

Some Aspects of Education in Cheshire in the Seventeenth Century

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MOST parishes had a school which taught at least reading; some taught writing and accounts as well; and a few were what nowadays would be called grammar schools. The last have been fairly extensively described by local historians, but much needs to be done before a comprehensive survey can be attempted of the ordinary village schools for the poor who did not need Latin and had no chance or even ambition to attend a university, nor even to become one of the more important parish or county officials to whom Latin would help solve the legal tangles of that legally minded century.

Two parishes in mid-Cheshire seem typical examples of villages having an ordinary school. The two parishes are contiguous to each other, but were very different in many respects, one being a farming parish entirely and the other being a salt town in the centre of farming land. The former is Church Minshull and the latter Middlewich.

Church Minshull school was first¹ endowed in 1614 by Christopher Minshull who gave £200; in 1668 Ralph Wilbraham of Dorfold Hall near Acton by Nantwich gave another £50 and the parish collected a further £50, thus making the endowment one of £300. The Reports of the Charity Commissioners² explained that an old book recorded a resolution of 1729 from a Vestry meeting to the effect that Richard Vernon³ of Middlewich had several sums of money intended to pay the salary of the Church Minshull schoolmaster and that these sums should be recovered.

Some of the details behind this story can be seen in the account books for the late seventeenth century, a period of great parochial activity in Church Minshull, well demonstrated by the increases in parish rates. Between 1671 and 1680 the assessment was $\frac{3}{4}$ in the £1, but in 1681/2 it was 20/- in the £1; the rates went down to $\frac{3}{4}$ again and even to $\frac{2}{6}$ between 1687 and 1697, only to rise to 40/- in 1701/2. These years of high rates were the years of rebuilding, mainly the church, but there are entries about the school in the churchwardens' accounts.

The wardens usually stated that they had spent money at the parish meeting; thus the whole parish had to be consulted about the school, and from the start the school was referred to as the 'free' school. This interest is to be expected at a time

¹These facts appear on the Charities board in the church.

²"The Reports of the Commissioners appointed in pursuance of various Acts of Parliament to enquire concerning Charities in England and Wales relating to the County of Chester, 1819-1837, Parish of Church Minshull," p. 642 ff.

³Richard Vernon seems to have been a relative of Christopher Minshull.

when stress was laid on the necessity of each one being able to read at least his Bible and when individualism was praised as a principle and was an economic incentive; social success equally depended upon the ambition and progress of the individual. Richard Harding at whose house the first recorded meeting took place was the local stone mason who was well to the fore at this time when the parish requested Quarter Sessions to grant financial help from the Hundred rates to restore the Weaver bridge and again when it sought and obtained national help to pay for the rebuilding of the church. Most master craftsmen and therefore their apprentices had to be able to read, write and do accounts, and Richard Harding was no exception.

In 1668 there were several parish meetings; Mr. Wilbraham gave his £50, but nothing more was done until 1672 when, following a visit to Nantwich and Middlewich, they obtained from Mr. Lowndes 'advice, certificate and bond for the free schoole.' By 1680 the wardens were recording the collection of school money⁴ from the parish and were surveying the school bounds. Mr. Lowndes⁵ was probably the Robert Lowndes of Middlewich who had given the school house there and in 1709 could claim the right to nominate the schoolmaster. Church Minshull does not seem to have had a school house until the next century. Ormerod⁶ says that the school house was built in 1785 'previous to which the master of the school (which was established about the beginning of the seventeenth century) taught in the church.' This is borne out in items in the church rebuilding accounts and is the only logical explanation of a partition made of 'Spars 24 foot and boards' costing £4/-/-, and which was plainly painted as though for a division in the church which, being a typical early eighteenth century one in style, does not lend itself to recesses for small groups.

If the children were having lessons in or about the church between 1700 and 1704 there must have been great difficulty in teaching. It would seem that lessons were normally in the church, probably in the tower and then in the church itself. What the children were taught is something else not known; the purchase of a table for 3/- in 1685 may indicate that writing was being taught, and it is noticeable that the wardens and others who needed to sign account books or petitions did so in a practised hand or careful copperplate style, as though all had learned at the same place and most were used to writing. In this parish, which from a study of rating assessments numbered about 66 families, at least 20 men at any time could and did write well.⁷ The salary of the schoolmaster was low, but he could be expected to teach reading and writing, and nothing more.⁸

⁴ July 1676 Received the sum of one pound four shillings being the free gift of William Woodstock towards the maintaining of a free school at Church Minshull. 01—04—00.

