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Looking Back at Peterloo

Ashton-on-Mersey Alehouses, Alehouse Keepers, Gambling Dens and Brothels 1613-1700

Sale Schooldays Remembered

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LOOKING BACK AT PETERLOO BASED ON CASUALTY LISTS

Chris Hill

Coloured engraving by Richard Carlile, 1 October 1819. It is owned by Manchester Libraries. (Wikimedia Commons, accessed 4 November 2019.)

JUST OVER 200 years ago, on 16 August 1819 in Manchester's St. Peter's Field, in the centre of the city, a protest-gathering to discuss parliamentary reform, under the chairmanship of Henry Hunt, a leading advocate of universal suffrage, was subjected to a savage attack, resulting in over six hundred people being injured and eighteen being killed either on the field or in later local skirmishes that day, or who died soon after from their injuries.

Of the eighteen people killed, one was a special constable, the subject of mob violence, and later on in the day two men were shot in New Cross as reprisals for what had happened at Peter's Field. A woman died, probably from suffocation, in a cellar in Bridge Street, when members of a crowd panicked and sought shelter from a cavalry charge. In so doing she was buried under other persons also avoiding the same danger. Of the other fourteen persons, seven had been sabred, six men and one woman. Constables fatally bludgeoned two men and one woman, and cavalry trampled on two men and a woman. The latter died soon after the incident of the charge in childbirth. Another man was killed by mob violence, in an unspecified way. Other accounts of Peterloo give different

totals of people killed and only give a lesser figure of eleven, but this is a result of defining who should be included in the total, partly due to playing down the severity of the incident; however, the accident lists give an accurate overview of the effects of dispersing the gathering and its subsequent casualties.

Casualty records survive giving details of those injured in the onslaught and later during that day. It is noticeable that, although there were considerably fewer women in the assembly than men, proportionally more women were injured, mainly by sabre attacks or by horses trampling or brushing people aside; only a few were injured as a result of being in the panicking crowd. It is evident that there was a deliberate policy of treating the women more brutally than the men. This does not seem to have been the result of any orders given before the attack to the cavalrymen armed with sabres, nor the constabulary with truncheons, or the infantry with their bayonets, but was perhaps a vague reaction against the possibility of revolution. However, although the church had been loosing its influence on the upper classes, the working class strata of society were against any show of excessive enthusiasm and were inclined to act in a reserved and dignified way. The women were more conspicuous due to many attending in small contingents from outlying areas (Salford, Bury, Bolton, Failsworth, Chadderton, Middleton, Rochdale, Oldham, Royton, Saddleworth, Ashton-under-Lyne and Stockport), displaying banners of their particular group and being conspicuously dressed in white.

At the time of Peterloo social conditions were very harsh. Married women were not allowed to have property (which was a requirement allowing a person the right to vote) and in general the poorer classes of the population did not own property and were therefore denied a vote. The ruling classes were frightened of the poor gaining a position where they could upset the existing 'caste system' whereby the aristocracy and the rich remained in power, maintaining their privileged positions. Unfortunately, this was also a time of great unemployment and the cost of basic essential consumables was also high, so there was widespread deprivation and resentment, which potentially could have turned into a revolution as had happened in France.

It is estimated that 802 people were injured: 31 women and 187 men by sabre; 23 women and 47 men by truncheon; 1 woman and 15 men by bayonet; 1 woman and 9 men received gunshot wounds; 52 women and 136 men trampled by horses and 65 women and 122 men were crushed in the crowd. Not unexpectedly, some received injuries inflicted by more than one weapon. Five women and twenty-eight men suffered injury by shot and sabre; twelve women and fifty-two men by horse and the crowd, and four women and nine men by truncheon or being crushed. A further category of injuries were those where the wounds could not be attributed to a specific weapon or were of a miscellaneous nature. These involved nineteen women and fifty-eight men. It should be noted that although the numbers of women in the data above are mostly less than for men, there were far fewer women at the gathering, so proportionally, women were targeted more than men. A rough estimate of the causes of the injuries is as follows: half (48%) were due to weapons deployed

by the military and police, a quarter (26%) due to being trampled or knocked down by horses and the remaining quarter (26%) being due to the crowd itself.

