

Education in Countesthorpe: From Origins to a Secure Foundation, 1706-1919

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Countesthorpe is a large village approximately six miles south of Leicester city centre. This article seeks to explore the origins of education within Countesthorpe and investigate the changes that occurred between 1706 and 1919. Although the Cottage Homes educated some children within this period, this essay will focus on the village, rather than the Homes. (1)

The origins of Countesthorpe's educational history emerge in the neighbouring village of Blaby, the two villages having been within a single ancient parish until 1878. The Rector, replying to two Bishop's visitation enquiries in 1706 and 1709, stated that there was no school in the parish at that time. Yet, just three years later, the roots of education within the two villages had begun with the setting up of a Charity school. (2) Subscriptions of £17 from the Rector, the Rev. Edward Stokes, and five other members of the parish provided a Master and Mistress. (3) The aim of the school was to take up to six children at a time to 'teach our miserable poor to spin, read write & to learn & understand the Church Catechism'. (4) The exact location of the school is not mentioned, but it was probably located within Blaby village as the first mention of a school in Countesthorpe does not occur until 1753. (5) It is unclear if any children from Countesthorpe attended the earlier school in Blaby.

Stokes' son, the Rev. Edward Stokes Jr., followed in his father's footsteps, and in 1753, indentured the use of a building known as Lord's Garden for the purpose of the first known Anglican school within Countesthorpe. The building consisted of 'one parlour, one stable, two coal-houses and two privies, and one chamber'. The premises were to be shared by the future rectors of Countesthorpe as a vestry, and the remainder of the building was to be used by either a schoolmaster or mistress to teach children 'to read, write and cast accounts'. The building was entrusted to five trustees - being the churchwardens, overseers and collectors of land tax, who were also responsible for appointing a new master within three months of the departure of the previous through 'death, incapacity, or unfitness from immoral conduct'. The indenture was meticulous in securing the longevity of the building, detailing the requirements of the master to be responsible for maintaining the building's windows. Any other repairs were to be shared jointly between the master and the rector. Conversely, if the master failed to meet his part in the repairs, the building could be temporarily taken over and rented out at the 'best reserved yearly rent' in order to have funds to pay for the repairs. Once any repairs had

been completed the building could go back to being a school. (6) This is likely to be the same school that was listed as a 'school room' in a Parliamentary Paper of 1819, which together with 'several dames' schools' oversaw the education of approximately 100 local children. Curate John Wootton noted that the poor could not afford to pay for the education of their children; writing 'if a daily school could be established for their gratuitous instruction, it would doubtless be well attended'. (7)

From 1793 the Baptists also provided a school in Countesthorpe, although the children attending appear to have been omitted from the figures quoted above. Accounts show that in 1804, subscriptions amounted to £3 10s. There is no detail as to what was taught at the school until 1810, when William Elliott paid a master £1 5s. for 'learning the children to write'. (8) Some Sunday schools were reluctant to teach beyond reading the Bible, any additional subjects were potentially seen as 'less necessary or even harmful'. (9) Rules for the Countesthorpe Baptist Sunday school stated that children must begin their learning at 9 o'clock and resume in the afternoon at 2 o'clock. However, it seems that The Baptists were not just concerned with the education of children, for in 1815 it was noted 'that many adult persons in the village were unable to read and others could read but a little.' As a result it was decided that a school should open to teach adults from 10 o'clock on Sundays. (10)

Countesthorpe's population increased from 593 to 839 between 1811 and 1831, but despite this increase, the number of children being educated in day schools between 1818 and 1833 remained around 100 with six daily schools overseeing the education of 104 children. An increased number was seen in the two Sunday schools, which educated 166 (Anglican) and 60 (listed as dissenter) children. (11)

Elsewhere, it was very common during this period for Sunday schools to be the only source of education children received, as education was 'haphazard'. Some people feared that education could have a negative impact on the poor, meaning their education would be disproportionate to their social standing. However over time, fears moved to be more concerned about the teaching of political and religious dissent to children. It was hoped that teaching children to read would give them some ability to read the Bible and prayer books. Perhaps what was more important for children being educated at a Sunday school was that it did not interfere with their ability to work during the week. (12)

There were four types of school in this period. Sunday schools, run by the Anglican or by dissenting churches, usually provided free tuition, as the teachers did not expect to be paid, and any costs, for example for heating and candles, were generally covered by a collection taken at an annual sermon. Charity schools were funded by a permanent endowment, the income from which would cover the costs of educating a number of children, often alongside those who paid fees. Subscription schools were financed by annual donations from local people, the children usually also paying a few pence each week. Private schools charged fees which covered the full cost of tuition. The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church (National Society) was set up in 1811 with the aim that a school should be available in every parish and provided building grants. (13) For the next 100 years, the National Society became a vital source of funds to Anglican schools.