⁵George Ormerod, *History of the County Palatine and City of Chester* (1819), vol. III, p. 101.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁷A subscription list of 1717 gives much the same result: 149 names are on the list, but members of the same family were noted separately.

⁸The usual rate of interest at this time in this area was apparently 4½%; thus on £300 his salary would be £13/10/-.

The journeys of 1695 were most probably about the lending of the school money. By 1729⁹ the wardens had decided to call in the money from Richard Vernon and were resolved to start a legal action against him if necessary; two gentlemen from Northwich and Kinderton, Hugh Wade and Ralph Kent, were to be employed to recover the money. The money was recovered and by 1785 Henry Brooke of the Grange at Weaverham, heir of Thomas Brooke, paid £15 p.a. interest for which in addition to a free house and garden, the master was expected to teach 20 children to read, write and do accounts.

No schoolmasters were mentioned by name in the seventeenth century, but as the vicars, John Farrington, and later Cornelius Edwards, normally accompanied the wardens on school business, perhaps it can be accepted that they were also the schoolmasters.

The school at Middlewich was in a separate building by 1660 and probably much earlier. By 1816¹⁰ eight boys had free places at a school founded before 1693 and the four wardens nominated the boys and the parish the master until 1719 when Robert Lowndes had gained this right: this was reaffirmed in June 1762¹¹ when an indenture referred to 'master or masters of the school situate in Newton near Middlewich, commonly called Middlewich school.' The Lowndes family owned Lea Hall and Manor at Wimboldsley, and the Ralph Lowndes mentioned in this deed and his heir John Lowndes had held and had recovered money belonging to the school including £100 given in 1719 by Catherine Harrison of Kinderton in Middlewich parish. In 1719¹² also Thomas Newall gave £20 to educate at the school poor children, and by 1733 a girl and two boys were benefitting:—

pd Schoolhire, a hat and handkerchaf for her
pd for a pr of Shuse for Duke and Hokinson and School hire

Mr. Newall's gift was invested in land, but as there was not quite enough money, the schoolmaster had to wait a little from Michaelmas when he should have received it, and was 10/- short. Perhaps as he had a house and garden he did not mind waiting; the master must have been a little better off than most villagers. Although his salary by 1816 was only £10/9/6 and so was less than the Church Minshull salary, at Middlewich eight boys only had to be taught and taught reading, whereas at Church Minshull writing and accounts were also dealt with. At Middlewich writing and accounts were extra, and by 1860 60 boys were in school and some girls were being taught by the master's wife. By then also the master had to keep the house and school in repair, including thatching the roof.

Repairs to the school were frequent from 1660 when the parish increased its rates partly for the repairs at the school. In 1660 the rate on 107 'occupations' was

⁹This copy of the 1729 resolution of the Vestry meeting is in the account book (the 'old book' referred to in the Charity Commissioners' Report).

¹⁰Ormerod, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 101.

¹¹Charity Commissioners' Report, pp. 770 ff.

¹²Churchwardens' Accounts for Middlewich 22 March 1722.

at 8/4 in the £1 whereas in the previous year it had been at 3/4 for the poor rate and 8/4 extra rate for repairs and payments of debt (Middlewich had been very loth to pay rates during the Commonwealth). This extra money was spent in various ways: the purchase of a chest, 4 keys, a ring, 'stables,' and a 'haspe,' 13 yards of Normandy Canvas for the Kings Arms and Commandments (£1/6/-), a cloth for the communion table and pulpit, materials for a cushion, and £5/18/6 for repairs to the school house. Unfortunately the accounts for 1666 to 1684 are missing, but in 1686 there is an item for glazing and several for thatching the school.