Various lists of the injured were compiled and collated in the period covering a couple of days or so after the incident, from the places where the injured were taken for treatment, for example, Manchester Infirmary. Some were treated by their own local doctors. Lists were also prepared by newspaper reporters for three Manchester papers: *Wheeler's Chronicle, Courier, The Globe* and a report of the incident was also carried in *The Times* of London. A Manchester Relief Committee was set up and compiled its own lists and sent people out to view patients to assess the severity of the injuries and hardship these caused, to justify money given out. In fact, several relief funds were set up local to Manchester together with a National one, all of which needed to apportion the collected monies in a fair manner. The above casualty lists do not include an estimated sixty-seven constables injured by sticks and stones, nor twenty horses which also received injury. The lists also underestimate the total numbers injured because some thought that to reveal their injuries would incur some sort of prosecution; so the total injured was certainly over 700.

Naturally, such a serious public disturbance, which had resulted in deaths and numerous injuries, had to be reported to the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth. This was the job of the Chief Magistrate, William Hulton. His report wished to show that the meeting had been broken up by the authorities in a reasonable and moderate way with those acting to control the peace using 'extreme forbearance', but that inevitably the majority of injuries to those attending St. Peter's Field resulted from being accidentally crushed in the crowd during the panic following the dispersal orders by the magistrates.

Within Peters Field, the hustings had been set up on a raised portion of the area near to the field boundary. The local Manchester contingent attending, being there early, chose this position as it was near to the speaker's platform and also allowed them to watch the procession of outlying groups filled up the vacant parts of the meeting space. Unfortunately, it was the raised part of the field that the cavalry charged resulting in many local Manchester people being injured.

The official reason for the cavalry charge was said to be to arrest Hunt, the main speaker, but unofficially, the magistrates ordered the cavalry charge with little hope of dispersing the crowd, but more to terrorise and humiliate those attending. The size of the meeting was the outcome of many previous protests against the conditions under which the poor were forced to live, the poor wages, the artificial increased cost of food due to the corn laws and what was seen as the corruption of parliamentary action and legal practices.

Reports of the 'massacre' horrified the nation's public and although the protest movement did not gain much immediate advantage, it was an incentive for reform.

On Friday, 16 August 2019 the celebration marking the 200th anniversary the massacre at the new memorial in front of Manchester Central conference centre, the *Manchester Evening News* had an article about a ‘torn scrap of

paper' recently discovered in a strong box at The National Archives, a note written by J. Allen, a magistrate, which he had dispatched to London by mail coach the same day. It gave a graphic account of what happened. The report was received the next day by the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, and it reported eighteen people had been killed, including a two-year-old boy. The memorial by Jeremy Deller, a Turner Prize-winning artist, consists of a mound of concentric steps on the edge of which are engraved the names of the towns and villages from which the dead had come, along with their names. Some have complained that there is a lack of disabled access to the memorial. A large crowd of over 3,000 people attended the commemoration in light rain.

ASHTON-ON-MERSEY ALEHOUSES, ALEHOUSE KEEPERS, GAMBLING DENS AND BROTHELS 1613-1700

Jill Groves

Introduction

This article is about alehouses and alehouse keepers in Ashton-on-Mersey mentioned in the Dunham Massey Barony Court Leets between 1613 and 1700 – Dunham Massey Barony Court Leet and Dunham Massey Barony Freeholders' Court Leet. Both Court Leets had jurisdiction over about half of the township

The Waggon & Horses in its heyday. (Photograph by Alan Morrison)

of Ashton-on-Mersey, mainly the half that was in the parish of Bowdon. (John Rylands Library University of Manchester (JRLUM), Dunham Massey Papers, EGR2/1/4; EGR2/1/5; EGR2/1/6.)