Stokes' school was still in use in 1839, nearly 90 years after it had been established, when it still only consisted of 'the parlour and stable and room over'. It was noted that William Jones was the schoolmaster and it was a fee paying school. The fees were not recorded but were probably only a few pence each week. (14) An indication of how much private education in Countesthorpe could cost is seen in a newspaper advertisement of 1840 when Miss Varnem's private school 'for the reception of Boarders' was charging fourteen guineas a term. (15)

Further details are given about the Church of England school in 1846-7, when it acted as both a daily and a Sunday school. The school was listed as being part of the church building. There were four paid (three male and one female) teachers and seven gratuitous teachers (one male and six female). The Daily school consisted of 28 boys and four girls, whilst the much larger Sunday school taught 114 boys and 72 girls. The total cost of running the school was £18 per annum and the funding for the school was paid for by a patron, Mr. Henry Ralphs. (16) By 1846, some of the cost of the school was funded by the revenue generated from the rent of cottages on Knighton Close, which reached £7 per annum, again gifted to the school by Henry Ralphs. (17)

This is the same year that Stokes' first school building within Countesthorpe closed, being so 'inconvenient and dilapidated', that it was unfit to be used as a school anymore. As a result the Sunday school had to be held in the chancel of the church. The Rev. Hoskins wished to demolish the old building and 'build a new & commodious one in its place', but was unable to secure enough funding locally as 'The Parishioners are very poor, chiefly of the manufacturing Class, so I fear not much pecuniary aid can be obtained from them'. Furthermore, Hoskins was also worried that the majority of the trustees of Stokes' school

might at some future point be dissenters who could use the school 'for the purpose of teaching Dissent'. (18) In the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census there were two nonconformist groups within Countesthorpe – Primitive Methodists who had 100 worshippers and Baptists and Independents, who met together, with 175 worshippers. Hoskins' worry was realistic as the Anglican Church had an average attendance of 145 to 200, making them the minority. (19) The application for the new building mentions two other Sunday schools which belonged to the Baptists and Methodists. Furthermore there was another daily school for about 20 male pupils with fees between 3d and 6d per week. The new school was intended to accommodate 120 boys and girls who would be taught during the week and on a Sunday, with a weekly fee of 2d. The expected cost of the building was £267, but estimates for subscriptions and donations would cover little more than half the cost (£140). (20) Further, the Committee of Council on Education which had been formed in 1839 to superintend the application of sums voted by Parliament for the purpose of promoting public education refused aid in funding the school.

Meanwhile, the National Society had given a grant of £50, enabling construction to go ahead. Built on the original site of Stokes' school, the new National School was described as being a 'neat brick building in the early English style'. It opened on the 31st January 1848, with the total cost of construction reaching £300. Donations for the school, which included the grant from the National Society, met just half the cost of the build (£188). Hoskins had donated £40 to the cause, but was worried that the remaining costs would fall on him, and asked the National Society if the grant could be increased, but it was not. However, when the Society paid, the grant did cover the remaining costs, but it is unclear where the additional funding came from. It could have come from Henry Ralphs who further endowed the school by leaving a £450 dividend. In addition, Rev. Miles gifted a house and garden for a schoolmaster. (21)

The 1851 Ecclesiastical Census records that on the 30th March 1851, 121 children attended the Anglican Sunday school in the afternoon, although normal attendance was estimated at 220-240. The recorded attendance for the Primitive Methodist Sunday school suggests all the regular 41 children attended on census day, with a similar figure of 40 being recorded at the Baptist and Independent Sunday school. (22) By 1869 Countesthorpe's schools were said to be in a 'flourishing condition'. (23)

The following year brought the introduction of the Elementary Education Act which fundamentally changed education within England and Wales. Before 1870, education was seen as a privilege to those who could afford it, or depended on local charities and subscriptions being available. This changed to ensure that any child, regardless



ST ANDREW'S c. 1885

Known names are: 2nd row from top L to R, Ada Riddington, ?, John Gillam, William Weston, Harry Veasey, Louisa Veasey, Mary Elizabeth Veasey. 3rd row, ?, ?, Frances Mary Ward, Sarah Stevenson March, Deborah Morris, Mary Morris, Jane Barsby.

