

RAGGED SCHOOLS AND OTHERS: THE EDUCATION OF THE POOR OF SAINT PANCRAS BEFORE THE EDUCATION ACT OF 1870

RICHARD CONQUEST

In 1870 an Education Act was passed – after years of debate and controversy – which laid the foundations of a national system of education. Within a few years some 2,500 schools were included and by 1888 about 14,000 establishments had been incorporated into the state system. The board schools, with their distinctive architectural appearance – likened by Charles Booth to ‘a tall sentinel at his post’ – survive in large numbers in every town and city of England.¹

However, it is the intention here to describe the educational institutions which served the poorer classes of the parish of Saint Pancras before the coming of the board schools. This parish was a spectacular example of that demographic expansion and urban growth which characterised the industrial revolution. The parish was thinly populated until the mid 18th century, the more so given its close proximity to the Metropolis. From the early 19th century urban growth was very rapid, and the growing size and destitute condition of many of its inhabitants were the frequent subject of comment and complaint by social commentators and reformers.²

Before the Act of 1870, state participation in popular education was indirect and insufficient. The Factory Acts had made some provision for working children and financial assistance was given to philanthropic and charitable organisations, especially the National Schools Society. The endeavours of the Church

were debilitated by jealousy and rivalry between the various denominations, a form of factious dispute with depressing sequels today.

The state, imbued with Utilitarian notions of non-intervention in social and economic life, was reluctant to employ the resources at its command to effect social reforms and some feared the growth of working class literacy, which was ‘like putting the torch of knowledge into the hands of rickburners’.³

Similarly, the Reverend James Fraser, later to become the Bishop of Manchester expressed a familiar view when he said that,

‘even if it were possible, I doubt whether it would be desirable, with a view to the real interests of the peasant boy, to keep him at school till he was 14 or 15 years of age . . . I venture to maintain that it is quite possible to teach a child soundly and thoroughly, in a way that he shall not forget it, all that is necessary for him to possess in the shape of intellectual attainment, by the time that he is ten years old.’⁴

Early Developments:

The Charity Schools

In the absence of a national standard of schooling which the state alone could provide, a motley collection of institutions emerged to meet the obvious need for basic instruction, some were admirable and some deplorable.

During the 18th century a number of charity schools were set up and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge gave support to such schools in London from 1698. One recipient was the Saint Pancras Charity School, founded in 1776 'for Instructing, Cloathing, Qualifying for useful servants and putting out to service, the Female Children of the Industrious Poor'.⁵

Prospective pupils were put forward at the age of eight years by their local church and a ballot was then held to select candidates since places were in great demand. There were six pupils initially, who were removed from their parents and 'instructed in the Principles of the Christian Religion, in true humility and obedience to their Superiors and such necessary Qualifications as may make them a Benefit to the Community and honest and useful Servants'. Children left the school at the age of 14 years, usually to go into domestic service.⁶

The school was financed, as its name suggests, by donations of money and by the sale of the children's work. The site of the school was given by Lord Southampton and Her Ladyship was a patroness. Appeals in local churches raised extra money, but not as much as the collections at the Freemason's Arms Tavern which produced the extraordinary sum of £319.13.6d.⁷

In 1816, Mr. James Stewart informed the Select Committee on the Education of the Lower Orders that he had founded a school at Percy Street in 1812, because, apart from the Saint Pancras Charity, there was nowhere for poor children to go.⁸

At first classes were held on Sunday evenings and 220 children aged between 7 and 14 years were taught to read in six months, according to 'Dr. Bell's Plan'. The school expended about £80 a year upon books and 'the remuneration to the

persons who keep the children in order during divine Service'.⁹

The Saint Patrick's Charity School was founded in response to a particular social need, that being the benefit of the children of the growing number of Irish immigrants, who,

'excluded, as it were, from their native country, by causes over which they at least had no control, settled themselves in this great town, where they constitute a large portion of the most industrious and hard working of the population'.¹⁰

The children were taught gratuitously by local ladies 'for motives of humanity, without reward'.¹¹ As was common at that time, much money was raised in support of the school at public sermons. For instance, in 1838, £520 was collected in this way and the governors paid special tribute to the Reverend Mr. Reardon, 'whose pathetic appeals in behalf of the Charity were equally distinguished by powerful reasoning and an eloquence emanating from the heart'. Donations were also raised at the school's annual dinner – in 1838 Daniel O'Connell gave £5.5s and the Spanish Ambassador contributed £2.2s.¹²

Such philanthropic and religious organisations certainly increased the availability of popular education but it is difficult to be precise about the number of schools that operated in the early decades of the nineteenth century. A Parliamentary survey carried out by the Vestry Clerks of each parish in 1833 revealed 118 day schools and twenty six Sunday schools. However, that was not a full count, for as the Parish Clerk of Saint Pancras said, many other private schools existed but 'the masters and mistresses whereof decline making returns'. Also, Catholic institutions refused to reply to official enquiries.¹³

The Dames Schools

The various enquiries and investigations into the education of the working classes revealed the existence of many private establishments and the most numerous and unsatisfactory type was that of the dames schools. Much detailed information about these schools was recorded by the Newcastle Commission of 1861 and by the inspectors who examined every school at the time of the establishment of the School Boards after the Act of 1870. It was all too evident that many, if not most, of these schools were schools in name only.

