

An Early Sunday School Minute Book

THE association of John Fawcett with early efforts in the North in the cause of ministerial education is well known. He combined a pertinacity in advocating the establishment of a northern college with very practical efforts to supply himself what was lacking. His own success in this respect fortified him in his advocacy and the ultimate founding of the Northern Education Society was largely due to him.

Less well known, perhaps, was the interest he took in education in general. On Tuesday, September 5th, 1775, the following advertisement appeared in the *Leeds Mercury* :

At Wainsgate
near Heptonstall, in the Parish of Halifax

Youth are generally boarded, and carefully
Instructed in the following Branches, viz : the English,
Latin, and Greek Tongues : Writing and Merchants
Accompts, with the Use of the Globe &c.

By John Fawcett, & proper Assistants
Terms for Board, Washing and Learning 15L per Annum.
N.B. Wanted at the above Place, a Person of sober
character, who is capable of teaching French.

From 1776 this work was continued on a much more ambitious scale at Brearley Hall and later at Ewood Hall. In his *History of Ewood* (Halifax Antiquarian Society Papers) George Dent quotes figures of a census early in the nineteenth century giving the inmates of the Hall as eighty, which would mean about sixty students, a small number of whom would be somewhat older men preparing for the ministry.

Early in his Brearley Hall period, after he had left Wainsgate, Fawcett began a Sunday School in Hebden Bridge. The date claimed for this is 1790, but as his son, in the biography of his father, says that "This was almost immediately after the simple but grand idea suggested by Mr. Raikes," it may have been earlier than this. His quaint *History of John Wise* was written as a religious and moral guide for children.

To Fawcett's great regret this work had to be abandoned because of inability to secure premises for the work, and it was some years before the school was revived. It is to the credit of a succeeding minister of Ebenezer, Hebden Bridge, John Jackson, that in 1824 this Sunday School was re-formed and its activity continues to the present day. The first minute book of this Sunday School remains in Hope Church (the continuation of old Ebenezer, the church of Fawcett's founding). The book covers the years from 1824 to 1845, and it throws an interesting light upon the conduct of an early Sunday School.

The minutes of the first committee meeting on May 21st, 1824, begin with the resolution "that Rev. John Jackson be the President of this Institution." The secretaries were William Fawcett and John Chambers, and five superintendents were elected.

At first the school opened at 8.45 a.m., but shortly the time was altered for the winter months to 12.30, prior to the opening of afternoon service. At first the school had no separate premises, all the work being done in the church itself, but very soon the success of the work led the teachers to request the church to take in a house adjoining which had been built for the minister, and at the same time to adapt the whole premises both to enlarge the sanctuary with an additional gallery and to provide separate classrooms for the school.

The equipment in the early days must have been meagre, for in June, 1824, we find a resolution "that eight copies of the Bible now in use be each divided into four parts in order to supply the first classes with books," and some years later "that the Bibles which are undivided shall be divided when necessary." One wonders whether the practice of dividing Bibles was at all common in early schools. In addition, "twelve spelling books of the most approved kind" and twelve copies of *Reading Made Easy* were purchased, and later it was decided "that the Reading Book published by the Sunday School Union be adopted and one hundred copies be ordered."

We know that in days when general education was scanty, Sunday Schools rendered a conspicuous service in the teaching of reading and writing, and much attention was paid to fundamental education in two of the three "Rs." We have here references to an "Alphabet Book" and to Sunday School Spelling Books which reveal how early a Sunday School Union was active in providing teaching materials.

From the first days tangible encouragements were offered to scholars for attendance and good behaviour. Tickets were issued to them; "those scholars who have ten tickets for attendance and good behaviour shall be entitled to rewards to the value of one penny." In this connection we find a very human note in a resolu-

tion of the teachers in 1824—"that it is desirable that scholars be warned of bartering or imposing on each other by means of their tickets or books."