James Tylor for drawing straw for the scoole	00-02-00
more straw and serving the thacher	00-02-06
Tho. Handley for [angrells] Letter and work at the scoole	00-01-06
glasinge for the scoole	00-00-08
Tho Gorst for thatching the scoole	00-05-00
Rich Blackmoore for glasing the Church and scoole	01-01-06
Peter [Wrench] for work at the scoole	00-17-06
for d[rr]ing the scoole	00-04-00

The expenses for the next ten years show a brick school with a thatched roof, glass in the windows and a paved floor. The school door had a lock and key (regularly lost or broken). A Thomas Newall is often paid for work done at the school; the windows were frequently repaired by Ralph Brodie e.g. in 1690 he received £1/14/- for 'Glazing the Church and Schoole and repairing the leads'.¹³

The account books for the period were not written up individually by the wardens and few of the officials made any records. In 1691 the schoolmaster wrote the register and made the pages into a book:—

pd the School mr for writeing the Register & finding par[ch]mt	00-02-00
pd him more for Ingrossing itt into the Register Book	00-01-6

It would appear then that in Middlewich few people could write. Middlewich was a little salt town (and one that was losing ground to Northwich about this time) and would have a large proportion of unskilled labourers who, unlike the apprentices, did not need a formal education; whereas in Church Minshull, a parish of farmers and rural craftsmen, more boys needed an elementary education of reading and arithmetic. The rating assessments give the same comparison: in Church Minshull there are well-to-do parishioners like the Wades of Wade Green but the majority were comfortably off; thus the Wades mix with the Garratts, Darlingtons and Hardings, who were the craftsmen and farmers; in Middlewich there is more divergence of wealth, from the Leicesters and other titled gentry or the owners of Lea Hall to the very poor cottagers who in 1659 'hould no wallinge'¹⁴ and had a mere fourpence to pay in contrast to the flat rate of one shilling for everyone else during that special levy. This difference in economic and social background is the

¹³After 1713 Widow Brodie, who seems to have been continuing her husband's business, received the payments.

¹⁴i.e. salt boiling.

key to the educational provisions of the parishes. Church Minshull boys belonged to an increasingly prospering farming community, for dairy farming and cheese production were lucrative; and the village craftsmen needed a similar schooling for them to provide the new houses, expanding farm buildings, improved implements and furniture. These people do not get themselves presented to Quarter Sessions for unrepaired roads or bridges: they kept on top of parish and county commitments and always had useful reasons for apparent failure, as when they said they had not mended their bridge because only strangers used it, and so the strangers should help to pay for its repair (and they did!). One has the impression of alert business people enjoying the administration of their parish which was not too harassed by its own poor and rarely by anyone else's. Middlewich seems to have been run by a small oligarchy; the gifts to church, school and poor came from a more affluent group. Materials were often given, e.g. in 1693 Hugh Wishaw, the servant of Sir Jeffrey Shakerley and a churchwarden, paid for eight days unskilled work at three-pence a day for unloading cinders and sand at the school and church, presumably to make a path. The parish paid for the work as a rule. In 1693 £2/5/6 was paid to 'Mr. Furnivall¹⁵ for 3000 of Brick for the School,' but no payments until 1699 suggest a use for these bricks. Then Adam Manley received nearly £3 for repairs, and two more flags were bought, which looks like an alteration inside the school. Between 1700 and 1704 more large sums suggest more than routine repairs and in 1704 thatching was done. The bricks may have come from Church Minshull where large quantities were being made to make the church, but the local clays are quite suitable for brick making and there was at one time a kiln across the River Croco not far from the church.

The school according to the 1762 indenture was in Newton, which is where building may have been going on in 1699. but a memorandum of the same year refers to paying the sexton 10/- for keeping the children out of the churchyard and the dogs out of the church during divine service. If the school had been near the church, the position most likely is somewhere near the present primary school.

From these two parishes the impression is gained of individuals intensely interested in local concerns, and this confirms the impression gained from studying petitions to Quarter Sessions. The enterprising and energetic man could find more than enough to occupy his time, and for these pursuits that indicated social position as well as wealth at least a meagre education was needed, and the general impression is that every parish had a school of some sort and that illiteracy did not belong to the seventeenth century. Those who were excluded from the Anglican controlled village or grammar school could and did find their own means of obtaining an education. In 1672 after the Declaration of Indulgence several Presbyterians and Congregationalists applied for and gained permission to preach and teach in the county: Thomas Leadbeater was allowed to preach and teach in his own house at Sandbach; John Ravenshaw at Wybunbury, Andrew Barnett at Astbury, John

¹⁵There was a Mr. Furnival in 1710 who was the schoolmaster at Sandbach. It is possible that in 1693 he was the master at Middlewich, and he was certainly consulted along with the Bunbury master in 1709/10.