The great majority of the dames schools were found to be 'utterly deficient' or were similarly condemned. They very rarely occupied adequate premises but made use of cramped domestic dwellings or any other available space. One school was held in the lavatories of a gin palace and as the inspector remarked,

'Basins fixed in wooden frames and towels on rollers a few feet from the roof give a very incongruous character to the schoolroom . . . there are no classrooms, no gallery, no playground, and the light is in part obtained by the temporary removal of some of the floor of the dancing room replaced in the ordinary position after the school-children are dismissed in the afternoon . . .'¹⁴

Generally, the schools were lacking in the most basic materials and 'the children bring their own books, or rather, portions of books, for they are usually in fragments and there is an utter lack of school machinery'.¹⁵

The schools often claimed to offer a sound curriculum, but all too often this was wishful thinking. An example was Miss Shaw's 'Adventure School' in Kentish Town, where, in a sitting room twelve feet square children were supposedly taught reading, writing, arith-

metic, dictation, religious knowledge, history, grammar, geography, needlework, music, drawing and French. The fee was 1s per week and the inspector found the school to be 'inadmissible'.¹⁶

Frequently, there was no pretence at teaching, as at the school run by 'A very respectable, but illiterate old woman . . . in a wretchedly dirty room'. Another was held by 'Mrs P, a perfect kennel, 30 little children, mixed, eldest nine. Boy reading Gulliver's Travels and firmly believes them true, the Mistress uncertain on the matter'.¹⁷

The poor quality of education offered by these schools explained the reluctance of their proprietors to submit to an inspection or to complete official returns as the Vestry Clerk had noted in 1835. The 1871 school inspectors found a similar coyness, for example, Mrs. Wallis of Bayham Place, Camden Town, said that 'she would rather chuck the school up and behaved in a very unladylike manner'.¹⁸ Miss Barshaw's school was found to be abandoned when the inspectors arrived and 'instead, Mangling done by a Mrs. Brown'.¹⁹

Evidently the quality of education in the schools costing £1.1s per quarter was abysmally bad. The usual charge was between 3d and 6d per week. When teaching competence was considered by the Newcastle Commission, the inspector for Saint Pancras, Josiah Wilkinson exclaimed, 'What can I say? The profession, as a profession, hardly exists; it is a complete refuge for the destitute, including German, Italian and Polish refugees, housekeepers and maids, not 5% of whom hold teaching certificates'. Wilkinson said that the academic claims of the teachers in such establishments were simply 'amusing'.²⁰

Perhaps the main purpose for many of the dames schools was simply to provide child-minding services for parents who



1. 'An Old Woman's School, Camden Town', c. 1855.

were obliged to work. Some better schools charged similar fees but then an excessive demand would appear. At least the payment of some small charge avoided the stigma of recourse of the charity and ragged schools. However, Wilkinson pointed out the irony in this situation, for the poor who escaped pauperism and the workhouse paid for teaching in 'wretched hovels' while pauper children benefitted from 'the magnificently appointed buildings and excellent tuition provided for the workhouse . . . children . . . this suggests very painful reflection . . .'²¹

The Ragged Schools

In the years between the mid-1840s and the mid-1870s, the Ragged School Union served to bring some instruction and moral guidance to the most impoverished and distressed classes of society. The Union was founded in 1844, and its Secre-

tary, William Locke, explained to the Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes that its schools were intended for,

The children of costermongers who sell in the streets, of pig-feeders and rag-dealers . . . knackers and cats-meat men, of slop-tailors and street musicians and the lowest mendicants and tramps . . . of hawkers and pigeon dealers, of dog-fanciers and other men of that class . . .²²

When asked if these children were really dressed in rags, Mr. Locke replied that the Union did not allow them to remain so for long, but provided a tunic, 'which covers their rags, but if you lift up that upper garment there is a mass of rags underneath'.²³

The Union was aggressive in its evangelical endeavours to remonstrate with 'indifferent' parents and to persuade them

to send their children to school. Other children were introduced to the schools by Churchmen, 'Bible-women' and other pupils. The first concern was to bring them the saving knowledge of the Scriptures, and beyond that their functions were modest, to prepare the children for one of the better available schools, or 'to make shoeblacks of them, or in some way to raise them in life'.²⁴

The premises and facilities found in these schools were often found to be very inadequate, even as late as 1871 when they were examined in detail by the School Board inspectors. The Ragged School Union tried to improve the quality of the buildings, facilities and staff, but its insistence upon independence from public funds provided through official channels meant that there was a constant shortage of money. However, despite these obvious limitations, the Ragged School Union was sustained by a sense of mission, to retrieve the young from a life of ignorance and vice.