Children at the National Junior School Countesthorpe, c1885. (Image courtesy of the Countesthorpe and Foston Heritage Group.)

of their circumstance, had the right to be educated. In order to ensure a place could be given to every child in Countesthorpe, a new infants' school was built in 1873. This was on land that was donated by the Rector opposite the National School, and was complete with a playground. (24)

The population of Countesthorpe had increased considerably by 1871 to 1,026, and by 1878 it seems that the National school was full to capacity and therefore needed to be enlarged. Plans were put in motion which saw an extension built the following year. At this point the school was still funded by Ralphs' charity. (25)

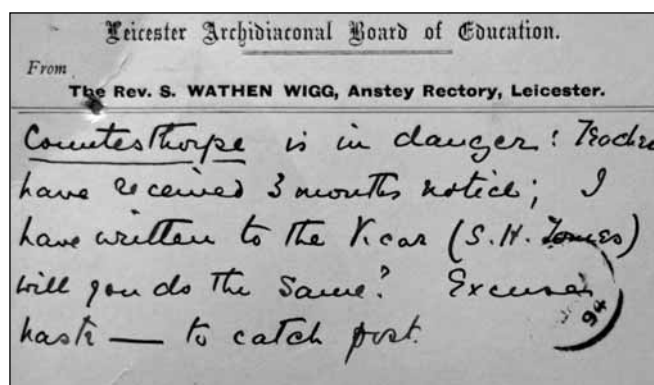
The population continued to increase, and in 1891 Countesthorpe was home to 1,344 people. The Elementary School (School Attendance) Act, 1893, had made it compulsory for children to attend school between the ages of five and eleven; meaning Countesthorpe's schools had to secure more places to meet the increased demand.

By 1894, there was talk that a school board would have to be imposed on the village to provide a non-sectarian school which would be funded by the ratepayers. It looked like the church school might be forced to close, and indeed the teachers were given three months' notice. The chairman of the Leicester Archidiaconal Board of Education, Rev. S. Wathen Wigg sent an urgent post card to the National Society, (26) and made an emergency visit to Countesthorpe on 6th February 1894. Following his visit, he judged the situation for the church to be 'serious', but advised the National Society that the situation would have been less severe 'if the Vicar had a little more spirit & got on better with his people'. The population were seen as 'mostly

"hard-shell" Baptists & very stiff necked'. Mr. Bassett, a major landowner, although opposed 'quietly' to the creation of a Board (on the ground of costs), seemed 'reasonable'. Reverend Wigg suggested to him that their local vicar address a meeting of ratepayers, but identified a 'great dread' at the possibility of 'meeting the ratepayers in public'. (27) In terms of the actual teaching within the schools, the diocesan inspector's report shows this seems to have improved and was now 'pretty good'. Praise was given to the upper school children – to their singing, oral responses and discipline. In addition, the religious teaching at the school was seen as good. The infants' school was 'of good tone', with praise towards the children's repetitions. (28)

The creation of a Board was temporarily delayed through improvements to the church school in 1895, costing £120 18s.

6d. The costs were covered by subscriptions, donations, a loan (£116 11s. including an £85 loan from Ralphs' charity) and a £10 grant from the Board of Education. However it seems that these improvements did not satisfy the demand for places, and two years later, the trustees of the school were faced with compulsory enlargement with estimated cost of £531 if a school board was to be averted. The trustees now faced the 'very serious difficulty' of having to borrow 'at least' £350 for the work to be completed. A request was made to see if the school building could be used as security for a loan, otherwise the trustees would have to give personal guarantees to the bank. (29) A final three month warning was given but the money could not be raised, and a school board was imposed in 1898 which would allow the necessary funding to be raised via a rate charge. (30)



Urgent postcard from the chairman of the Archidiaconal Board to the National Society, February 1894. (Image from the National Society Archive, reproduced by permission of the Church of England Records Centre.)

The creation of the Board caused tensions over the composition of the future elected members. As it was the National School which needed to be expanded, it was suggested an Anglican-favourable board should resolve the matter. However, the nonconformists argued that as the majority of the children in the existing schools were nonconformist and the new Board School would need to ensure places for nonconformist children, the 'Nonconformists and Liberals ought to have a majority on the School Board' to satisfy their interests. The nonconformists argued that schools were 'no longer private institutions' and that the school board should be representative of the community as it was funded by public money. Nonetheless, the first election brought an overwhelmingly Anglican/Conservative majority to the board (out of the six elected members only one was Liberal). (31) The interests of the Anglicans were fully realised when Rev. H. Tomes became the chair of the Board.

