

Leicestershire School Boards 1871-1903

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W. E. Forster's Elementary Education Act in 1870 was a compromise. While allowing voluntary agencies like the Anglican National Schools Society and the Non-denominational British and Foreign Schools Society to continue to maintain grant-aid schools, it also provided for the possibility of *ad hoc* directly elected bodies to provide schools where the voluntary system could not supply school places for all children between five and thirteen years of age. The school boards, as these bodies were called, were not, therefore, universal. Substantial Liberal-Nonconformist towns like Leicester and Nottingham were usually quick to avail themselves of the opportunity of electing a board, but it was possible for Church-dominated Lincoln to avoid doing so throughout the thirty year history of school boards. In the countryside it was the parish that was the unit of administration on which the school board was based, so that in smaller villages the board was usually the administrator of a single elementary school. Of the thirty-two school boards enumerated in Leicestershire in 1895 half were in parishes with a population less than 500. Only eight were in communities of more than 1,000 people.¹ In 1900, outside the county town, 33 school boards controlled no more than 36 schools. The remainder of the 250 parishes continued to be served by voluntary elementary schools, of which there were 223 in receipt of grants. 198 of these were administered by the Church of England.²

In Leicester and towns of a similar size and status school boards were usually called into existence by the voluntary application of ratepayers. Usually the town council would debate the issue and, if in favour, would make the application. In small villages, however, where there was less political awareness and a higher incidence of illiteracy, a large number were also created on the insistence of the Education Department to ensure that some provision for a school would be made, where previously there had been none, or where an existing voluntary school was on the verge of closure. As the Department stated, in respect of the whole country: "Of the 2,304 school boards in towns (incorporated) and rural districts 1,063 have been elected under compulsory orders from the Department, and 200 to meet deficiencies caused by the closing of schools by the managers; while the remaining 1,041 have been called into existence by the voluntary application of the ratepayers".³ The strength of Liberal Dissent in Leicestershire, however, ensured that where school boards were created they were normally at the request of ratepayers.

In some of the larger towns and villages, where Liberalism and Non-conformity were strong, and where industrial development was evident, school boards were an early development. Loughborough and Hinckley were towns in which the prosperity of the hosiery industry was encouraging migration from adjoining rural areas. The former grew from 11,456 in 1871 to 14,681 in 1881; the latter from 6,779 to 7,673 in the same decade. Each displayed a variety of Nonconformity. In Loughborough there were two General Baptist congregations, while the United Methodists, Primitive Methodists, the New Connexion, the Wesleyans, the Society of Friends and the Roman Catholics each had one place of worship.⁴ In Hinckley Nonconformity was represented by Unitarians, Congregationalists, Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists and General Baptists. There was also a Roman Catholic Church.⁵ Hinckley's school board was functioning in 1872, while in Loughborough, where the presence of several endowed schools enabled more conservative elements to stave off the inception a little longer, a board was elected in 1875, and was reported to have opened temporary schools for 370 children within a year. Both boards were seven members strong.⁶

The experience of Loughborough and Hinckley was not shared by the other larger towns in the county. Melton Mowbray, Market Harborough and Lutterworth, where the Church was strong and where there was no significant industrial growth, remained without school boards during the whole period. On the other hand there were some smaller centres which reflected the experience of Loughborough and Hinckley. The most significant of these were Wigston Magna and Anstey, both less than three miles from Leicester. The former not only shared in the prosperity of the hosiery industry, but had also become a junction on the Midland Railway. Here the line north to Leicester from London was joined by branches from Rugby and Birmingham. Here also was a range of sidings where goods trains were assembled or distributed. Between 1871 and 1881 population increased from 2,638 to 4,299. Its Non-conformity consisted of Primitive Methodists, Wesleyans and Congregationalists, the latter of whom had maintained a congregation since the reign of Charles I. Its school board, formed in 1872, betrayed its divorce from the establishment in the election of five members, none of whom White's *Directory* featured in the list of the village's prominent citizens. By 1873 there was a board school for 320 children, competing with the National School that had been erected in 1839.⁷ Anstey grew from 734 people in 1861 to 1,012 in 1871, and continued to grow to 1,279 in 1881, and 2,544 in 1901. This growth was attributed to the development of the shoe trade and stocking-frame knitting and to the demand for labour at the granite quarries. With Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists and Congregationalists strongly represented and organized Liberalism fostered by the Ellis family, the election of a school board was assured in 1872. Significantly it was chaired by James Ellis, subsequently to become chairman of the Leicester School Board; he was joined by John Moore and Henry Clarke, shoe manufacturers, Samuel Flattry, a shoe clicker and Samuel Birchnell, a farmer.⁸ Rebuffed initially when it attempted to gain control of the National School, the board built a school for 200 pupils, in spite of a change of heart on the part of the Church School managers, who had