The accent of teaching was placed firmly upon religious instruction and moral improvement and the schools purposefully directed their energies to those classes of children 'whose repeated criminality and gross obtrusive vice, provoke the loud demand for further education, while they have hitherto been untouched, and seem to be almost intangible to any other agency'.²⁵

An early example of a ragged school in Saint Pancras was that opened in Agar Town in 1845. Agar Town had a brief and very inglorious history, being built as a speculative shanty-town in the early 1840s only to be demolished, almost without trace, to make way for the construction of the approaches to Saint Pancras Station some twenty years later. The Ragged School Union reported upon an early social survey conducted there by the City Mission in about 1844. This revealed 464

'small houses' to be occupied by 698 families. Out of a total population of 2,960 people, 818 were aged between 3 and 12 years, and of these 492 or 60% attended no day school. In addition, 132 families were found without a copy of the Bible and 445 'whole families attended no place of worship'.²⁶

Such conditions aroused great fears for the moral welfare of the inhabitants, especially young females, for 'it is quite impossible for the proper decencies of life can be observed and they . . . know more at 12 than many "a high born dame" knows at 20'.²⁷ It was to such districts as Agar Town and the nearby Somers Town that the Union sought to bring salvation through the teachings of the Christian faith.

The Agar Town Ragged School was opened in a skittle shed called the 'Olive Branch' and initially there was no solid floor but the staff gave their time to remedy this. The school administrators and the Union itself, were always anxious to demonstrate the need for such schools and to show a great demand among local impoverished families. A proven need would better persuade wealthy benefactors to contribute funds and for these reasons statements about school enrolments and attendances should be treated with a little caution.

When the school opened, 150 children were admitted, although it was recognised that this was too great a number to allow any useful instruction. A further hundred were turned away and 'stayed around the door to annoy by throwing stones, brick-bats etc'.²⁸ By 1850 some five hundred children and young people were said to be enrolled, and an average of one hundred attended the school between the hours of 9am and 9pm. From time to time it was necessary to teach children in the open air or to send them home for the want of space. The task of teaching was made

easier by the appointment of a teacher who had been specially trained for this demanding work by the Home and Colonial Infant School Society and a new building costing £250 was opened in 1847.²⁹

The Kings Cross Ragged School was founded in 1844 and was housed in a two story building in Britannia Street which was rented for £20 a year. The two classrooms were used during the day and an evening class was held on the lower floor. The building was thought adequate to house forty-seven scholars and the average attendance was put at sixty.



2. Kings Cross Ragged School, Britannia Street, c. 1865.

When the school was inspected the instruction given by one unassisted teacher was considered better than that usually found in ragged schools, but it was impossible for the teacher to maintain order on two floors at the same time.

There was a lack of apparatus, books and desks and 'no separate offices for boys and girls'. However, the premises were judged to be sufficiently good to be continued as a public elementary school within the Board system.³⁰

Several other ragged schools were set up in Saint Pancras but the inspector's reports of the early 1870s tended to emphasise the inadequacies of buildings, equipment and teachers. For example, the school at Rochester Place, Kentish Town, was found to be 'utterly inadmissible' for 'the smells from a cowshed immediately under the school room and the bad ventilation, want of proper offices . . . made the work of inspection very irksome'.³¹

The Camden Town Ragged School was conducted in two rooms of forty by nineteen feet and this was considered sufficient to accommodate 182 children. On the day of the inspection in 1871, some 265 children were crammed in, possibly to demonstrate the high level of demand among parents. Hardly surprisingly, the schoolmistress 'said that she was too nervous to give a lesson in the presence of strangers'. Evidently, little teaching went on and it was concluded that 'the attendance of the children is so irregular and the ignorance so great' that it would be 'hopeless' to present more than a handful of pupils for examination.³²

It must be said that the ragged schools were often harshly criticised and unfairly disparaged. Henry Mayhew for example, attacked them for providing 'slipshod education' and for being places 'where the bad are allowed to corrupt the less vicious and lead them into theivish practices'.³³

Many schools were seriously disrupted by riotous and criminal children and the police were frequently called to restore order. When the Somers Town Ragged School was visited in 1871, the inspector wrote that examination was made impos-

Service to Commence at half-past Six. A Collection will be made.

AGAR TOWN RAGGED SCHOOLS.

A SERMON

WILL BE PREACHED ON BEHALF OF THE ABOVE SCHOOLS

By the

REV. JOHN KELLY,

Of Liverpool, In

TONBRIDGE CHAPEL, NEW ROAD,

On

SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 9,

The Service will commence at 11 o'clock.

These Schools are for the poorest and most neglected Children of the neighbourhood, and are open on Sunday from 9 to 12, from 2 to 4, and from 6 to 8 o'clock; on week-day evenings from 7 to 9 o'clock.

An Infant Day School is conducted from 9 to 4 o'clock daily, except Saturday. The attendance is on Sunday 200; week-day Evening 80; and week-day 100.

CONTRIBUTIONS of Money, Books, or Clothing, will be thankfully received by the Treasurer, J. R. BUNNETT, Esq., 5, Gordon Place; the Secretary, Mr. WOODMAN, 22, Church Terrace, Agar Town; and by Mr. GENT, at the Office of the Ragged School Union, 1, Exeter Hall, Strand.

Blackburn & Burt, Printers, 904, Holborn Hill.

