

No. 10: September – back to school!

September is traditionally the month when pupils and students return to school, college and university. Holy Trinity's links with education go right back to its roots and this month's blog focusses on the church's schools in the early days.

I recently noticed this gravestone in the churchyard. It is not easy to read but the inscription says **"IN MEMORY OF Rebecca, Wife of Thomas Stott and late Mistress of the Greenhead School who departed this Life, May 2nd 1833, Aged 53 Years. Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through Our LORD JESUS CHRIST"**



The information on the gravestone deserves some unpicking:

- Benjamin Haigh Allen (the church's founder) opened a Sunday school at Greenhead, his family home, before Holy Trinity opened in 1819. Classes were held in the rooms above the stable block and Allen himself taught a class there.
- The boys' classes moved out of Greenhead and into the church itself when the building was completed. Lessons were taught in the 'north vestry' (now the organ chamber) and also in the chancel.
- Married women were barred from teaching as a profession; so if she was paid as school-mistress, even assuming Rebecca married later in life, this still suggests she was one of the first teachers at the school, maybe even prior to the church opening in 1819.

The school at Greenhead started as a 'Sabbath' (or Sunday) School. Most children worked during the week and Sunday schools provided the only opportunity for them to gain an education. Lessons were based on the bible and taught children to read and write. Education for children did not become compulsory in England until 1870 but campaigning against child labour in the early 1800s (including by Allen) had reduced working hours for younger children, many of whom became 'half-timers', working part-time and attending school part-time (if they could afford it).

The school at Greenhead lasted until 1839, when the Allen family sold the house and moved away. It is likely that by that stage there was a girls 'day-school' running there in addition to the Sunday school. A boys' 'day-school' had already opened on Dyke End Lane (later renamed Portland Street), in a temporary building originally built as an overflow Cholera hospital to the nearby Infirmary back in 1836.

The fact that Rebecca Stott was described as 'school mistress', suggests either that she ran or taught at a day-school rather than the Sunday school or alternatively that she was paid to teach at the Sunday school.

The first suggests that perhaps the girls' day-school opened much earlier than we know for certain. [It is quite possible that the boys' day-school had operated at the church before 1836 as the north vestry was set up as a classroom with a desk and

high stool for the superintendent]. The fact that Rebecca was called 'school mistress' implies that her role was a significant one in the running of the school and that it operated during the week.

The second alternative, that she was paid as a Sunday school teacher is plausible but nationally evidence for paid Sunday school-mistresses is very limited. This theory also points to her role being an important one but would fit with the known time-scale of the Sunday school for girls operating at Greenhead right back to before 1819.

Needless to say Rebecca Stott almost certainly was very instrumental in girls education at Holy Trinity in the early days, indeed sufficiently so to be recorded as such on her gravestone. I'm certain that her work will have had a lasting legacy on the lives of many young people, probably more than she ever knew (and definitely more than we will ever know!)

Stott's death came before Holy Trinity's first purpose built school building opened in 1840, also on Dyke End Lane. Boys and girls classrooms for up-to 180 children each were provided on 2 floors. There were also 2 smaller classes of 20 older boys and girls, who probably spent some of their time 'monitoring' the younger children in the main classes. By today's standards the school must have been very cramped.

The Dyke End Lane School also ran as a Sunday school. In 1843 the school was extended with the opening of a (mixed) infant class. By the following year there were 404 pupils on roll (including 54 infants).

With the growth of the Marsh district, an Infants School opened there in 1865. A Sunday school was also established there, eventually moving into the Parish Hall building on St James' Road.



Whilst neither day-school is still open, (Portland Street closed in 1935 and Marsh in 1947), the Sunday school has an unbroken history of 198+ years. Obviously styles of teaching and learning have changed dramatically over the years. It was begun by a dedicated team of volunteers, keen for children to experience and encounter God's love and to know him. We currently have a few vacancies in our present-day team of volunteers, could you help maintain this legacy?

The Portland Street building is still in educational use as a daily nursery, the Parish Hall is a childrens play centre and the site of the stable-block at Greenhead is of course now Greenhead College.

Happy new year, to all school pupils, students and staff! Whilst not everyone considers returning to school to be a cause for celebration, we should be thankful that we have such a good education system in this country; we should remember those who, in the past, strived to develop schools for all children, especially here at Holy Trinity and we should pray for the 10% of children worldwide in our day who still are denied an education.

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September '17