At most meetings of the abovementioned court leets, which were held twice a year, there would be a list of people who were said to have broken the Assize of Bread and Ale and who were fined 1s each every six months. The Assize of Bread and Ale was supposed to be for regulating the quality, quantity and price of bread and ale, and fining transgressors, but by the fifteenth century it was clearly just a licence fee. Those who really did break the Assize of Bread and Ale, such as unlicensed alehouse keepers, were fined 3s 4d or 6s 8d each time. ('The Market and Fairs of Late Medieval Macclesfield' by Jane Laughton, *Cheshire History*, 2013-2014.)

Ashton-on-Mersey had about two or three alehouse keepers a year listed between 1613 and 1643. Then there is a gap in the court leet records until 1663. After that the records for the 'Assize of Bread and Ale' are less frequent, the last being Nathan Holbrooke in 1698. That doesn't mean that there weren't many alehouses in Ashton-on-Mersey after 1663, just that the Dunham Massey Barony and Freeholders' Court Leets didn't list them

In 1700 all manor courts stopped taking license fees on the orders of the national government.

Licensed

Henry August – 1640-1641, 1663
Ralph Barlow – 1615-1616. Son of Randle the carrier (d.1611).
Ralph Barlow – 1641-1643
Ralph Barlow – 1669
James Brundrett – 1627
Pole/Paul Cheshire – 1611, 1617-1619
Henry Chorlton – 1669-1671
John Dean alias Heyward – 1633-1636, 1640-1641
John's widow – 1635
Ralph Devis – 1628-1635
Edward Hamnett – 1679
Alexander Hartley/Hartles – 1617-1618
Nathan Holbrooke – 1698
George Hyde of Cross Street – 1614-1615, 1618-1622
Randle Jones senior – 1616-1629, 1633-1636
Jane Jones, widow – 1638, 1640-1643
Robert Parker - 1669
Robert Ravold – 1618-1619
Richard Renshaw – 1681, 1691
James Rowson – 1616. Owed money to Edward Alcock
Catherine Shawcross – 1690-1697
Richard Taylor – 1668-1671
Richard Watt – 1616

John Devis, The Plough – 1750s-1772?

Unlicensed

James Brundrett – 1626, 1627
Alexander Hartles – 1617
George Hyde – 1614
Margarett Watt, wife of Richard Watt – 1620

From the above list, it can be seen that although only two or three alehouses might be listed, twenty-three people ran them between 1613 and 1698. This is because Ashton-on-Mersey was a rural village in the seventeenth century and in North-east Cheshire villages the turnover of alehouses and alehouse keepers was very high. Most alehouses in Ashton-on-Mersey and other villages were what we now call 'pop-up' pubs. They 'popped-up' for a year or two and then disappeared. They might 'pop-up' again a few years later as in the case of Paul Cheshire in 1611 and 1617-1619 or James Rowson in 1616. They 'popped-up' when the alehouse keeper had extra beer to sell if the barley crop was good or malt cheap, or when the alehouse keeper needed extra cash and disappeared when the beer ran out.

'Pop-up' pubs were the norm in the villages in the jurisdiction of the Dunham Massey Court Leets. The same was not true of the market towns like Altrincham and Manchester. There pubs or inns, taverns and alehouses were the main occupation of the families who ran them, not a sideline from farming, as in Ashton-on-Mersey. A lot was invested in market town pubs, in the buildings and the beer. Some of the alehouses listed in Altrincham Court Leet in the seventeenth century existed until the mid-twentieth century – Axe and Cleaver, the Woolpack. Some still exist (just) – The Old Market Tavern, the Wheatsheaf (now about to be turned into apartments) and the Malt Shovels. So permanent alehouses were the norm in market towns. Not that they didn't have 'pop-up' pubs, they did. They weren't rare, but they weren't the norm and tended to be run by incomers in need of money.