3. A Handbill of c. 1848.

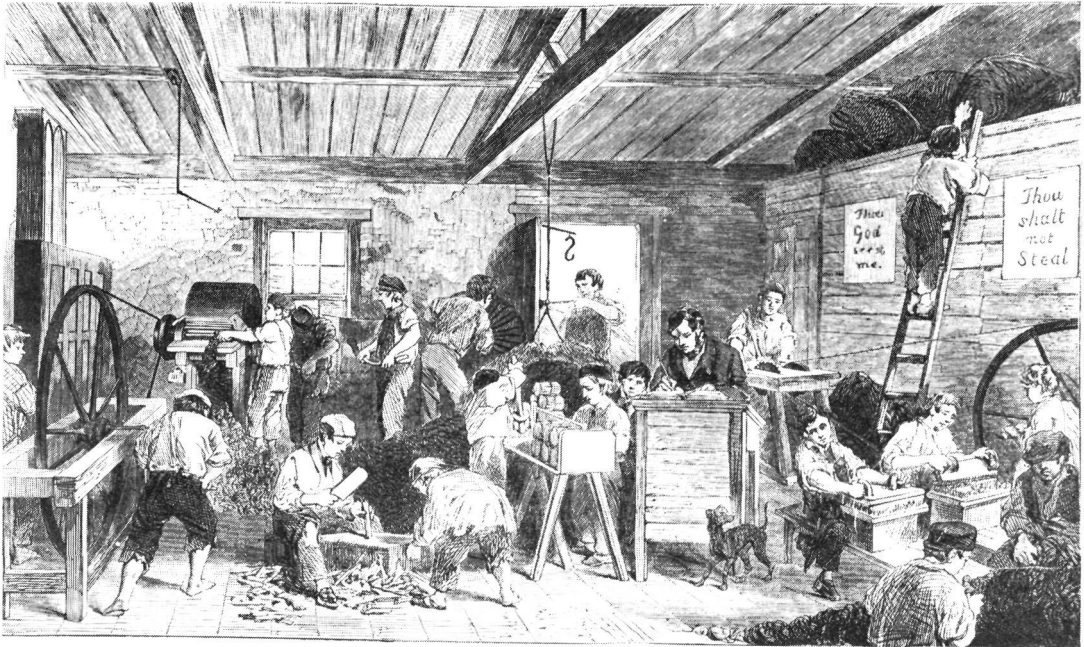
sible 'by the noise and shouts of the children running about and pursued by the teachers'. After two hours of mayhem, 'I was obliged to give up the struggle'. The school was described as being 'merely a refuge for wild and fearfully ignorant children who run about under cover instead of in the open street'.³⁴ Here, as at Agar Town, the teachers were used to finding their truant children in the local jails.³⁵

The criticism that the schools were 'a ragged refuge for noisy children' was true and therefore misplaced. Many attended simply to keep warm or to receive food and clothing. So many homeless turned up

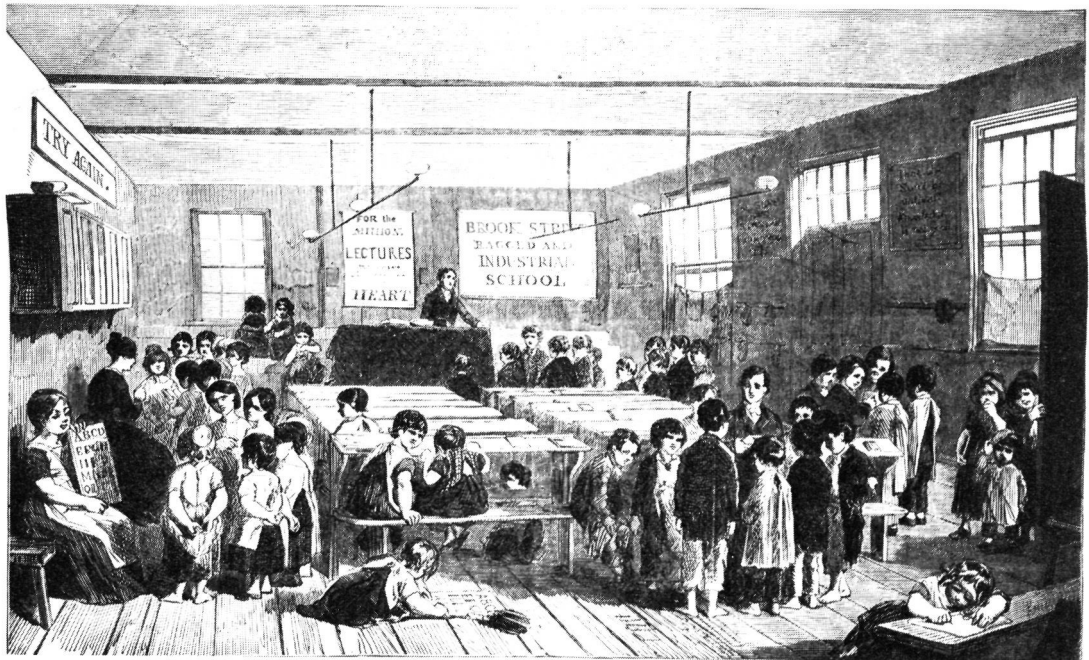
that the Union was obliged to open refuges for them and infants as young as two years were taken in.³⁶