The Anglican majority on the Board clearly preferred the smallest board school possible to ensure the Anglican school would remain viable, and proposed to construct a new board school for just 53 children. With over 100 children of nonconformist parents at the National School, the nonconformists on the board, and those interested in overall economy, preferred a larger board school, and a local newspaper commented on 'the downright absurdity of the dual system' (32) There followed discussion about whether children from the Cottage Homes would be able to attend the Board School. The Leicester Board of Guardians, who had a legal obligation to ensure the Cottage Homes' children

received an education, rejected the idea for a number of reasons, including a claim that the former workhouse children could bring 'infection and contagion' back to the Homes if they mixed with others. Some also saw it as unfair that Countesthorpe's ratepayers would be responsible for paying for the education of children who were 'taken into their parish by the public body'. (33) However, part of their reason may have been financial, as the Guardians would have to contribute towards the cost of the Board school, but if the children went there they would lose the government grant they were receiving for educating them. A newspaper editor thought it was a 'grotesque situation' to have three schools in one village served by three different authorities. (34)

During the process of building the new Board school - unconnected with the church - the school leaving age was again increased, this time to 12. Despite this, the new Board school which was built c1900 on the corner of Leicester and Foston roads accommodated just 53 children. Although the nonconformists suggested that it should at least accommodate 60 children, equating to the number of nonconformist children who had passed the first standard, the majority of the Board favoured the smaller number, the Vicar contending that the extra cost for the larger number would be around £50. (35) Soon afterwards, the Board school was taken over by the County Council following the 1902 Education Act.

This decision to restrict the Board school's size backfired for the Anglicans, because although the immediate shortfall was covered, by 1907 the National School was again too small and the Vicar had to buy more land with the intention of adding it to the National School site. (36) Countesthorpe's population was now around 1,450.



FOSTON ROAD c. 1922

Top row: Aubrey Hickford, Graham Boat, Douglas Boat, ?, Arthur Herbert, William Lord, Bernard Page. Middle row: Reginald Williams, Winifred Chapman, Dorothy Oldershaw, Nora Immins, Ivy Dalby, Francis Page, Marjorie Weston, Grace Lord, Mary Lord, Mary Weston. Bottom row: Graham Findley, Alfred Oldershaw, Vera Finley, Barbara Herbert, Naomi Plumtree, Ivy Lord, Dorothy Hunt, Cyril Adams, George Reynolds, George Wood, Leslie Higgs, Norman Cobley.

Children at the Foston Road Board School c1922. (Image courtesy of the Countesthorpe and Foston Heritage Group.)

It seems little change occurred to the National school over the next five years but by 1912 the school was condemned 'as a bad building' which saw the Vicar wanting to build a new mixed school next to the 'satisfactory' infants' school. (37) It was hoped that the construction costs could be met through Ralphs' trust and that the Board of Education would simply allow the transfer of funds and not interfere with the school or its denominational character in any other way. The application mentions that there were three schools within the village: the senior and junior school (1848), the infants' school (1873) and the Council former Board school (c1900). The proposed plan was for a one-roomed mixed senior school to be built onto the junior school, to replace the 'present senior room, which has neither classroom nor playground'.

Estimated costs totalled £890. Local donations raised were just £16, with an additional £261 2s. 9d. coming from the realisation of the capital sum on Ralphs' charity. The Board approved the plan, but the parish 'consists entirely of the working classes' and was considered too poor to contribute more than just 'a few pounds'. It seems the same procedure as 1848 was adopted and the school was built without securing full funding. The new building was complete by July 1914, but even after grants from the National Society (which would not normally have paid until all costs had been met) and the Diocesan board, there was still a shortfall of £379 12s. 0d. on the total cost of £904 17s. 10d. This had been met through a bank overdraft, for which some of the trustees had accepted personal liability. (38) The National Society agreed to pay £70 of their £80 grant, reserving the remainder for when the debt was cleared. In thanking them, Tomes asked if the sum could be increased, stating that the Anglicans were 'prepared to make any sacrifice' in order to prevent the school children from being 'handed over to the secular system of instruction, which has for many years done so much harm in this country'. However, the Society did not increase the grant. (39)