Ashton-on-Mersey had some permanent pubs before 1643. They were run by the Barlow family, who were also carriers (a good occupation for an alehouse keeper); the Dean alias Heyward family, George Hyde of Cross Street (which could be the origin of the Waggon and Horses), the Jones family and Ralph Devis.

Then there came the bonanza years of 1640-1643 when the annual lists of alehouses in the Dunham Massey Court Leet records shot up from about eighteen to twenty-eight per year. The number of alehouses in Bowdon (the largest number outside of Altrincham) went from the normal six or seven to ten or eleven. Ashton-on-Mersey went up from one to three.

The bonanza was caused by the country moving towards civil war. There were agents and militia soldiers moving about the country and they were thirsty and hungry men.

Henry August was one of those to take advantage of the bonanza. He ran an alehouse between 1640 and 1641. What he did for the next twenty years is unknown, but he was still in Ashton-on-Mersey in 1663 when he was fined for lodging two women who were strangers, so he might still have been running an alehouse, although the Dunham Massey Barony Court Leets probably suspected he was also running a brothel.

By 1667 Henry had moved to Altrincham with his son John August and daughter-in-law Susan. They lived in a house with two hearths. (The National Archives, 1664 Hearth Tax Return for Altrincham; Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALS), DLT/75, 1667 Poll Tax Return for Altrincham.)

John August ran his own alehouse in Altrincham between 1671 and 1680. Which makes me suspect that his father was running an alehouse in Ashton-on-Mersey between 1640 and about 1664 and he ran another one in Altrincham, all under the radar of the Dunham Massey and Altrincham Court Leets. Although they might have been properly licensed by the Quarter Sessions. The Quarter Session Alehouse Recognisances only survive in 1649 and from 1740 onwards so it isn't possible to know. So the August family were possibly running a permanent pub in Ashton. (JRLUM, Dunham Massey Papers, Altrincham Court Leet.)

The Barlow family ran another one of Ashton-on-Mersey's permanent pubs. Ralph/Randle Barlow the father (1615-1616) was a son of Randle Barlow the carrier of Ashton-on-Mersey. He married Mary Tipping of Hale and had at least three daughters, including one called Elizabeth, and one son called Ralph. He was fined in 1615 for allowing 'Unlawful Gambling' in his alehouse. (*'Enticing and Alluring': Fun and Games for Ordinary People in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries North-east Cheshire 1613-1760* by Jill Groves, Altrincham History Society Occasional Paper 48, 2019 ('Enticing and Alluring').)

This branch of the Barlow family had leased a farm in Ashton-on-Mersey called Caballs Farm since 1527 from Sir John Stanley of Handforth. (Rental for Ashton-on-Mersey from Will of Sir John Stanley of Handforth, 1527 in *Lancashire and Cheshire Wills*.) Later the Barlows leased this farm from Sir William Brereton of Handforth. Ralph Barlow the elder was involved in a fight in 1618 with fellow alehouse keeper, Ralph Jones. They were fined 3s 4d each. (JRLUM, Dunham Massey Papers, EGR2/1/4/12/193-196.)]

Ralph/Randle Barlow the son ran the alehouse from 1641 to 1643. Now the alehouse may have continued for a couple more years at a time when there were a lot thirsty soldiers in the area, but what happened after that is unknown because of the nineteen year gap in the Dunham Massey Barony Court Leet records.

In 1630 Ralph/Randle Barlow 'Infringed the Liberty of the Court', probably by suing someone in another court. In 1634 he was fined for hunting with a gun. In that same year he kept rabbits, probably in an illegal warren on the common. (JRLUM, Dunham Massey Papers, EGR2/1/4/13/25-27.)]

John Dean alias Heyward ran an alehouse until his death in 1635, when his widow rook over and then his son John until at least 1641. In 1635 John Dean

alias Heyward was fined for having a ‘disorderly alehouse’. Elsewhere in England this was an euphemism for a brothel, but here it means allowing fighting in the pub. In the same year Ralph Devis, who had been running his alehouse since 1628 was also fined for having a ‘disorderly alehouse’.

