

Education in Birmingham

(This article, examining the development of education in Birmingham, builds on the material in the Birmingham History Galleries.)

Our story starts in 1382, in medieval Birmingham, with the foundation of the St John's Guild in Deritend with a royal assent from Richard II for a chapel and school in what was then the parish of Aston. The legacy of that period lives on in the building that now houses the 'Old Crown' built in 1490 where the school originally operated from until the Reformation.

In 1547, as result of King Edward VI's Edict, all guilds and their associated activities were suppressed, including St John's and the Holy Cross Guilds in Birmingham. The Guilds had provided a range of educational and social services such as a midwife

and alms houses, along with the school in Deritend. In the report of Edward VI's Commissioners, they had made the following recommendation regarding the Guild of the Holy Cross: *'The said Town of Brymyncham ys a very mete place, and yt is very mete and necessarye that thears be ffree school erect theare'*. Despite this recommendation it took a petition from local people in 1552 to obtain Edward's approval for the setting up of a free Grammar School on the site of the Holy Cross in New Street, now the location of the Odeon cinema. This created a significant asset for the growing town, which is still very much part of the City's structure in the various schools of the King Edward's Foundation. At the time of its endowment it of course reflected the values of the time, being only open to nominated sons of Anglican families, something that did not really change until the Victorian era.

At the dawn of the Victorian period in Birmingham a detailed survey of educational provision was undertaken and published in 1840. It allows us to see how schooling had developed in the previous century, as Birmingham became a major industrial town with a significant population and to measure the progress achieved by the end of the 19th century. The survey covered 45,000 children, only half which whom received any form of education. For parents who could afford the costs of education there were a number of choices, reflecting class and religion, ranging from the King Edwards Grammar School, to private fee-paying options such as the dame and common schools and religious sponsored schools split between Anglican and Dissenter. There was no inspection system and much of the provision was staffed by untrained tutors in poor premises, a situation well captured by Dickens in his novels.

In the 18th century there had been two main drivers of educational development, firstly for an element of the workforce to have at least a basic level of skill and secondly the desire from a growing Dissenting community for its own schools as it was excluded from many existing institutions. We can see these aspects through a couple of examples, firstly the Anglican Blue Coat Charity School set up in in 1724, originally in St Philip's Square. It provided places for boys and girls from low income families with a curriculum focused on the 'three R's' and then providing the skills for basic industrial or domestic employment.



Old Crown Deritend A water colour by George warren Blackham (1956V372)

The painter was active between 1870 to 1900 so this is probably in the latter part of the 19th century. It has been definitely proven to be the building that housed the St John Guild and associated school, built at the end of the 15th century and one of few buildings of that period to survive in situ during Birmingham's repeated reinventions.

The Sunday School in the latter half of the 18th century became one of the main ways people acquired an elementary education, and continued to be during the Victorian period.



Sunday School New Meeting House (1996v148.54)

The scale of the building demonstrates the investment in Sunday school facilities particularly by non-conformist chapels. This building would have probably been adjacent to what is now St Michael's (R.C.) Church which was previously the Unitarian's New Meeting House in New Meeting Street/Moor Street, rebuilt in 1801 to replace the one burnt down in the Priestly Riots of 1792

For Nonconformists the formation by Joseph Priestly in 1790 of the Birmingham Sunday School Society was significant step forward, as it moved the curriculum away from simply scripture-based studies to include subjects such as arithmetic, geography and science. Children who attended this programme went on later to found the internationally famous Hazelwood School in Birmingham, delivering a non-denominational and progressive curriculum, that was to influence much future thinking on education. By 1838 there were 16,757 children enrolled at Sunday Schools sponsored and attached to a range of churches and meeting houses. Quaker schools both Sunday and day were particular popular as they were well run and open to all regardless of belief.



Ann Street Quaker School (1928p644)

Painted by Alfred Green (1844-62) in 1855, oil on canvass. The school was opened in 1826 for 90 pupils ages 3 to 12, at 48 Ann Street, now the site of the Council House. A delightful picture that captures the spirit of learning in an early educational setting, from the illustrations on the walls to the small child dozing off in the corner, and the circles of attentive older children. It is quite a contrast to photographs of schooling by the end of the century showing heavily regimented and drilled children.

