

## Three R's by candlelight in the dawn of adult education. Or, how we managed our night school in 1863, by a Lady. (Church Times, 24 September 1954)

The Lady was Margaret Elton, wife of a reforming vicar at Wheatley, a new parish which Bishop S. Wilberforce regarded as one of the most difficult in the diocese of Oxford.

I long ago promised to give you some account of our last winter's Night School. I may certainly begin by saying that it was a very successful campaign, and in many ways answered the desired end; failures, however, alternated with successes; and while perhaps on a Monday night we returned home with a pervading feeling of triumph over all difficulties, on the following Friday we were too likely to have our pride taken down,

The system we adopted seemed to give equal satisfaction to pupils and teachers. The main part of the boys were divided into four classes – the number in each class varying from six to ten. Four lady teachers were appointed, each of whom undertook a distinct branch of education; our eldest daughter taking arithmetic; the second taking the reading; another inmate of our house taking the writing; I taking dictation and spelling; my husband overlooking all.

We always opened the school ourselves at 6.30; and carried on until 8.30. We engaged a steady lad to see that the room was thoroughly warmed, and that the books, pencils, copybooks, pens etc., all in their places, and the candles lit at the appointed hour. On our arrival, we immediately admitted the boys.

### STEADY LAD AS STOKER

We found punctuality a most important point; and if we happened to be even a few minutes behind time, we were sure to be punished by finding the boys noisy, and less ready to fall into their places in an orderly manner. I never remember, throughout the winter, a night on which the main part of them were not there when we opened the door.

My husband always admitted them as their respective names were called; and on Monday night each boy paid his penny to me as he passed by to his place; and he saw the penny duly registered at the moment of presentation.

Each teacher was ready to receive her pupils; the first class went to the arithmetic desk, the second went to reading, the third to dictation, and the fourth to writing; and lessons began *without any loss of time*. And this, I think, is another most important point, and one that is often overlooked by managers of Night Schools.

Our time was divided into four half hours; and at the end of each half hour a bell was rung, which was the signal to all, to give up their present employment, and each class passed on to the next teacher, the arithmeticians to reading, the readers to dictation, and so on all round.

### LETTING OFF STEAM

The process of moving was, of course, a likely thing to call out the disorderly propensities of the boys, as it gave each an opportunity of making a noise, under the cover of the multitude. My belief is that the fact of seeing the whole school in motion for a short time, by full permission of the managers, gives vent to any inclination to be fidgety etc., and makes them sit down peaceably to their next employment. I may add that I found it necessary to use some little artifice for keeping the peace; and I sometimes asked the boys of the writing class to stand back, while I politely offered to escort the other classes in turn to their respective places, which I found the most successful of checking their fun (tho' many a sly pinch or poke was given *en passant*, when my eyes were supposed to be turned in a contrary direction).

In many ways this system proved most desirable. In the 1<sup>st</sup> place each teacher gets so familiar with the particular subject on which she teaches that she becomes adept at it. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> place it effectively prevents weariness on the part of the boys. A 3<sup>rd</sup> advantage is that each teacher becomes equally acquainted with each boy, and in the same way each boy feels that he knows each of the teachers; and this (I need hardly say) is likely to be beneficial to him, not only while the school is kept up, but in his daily life afterwards.

## EXCITEMENT ABOUT MARKS

Another chief feature in our school was the system of *taking of places* which we found most useful in keeping up the interest of the boys. Whoever was at the head when the classes changed was entitled to a mark; and we found that a wholesome emulation was thus caused which had not subsided in the month of March: indeed the excitement rose high about that time because a rumour was afloat that "*prizes* were to be given for the *marks*": and I believe that many an involuntary gape was checked by the hope that a *mauvais pas* might be made by John or Tom, and so a triumphant move might be made to "*the top*."

I have heard a rough youth, unable to restrain his joy on his attaining to this (perhaps unlooked for) distinction, exclaim to a friend in an adjoining class, "See, Dick! Here's me a-top! There's a mark for me if I've good luck." And when at the end of the two hours I went round to enquire who were the "*boys of mark*" it was most amusing to see the joyous faces of those who proclaimed themselves winners. I seldom required further information; and many eager heads were generally bent over the mark-books to see whether Jim's row was as long as Bill's; and "Please Ma'am, how many be I got?" was an enquiry often made; and "Michael's row will be longest if we don't look sharp."

Prizes were (as was rumoured) afterwards given according to the register.

On Monday night each boy paid a penny, which freed him for the Friday; and as our average number was thirty, and we carried on the school for twenty weeks, we received about £2 10s, in pence; and this is all that my receipt page of my night school account has to record; (subscriptions we neither asked, nor received). The expenditure page tells a different story; it says, reading books 2s 6d, copy books 6s., slate pencils 3s 6d., candles (dip) £1. 1s. 8d., firing £2 ; and, at the last, £1 10s laid out in prizes, which were highly appreciated by the boys.

## BIBLE BEFORE BAT

Nothing seemed so valued by them as a Prayer Book or Bible or even a copy of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. One youth of seventeen, who received a cricket bat., brought it into us afterwards, and said, "I wish I had got a Bible or Prayer book instead of this."

We always ended with prayers; usually two collects, the Lord's Prayer, and the blessing. At first there was a great inclination to laugh, or even to speak. We very much overcame this difficulty; though I must confess that we did not make the progress we could have wished towards *devotion*.

I can recall one or two occasions on which we had trouble. P. D. was a very rough subject; he had been in prison up to the time of presenting himself to our school, and it was often difficult to manage him as his feelings had been much blunted. One night he tried the effect of making a loud whistle; he was told not to do this but did it again – and I think a third time; as he would not desist my husband called him into the adjoining room and from thence showed him out of the school. On the following school night, however, he again presented himself, asking to be admitted on the promise of better behaviour, and was quite tractable.

The same kind of thing occurred with J. S., and he expressed complete contrition the following week, and was allowed to return; and (although a lad of sixteen) quietly bore allusion to his disgrace, before the other boys of his class.

The only other difficulty that I remember was an inclination on the part of the boys to be noisy and mischievous before being let into the school; and we found that the surest remedy for this evil was strict punctuality on our part.