

The Pupil-teachers of St Margaret's Boys School, Leicester, 1863-1867

by *T. J. Elkington*

Shortly before his resignation as Master of St Margaret's Boys School, Leicester, a disillusioned Harry Poyner wrote, 'I am heartily tired of such a field of labour as this with nothing but discouragement.'¹ Poyner's entries in the School Log Book, written in an abbreviated and impatient Victorian hand, reveal the increasing frustrations of a man of considerable learning and experience having to teach 'such poor, dull, stupid beings as most of the boys here.'² It was not merely the pupils that attracted Poyner's cynical and forthright comments: their parents; the school manager; the 'oracle over the road' — Elizabeth Chalk, Mistress of St Margaret's Girls School; the visiting H.M.I.s and the Committee of Council itself, each in turn infuriated this gifted, energetic and impatient Victorian schoolmaster. By 1867 Poyner's tolerance had reached breaking point: he declares that he is 'becoming quite tired of this hard, begging, monotonous routine', and laments, 'it is no use working like a slave for people who evidently look upon the school as a place to absorb a lot of dirty, stupid children when they have nothing else for them to do and nothing else to attract their attention. This is a Cattle Fair — anything is sufficient'.³

Poyner's difficulties were compounded by two factors: the social and economic environment of the parish of St Margaret's in which he laboured and the code of educational regulations within which he had to operate. The town was undergoing a period of industrial expansion in the mid-1860s, especially in the hosiery and boot and shoe industries. Indeed, in 1865, Corah's opened their large new factory, designed to introduce new standards in mechanisation, not far from the St Margaret's Schools. As R.H. Evans has pointed out, the majority of the thousand or so migrants who poured into Leicester each year were absorbed by the red-brick terraces of the teeming parish of St Margaret's.⁴ As far as the schools were concerned, this meant that they were competing with the factories for the child's attention, and when parents were faced with the alternative of paying two or three pence per week to send their child to school, or having them earn far more in local factories, it was the schools which invariably lost out. As the Mistress of St Margaret's Girls School complained in 1869, 'The Leicester trades afford so great facility for the employment of little girls, that it is almost impossible to keep a First Class... In January last I numbered 50 in Class I: in November there were only 27, and the average age of these was only 10'.⁵

The code of regulations to which Poyner had to work had been determined in 1862 by the Vice-President of the Committee of Council on Education, Robert Lowe. These plunged the elementary schools of the 1860's into the era of 'payment-by-results'. The Revised Code was a declared attempt to increase efficiency in elementary education by 'making existing schools work harder'.⁶ This was to be accomplished by tying the Government grant to schools directly to pupils' attendance and to an annual examination in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, conducted by a Government Inspector. In Poyner's school, as in many others throughout the country, this led to a greater concentration on the '3R's' coupled with thorough and frantic preparations for Inspection Day which

became 'literally a matter of life or death'.⁷ These then were the difficulties which Harry Poyner faced as Master of St Margaret's Boys School, Leicester in the mid-1860's. They were difficulties with which he might have been well able to cope had they not been accompanied by a tremendous sense of fighting a lone battle. For although Harry Poyner had assistants in the shape of his Pupil-Teachers, these boys, often only twelve or thirteen themselves — far from helping him — proved his greatest problem, and posed the set of frustrations which were eventually to cause him to tender his premature resignation.

The following extracts are taken from the Log Book of St Margaret's Boys School. Although in the front of the Log there was a copy of a letter from Ralph W.W. Lingen (Permanent Secretary to the Committee of Council) which stated that 'No reflections or opinions of a general character are to be entered in the Log Book', Poyner paid scant regard to this instruction, and his entries are much more enlightening in illustrating the difficulties of the mid-Victorian schoolmaster for that.⁸