written that "being of opinion that rival schools will prove very detrimental not merely in a pecuniary point of view but as affecting the discipline of both schools beg to inform the Board that they are willing to do all in their power to render such rivalry unnecessary."⁹ By 1884 the Anglican concern was seen to be justified, for in that year the National school, its managers faced with the necessity for improvements that they could not afford, was in fact taken over by the board.¹⁰

There were also smaller communities than Wigston Magna and Anstey that displayed the same features, such as Ratby and Groby and Barrow-upon-Soar. Ratby and Groby, adjacent villages on the fringes of Charnwood Forest, were in process of growing from small insignificant farming communities into suppliers of granite to pave the streets and slate to roof the houses of Leicester.¹¹ The population, 1,218 in 1871, was to grow steadily to reach 2,731 in 1901. The Primitive Methodists had one place of worship there. The character of the combined parishes was reflected in an early application for a school board, in August 1871, the early building of a school to replace the existing infant school in Ratby, and the adoption at an early stage, after the building of the school, of a compulsory attendance bye-law.¹² Barrow-upon-Soar, with a rapidly increasing population in the years just prior to 1871, when it had reached 1963, attributable to the opening of a limeworks, was the scene of much Dissent. General Baptists, Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists were well-established, as also were Roman Catholics. By 1875, after much argument, a school board had been elected.¹³

Though industrialization was a constituent among those factors that encouraged the early development of school boards, for it caused rapidly increasing population, and the influx with it of Nonconformity and Liberalism, it was not always a factor. For in some cases centres of industrial activity and Nonconformity did not become the Venue of boards: Westward from Leicester, beyond the crags of Charnwood, there were coal-mining communities with substantial Dissenting elements, like Coalville, Ellistown and Hugglescote that remained without school boards. The Baptists of the latter two preferred to maintain their own schools, each with nearly 400 pupils, rather than commit themselves to a non-demoninational system.¹⁴ There were, on the other hand, other communities with Dissenting groups but little or no industrialization where school boards were elected. Thornton experienced no industrial development between 1871 and 1881. The population of just over 400 remained almost the same. The General Baptist congregation had been formed in 1813, and the Wesleyans had appeared in 1828. Together the Dissenting congregations insisted on the formation of school board, with a Baptist farmer, T. Deacon, as chairman in 1876, when the parochial school, built in 1854, was seen to be inadequate.¹⁵ The same was true in Barton-in-the-Beans, which, although it was near productive collieries, was not itself an industrial village. Between 1871 and 1881 its population declined from 168 to 136, a factor that in many places tended to discourage the development of a school board. But it had been a General Baptist stronghold since 1745, when the evangelical watchmaker Samuel Deacon had been called to the ministry. A school board was formed early in 1873.¹⁶ In rural eastern Leicestershire two

declining agricultural villages, Ashby Folville and Barsby, whose combined population of 447 in 1871 showed a progressive decline in each decade to 282 in 1901, had become centres of Wesleyan activity in the 1820's. Taking advantage of the Education Act of 1870 they insisted on the with-holding of rate aid to the parish school built in 1849 in Barsby, and the building of a board school exactly half-way between the two villages.¹⁷