Brereton in Bowden parish, Robert Steele at Barthomley, and several in Chester. These people had probably been quietly preaching and teaching for a long time and would do so again outside the boroughs after the Indulgence was withdrawn. So had John Pleasington, the private priest of Edward Massey, son of Sir William Massey of Puddington. In 1674 Edward and his wife were accused of recusancy and of housing a schoolmaster who 'comes not to church.'¹⁶

There was general interest in knowledge for its own sake; Bishop Burnet commented on this among both clergy and laity¹⁷ and John Locke's "Thoughts on Education," published in 1690, advocated a practical and sensible approach to education to fit the boy for life, Greek, fencing and music being useless, except for a small minority, but Latin, drawing, arithmetic, astronomy, history, account keeping, gardening and shorthand were considered useful subjects. This being the ideal one expects the seventeenth century schoolmaster like the twentieth century schoolmaster to write books about teaching and for teaching, as did Adam Martindale, vicar of Rostherne between 1643 and 1663, previously a schoolmaster at Upholland¹⁸ and Rainford in Lancashire before becoming a Puritan minded vicar to be dispossessed at the Restoration. Martindale became chaplain to old Lord Delamere until he died in 1686 at High Legh.

Gifted masters include several from the school at Macclesfield. Thomas Newton was born in Butley-cum-Newton in Prestbury parish, went to school at Macclesfield, and after studying at the universities became headmaster at Macclesfield until he died in 1607. Caleb Pott had his estates sequestered in 1645; he had been schoolmaster at Knutsford, Sandbach, Newcastle and Audlem previously. Thomas Brancker had a fellowship at Exeter College, Oxford, until he lost it at the Restoration; he originally came from Tilston, was eventually reconciled to Anglicanism, became vicar of Whitegate and later master at Macclesfield. His writings in Latin include in 1662 "The Doctrine of the Sphere" and in 1668 "Translation of Rhonius's Algebra called An Introduction to Algebra"; he had studied chemistry under Robert Boyle, and it was this and his knowledge of mathematics that led to his introduction to the third Lord Brereton, a founder member of the Royal Society. Brancker's epitaph describes him as the ideal scholar who knew Hebrew and other languages, had read and taught philosophy, mathematics and chemistry.

This school at Macclesfield was one of the grammar schools. Audlem, where Caleb Pott had been, was another endowed in 1655 by Sir William Bolton and Mr. Gamull, citizens of London, who gave enough to pay a salary of £30 p.a. to the Master and £10 p.a. to the usher; money which came partly from the Merchant Taylors in London. Bunbury continued its tradition from before Edward VI's time; there Thomas Aldersey had been the benefactor and the master received £20 p.a. The Haberdashers of London controlled this school which was to have no girls over

¹⁶Petitions to Quarter Sessions for the County of Chester at Chester Castle.

¹⁷Bishop Burnet, *My Own Times*, p. 42.

¹⁸J. J. Bagley, *Upholland Grammar School: The Evolution of a school through three centuries* (1944 University Press of Liverpool), pp. 12-13.

the age of nine and as few under nine as possible: although one finds women conducting a business after the death of a husband or father, advanced education for girls is seldom mentioned. King's school in Chester was continuing¹⁹ in the refectory. Malpas school was founded in 1528. In 1654 the baptism register refers to Robert Thornton as 'Minister and Master of the Free School in Malpas'. He had taken the place of Thomas Bridge who was restored after 1662 and who, with his successor, Richard Wright, gave money to build a grammar school while Lord Cholmondeley gave another £200 to make the master's salary up to £25 p.a. The Malpas registers also refer to a schoolhouse at Cholmondeley, a schoolmaster of Chorlton, one at Wigland and to a Mr. Nathan Williams, schoolmaster. Another Puritan was Richard Joell who in 1654 was 'now Schoolmaster at Chad Chapel'. The famous Edward Burghall of Bunbury and Acton near Nantwich was another Puritan who combined schoolmastering with being a parson; he lost his livings in 1662 and in that year began a free school in Acton founded by private subscriptions. The schoolhouse in Bowden was rebuilt in 1670. Nantwich had a school in the churchyard by 1611; Roger Wilbraham of Dorfold gave Mr. Millinge 5/-, and 10/- for a quarter's fees, when he resigned in 1692 and a quart of sack to the new master, Mr. Boydell, 'to welcome him to N.' Northwich school had a master and an usher.