In addition to teaching activities, the ragged schools encouraged other inducements to moral improvement and responsible parenthood and citizenship. At Agar Town a Penny Bank was opened, together with a clothing club and a Band of Hope was formed.³⁷

The inspections of 1871 revealed that most of the ragged schools were deficient in terms of the rising standard of professionalism among teachers that was then developing because of the increase in vocational training. Similarly, the



4. Brook Street Ragged and Industrial School: the workroom 1853.



5. Brook Street Ragged and Industrial School: the school room 1853.

growing public expenditure upon schools and facilities meant that the standards offered by the ragged schools were overtaken by events elsewhere. However, some were thought to be good enough to warrant inclusion within the Board system, for instance, those at Camden Town and Kings Cross.

Occasionally, somewhat better schooling was provided for the working classes by other agencies. A case in point was that of the school opened by the North Western Railway Company. Although it was intended for the children of 'railway servants' and ninety-four were admitted, 120 pupils were not employees children, and a further hundred were turned away. Fees ranged between 2d and 6d per week depending upon the father's income. The school encouraged reading by providing a library. Josiah Wilkinson commented that this school illustrated the underlying weight of demand, 'even where the public are not invited, but only permitted to attend'.³⁸

The Workhouse School

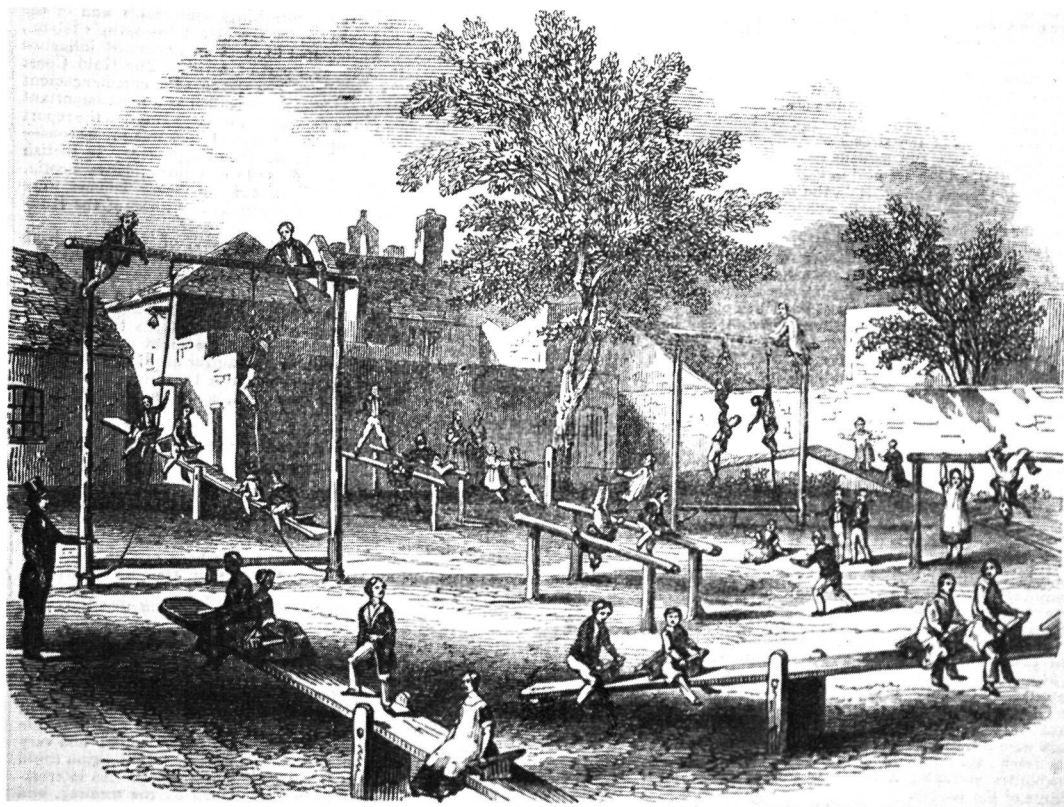
Perhaps the saddest class of children were those whose parents were consigned to the workhouse which was situated on the edge of Agar Town, 'that stately pauper palace, which looks down proudly upon this withered portion of the parish'.³⁹ Before the 1850s virtually no teaching was carried on either in the infants or the girls schools. The workhouse was grossly overcrowded and insanitary, giving rise to frequent scandals over the management of the institution. The workhouse children were said to be 'totally ignorant' and their physical condition was often so bad as to prevent any attempt at instruction. The workhouse population was, by its very nature, itinerant, and this meant that destitute children attended school 'only for a few days'.⁴⁰

The workhouse schools were visited by representatives of the Home and Colonial Schools Society and the British and Foreign Schools Society and their reports indicated that conditions were somewhat better in the 1850s. The classes were found to be well organised with desks and forms provided. A trained teacher was appointed to teach according to the Pestalozzi Method. In addition to the all important religious instruction, the children were taught 'common things' such as 'making a bed, cleaning a room, cleaning a mahogany table and making a plum pudding'.⁴¹