In another class were small villages whose rural peacefulness was disturbed by the growth of Leicester beyond its boundaries. The parishes of Aylestone, Belgrave, Evington, Humberstone, Knighton, Newfoundpool and Oadby all lay within the path of the approaching urban monster as it pushed outwards in all directions. Only Oadby had formed a school board, in January 1872, before suburban increase began to threaten its separate existence.¹⁸ There the Liberal-Dissenting tradition had strong links with Leicester itself. Particular Baptist and Wesleyan interests were strong. W. E. Hutchinson, a Quaker chemist whose business was in Leicester, lived within the village's boundaries.¹⁹ A. H. Burgess, the clerk to the Leicester School Board, who was consulted on a legal matter in 1875, became, as he had already become at Anstey, and was soon to become at Ratby, clerk at Oadby.²⁰ The board's

Population increases in villages close to the Leicester boundary 1871-1891

	1871	1881	1891
Aylestone	450	2,546	5,381
Belgrave	1,510	2,049	11,405
Evington	310	450	4,173a
Humberstone	852	2,638	3,284b
Knighton	928	1,827	6,075
Newfoundpool	60	56	2,160
Oadby	1,250	1,731	1,865

a. North Evington only.

b. West Humberstone only.

policy was clearly that of Liberal Dissent. Failing initially in its resolve to have the National School transferred, the board rented the premises of the Baptist Sunday School.²¹ Soon, however, it gained a trump card. The parish piece, rent of which had formed a proportion of the National school's income, was the subject of an argument won by the board.²² Successful application for a share of the income was soon followed by the Church's capitulation, and the board took over the school and enlarged it.²³ Though obviously Liberal-Dissent orientated, Oadby was to be the only one of the seven fringe parishes to remain independent of Leicester. Its population did not grow fast enough for the village character to be lost. When the Bill authorizing the county town to extend its boundaries was passed in 1891 there were still fields separating the two entities. Aylestone and Belgrave were completely swamped by urban growth. White's *Directory* noted that: "The population of Belgrave is rapidly increasing, and many inhabitants are engaged in the manufacture of hosiery and boots and shoes". Leicester horse tram services already ran beyond the town boundary to the centre of the former village.²⁴ In such circumstances

the existing voluntary schools could not cope with the demands made upon them, and school boards were elected in the 1880's. The same was true of Newfoundpool, whose hastily-formed board had time to erect only one school before the boundary change was made.²⁵ Humberstone and Evington were large parishes whose fringes were affected, though the villages themselves were not yet overwhelmed by the new developments. West Humberstone was thus able to elect a school board (and build the Overton Road and Bridge Road schools) as a separate entity from the village of Humberstone, which continued to rely upon the Church School.²⁶ North Evington, which did not elect a school board, relied on the West Humberstone schools. Knighton also remained without a school board until the Leicester School Board extended its authority into the parish.

A third of the school boards were in small villages untroubled by industrial development or rampant Liberal Nonconformity and too far from larger towns to experience population overspill from them. Their inception can only be explained by the inability of the Church to expand existing facilities or to initiate them where they were not pre-existent. Typically there was no Church opposition. In a number of cases the incumbent was, as the best educated person in the parish, and the person to whom villagers tended to turn to for leadership, elected not only to the Board but to the chairmanship. At Seagrave the Reverend W. H. Dalton not only became chairman but also acted from time to time as an attendance officer.²⁷ At Peckleton, where the Reverend T. E. Chataway shared membership of the board with four farmers, the rector was regarded as the proper person to act as chairman.²⁸ At Coston and Garthorpe which had a united board, the two incumbents were both members, and became chairman and vice-chairman.²⁹

The election of parish incumbents was not merely an expression of the feelings of the community, but resulted also from the encouragement of W. C. Magee, the bishop of Peterborough from 1869 to 1890, who urged the clergy to gain a footing in the school boards, so that where board schools were built or where Church schools were taken over there would be some attention given to religious instruction.³⁰ Often indeed in the case of the small villages the change of ownership made virtually no difference to practice within the school. At South Croxton, for instance, a motion to provide for the teaching of religious instruction by the head teacher was defeated, and an amendment made "that the Rector as usual do give the instruction subject to the conditions laid down in the Code".³¹