1863

June	16th	Barker absent from lessons — excuse, overslept himself.
June	23rd	Reproved Barker and Lock for not having learnt 40 lines of Milton.
June	24th	Barker not at lessons though told positively to come. Talked to him and told him not to come again till his father had called on me.
June	29th	Barker asked leave to be away today.
July	7th	Heard P.T.s repeat a large dose of Hamlet and Milton with explanations of words and also Latin Roots.
July	13th	Barker and Mackintosh both asked leave of absence from 11.00 and were allowed it. Talked very seriously to the Pupil Teachers about conscientiously discharging their duties to me and the school.
July	14th	Lock only at school. Said nothing to the other two supposing they were late home and tired.
July	16th	Told Barker to have the school opened <i>before 2.00</i> fearing the danger from the gaspipes. I however opened the school myself <i>after St Margaret's clock had struck two.</i>
July	22nd	Mackintosh asked and obtained a half-holiday. Carried on the school very quietly and satisfactorily without him, I taking one of his classes and Lock the other...thought it an improvement.
July	23rd	Lock absent from morning lessons. Excuse illness.
July	29th	Mackintosh absent from lessons. Barker's and Lock's etymology not said.
July	31st	Mackintosh and Barker absent from lessons.
Aug	3rd	Lock excused from lessons. Mackintosh and Barker absent without leave, no cause assigned. Thought I would say nothing to them but see when they would come.
Aug	7th	The Vicar opened the school for the first time after his return. Mentioned to him the stoppage of Lock's money and Barkers disgraceful failures.
Aug	10th	Barker 10 min. late.
Aug	27th	Managed the four Upper Classes almost entirely by myself...had less noise and altogether felt quite satisfied with the result.
Sept	2nd	The Vicar opened the school. Spoke to him respecting the cancelling of Barker's Indentures.
Sept	21st	Did not take the P.T.s today, not having sen them to bid them come.

- Sept 22nd Lock absent from school today. Mackintosh absent from lessons owing to a toothache.
- Sept 23rd Lock absent.
- Sept 25th Mackintosh asked leave of absence from morning lessons. Lock away ill all week. Barker, considering he was about to leave, has not been to lessons since August 14th.
- Sept 28th Mackintosh absent from lessons. Excuse — overslept himself. Barker sent the Vicar a note expressing his willingness to leave if he could be paid from May 1st. *Barker's connections with the school ceased.*
- Sept 29th Found it very hard work to teach and keep at work 4 classes, but did it and felt that they had learnt more than if taught (?) by the Pupil-Teachers.
- Sept 30th Managed the first four classes in a way quite satisfactory to myself. Kept all well at work and had less noise than when I trusted more to junior pupil-teachers. Felt I would rather be without the trouble and annoyance attaching to them and that the results would be little if any different.
- Oct 5th Lock returned to school after two weeks absence.
- Oct 11th Lock and his father came today and wished to withdraw him from school.
- Oct 22nd Felt satisfied with the weeks work and would rather do more myself and be without pupil-teachers who do this work badly.
- Nov 30th Had a new pupil-teacher today by the name of Beale. Liked his appearance and manner much.
- Dec 1st Took Mackintosh and Beale in Arithmetic before school time.
- Dec 7th Gave Mackintosh leave to be away from afternoon school to prepare for his (scholarship) examination.

1864

- Jan 19th The candidate Swann of little use. Could spell none of the words: shepherd; separate; fatigue.
- Jan 21st Mackintosh heard about his 2nd class scolarship...away all day at Peterborough applying for admission.
- Jan 26th Beale and Swann both came in after St Margaret's clock had struck 9.00.
- Feb 12th Boys told me Beale and Swann were chasing each other round the school during my temporary absence at the Vicarage.
- Mar 10th Felt very unwilling to have Swann as a pupil-teacher.
- Apr 11th Geo. Tolton commenced work as a paid teacher. Felt his assistance a great help compared with that of Swann.
- Apr 15th Tolton rather boyish and apt to waste his time if not looked after; has not, for so young a lad, a bad idea of teaching.
- Apr 25th Informed (Vicar) of offer of pupil-teacher from Cottesmore.
- Apr 26th Wrote to Mr Atkins respecting a pupil-teacher. Swann late both morning and afternoon.
- Apr 27th Mrs Swann called about her boy being a pupil-teacher. Told her I thought he was not suitable. Took P.T.s from 12.00 to 1.00 on 'Derwanton': Beale's lesson not half learnt.

