

The First School



A wartime music lesson at St Joseph's Roman Catholic elementary school in Upper Norwood. Roman Catholic elementary schools were popular because they had a good reputation, and many non-Catholic – even Jewish – parents preferred them. Note the multiplication tables at the back.

Miss Eastor had long black plaits curled round each ear. She was extremely tall and hideously ugly. She taught us to read in spite of her method, which was to write a sentence on the blackboard and say we could go home if we could read it. I sat at the back on the floor and couldn't see a thing but simply remembered and repeated what everyone else had read. At six I went to Moorfields and chose pink bendy frames.

The children in our group started school at some point between 1925 and 1945. How did their schools differ from today's? At the start of the 20th century it was recognised that the organisation of the British national system of education lagged behind the best practice in Western Europe by up to 50 years. The eventual 1918 Education Act raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14, and moreover gave all young workers the right of access to day-release education. The age at which children often began work hitherto can be gauged from the ruling that from now on: 'no under-twelves could be employed', and there were limits to the employment of over-twelves, such as in street trading. In other words, despite the rise in school-leaving age, parents could still take their children out at twelve. The official school-leaving age was to have been raised to 15 in the mid-1930s, but it didn't happen until 1947, and it didn't become 16 until 1973.

State primary schools were then known as public elementary schools, and took children right up to the school-leaving age. Traditional teaching was still described as being largely by 'arid drill', tedious rote learning which was being condemned but took a long time to change. The radical approach of Maria Montessori in the early years of the century, which emphasised the individual, 'sense' training, and structured learning, was starting to have only a minor impact, largely in infant schools and some middle-class private 'prep' schools. It took many years to shift the ingrained approach to primary teaching. This is despite an enlightened piece in a Board of Education report of 1918, which might make teachers of today somewhat wistful...

The only uniformity of practice that the Board of Education desires to see in the teaching of Public Elementary Schools is that each teacher shall think for himself, and work out for himself such methods of teaching as may use his powers to the best advantage and be best suited to the particular needs and conditions of the school. Uniformity in details of practice (except in the mere routine of school management) is not desirable even if it were attainable. But freedom implies a corresponding responsibility in its use... However, the teacher need not let the sense of his responsibility depress him or make him afraid to be his natural self in school. Children are instinctively attracted by sincerity and cheerfulness; and the greatest teachers have been thoroughly human in their weaknesses as well as in their strengths.

Many of the public elementary schools were run by the church. Since 1870 the Church of England had controlled most rural elementary schools and many in urban areas. 'They were in many cases the epitome of low-level mass education'. Almost all were housed in Victorian buildings which the church could not afford to maintain – one education historian called them pigsty schools. As we shall see, a substantial minority of schools in the London area were run by the Catholic Church, often with better buildings, though the quality of the teaching, undertaken by nuns, was highly variable.

Let's start by looking at one or two memories of that first day at school, usually at five. Nurseries were uncommon.