George Hyde of Cross Street was an interesting character in the early seventeenth century. In 1614 he ran both an unlicensed alehouse and a licensed one. He was fined for running a gambling den in his alehouse in 1615. In 1619 he had a fight with Robert Ravald/Raffold. Blood was drawn so George was fined 10s.

In 1620 he was the Bylawman for the Dunham Massey Barony Court Leet for Ashton. (Bylawmen or Burlimen enforced the court leet orders on ditches, road repairs and repairs to the banks of streams and rivers.)

George Hyde married Elizabeth Alcock, widow, as his second wife, before 1667. The couple lived with Elizabeth’s three sons by her first marriage (Edward, Alexander and Robert) and George’s son by his first marriage (George and Henry). (CALS, DLT/75, 1667 Poll Tax Return for Ashton-on-Mersey.)

George Hyde junior bought land from the Rector Hugh Hobson in 1678 and became a freeholder.

Alexander Hartles was another interesting character running an alehouse in early seventeenth century Ashton-on-Mersey. 1617 was quite a year for Alexander. He ran an unlicensed and a licensed alehouse in 1617. Like George Hyde, he ran a gambling den. He loved gaming so much he travelled to that centre of gambling, Dunham Massey. It was probably whilst gambling in a Dunham Massey pub in 1617 that Alexander got into a fight with Henry Hazlehurst of Sinderland (not difficult since Henry was always up for a fight with anyone). When a woman, Elizabeth Tarleton, tried to intervene Henry punched her in the face. Henry was fined 10s.

Alexander continued to gamble, but in his own alehouse after that. He had a licensed alehouse in 1618, but afterwards he disappeared. There was a Hartles/Hartley family in Sale throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, but no sign of Alexander. He may have moved to Stretford.

The Jones family ran an alehouse in Ashton-on-Mersey for over three decades from 1616 to 1643. Then a son left to establish another alehouse at Streethead in Bowdon. (Streethead is where Bow Green Lane has a junction with the A56, just before the A56 drops over the brow towards Lymm roundabout.) That alehouse ran from 1637 to 1700 and beyond.

Ralph/Randle Jones, patriarch of the clan and the son of either James Jones (died 1613) or Randle Jones senior, ran a gambling den in 1616. He may also have run a brothel, but that is something I will mention later. Randle was also a weaver as well as an alehouse keeper.

Like all alehouse keepers in the seventeenth century, Randle Jones and his family were involved in their fair share of fights in their alehouse. And Randle was not adverse to starting a fight himself. In 1618 he tangled with fellow alehouse keeper Randle Barlow, as mentioned above. It wasn’t much of a fight, so they were both fined just 3s 4d.

In 1620 he was attacked by James Turner (who might have been his late father's servant). The latter was fined 3s 4d. In 1626, Randle's own daughter Ann was attacked by James Davenport of Sale. He was fined just 3s 4d. In 1630 Randle Jones had another fight with fellow alehouse keeper John Dean alias Heyward. Both were fined 3s 4d.

Randle died in 1637.

In 1638, James Jones, son of Jane and Randle, with his mother, attacked Hugh Bowdon. What the poor man had done to deserve it is unknown, but he got a bloody nose. Jane and James were fined 6s 8d and 3s 4d respectively. Three years later James had a fight with John Cheshire. Both were fined 6s 8d.

James could be the James Jones who went on to be a miller and died in 1670.

*

After 1663 it isn't easy to tie-up Ashton alehouse keepers of the 1660s through to the 1690s with pub landlords known to be in the village in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, such as John Devis/Davis at the Dog and Buck and the Plough on Green Lane, and the Ryding family at the Waggon and Horses. There is a Ralph Barlow in 1669 who could be a grandson of Randle Barlow. Richard Taylor ran an alehouse between 1668 and 1671 and was listed in the 1673 Hearth Tax. (Reprinted in The *Memorials of the Ancient Parish of Ashton-on-Mersey* by Isaiah Renshawe.) Richard Renshawe was running another alehouse in the 1680s and possibly later. He died in 1714. Catherine Shawcross was an alehouse keeper in the 1690s; Edward Hamnett in 1679 and Nathan Holbrook in 1698 ran alehouses.