- May 3rd Found that Tolton and Swann require a deal of watching or they do nothing.
- May 4th A boy named Reed came to school from Cottesmore having passed his 2nd year Pupil-Teachers examination.
- May 9th Appointed 8'o'clock as the time for the P.T.s lessons. Beale not here until 9'o'clock.
- May 10th Beale again absent from lessons.
- June 6th Beale away all day having fallen down while cleaning school windows on previous Saturday. Reed absent all day pleading sickness as the excuse.
- June 23rd Tolton worked harder and better with his class this week.
- June 28th Heard Beale and Reed repeat 30 lines of the 'Deserted Village' and Latin Roots — Reed's not said: his repetition rarely is.
- June 29th Beale's lesson attendance very irregular indeed.
- June 30th Reed very late for lessons.
- July 18th Beale away all day ill. Found Tolton and Reed of exceeding little use as assistants.
- Aug 3rd Had to reprove Tolton for not attending to his work, and eating fruit before his class during lessons.
- Aug 26th Appointed 6 o'clock (a.m.) for the teachers to come for lessons: no one came.
- Aug 29th Appointed 8 o'clock for the P.T. lessons: none came before 25 past.
- Sept 5th Reed absent from lessons.
- Sept 6th Reed shooting things about the school. Reprimanded him severely.
- Sept 27th Beale and Tolton not at lessons before 9.00. Bolted off at 12.00 instead of staying for lessons. Beale away without leave in the afternoon. Teachers discouraging. Tolton's father and mother object to im learning selected pieces of Hamlet.
- Sept 28th Did not teach P.T.s today feeling too discouraged with their indifference to lessons and inattention to duty.
- Sept 29th Did not take the P.T.s today.
- Sept 30th Beale walked in at 9.20 by the school clock.
- Oct 4th Lectured Beale and Tolton, especially the former, about their idleness in and out of school.
- Oct 15th Reed worked better with his class.
- Oct 18th Examined the boys in Standard II. Only $\frac{1}{3}$ could pass in Arithmetic, and about $\frac{1}{2}$ in Writing from books... Beale is the teacher of this Standard.
- Nov 15th Found Beale in school after 9 o'clock on Friday 11th (a holiday) I asked him to give up his key.
- Nov 22nd While my back was turned about, Tolton, in hitting Reed, knocked an arm off the gas fitting for which I said he must pay.
- Nov 25th Not one of the P.T.s here at 9.00.
- Dec 2nd Reed absent without leave.
- Dec 13th Cautioned Beale and Tolton to always question upon the lesson read...Tolton more trouble than he is worth.
- Dec 19th Reed during the dinner-hour sent a ball through the window and, upon being accused, or rather asked if he knew anything about it, told a barefaced lie as was plain from the evidence of a boy.

- 1865 Jan 5th Beale and Tolton arrived after prayers. Spoke to them sharply and firmly about it.
- Jan 10th Gave P.T.s to read Lord Palmerston's speech at Ramsay on education and the teaching of the three Rs.
- Jan 11th Beale cut Wither's head by throwing a piece of coal. His mother came.
- Jan 13th Disagreement between Tolton and Reed.
- Jan 17th Beale absent, sent no excuse though Tolton comes from same lodgings.
- Jan 19th Mrs Brown complained at Beale making her boys eye black.
- Jan 23rd Feel disgusted with the irregularity of the P.T.s which I believe to be sheer idleness and shirking of duty.
- Jan 26th Beale walked in at 9.30 — excuse, swelled feet.
- Jan 27th Beale and Reed not here at 9.00.
- Feb 1st Reed late 5 mins. — a very common occurrence.
- Feb 3rd Beale 10 mins. *too* late.
- Mar 2nd Caught Reed playing with boys instead of teaching them.
- Mar 22nd The Inspector spoke to the P.T.s about diligence and objected to cuffing the boys.
- Mar 30th Mrs Tolton called and told me what did not surprise me concerning Beale.
- June 12th Reed absent all day without my leave but with the Vicar's surreptitiously obtained.
- June 28th Beale away from school having met with a broken head through 'larking' at his lodgings.
- July 5th Beale at school but moping about and doing nothing.
- July 13th Beale and Reed not at school till 9.15, excuse — they had been for a walk.
- July 14th Told Beale he had better give notice to leave, his heart not being in the work and little attention paid to his duties.
- July 19th Worked hard among all the classes feeling that no one else could or would do so. Every day I feel the uselessness of such Assistants as mine are.
- July 28th No pupil teachers at 8.30a.m. Perhaps it might be a misunderstanding. Beale's exercise (Comprehension) was shamefully done. Told him I thought it high time he gave notice to leave here... I feel most discouraged and dissatisfied with the tone of the Pupil Teachers and the way they work or rather 'pass time' in school hours. In fact I firmly believe the school would be as well off in every way without one of them. I am completely tired of trying to awaken them to a sense of their duty, and am thoroughly disgusted with the whole Pupil Teacher system.
- Nov 16th Caught Tolton kicking a boy for a trifling fault.
- Nov 27th James W. Beale has been dismissed the school at this date for the following reasons; viz-
- continual absence from school on the most frivolous pretences,
 - gross idleness in the performance of his duties,
 - keeping late hours habitually at his lodgings,
 - and, continually walking with young women around the town.
- Dec 19th Some women came to complain of Reed encouraging the boys to bring oranges to school and making favourites of those who did so.