The deficiencies of the system can be seen in a stark statistic from 1846; on marriage certificates in Birmingham 29% of men and 47% of women registered with a cross, unable to write their name. These facts and the growth of trades unions led to a focus on adult education particularly evening provision. Joseph Sturge, anti-slavery campaigner (see Artefacts April 2020), helped to set up a school for adults in Severn Street in 1842 which was very popular. Evolving out of the Mechanics Institute (1825-43) was the Midland Institute, created in 1857 and still with us today, it offered both technical classes aimed at artisans and general interest classes to a wider audience.

The middle of the 19th century brought the most profound changes since the founding of that first school in Deritend in 1382. The Second Reform Bill of 1867 was nationally significant, for which Birmingham's own MP John Bright had been a major campaigning force. It extended the franchise to a wider cross section of the male working population, especially in towns like Birmingham, and resulted in the famous phrase '*we must educate our masters*'. In Birmingham George Dixon, a successful merchant and leading Liberal, set up the Education Society in 1867 with one of the first objectives being to carry out a new survey of current provision in the Town. The survey undertaken by its members produced comparative evidence with the earlier piece of research in 1838. The final report demonstrated that despite improvement in facilities, state grants and inspection there were still insufficient places, many parents could not afford the costs, attendance was patchy and achievement poor with few trained teachers. The picture painted by this research had a profound

impact on a generation of Liberal politicians, in particular a successful screw manufacturer, Joseph Chamberlain, just starting out on a career in public life. They came to the conclusion that charitable work such as support with school fees was inadequate and that there was a need for a totally different approach based on a universal and secular school system.

From this Birmingham context the National Education League (NEL) was formed in 1869 with George Dixon as Chair and Joseph Chamberlain as Vice-Chair. It quickly spread round the Country with 133 branches largely reflecting Liberal and Nonconformist opinion, although George Dixon was an Anglican. The vigorous campaign, in which Chamberlain was at the forefront, had a number of clear objectives. They were for a universal, free, non-sectarian education system supported by a combination of local rates and government grants, managed locally with compulsory attendance once sufficient places were guaranteed. The response was the 1870 Forster Education Act which was given a cautious welcome by Dixon, now an MP, but vigorously opposed by Chamberlain and the Nonconformist community

The Forster Education Act was passed with some amendments but its ambition was very far from the goals of the NEL, essentially allowing newly formed local school boards to fill the gaps on a piecemeal basis, left by the existing religious and voluntary based system of schooling. Critically, hence Dixon's support, it did allow school boards, once elections had taken place, to go much further if there was support locally. The first elections took place in Birmingham in 1870 and the result was a defeat for the radical and liberal candidates due to confused tactics. Despite the ensuing stalemate for three years Chamberlain was able to obtain permission to commence a building programme and by 1880, twenty-eight Board Schools had been built, producing a great legacy of well designed substantial buildings.

Burlington Road Board School Postcard ID 12311 1995v632.881

This Board School opened in 1878 and was built by the Aston School Board at a time when Aston was a separate municipal unit from Birmingham, and of course with a longer history, eventually merging after some resistance with Birmingham in 1911 as part of the Greater Birmingham Parliamentary Bill. The photograph illustrates how much investment had gone into schools in terms of buildings but also how much more regimented children were when compared to earlier in the century.



A testament to this programme is that many survive today around the City, the most renowned being Oozells Street (1877), now the Ikon Gallery in Brindley Place.