In all cases the school boards of small parishes became responsible for the village school, the sole reason for their existence being the necessity for providing a school or arranging for the transfer of a Church or charity school. Not in all cases, however, did the Board own the building concerned. At Burton-on-the-Wolds, where a united board served the parishes of Cotes, Hoton and Prestwold, as well as Burton, an old charity school dating from 1657 had recently been rebuilt and was maintained by the local landowner, Hussey Packe, Esquire.³² As soon as the board was formed Packe "suggested that the Board should not take any steps towards purchasing land for the erection of a School but that he would most likely erect a School and School

house and let them to the Board at a rent to be agreed upon".³³ Actually the old school was enlarged and renovated.³⁴ Though such arrangements undoubtedly saved the ratepayers' money they had their unsatisfactory side, for it was not always easy to effect alterations and improvements. In the case of Burton-on-the-Wolds the clerk reported that he had requested Packe to carry out desired alterations during the summer holiday of 1892, but the owner had replied that he could not undertake to carry out the work during the vacation,³⁵ and the Board had to await his pleasure.

There are some generalizations that can be made about the smaller school boards of Leicestershire. From the larger to the smaller boards there is a noticeable loss of political tension. While Hinckley, Loughborough and Wigston Magna echoed the political divisions in the county town, there was a noticeable absence of party politics in the smaller boards. The small nucleated settlement, though showing clear evidence of social distinctions, had little room for the kind of divisiveness that would have nullified all community effort. A board elected by such a community, and having a total membership in most cases of no more than five people, usually had difficulty in ensuring the attendance of a quorum of three. Its meeting place could hardly be the venue of bitter sectarian squabble or party division. Even in the case of larger villages, business was often held up because there was no quorum present. At Oadby, for example, there were three occasions during the first year of operation when only two members turned up.

A school board of only five members could never hope to achieve the same efficiency as, say, the thirteen members of Leicester's board, even if those members had been of comparable standing, which they usually were not. For the supporting services that a large borough could provide for its multiplicity of schools could hardly be provided when only one or two schools were being administered. An inspection staff was impossible. It was difficult enough to find suitable teaching staff. Qualified teachers were often reluctant to move into villages where they were strangers, so that applicants were few. In Seagrave, when the mistress resigned, the board decided to advertise for a master, and received only one application, considered unsuitable by the chairman. Another whole term went by before a new appointment could be made.³⁶ Most of the smaller boards insisted on the appointment of married couples, who could then share the same house. This must have resulted in the appointment of some inadequate teachers simply because their marriage partners were good teachers. It also resulted in the dismissal of two teachers where one had proved to be inadequate. At Ratby in April, 1879, Mr. and Mrs. Pittman were given three months notice. No reason was given but J. R. Blakiston, Her Majesty's Inspector, had noted "there is evidence of undue friction between the master on the one hand and the scholars and their parents on the other", so that it was presumably Mr. Pittman to whom objections were made.³⁷

The Education Act 1870 made it possible for school boards to frame by-laws to enforce the full-time attendance of pupils between five and ten, and half-time attendance thereafter up to the age of thirteen years. Many small boards did not do so. After the Education Act of 1876, however, it was

incumbent upon the boards to enforce attendance, compulsion being no longer merely a matter for the individual board.

While the larger boards could afford to employ school attendance officers there were not usually enough children in small parishes to justify a full-time appointment. At Seagrave, where there were less than sixty school age children, members of the school board assumed the part-time office of school attendance officer for one month at a time before passing it on to a colleague.³⁸ Some board members had good reason for not wishing to appoint an officer. At Nailstone, where existed the most inadequate of all the smaller boards, a letter from the Education Department complained that "two boys namely George Houghton and Joseph Horspool were in the employment of two members of the Board although they had not obtained exemption from School Attendance under the Bye-laws".³⁹ The board members concerned complained that they were unaware of the real ages of the boys, but did not convince the Inspector of Schools, who stated in his report that: "The irregularities of attendance mentioned last year continue. A School Board whose members break their own Bye-laws is of course powerless to enforce them, and is consequently defied with impunity when attempting coercion or threatening prosecution of offenders".⁴⁰

The financial problems of small school boards often made them dilatory about effecting physical improvements in their schools. Throughout the existence of the Nailstone Board there were complaints about the facilities. Inspector J. R. Blakiston's report of 1878 presented at a meeting which conducted no other business for lack of a quorum, noted that not only were the rooms badly ventilated "owing to non-fulfilment of recommendation in last Report", but that they were also "very untidy and dirty - should be forthwith cleaned and well scrubbed once a week and swept every day".⁴¹ Such complaints continued throughout the next two decades.

