These schools were similar to dame schools, defined in the 1818 Digest as schools kept by females and also preparatory schools for very young children. However, the parish schools were not included in the digest as dame schools although Davison's copy of his answers show that there were three parish schools that fell within this category. After Owen's New Lanark school opened in 1816 and the consequent development of the infant school system from 1818, schools were called infant schools when children left school at or before seven years and were conducted on the infant school system. Once the name, infant school, gained wide publicity it was often substituted for dame school to describe schools for young children under seven years,

however conducted. It was on this basis that the *Education Enquiry Abstract* of 1833 was compiled, although in contradistinction it uses the phrases, Infant-School-System and systematic Infant School.¹⁸

If infant schools were considered primarily as preparatory schools for very young children then these schools existed in the 18th century. However the parish claim was specifically related to the experimental, model schools opened in the 19th century to promote the new infant school system and in that context the concept of the first, systematic school was significant. The publication in 1824 of Wilderspin's list of infant schools and the reference to this year in the parish claim points to a reaction by the parish to the placing of the parish schools after those in London. The statements of Davison from 1820 and the Diocesan Society reports show that the parish schools were preparatory National schools for very young children, conducted in part with the aim of attracting Dissenters' children into National schools and subsequently the Church of England as well as attracting other schools away from the infant school system.

The attitude of the parish to its claim to have opened the first infant schools in England was initially ambivalent and little effort was made to publicise the infant schools until the 1830s. This was consistent with the cautious attitude of the National Society to infant schools in the 1820s and the general hostility of the Church of England to any system of education outside its control. There was no defence of the claim in the long public controversy between Brougham and Wilderspin. The concern of the parish throughout was to raise subscriptions to promote the National Society objective of educating the poor in the principles of the Established Church, not to evolve new teaching theories and practice.¹⁹ This was the reason for the lack of any educational development originating from the Broadwater schools and their absence in the history of education. The critical path of the growth of infant education ran from New Lanark through Westminster not

Broadwater. The parish schools were not the first infant schools in England, they were not even conducted on the infant school system, and in making the claim the parish itself, not others, failed to render to all their dues.

Author: R. F. Drake, 10a Southover High Street, Lewes, East Sussex.

Notes

- ¹ *VCH Sussex* 6 i (1980), 125.
- ² R. Owen, *New Existence* (1854), Part V, Liii, quoted in F. Padmore, *Robert Owen* (1906), I, 132.
- ³ H. P. Brougham, *Evidence taken before the select Committee on Education*, 6 August 1834. *Parliamentary Debates* 3rd Series 88, 14 August 1846, 699. S. Wilderspin, *The Importance of Educating the Infant Poor* (1824), 22, 30; *Infant Education* (1825), title page. *The Times*, 17 December 1819, 8 August 1824.
- ⁴ Wilderspin, *Infant Education*, 273. P. McCann and F. A. Young, *Samuel Wilderspin and the Infant School Movement* (1982), 32–3, 39, 40, 43–4. W. A. C. Stewart and W. P. McCann, *The Educational Innovators 1750–1880* (1967), 66–8, 72.
- ⁵ Wilderspin, *Infant Education*, 273–4. See also 11 below.
- ⁶ *Brighton Gazette*, 18 December 1823; *Sussex Advertiser*, 22 December 1823.
- ⁷ *Sussex Advertiser*, 28 November and 12 December, 1825.
- ⁸ J. Evans, *A Picture of Worthing* (1805), 42; and (1814), 56–7. J. Shearsmith, *A Topographical Description of Worthing* (1824), 40. Handbills, *Worthing, Miscellaneous Cuttings, 1800–1830*. Worthing Reference Library (WRL).
- ⁹ J. Shearsmith, *A Topographical Description of Worthing* (1832), 28. No reference was made in his guide of 1824 to the infant schools; he was parish surgeon and visited the parish schools. French and Watkins, *Handbook and Directory for Worthing* (1857), 39. Breads, *New Guide and Handbook to Worthing* (1859), 21. Pigot, *London and Provincial Directory* (1823–4), 524. Kelly, *The Post Office Directory of Sussex* (1866), 2148; (1870), 2604; (1874), 2786.
- ¹⁰ *Digest of Parochial Returns to the Select Committee into The Education of the Poor (1818)*, 954.
- ¹¹ The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, throughout England and Wales, was formed in October 1811. There are several uncatalogued files for Broadwater and Worthing in the National Society Archive. The Sussex Society was the Diocesan society formed in December 1811 to carry out the National Society's policy and open parish schools and manage two teacher training schools in Chichester in Dr Bell's monitorial system, later National system.
- ¹² Handbills, *Worthing, Chapel of Ease Notes*. (WRL).
- ¹³ 49 Geo III C115, 5 Geo IV C20.
- ¹⁴ R. Southey, *Life of the Rev. Andrew Bell* (1844), 3, 320. *Brighton Gazette*, 4 January 1827.
- ¹⁵ *Education Enquiry, Abstract of Answers and Returns* (1833), 964.
- ¹⁶ R. M. Healey, 'Brighton in 1836', *Sussex History*, 2 (9) (1985) 1, 2.
- ¹⁷ University College London, Brougham Correspondence, 10653. *The Life of Robert Owen written by Himself* (1857), 1, 142, 152; Supplementary Appendix Aa (1858).
- ¹⁸ *Education Enquiry, Abstract of Answers and Returns* (1833), 5, 405. S. Wilderspin, evidence to *Select Committee to inquire into the Present State of Education*, 18 June 1835.
- ¹⁹ For example a plaque on St George's infant school, Worthing, read, 'This school and two others one for Broadwater and the other for Christ Church Worthing were built by voluntary effort to secure the daily instruction of the young IN THE TRUTHS OF THE BIBLE and in the principles of the Church of England 1873.'