All these grammar schools and others accepted the bright poor boy and the richer boy; many began at the village school together. As Christopher Wase²⁰ pointed out, the schools were socially comprehensive and the squire's son rubbed shoulders with the proud poorer child from the vicarage and the clodhopper from the tiny cottage; this maintained class consciousness, but it also led to accepted responsibilities and more understanding and tolerance in running parish and county affairs. For the very poor who could not or did not want to benefit much from learning at school, reading and simple measurement fitted most of them into apprenticeships, and some parishes soon had apprenticeship charities to enable the poor and deserving child to gain a trade.

OTHER SCHOOLS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

(Information gathered mainly from the Returns of the Charity Commissioners)

Bebington had a schoolhouse but the master may have taught in the belfry.

Barthomley had endowments for school and poor by 1722 worth £610, mostly given by the Crewe family.

Barrow used the church tower as a school.

Bidston had land bought by 1724 to endow a school and later had a school built on waste ground.

Burton in Wirral had £400 given in 1663 by the Bishop of Sodor and Man, who had been born at Burton, to erect and endow a school

¹⁹At the Chester City Record Office the Mayor's Letterbook (M/L) 335 1st Jan. 1651/2 has an order from the Committee of Parliament about lands which provided the money for the school.

²⁰Christopher Wase, *Considerations concerning Free Schools in England*, 1678 quoted by G. M. Trevelyan, *England under the Stuarts* (Methuen 1949), pp. 12-14.

Caldy must have been regarded as a classics school because by 1727 there was a complaint that the parson who taught there did not know any Latin and should be removed.

Great Budworth does not seem to have had a school, although a schoolmaster was buried there in 1656.

Eastham parish built a school by public subscription in Childer Thornton; Stanney school was founded in 1682 by Sir Thomas Bunbury of Little Stanney in Stoak: both schools later benefitted and seem associate schools.

Farndon had a school built in 1629; the master had a small croft and garden and £14 p.a.

Frodsham had a neat stone school in the churchyard built about 1660; the master had a house at Overton. Representatives of the parish and townships as far away as Manley and Norley administered the money.

Foulk Stapleford had a school probably part of the chapel built by Thomas Moulson of London at his own cost in 1627: it was a red stone building on common land near the Gowy in Hargrave Stubbs. Moulson gave lands to make a salary of £20 p.a. for the master.

Halton school was mentioned in a memorial in Runcorn church for 1635 when John King who died in 1635 was said to have given £6 to the poor and school of Halton.

Little Budworth had a school given in 1706 near the park wall of Oulton, presumably where the present little school is.

Little Peover may have had a school before 1710 when a school house was built.

Nether Alderley had a good school house 'built of free stone' in Gastrell's day; it was in the churchyard.

Lymm had a school from 1698 when Sir George Warburton of Arley and William Domville of Lymm gave lands and John Leigh gave £50. By 1785 the school was a substantial stone building and the masters taught writing and accounts.

Marbury had a school built in the churchyard in 1688 at the expense of the parish with other small endowments. This is the Marbury near Whitchurch.

Marple would have had a school if the would-be benefactor, John Bradshaw, had not been a regicide.

Mobberley is said to have had a free school in the middle of the century founded by the Rev. William Griffith.

Mottram-in-Longendale had an endowed school from 1681, though several people gave money and/or lands later. By 1717 it had considerable funds.

Neston had a school on Windle Hill by 1724 but it had no endowments and nobody went to school!

Over had money given in 1698 by Thomas Lee of Darnhall; the school may have been above the church porch or where the present Darnhall school is.

Plemstall may have had a school from a bequest of 1667.

Pott Shrigley may have had a school from a bequest in 1684.

Rainow had money left by undated wills before 1787.

Sutton had a small charity given in 1689 to teach children to read..

Further schools may be discovered by a thorough search of parish account books, Quarter Sessions petitions and Diocesan records.