There was a tendency also to expect more than was reasonable of teachers, and then to save on salaries when they left. At Nailstone a mistress was reprimanded for not presenting invoices or making entries in the "Stock and Storebook" or handing over pupil fees to the board treasurer.⁴² After she left there was an attempt to substitute a pupil teacher for a new assistant mistress, even though a qualified teacher was available. The mistress complained that the pupil teacher was "totally inexperienced and for a considerable time will require not occasional but constant supervision". The board, however, would only agree to the appointment of a monitor.⁴³ At Oadby the Inspection Report for 1877 complained that: "This School is in even worse plight than last year as there is no Assistant Mistress to teach the Infants who are now left mainly to the younger Pupil Teacher. The Master seems to work hard but is utterly powerless to secure order or teach efficiently such a mass of children in such premises".⁴⁴

Though the school boards in large towns increased in efficiency through the three decades of their existence - the Leicester School Board in particular being among those whose schools were recognized for grant purposes as highly efficient - their very success seemed to highlight the need for larger units of administration in rural areas. Technical education was already the

responsibility of the County Council by 1890. By the end of the century the rural boards, some of whom were already sharing the services of attendance officers, were prepared to consider larger units. The Anstey School Board resolved "to inform the Clerk to the Nottingham School Board that in case of the formation of a local Federation of School Boards this Board would be inclined to join it".⁴⁵ When the Education Act of 1902 took effect during 1903 there were no complaints about the County Council's take-over. Loughborough was a substantial enough town to retain its board in the form of an Education Committee of its Borough Council. All the others were demoted in status to that of managing bodies for the schools which now became the property of the Leicestershire Local Education Authority.

Notes

1. *Report of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, 1895-1896*, XIVIII
2. *Victoria County History: Leicestershire*, III (1955), 250
3. *Report of the Committee of the Privy Council on Education, 1895-1896*, XXIV
4. *White's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1877), 498
5. *Ibid.*, 232
6. *Ibid.*, 498
7. *Ibid.*, 634
8. Anstey School Board Minutes, 2 April 1872
9. *Ibid.*, 12 November 1872
10. *Ibid.*, 10 January 1884
11. *White, op. cit.*, 574
12. Ratby School Board Minutes, 9 October 1871 - 23 October 1874; *vide also White, loc. cit.*
13. *White, op. cit.*, 144
14. *Leicestershire Education Committee: Report on Public Elementary School Accommodation*, 11 June 1904
15. *White, op. cit.*, 617
16. *Ibid.*, 148
17. *Ibid.*, 49
18. Oadby School Board Minutes, 25 January 1872
19. *White, op. cit.*, 563
20. Oadby School Board Minutes, 17 June 1875
21. *Ibid.*, 29 February 1872 and 2 May 1872
22. *Ibid.*, 15 April and 10 May 1875
23. *Ibid.*, 151
24. *Wright's Leicester Directory* (1888), 348
25. *V.C.H. Leics.*, III, 456
26. *Ibid.*, 442
27. Seagrave School Board Minutes, 4 September 1897
28. *White, op. cit.*, 569
29. *Kelly's Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1895), 83, 262
30. *V.C.H., Leics.*, III, 249
31. South Croxton School Board Minutes, 1 July 1895
32. *White, op. cit.*, 180
33. Burton-on-the-Wolds School Board Minutes, 22 August 1878
34. *Ibid.*, 16 May 1881
35. *Ibid.*, 15 July 1892

36. Seagrave School Board Minutes, 5 March, 2 April and 21 April 1878
37. Ratby School Minutes, 19 August 1878 and 8 April 1879
38. Seagrave School Board Minutes, 1897-1898
39. Nailstone School Board Minutes, 1 July 1881
40. *Ibid.*, 31 August 1881
41. *Ibid.*, 7 February 1878
42. *Ibid.*, 2 March 1876
43. *Ibid.*, 2 August 1877
44. Oadby School Board Minutes, 17 May 1877
45. Anstey School Board Minutes, 16 July 1900