Ralph Barlow and his wife Katherine ran the Barlow alehouse in 1669 and probably beyond. Ralph died in 1673.

There was a John Shawcross living in Ashton in the early eighteenth century, according to the Dunham Massey Papers. He could be a son of Catherine.

Nathan Holbrook was still living in Ashton in the early eighteenth century, so he could have continued as an alehouse keeper. His son John was living on Cross Street and was said to be a carrier at his death in 1726. As I said before, carrier was a good occupation for someone who also ran an alehouse. It mention he had strings of packhorses to lease to other carriers using his alehouse, and stabling to lease.

There are people missing from the above list – James and Ann Gibbon. Like the Holbrooks, they were living on Cross Street. James might have made a living as a tailor, but Ann Gibbon (née Coppock) was a sister and sister-in-law of Northenden alehouse keepers, Ellen Coppock and her brother-in-law William Coppock. In fact she helped her sister-in-law Ellen Coppock run the alehouse in Northenden. After Ellen's death, Ann ran the Northenden alehouse with her new husband James Gibbon, until they moved to Ashton. After his death in 1683 Ann returned to Northenden to run the family pub until her own death in 1686. So she almost certainly ran an alehouse on Cross Street for a short time. James Gibbon was probably a grandson of the James Gibbon of Timperley

fined 2s for allowing gambling in his house/alehouse in 1627. (JRLUM, TW, Northenden Court Leet.)

And finally there is John Devis/Davis of the Plough, Cross Street. There had been a Devis/Davis/Davies family living on Cross Street since at least the early seventeenth century and probably before. In the early eighteenth John Devis of Cross Street was a tailor. From 1742 to 1745 the Freeholders' Court Leet for Dunham Massey Barony noted him as a freeholder meaning he had some land which he owned outright. Being a tailor didn't preclude John Devis from being an alehousekeeper as well. Another John Devis, almost certainly the tailor's son, born 1727, was listed in the late 1750s as John Davis of the Plough (now the Old Plough on Green Lane, Ashton-on-Mersey) and freeholder by the Freeholders' Court Leet. He was still a freeholder in 1765. In 1772 he was still at the Plough.

Gambling

For 95 per cent of people living in England in the early seventeenth century, gambling was illegal because they earned less than £100 a year. It was only legal for ordinary people to gamble during the Twelve Days of Christmas. (Unbelievable to us now, but gambling had been a Christmas tradition for centuries before 1600.) (*The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England* by Ian Mortimer, Vintage Books, reprint 2013.)

However, as the Dunham Marony Court Leets show, a lot of people gambled from time to time. And court leet records were probably only the tip of the iceberg. They rarely gambled for cash. Beer and bread were the common currency. The court leets fined the gamblers 3s 4d each, not a high fine. The court leets were just as concerned about the potential for fights over card and dice games, especially when drink was also involved. Most gambling dens were alehouses.

Gambling dropped from the court leet records after the Restoration, probably because the whole of Charles II's court were gambling. The Gaming Act of 1664 made losses of more than £100 unenforceable, but that wouldn't have made much difference to ordinary folk.

Ashton-on-Mersey Gambling Dens

Ralph Barlow – 1615
Alexander Hartles – 1617 (2)
George Hyde – 1615
Ralph Jones – 1616
Margaret Watt – 1620

Popular card games in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Gleek
Primero
Prima-vista
Maw

Cent or Sant (like modern Picquet)
One-and-Thirty
New Cut
Trumps (like modern Whist)
Ombre
Basset
Lanterloo
Whist
Cribbage
Brag

And dice games like 'Tables', which was a close cousin to Backgammon, and played in Bowdon.