The teaching given concentrated upon the ideas of moral improvement and self-reliance, the parochial authorities hoping against hope that these young charges to the local ratepayers would secure employment and thus remove themselves from such dependence. The inspector's reported that 'the children's knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and of the Catechism of the Church of England, was highly creditable'.⁴²

The schoolchildren were evidently more disciplined and restrained than some of the pauper children who attended the local ragged schools at Agar Town and Somers Town, and 'The order and discipline . . . pleased me much, and the children appeared subdued, yet generally cheerful and obedient without fear'. This was doubtless the result of the often draconian regime that operated there and given the grim history of the workhouse, this was something of an accolade.⁴³

When Josiah Wilkinson visited the workhouse some years later, he commented upon the paucity of education that was provided for the frightening total of seventy children under the age of six years but approved strongly of the removal of the older children to new and vastly better premises at Finchley. The regime of fear



6. Gymnasia and playground of the children of the Home and Colonial School Society, Grays Inn Lane, c. 1860.

and callous discipline still continued with such practices as the removal of children from parents who had breached one of the many workhouse rules. However, the parish authorities did at least provide some stimulus to education by refusing to give relief to paupers outside the workhouse unless they agreed to send their children to school.⁴⁴

Sunday and Evening Schools

Sunday schools had become numerous in the late 18th century and by the 1860s there were one hundred of these establishments in Saint Pancras. According to estimates produced by the Newcastle Commission, these reached over 15,000 students.⁴⁵ It was very common for large

numbers of children to be given basic religious instruction by lay teachers. At one school, 700 children were tended to during the course of the day by 34 teachers who were mostly local shopkeepers, bookkeepers and artisans.⁴⁶

In addition to the Sunday schools, evening schools were instrumental in bringing literacy to children who were obliged to work during the day. In the early 1860s, fifty schools offered evening classes, usually in addition to day school activities. More than two thousand five hundred pupils were enrolled and the average attendance was put at 1,488 or about twenty-nine pupils per establishment.⁴⁷

The high level of demand was indicated by these figures and it is very significant

that one quarter of those attending evening classes in 1861 were found never to have attended a day school. Less than a third of the pupils had attended a day school for a period of five years. Staff student ratios were estimated at 1:79 and this again suggests the strength of demand.⁴⁸

The Agar Town Ragged School provided such facilities but was obliged to limit the numbers to fifty students, 'in consequence of their rude and often violent behaviour, five or six are quite sufficient for one individual to manage'.⁴⁹ Classes were also provided for youths between the ages of twelve and twenty and it was said that some had improved themselves sufficiently to emigrate to Australia, there to start a new life.⁵⁰

In addition to the Sunday and evening schools, a number of institutions emerged which provided adult education. The Working Men's Literary Institute was opened in 1853 in Gray's Inn Road. Its purpose was 'to supply means of educational progress and harmless recreation'. The Institute was managed by a Committee of working men and the classes were vocationally inclined, the range of subjects included book-keeping, arithmetic and shorthand. There were also wide readings of classical literature and debates upon such matters of moment as to whether 'it is likely that the general excitement in Italy will result in a successful rising of the people?'⁵¹

The Working Men's College at Mornington Crescent provided similar instruction in the evenings and – then as now – 'is doing much to increase the intellectual results of education'.⁵² Josiah Wilkinson approved strongly of this kind of establishment, being as they were, alternatives to drinking and other harmful leisure activities. Given the deficiencies of the educational system, such as it was, he thought that not too much should be ex-

pected of it and therefore the value of these adult schools was enhanced.

The Obstructions to Education:

Drunkenness, Indifference and Poverty

It is evident that by the 1860s educational facilities of some sort had become available to most of the people of Saint Pancras, even those in the most squalid slums such as Agar Town. The ragged schools adhered to their policy of providing free education to all and this often resulted in an inability to provide adequate staff and materials. The reason for this was that the Ragged School Union felt that it should maintain its dependence from all other agencies in order that it should remain free from all constraints to reach those most neglected classes of society and tend to them according to its particular religious convictions. In the event it was a debilitating independence for it could not provide the same standard of education as those schools, such as were opened by the National Schools Society, and the latter gradually usurped the functions of the Union, making it superfluous to any obvious need. The coming of the Board schools merely completed this process.

However, it was not always so and for a time the ragged schools diverted the more problematical of children away from the more respectable establishments. It was reported that one National School in Saint Pancras had been invaded by 'a considerable number of untrained, rude, half-clothed children' thus provoking protests from the more diligent parents who complained about the reception of 'this rude . . . Ragged class'. As a result, the destitute children were sent to a ragged school, after which 'The National School quickly recovered its reputation'.⁵³

The overwhelming problem was that of child poverty, which had become in-

creasingly conspicuous during the urban expansion of the early nineteenth century. The Census of 1851 indicated the scale of the problem by showing that nearly one million children aged between three and twelve years were missing from school and other counts and this 'too numerous body of destitute children . . . perpetually haunt large towns and cities, snatching a miserable and precarious subsistence as the fruit of vagrancy or crime'.⁵⁴