Scripture examinations were an ordeal still to come; but quite early tests were instituted for the scholars. In the second year of the school's existence a public meeting was arranged for the catechising of scholars, and suitable catechisms were secured for them to learn and repeat, after which refreshments were provided for both teachers and scholars. Fifteen of the children repeated the first chapter of Lloyd's Catechism and another twenty Watt's First Catechism. This became an annual event and on later occasions texts of Scripture and hymns were added to the repertoire.

Discipline in the school was ever a thorny problem which is frequently reflected in resolutions of teachers' meetings :

In 1831 it is "recommended to the teachers that a number of boys particularly those who are rude and disorderly be every Sabbath required to meet in the schoolroom during morning service in order to have correction as well as religious instructions."

In 1824 "that a piece of wood labelled with the appropriate offence be provided to be used as a punishment for refractory scholars."

In 1837, "that in order to preserve better order on opening school every Sabbath day all the boys be requested to kneel and the girls to stand orderly; likewise during singing in service time all both boys and girls be requested to stand up and join the singing."

In 1839, "that scholars after assembly at noon be not allowed to go out till the close of the service and that our friend Mr. Chambers be in attendance to examine those who we think have gone out under false pretences," and—the choicest of all—in 1840, "for the better discipline of the school the following persons . . . be requested to exhibit publicly in the school the crimes which the scholars are guilty of, for which they shall be subject to be detained half-an-hour after the others have gone."

The expenses of the school naturally fell upon the church, and at the very beginning the church was asked to take collections to defray them. Almost at once the Sunday School Anniversary, as it came later to be called, was a red-letter day. In 1826 it was resolved "that sermons be preached for the benefit of the Sabbath School on Easter Sunday and that it be recommended to have these sermons on that day each succeeding year." Special hymns were printed for the scholars and congregation, and the scholars repeated "pieces." The services of eminent ministers from the north were sought, the names including Godwin, of Bradford;

Aldis, of Manchester; Dowson, of Bradford; Birrell, of Liverpool, and Steadman, of Bradford.

At first there was no assumption of singing ability in the scholars, for it was decided "that it is desirable that one tune be sung till many of the scholars become familiar with it," but it is not long before we find a much more varied selection, and among the arrangements for 1827 we have "that the 153rd Hymn of Dr. Fawcett's Hymn Book be first in the afternoon service . . . and the 150th Psalm to conclude the afternoon service. For the evening service the 12th of Rippon's selection, the 28th of Miss Taylor's Hymns, the 529th of Dr. Williams, the 474th of Montgomery's Hymnal to conclude the service." A choice was made of the best scholars "to aid the singing in the church service."

From time beyond memory Whit-Monday has been in the north an outstanding day for Sunday Schools. Our Minute Book shows that as early as 1826 this day had a place of its own, but the nature of the "treat" was then somewhat different from its later development. The scholars were assembled in the church at 5 p.m. to repeat portions of Scripture, hymns and catechisms, and to hear a sermon either from the minister or from some eminent visitor, after which a currant bun was given to each scholar to fortify him for the hearing of the school report. Fun and games were not yet regarded as a necessary part of Whit-Monday treat!

The poverty of some of the children was clearly a great concern to the teachers: in 1827 it was decided that four boxes be provided for donations for clothing for destitute children, and in 1842 we have a resolution "that Mr. Chambers and Miss Ann Appleyard be requested to receive articles of clothing contributed from any of the friends who are able and disposed to give them in order that they may be distributed to the poor necessitous children in the Sabbath School according to their directions."

The advisability of visitation was realised from the first. Four persons were appointed to visit the homes of absent scholars, and at a later date lists of absentees were made and the names given to teachers resident nearest to the homes of absent scholars. The teachers were also conscious of the need of the support and prayers of the church, for they asked that an open prayer meeting should be held on the first Sabbath in January at nine o'clock in the morning "for a Divine blessing to attend the interests of the Sabbath School and to implore the influence of the Holy Spirit upon teachers and scholars."

