

Early Education in Bratton

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In the 18th century Mr Whitaker opened a private school in Lower Road which proved very popular and successful. This was a boarding school for boys which he ran for a number of years and which, on his death, was taken over by his son Mr Jeffery Whitaker.

He was very young and to help him he took on one assistant. All exercise books were made by hand and some of the time was spent in decorating them. Lessons taught were Latin, reading, writing and arithmetic. One disgruntled scholar tried to burn the school down in the 18th century and part of it had to be rebuilt.

Dame schools were plentiful during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These schools were run in private houses by ladies 'of reduced circumstances' who needed the money paid by parents. In Bratton and Edington these were a popular form of education for girls and young ladies. A successor to this type of school was run in Bratton by the Misses Brock in the early 1900s, and according to reports was very successful. I have the table round which the girls sat to be taught their 'three Rs' and needlework.

An infant school raised on staddle stones was started by Mrs Whitaker in the 19th century, next to the Baptist Chapel, the building later being moved to where the Jubilee Hall now stands. People were now realising that education was important and this school quickly became too small to hold all the children.

The British School

In 1844 the British School (which is now the ex-servicemen's club in Stradbrook)¹ was built with accommodation for 120 children of nonconformist parents.

Between 50 and 60 children attended as a rule, with the upstairs accommodating the infants, Class I and Class II. Downstairs the older children were taught in standards. Two teachers were employed to teach the whole school. There was no running water – this had to be fetched from a spring across the road – and no indoor sanitation for the children. Inspectors regularly called to examine the children and by the turn of the century prospective teachers had to satisfy examining bodies that they were fit to teach.

Until the Education Act was passed in 1870 making attendance at school compulsory, children were often away for days at a time for such distractions as fair days, working in the fields for farmers, or illnesses such as whooping cough, measles, colds and smallpox, which were very prevalent during the early days of the school. Bad weather also affected attendance, and one entry in the log book reads 'bad attendance today

¹ Subsequent to this article, the club vacated the building and it was sold in 2009.

due to threat of thunderstorms'. Sometimes the children played truant – and an older child would be sent to look for them – as parents had to pay for the education of their children in the early days.

Children attended the British School from Edington, Heywood and the hill farms – Grant's, Ladywell, Southdown, and Reeves' Farms to mention a few. Except for the holiday known as harvest in August, breaks in school routine were very short: for instance the Easter one was taken on Good Friday only.

In 1864 it was decided to open the school on Saturday mornings for those wishing to attend, but after two years this was stopped owing to lack of interest.

General subjects were now being taught at the school, including arithmetic, geography, grammar, singing and sewing (for the girls), dictation, national history, tables, writing and spelling. An outside seamstress was employed to take the sewing classes. Inspectors conducted periodic examinations and the results were usually very high, many students gaining marks of 90 per cent or more.

The school day started at 9am and concluded at 4.30pm, or 5.00pm occasionally, unless of course the weather deteriorated. Heating was poor – the tortoise stoves were very temperamental, with black smoke often billowing out across the room. New tortoise stoves were installed in 1870 but conditions did not greatly improve.

Until early in the 20th century the school remained much the same. In 1912 Miss Louise Burgess was appointed as head teacher and immediately things began to change. The children's health was regularly checked, the school day was shortened and the discipline sharpened – the cane was brought into use more. One stroke was given for talking and four for general bad behaviour. She remained as headmistress with an assistant teacher until the school closed in 1928, and then all the children transferred to the new council school.

The National School

This school is the building known as the Oratory in the Butts, and was built in 1820 with a grant from the National Society. It had flagged floors and loose desks and catered for 20 children. The teachers were untrained and tuition and discipline just moderate, that is until a resident vicar came to the village and things changed for the better.

In 1859 books and apparatus were used for the first time and in 1863 a log book was started by the headmistress. Children were admitted from an early age – some only two years old. There is on record one child who attended the school at the tender age of one year eight months. They usually left school at 12. The teachers' salaries depended on the results of examinations carried out by inspectors who arrived without prior notice. The whole school including the infants were tested. During the 19th century all children learned lessons by rote and passers by would stop to listen to them. Infants sat in a gallery at one end of the room.

The school was enlarged in 1877 making it into a 'T' shape. About that time playtime was introduced, but not as we know it today. Walks and physical exercise in all weathers was the form it took. Religion was also a major part of the school curriculum, as it was in the British School during the 19th century. Even the very little children learned to quote scripture and recite hymns. As time went on discipline became stronger and many children played truant rather than attend, spending the money given them by their parents for lessons and living rough for the week in the hills while setting out and returning home as if they were attending school.

In 1912 complete medical examinations and dental inspections were paid for by the Board of Guardians, and it was about this time that more general education was introduced, embracing such subjects as square roots, areas, general measurements, geography, history, nature and – for the girls – domestic science.

Thus the school kept ticking over happily for the next ten years, but in 1922 it was regarded by the authorities as unsanitary. Nothing was done for six years but in 1928 the children were all moved from the building into the new council school that had just been built.

Bratton County Primary School

When this school was first built it was known as 'the school in a garden' because as an experiment it had gardens all round it. The children had their own little plots which they were taught to look after – growing such things as radishes, carrots and parsnips, and a few flowers such as polyanthus and pansy. There were three classrooms, with a staffroom and cloakrooms – one for girls and one for boys near the staffroom.

The toilets were housed in little red brick buildings across the playground towards the north, and in the winter they were very cold and the playground slippery. There was no corridor running along the outside of the classrooms, which in the winter became very cold as they faced north. The windows were very much like they are today.

Lessons were much the same as they had been in the older schools. Some time after it had been opened, a headmaster called Mr Cherry took charge. In 1931 the Education Authority decided to send all children of 11 years and over to the school in Westbury as a matter of policy.

Many changes to this school have taken place over the past few years. The school kitchen and hall have been built and a closed corridor runs the entire length of three classrooms on the north side. Outside a playing field and patio were added later.