It was stated in the Census Report that the depraved, criminal and violent character of these children had provoked loud demands for action which had been answered most obviously by the Ragged School Union. Despite the activities of such philanthropic bodies and individuals, the progress of working class education was painfully slow and unsystematic and their early endeavours were to be swamped by the sheer enormity of demographic expansion. By 1859, it was estimated that the population of Saint Pancras was 199,000 people, and this represented a 600% increase from 1801. Furthermore, the problems that this increase posed were accentuated by the dramatic rise in the child population, for the under-twelves numbered 41,613 in 1859. The under-fifteens numbered 47,882. This figure was 50% greater than the *entire* population in 1801.⁵⁵

The position in Saint Pancras was aggravated not only by the age structure of this exploding population but also by its economic status. The area received many Irish immigrants during the 'Great Hunger' of the 1840s and they gravitated to the poorer areas, especially Saint Pancras since railway building activity offered some prospect for employment. Also, the clearance of the infamous slums or 'Rookeries' of inner London served simply to increase demographic pressure on the poorer outlying areas.

The inability or unwillingness of these

impoverished people to pay school fees of about 6d per week was compounded by the refusal of many Church and National schools to give places to the poor because of 'their rude habits, from their filthy condition and from their want of shoes and stockings'.⁵⁶

Apart from this reluctance on both sides if for different reasons, the main obstructions to education were irregular attendance and early withdrawal from school. Both problems were caused by abject poverty, as well as the additional evils of indifference and drunkenness.

Sending children to school involved a double sacrifice which fell most heavily upon the poorest classes of society. School fees could be quite low, ranging from 1d to 6d per week in the Church and National schools and between 6d and 1s per week in the private sector. Many National schools waived fees for those families who were obviously in distress. This meant that school fees were a tolerable burden but the loss of children's wages which could be as high as 8s per week was a much greater hardship for an impoverished family.

A teacher from Camden Town, a Mr. Roberts, informed the Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes that 'In the Metropolitan districts there are facilities for earning money from the age of six and upwards, and the variety of occupations is so great as to render a detailed list almost impracticable and the unwillingness of parents to forego wages is the hinge on which works the whole or nearly the whole question of early withdrawal from school'.⁵⁷

A detailed investigation revealed that boys could earn between 1s and 5s per week, depending upon age, while 'girls are usually kept at home to nurse babies' thus allowing both parents to work. Much of Saint Pancras and the neighbouring districts to the north and east were essentially rural in the early 19th century and there

were many market gardens and small-holdings. During the harvest, work was readily available for the young who deserted their schools in droves for this seasonal employment.⁵⁸

Many children attended school intermittently and it was thought that a stay of one year was unusual. The Education Act of 1870 altered the balance of the family economy by making school attendance until the age of thirteen compulsory. This new legal obligation to support under-age dependents increased the material incentives to limit family size, which had earlier been one of the major causes of early withdrawal from school, for 'The fact is, that by the time Tommy is nine or ten, half a dozen brothers and sisters have accumulated and therefore he *must* get his living'.⁵⁹

The Ragged School Union was one of a number of bodies that tried to break the cycle of material deprivation which was perpetuated by ignorance and the most extreme poverty. These causes contributed to the 'indifference' of many parents towards the improvement of their children. However, it was stated that this 'lack of will' decreased 'and decreases in proportion to the pains taken by district visitors and others having access to the Poor, to explain to the parents the advantages of education'.⁶⁰

Irregular education was thus a symptom of acute material insecurity, for quite apart from the contribution that a child's wages could make to the household income, many parents wished their young to secure some occupation or living, for if the parents should die, then their pauper orphans would be consigned to the workhouse.⁶¹

A further obstruction to popular education was caused by jealousy and rivalry between the different religious denominations in the provision of schools which often led to the duplication of

schools in the more respectable areas and an unequal distribution of facilities. For example, when the British and National School opened in Highgate, a dissenting church quickly followed with their own establishment, 'in order that parents in the humbler ranks may have the same free choice which those in more affluent circumstances enjoy'. The very notion of parental choice in education was, of course, a Victorian folly, but one that has only recently been abolished by those who are better able than parents to judge these things.⁶²

Conclusion

Saint Pancras represented a microcosm of the Victorian urban experience and the social problems found there were shared by many other areas. The explosive growth of the population was encouraged by migration from the central districts of London, from Ireland and other places. Often this represented simply the urbanisation of rural poverty as labour was drawn to the Metropolis, hopefully for work in the burgeoning commercial and industrial centres and failing that, to secure relief at the Saint Pancras Workhouse.

This unprecedented growth caused extreme distress, for it was not initially attended by a sufficient provision of amenities, such as housing, sanitation and education. This tended to emphasise the plight of the most insecure in society, especially the old and the young.

The growing awareness of these problems was indicated by the many official investigations and enquiries into every aspect of social, economic and spiritual life and these were prompted by many motives, such as the desire for social stability, and a moral concern as well as the fact that the franchise was widening to include men of the 'mechanic' and artisan class.