A notable feature in the work of the school was the attempt to provide good books for the scholars who had been taught to read there. Long before the founding of public libraries, signal service was rendered by many Sunday Schools in this direction. Much earlier than this, the two outstanding figures in the district, John

Fawcett and Dan Taylor had co-operated to provide a library for the people of Heptonstall, the ancient township on the hills above Hebden Bridge.

The Ebenezer Sunday School took up this work in 1834, when it was decided "that Messrs. Stephen Fawcett and J. Ogden should obtain £3 from the school treasurer and that subscriptions be sought on behalf of the library for the school as soon as possible." Further sums were later secured and the nucleus of a library created which gradually grew until by the middle of the century a really fine library had been built up, of which a printed catalogue and a supplement are still preserved. A number of the books still remain at Hope and reveal the high quality of the literature chosen—novels, history, biography, Baptist history, science and theology. It provides a fine example of the private libraries which in the early part of the 19th century offered the only reading available for most people.

In the earliest days strict limitations were placed upon the books chosen. The original rules state that "no novels, political publications or books of controversy on religious subjects be admitted into the library," but later there was a vastly more liberal choice. The first lists of books selected provide an interesting commentary on earlier standards set for the young. They include *The Baptist Magazine*, Harris's *Mammon*, Beaufoy's *Guide to the True Pilgrim*, Keach's *Travails of True Godliness*, Bogue's *Divine Authority of the New Testament* and Craps' *Election Calmly Considered*. Some years later we find, *Memoirs of Dr. Carey*, *Examination of Dr. Pusey's Sermon* by Dr. Godwin, Cramp's *Textbook of Popery* and Hoby's *Visit to the Christian Brethren in Copenhagen*. The privilege of using the library was very soon extended to the families of any who held sittings in the church.

Teachers' meetings were held regularly each month. The minutes suggest that they were not of undue length, but there must have been occasions when longer meetings were briefly minuted, for in 1840 we find the resolution "that in future no teachers' meeting shall continue longer than half-an-hour and all business remaining after that time shall be postponed."

There is little record of the number of scholars until 1851, when there was a national census in which much more information was sought than is nowadays required. The church minutes record the details of the Ebenezer return for church and school. They show that on Census Sunday 192 scholars were present at morning service and the same number in the afternoon. The total enrolment was 243, 95 boys and 148 girls, of whom 209 were present on that day, so that most of them joined in the services in the church. Of that total enrolment, 77 only were in attendance at a day school, though 99 others had attended but had ceased to do so. In

addition, it was reported that a writing school was held on Wednesdays with an average attendance of 30. The annual expenses of the school were recorded as £32. There were actually 92 teachers on the roll.

In this period Baptists had the dominant place in the Calder Valley, and on the hill above the town the General Baptist at Birchcliffe maintained a strong Sunday School. What little co-operation there was with General Baptists and other Christian bodies seems to have been mainly in connection with Sunday School work. The Ebenezer church staffed a Sunday School in a neighbouring village, and we find the decision of the teachers to solicit subscriptions in Ebenezer to help the building of a Methodist School at Blackshawhead. A bond of union was provided by the Halifax Sunday School Union, which Ebenezer School joined in 1841. A year later we find them circularising the various schools of the neighbourhood "to know if they will attend a lecture to be delivered by Mr. Gurney on Idolatry."

One of the last recorded minutes in the book is of some interest—"that the Sunday School Library be a subscriber to the Hanserd Knollys Society."

W. S. DAVIES

A REQUEST

A correspondent interested in the early Baptists of Hampstead asks if any member of the Historical Society can suggest lines of research which may give further information about the church meeting at Holly Bush Hill, Hampstead. It would appear that this Baptist group was founded in 1818 by James Castleden an ex-Anglican. Any suggestions should be sent to the Editor.