The completion of the new mixed (church) school coincided with the outbreak of the First World War, which made it even more difficult to raise money, which was now diverted to the war effort. Tomes again pleaded with the National Society that although the timing was unfortunate, the school was very much needed to combat the 'presence of the militant attitude of nonconformity here' and prevent the constant attempt 'being made to draw away the children to the council school and so to sacrifice the Christian interests of the children to a godless system of secular teaching, with a smattering of bible reading'. Between July 1914 and August 1915 he had only been able to raise £47 4s. 3d. and with accrued interest on the bank overdraft, the deficit had increased to £442 4s. 11d. (40) By 1918, with the aid of the Diocesan Board, Betton's Charity and village donations, this had been reduced to £205 10s. 5d. As a result, the Society agreed to release the remaining £10 of their grant. Further pleading letters from Tomes continued to be sent, stating that Countesthorpe was 'just the class of parish that needs outside help'. (41)

By 1919, the outstanding costs were still £109 14s, the First World War had ended and the ongoing need to pay the balance of the school was now preventing much needed church improvements. It seems the Society relented and agreed another grant of £10. (42) Although the building was eventually paid for, Fisher's Education Act (1918) increased



A GROUP OF CHILDREN AT ST ANDREWS SCHOOL COUNTESTHORPE 1912

ARTHUR ROOT	SID GLASS	FRANK BARWELL	FRED HUBBARD	WILLIAM CHAPMAN	PEG FINOLEY	JOHN PAGE	HARRY HEASLES
MARIE FINDLEY	MARJORY YEHM	MAUD RODINGTON	MARY SMITH	DORIS HUBBARD	JANE JOHNSON	DOROTHY WESTON	MILDRED ASHER
PHILLIS WILKINSON	FLORENCE HUBBARD	EDNA HUNT	NELLIE ROOT	PHILLIS ELLIOTT	GEORGE COLEMAN		
			ALBERT YEASLEY	CICEL HERBERT	GORDON MASON		

Children at the National Infants school 1912. (Image courtesy of the Countesthorpe and Foston Heritage Group.)

full time educational attendance to the age of fourteen, with the provision for part-time attendance to continue to the age of eighteen. (43) A new 'battle' would soon begin, as the new mixed school rapidly became too small, although this proved to be more easily defused, largely through the efforts of Colonel Martin, the Chairman of the Leicestershire County Council Education Committee and also a member of the National Society's standing committee. (44) In 1928 it was decided that 'junior' children would in future go to the council school, and 'senior' children to the mixed church school. Although Rev Tomes regarded this as a 'downgrading' of the church school, he was encouraged by the National Society to see that 'in the interests of our children the church is bound to cooperate in the great advance in education which is now being made'. (45)

Between 1706 and 1919, education within Countesthorpe had gone from non-existent to being an important and thriving part of the community. By 1909 there were three schools supplying education to children between the ages of five and fourteen (with part-time compulsory attendance to the age of 18). However it seems that the creation of an education system within Countesthorpe had not been an easy process. Ongoing population growth, the introduction of compulsory education and the raising of the school leaving age had seriously impacted on available spaces. The vicar and many Anglican members of the community, who were concerned about the threat of nonconformity in the village, had been reluctant to allow an alternative to the National School, which would provide Anglican teaching. However, in a parish with little wealth, and other demands for the little money which was available, including a major church

rebuilding project and the War effort, it was a struggle. As a result, the schools could not be expanded, updated or renovated as quickly as the church people would have liked, to ensure sufficient places would always be available to new children entering the school and to those staying longer within the system.

The arrangement made in 1928 only lasted a few years, as by the early 1930s all Countesthorpe children over the age of 11 had to complete their education elsewhere: Lutterworth Grammar school or Long Street, Wigston Magna until the latter closed in 1957, to be replaced by Abington secondary school in Wigston Magna. Bushloe and Guthlaxton Grammar school also opened in the late 1950s, while some parents still chose Lutterworth Grammar or the secondary schools in South Wigston. Foston Road school continued to serve all children between ages 5 and 11, although infants could also attend the 'church' school, now known as 'Old Main Street school'. Foston Road school closed in the late 1960s, to be replaced by Linden Junior School. 'Old Main Street' closed in 1976, when Beechwood Infant school opened. Beechwood and Linden schools amalgamated in 2000 under the new name Greenfield school. (46) Secondary education was again reorganised in the 1970s, with the opening of Countesthorpe College for ages 14 to 18 and Leysland High School for ages 11 to 14. These schools plan to merge into a single school for ages 11 to 19 by September 2016. (47) These later reorganisations are being achieved harmoniously, in contrast to the changes of earlier years.

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