

Education in Victorian Dover

Colin Friend

In 1870, with the growing competition from other nations who were getting ahead in all forms of commerce and engineering, the need to educate this country's children was felt. The British Government, with the energy of W. E. Forster, a Liberal minister under Gladstone, tried to push through compulsory education on the town rates. These schools were to be called Board Schools. The bill in Parliament was eventually watered down to appease the protestors. It was only accepted, because it became voluntary for each town. Forster had to concede a clause in his bill called the Cowper Temple Clause. This allowed pupils in government Board Schools to read the Bible without any theology, or doctrine attached.

The advantages of joining the government scheme meant that old school buildings would be renovated, there would be more books, increased grants, and more help for the poor. The disadvantages seemed negligible compared with the advantages. One organisation opposing the scheme was the Church of England, on the grounds that religious education might be taken away, and a secular approach would creep in. Basically it was one big power struggle; the losers would be the trustees who sat on the charity boards. The government's plan was to have elections to decide who should sit on the boards of the grant-aided schools. This would mean that some people might be voted off, whereas previously money and status controlled which members sat on a charity school committee. The other



Buckland School, London Road

losers in the government plan would be the school managers, the people appointed by the trustees for a wage to attract funds and run the schools like companies.

The trustees were in a position to abuse their position of trust, as teachers appointed by the trustees and managers would be under pressure to give a better education to a child of a trustee than to a pupil with no means to pay the school fees. A poor child had to register with the poorhouse for a token each day to pay the fees. This led to open discrimination. Middle class parents who sent their son or daughter to an elementary charity school would pay nine pence a day on average. Why did they send them to an elementary school and not a private one? Because in those days the dame schools or small private schools very often did not have a qualified teacher with the capacity to teach the children well. The elementary schools, although rigidly run with a mechanical style of teaching, were the next best thing.

The hypocrisy of the fund raising was shown in the newspaper reports of the day, "a fabulous garden party where everyone enjoyed themselves, and raised £100 for the school." This might sound good, but the government after 1870, decreed that the annual grant to voluntary schools would not be increased. In effect this would mean that as each year went by the charity school grants would diminish with inflation whilst those schools that joined the government scheme would have their grants increased.

Although much less was spent, namely £6,457,162, on the government scheme there were far fewer board schools compared to voluntary ones at that time.

The basis for the government action was not only to make sure proper education reached the poor, it was also to ensure that the grants would be spent on schools, and not slipped away privately. The government wanted proper professional bodies to handle any ratepayers' money that went to the schools. That was the national scheme.

In Dover, the town council, as in most places in the country was against the government plan. Education on the rates would not be a vote winner, and some of the town councillors were on various committees of elementary schools. Religion was a strong consideration with the Church of England, but Dover, with its record of non-conformity and low church attitude had an opposite view. Nationally in the 1870s the Church of England had good attendance figures, and a letter now stored in the East Kent Archives shows the concern of Austin Farmer M.C.P., Associate of the University of Oxford and member of the University of London, who wrote to the Dover School Attendance Committee on the 31st March 1884. 'I beg further to remind you that when better class children were admitted to these schools, the argument used was that the poor children should benefit by being taught with those of superior homes and I draw your attention to the present definition of a public elementary school: one that is not kept for private profit. You will find the schools referred to are as much kept for private profit of the masters as any others.' He goes on to make the accusation that better off children were educated to a higher standard in great measure apart from the poor who were recognised by their tokens.

By March 1896, however, the Dover Express reported that the church elementary schools were in financial crisis. Dover's middle class response to the government directive was to stifle attempts at

compulsory education. This is shown by the length of time they dithered before replying to the government boards, and it was becoming crucial, as the number of places for pupils in the classrooms was dwindling whilst the population of Dover was increasing. The Dover Express showed quite clearly that for the last quarter of 1869 Dover was at the top of the East Kent population table with double the number of births compared to Canterbury, which had one more marriage.

<i>Town</i>	<i>Births</i>	<i>Marriages</i>	<i>Deaths</i>
Dover	259	79	123
Canterbury	128	80	80
West Ashford	143	23	94
East Ashford	111	10	55

A letter to the Dover Express on 2nd September 1870 from Mr Woodcraft, suggested that Dover was not prosperous with its run down shops and empty houses. Yet Dover was developing new housing estates. Tower Hamlets, Folkestone Road, Castle Hill, Charlton and Buckland were all areas around Dover that were developed between 1870 and 1900. This meant that a hasty plan was needed to satisfy the government inspectors for school places. If Dover could prove they could manage, and every pupil have a place then Dover would not be forced to have a school board.

The Dover Year Book of 1877 showed that there was a shortage of school places, on pages 16 and 17 stating 'There is a shortfall of 460 places. If not supplied it will become necessary to form a school board.'

Although not prosperous, Dover's middle class formed a Chamber of Commerce in the same year as the Forster Bill of 1870. The result was significant, because one of the early moves of this chamber was to form the Dover College Company with a £10 subscription from each of the 300 members making a total of £3000 pounds. This was a

blow to the poor of Dover as it meant that the elementary schools would be run down, all the while these same middle class parents were giving their children a top class education. This was Victorian hypocrisy at its worst, making sure that their own children got the best, whilst ignoring the pleas of the Government to educate the poor.

The College was proposed and opened the following year, 1871, and its curriculum was based on a classical education, compared to the mechanical monitorial style in the elementary schools. The problem with this style of teaching was described by Charles Dickens in his book *Hard Times*, in that it drummed out any artistic gift in a child. This became important when Dover started its first art school in August 1870 in a building at Cambridge Terrace. This was not a permanent site but in his opening speech Mr Buckmaster, representing the Government, tried to point out that the school was open to all. In a press statement he asked 'How are we going to teach Stonemasons and Carpenters to draw?' It went on 'No doubt plenty among the middle and upper classes would be glad of the opportunities such a school could offer, but it was specifically designed for those youngsters engaged in manual labour wanting to attend night school. This would improve their chances in life and would keep them away from gambling and drunkenness.'

Dover held out against the board schools longer than any other town until the Balfour Act of 1902, when finally state run schools had to be accepted. How much this affected education there we do not know. However, with hindsight the town could probably have been more prosperous if only it had nurtured its young talent.