New elections in 1873 gave the Liberals a clear majority and Joseph Chamberlain became Chair, coinciding with his radical Liberal period as Mayor of Birmingham, ushering in what some historians have called 'municipal socialism'. The elections, at which some women could vote and stand, also brought onto the board Eliza Sturge, one of the early campaigners for women's suffrage and who made an important contribution to the development of education. What followed for the next twenty years was a determination by the Board to develop a universal education system, as close as national legislation would allow to the original aims of the NEL and provide a national lead in many aspects of schooling. Whilst the original push was undoubtedly Chamberlain's it was largely overseen by George Dixon who was Chair for most of the reforming and radical period. Continuing the legacy of Joseph Priestly Birmingham developed a ground breaking approach to science education in elementary schools, with a central laboratory and demonstrators accessible to all council schools. Birmingham pushed ahead on providing medical and social services linked to schools, teacher training and secondary education attracting national attention for this initiative.

The movement for civic reform spread to Birmingham's oldest school, King Edward's, with the position of governor opened up to non Anglicans, including Council representatives, and entrance by competitive examination established. Significantly for girls' education, King Edward's High School for Girls was established in 1883, and by 1893 was responsible for 6% of all girls gaining a place at Cambridge University. Slightly earlier in 1875, Dissenting families had established Edgbaston High School for Girls and in Mary Sturge produced one of the first female doctors in Birmingham. She was able to benefit from Mason College, set up by philanthropist Joseph Mason in 1880, which was open to women, and she then went onto University College London. She returned to Birmingham to work at the Women's Hospital and in 1905 became an honorary surgeon.

This extraordinary period of innovation and reform, ends with Mason College, which Mary Sturge had attended, becoming Birmingham University in 1900 and the Edgbaston campus opening in 1908. The University incorporated many of the principles of the 'civic gospel' that had underpinned the changes of the last thirty years, with access open to all regardless of religion, to both men and women and with a curriculum heavily linked to the industrial and commercial interests of the City. The story of the University is well illustrated in the Birmingham History Gallery, why not pop in when the Museum and Gallery are open again.

Jim Wells
September 2020

Suggested reading

- C. Gill History of Birmingham Manor to Borough to 1865 Vol 1 1952 OUP
- Victoria County History Vol 7 (British History Online website) <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>
- R. Watts Ch 7 in Chinn/Dick Birmingham the Workshop of the World LUP
- Connecting Histories website <http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/>
- J. Toumlin Smith English Gilds 1870 OUP
- E. Hopkins Rise of the Manufacturing Town 1989 Sutton Press
- J. Mony Experience and Identity Birmingham and West Midlands 1760 -1800 MUP
- Andrew Reeks The Birmingham Political Machine. West Midlands History 2018
- G J Barnsby Birmingham Working People 1989
- D Smith Conflict and Compromise RKP 1982
- A Foster Birmingham Pevsner Architectural Guides 2018 edition
- A Briggs History of Birmingham Vol 2 OUP 1952



Birmingham School of Art Life Class Group 1888 ID 9669

This photograph was taken just three years after the founding of the first Municipal School of Art in 1885 with financial support from the Tangye brothers which facilitated the construction of one of Birmingham's outstanding buildings, located in Margret Street. Designed by the architect J.H. Chamberlain it was his last project and probably his finest, it had to be completed by his partner and continues to provide a home to the Art Department of Birmingham City University.



Saltley/St Peter's College 1852 ID 8894 1978v789
Painter unknown

Recognising the need for trained teachers in an expanding school system Saltley Church of England Training College, later St Peter's, was founded in 1852 with financial support from Charles Adderley, 1st Baron Norton. Open initially for 30 male students, rising to 300, but only admitting women in 1966, it continued to operate as a training college until 1978. The building was designed by Benjamin Ferrey on the lines of an Oxford College quadrangle and at the time of the painting situated in a rural landscape on the edge of Birmingham. By the start of the First World War it was in a built up urban environment of the now industrial suburb of Saltley, a centre for the rail industry and rail workers. The building survives today as community facility and housing resource.



King Edwards Grammar School. (1996 V148.141)

This is an engraving of the school in its third and final building on the New Street site, replacing a building from the Georgian period. Designed and built in 1838 by Charles Barry who employed Pugin (St Chads) for the interior and was a fine example of the Gothic style, fashionable at the time. It was the result of the renewal of the school led by the Headmaster Francis Jeune, whose leadership resulted in a much improved place of learning.