While there can be no doubt that living standards improved in the longer term, these developments in the early decades of the century had a crushing effect upon unskilled labour and this was accentuated by cyclical downturns in economic activity. When gathered and concentrated in the most delapidated areas of London, the poor became a class of 'outcasts' who 'though living in a great city, and surrounded by people of all classes, yet the poorest are, to a great extent, a separate and separated class from the rest of society'.⁶³ Many of these were children and the efforts that were made to educate them in the ways of Christian life must be seen in this harsh context.

Some progress was made before the Education Act for the endeavours of the National Schools Society and other similar bodies progressed downwards through the ranks of society. In the meantime the Ragged School Union persevered among the destitute and those of 'immoral character'. Even here some achievements were visible and as Josiah Wilkinson remarked as he observed the arrival of some poor children at a ragged Sunday school—

... even the most foulmouthed and brutalised ruffians looked at them with a kindly eye, and an apparent consciousness that they belonged to a different race, and that the generation of savages was passing away . . .⁶⁴

NOTES

- Charles Booth is quoted in Maurice Bruce *The Coming of the Welfare State* (London, 1961) 127.
- For example, the southern part of Saint Pancras figured largely in John Hollinshead's *Ragged London* of 1861. Also, Hector Gavin, editor of *The Builder* magazine and a tireless campaigner for social reform, described conditions here in his *London's Shadows: The 'Homes' of Thousands* of 1854.
- Bruce *op. cit.* in note 1, 125.
- Quoted in H. C. Dent *1870-1970: Century of Change in English Education* (London, 1970) 3.
- A Brief Account of the Charity School of Saint Pancras* (1971)
- Loc. cit.*
- Loc. cit.*
- The Select Committee on the Education of the Lower Orders* British Parliamentary Papers (1816) Vol. 00, 88.
- Loc. cit.*
- Thomas Barnwell *Saint Patrick's Charity* (1838).
- Select Committee, B.P.P. (1816) Vol. 00, 5.
- Saint Patrick's Charity for the Gratuitous Clothing and Education of the Children of Poor Catholics and Asylum for Orphan Girls* (1838).
- Abstract of Education Returns* B.P.P. (1853) Vol. 52, 476-478.
- Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, London. Education 3/19, (1871). This class of documents contains boxed files covering each of the schools inspected.
- The Report of the Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England* (the 'Newcastle Commission') B.P.P. (1861) Vol. 21 Part VI 379. This Report is attended by very voluminous minutes of evidence and statistical surveys of every region of England. It was quickly followed by the enquiries conducted by the Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes because such bodies as the Ragged School Union argued that the problems of the poor had not been sufficiently assessed.
- P.R.O. Ed 3/19 (1871).
- Newcastle Commission* Vol. 21 Part VI 371.
- P.R.O. Ed 3/18. (1871).
- Ibidem.*
- Newcastle Commission* Vol. 21 Part VI 379.
- Ibidem.* 375.
- The Report of the Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes B.P.P. Vol. 7 413.
- Ibidem.* 415.
- Loc. cit.*
- Report on the Population Census of 1851* B.P.P. (1852-1853) Vol. 91, LXX.
- Agar Town Sunday and Ragged School, Saint Pancras Road: Annual Report, (1847).
- Newcastle Commission* Vol. 21 Part VI 356.
- Agar Town Ragged School; Annual Report, 1848*
- Agar Town Ragged School; Annual Report, 1850*.
- P.R.O. Ed 3/19/139. (1871).
- P.R.O. Ed 3/18. (1871).
- P.R.O. Ed 3/19. (1871).
- Ragged School Magazine* 2 (1849-1850).
- P.R.O. Ed 3/18. (1871).
- Ragged School Union, Third Annual Report* (1847) 16. Also, *Agar Town Ragged School, Annual Report* (1848).
- E. A. G. Clarke *Ragged Schools* Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of London (1967). This formidable study is mainly centered upon London where most of the ragged schools were established.
- Ragged School Union, Third Annual Report* (1847) 66.
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 352.
- John Hollinshead *Ragged London* (1861) 134.
- Reports on the Boys, Girls and Infant Schools Attached to the Saint Pancras Workhouse, Middlesex* (1855 and 1856).
- Ibidem.* report of 1856.
- Ibidem.* report of 1855.
- Loc. cit.*
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 365.
- Ibidem.* 327.
- P.R.O. Ed. 3/19. (1871).
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 327.
- Ibidem.*
- Agar Town Ragged School, Annual Report* (1848).
- Agar Town Ragged School, Annual Report* (1850).
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 400.
- Loc. cit.*
- Report on the Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes* B.P.P. 7 (1861) 412.
- Report on the Census of 1851* B.P.P. (1852-1853), Vol. 91, LXXIV.
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 321.
- Select Committee on the Education of the Destitute Classes, loc. cit.* 414.
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 354.
- Ibidem.* 418.
- Ibidem.* 355.
- Ibidem.* 353.
- Ibidem.* 359.
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 364-365.
- London City Mission *Third Annual Report of the Saint Pancras Auxiliary* (1850) 12.
- Newcastle Commission, loc. cit.* 399.

(All illustrations from Local History Section, Camden Public Libraries, Swiss Cottage)