1866

- July 12th A boy told me Reed had dipped a boys head in a bucket of water, and his mother had removed him in consequence. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the lowness of the numbers is directly attributable to the utter unfitness of these teachers for their work (morally).
- Aug 1st A complaint from Mrs Dilly about Tolton punching her boy — the woman spoke moderately and fairly enough and Tolton did not deny what she had said.
- Aug 14th Mrs Tausley came to complain about Reed throwing a bunch of keys at her boy and hitting him in the eye and nose and fetching the skin off... While I have such teachers the school will never come up to my standards of efficiency. Teaching here appears like throwing oneself away.

1867

- Jan 10th The Vicar called and told me that Tolton had sent in his resignation. We have gone on today as well, I think better, without him, for he has done nothing of late but trifle his time by all sorts of crafty expedients. *(During the following months of 1867 there is an increase of numbers due to an intake of 45 young boys from the newly opened Infants School, and Poyner makes frequent comments about 'the impossibility of teaching approximately 180 children with one inadequate assistant'.)*
- May 10th This week and the previous one there has been a considerable decrease both in pence and scholars. Such is certain to be the case as it is simply an impossibility for two of us to attend to them properly and as I receive no encouragement in the shape of increased salary to increase exertion, I shall not put myself about. *(Finally, in mid-September 1867, due to increased illness and increased frustration, Harry Poyner tenders his own resignation, to be replaced by one Samuel Padmore.)*

Poyner's frustrations were not those of every Victorian elementary schoolmaster, though, as H.M.I. W.F. Tregathen pointed out, 'The majority of teachers in this district (Northampton, Rutland and Leicester) are God-fearing persons doing their work amidst many hardships and discouragements, hopefully and faithfully from a deep and abiding sense of duty'.⁹ Harry Poyner's frustrations were intensified by the special problems posed by expanding industry and expanding population in the Parish of St Margaret's — and it was in such conditions that some of the harshest effects of Robert Lowe's Revised Code were experienced.¹⁰ Poyner's four years of effort had brought him little reward and he retired a disillusioned man, concluding that, 'to teach such poor, dull, stupid beings is a physical impossibility'.¹¹

Notes

1. *St Margaret's Boys School Log Book*, Leicester Record Office (LRO) 19D59/VII/372, entry dated 27 April 1867
2. *Ibid.*, 21 June 1867
3. *Ibid.*, 14 May 1867

4. R.H. Evans, 'The Expansion of Leicester in the Nineteenth Century' in, A.E. Brown (ed) *The Growth of Leicester* (Leicester University Press, 1972) p.67/8
5. Letter from Elizabeth Chalk, Mistress of St Margaret's School, Leicester, quoted in *Report of the Committee of Council on Education*, 1869/70 p.101/2
6. Robert Lowe, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Vo..CLXV Col.238 (13 Feb. 1862)
7. J.R. Blakiston, H.M.I. Leicester, Northampton and Rutland. *Report of the Committee of Council on Education*, 1867/8 p.108
8. The following entries by Harry Poyner all come from *St Margaret's Boys School Log Book*, LRO 19D59/VII/372
9. W.F. Tregarthen, H.M.I. *Report of the Committee of Council on Education* 1866/7 p.241
10. For the less harsh effects of Lowe's Code on other Leicester Schools see my article, 'Maximum Education at Minimum Cost: Elementary Education in Leicester under the Revised Code' *History of Education Society Bulletin* No.24 (Autumn 1979)
11. *St Margaret's Boys School Log Book*, LRO 19D59/VII/372 21 June 1867.