Brothels

There were three possible brothels in Ashton-on-Mersey between 1635 and 1663: Randle Jones in 1635, George Renshaw in 1638 and Henry August in 1663. All three also ran alehouses. Other nearby townships also had brothels. Alice Clark ran a brothel in Partington between 1616 and 1618 where she had a woman (Anne Partington), 'burdensome to her neighbours'. 'Burdensome to her neighbours', 'Nuissance to the neighbours', 'a house of evil fame' were all terms used by Dunham Massey Barony Court Leets for brothels. 'Lewd woman', and 'misguided woman' were terms for prostitutes. If a man took a prostitute to an alehouse or entertained the alehouse's usual lady of negotiable affection, then what they were doing was called 'misorderly', especially if they were drunk as well. (*'Enticing and Alluring'*.)

Three is not a large number. Altrincham was brothel central in the early seventeenth century with eight brothels recorded by Altrincham Court Leet between 1630 and 1653. Timperley had six between 1614 and 1635 – two of them were run by Alice Coe. Dunham Massey had continuous line of brothels: William and Jane Shaw, alehousekeepers, ran a brothel between 1621 and 1627; Jane Finney ran one in 1626 and 1627; George Sampson, alehousekeeper, ran a third in 1628. (*'Enticing and Alluring'.*)

Randle Jones's brothel also ran out of his alehouse, with his own daughter as the resident prostitute. This shocks us today, but it was common in the seventeenth century and before. Elizabeth Leigh of Agden, herself the resident prostitute in Ralph Rowe's alehouse in the 1620s, ran a brothel and alehouse in the 1630s with her own daughter as the resident 'lady of negotiable affection'. (Elizabeth must have made Ralph Rowe good money because he was being heavily fined by the court leets each year she was there.) (JRLUM, Dunham Massey Papers, Dunham Massey Barony Court Leets.)

SALE SCHOOLDAYS REMEMBERED

Pauline Holden

[This article, originally written for *ASHS Newsletter 11*, is being reprinted here in memory of Pauline who died in November 2019.]

THE YEAR WAS 1953 when, not quite five years old, I was despatched to Worthington Road Primary School. It had been built in 1905, the first council school in Cheshire, but I doubt whether my parents knew anything about that.

Whether my arrival at school was auspicious for the history of education is uncertain, but, on reflection, it seems I was fortunate in commencing my school days at a time when the far-reaching 1944 Education Act was beginning to bear fruit. The minimum school-leaving age had been raised to fifteen, with an emphasis on educational qualifications as a means of equipping children for the world of work.

The eleven-plus system was well in place (though now widely viewed as divisive). Those who passed were offered the more scholarly approach of a grammar school, whilst those who failed were sent to a secondary modern school, where a more practical education was deemed as appropriate.

All this, of course, was beyond my understanding as I waved goodbye to my mother and entered the school gates for my very first day at school. Sadly, though, I barely recall anything of this important milestone in my life.

My first real memory of school was during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, our present queen. As a celebration, every schoolchild was to be given a coronation mug. To this day I can see them lined up on a high shelf, no doubt to preserve them from busy fingers, whilst each of us was called to the front of the class and presented with the royal token. Unfortunately, mine was not presented well enough. After being placed into my care with due ceremony it suffered a sorry mishap. With the impertinence of one who obviously knew no better, I asked the teacher for another, only to be told that those remaining were for absent children. I distinctly remember hoping that at least one of them would not return to school, whereupon I could lay claim to their trophy sitting on the shelf. It was not to be and the business of learning moved on apace.

One of the first things I learnt at school was as education in itself. I discovered that boys were different. All infants shared the girls playground, and so it naturally followed that male infants shared the girls' lavatories, which were open-air arrangements in the girls' playground. From the age of seven, boys were segregated into their own playground at the other side of the school, with a sort of 'no-man's land' behind the school building. It was a very old-fashioned school.

Other people were different too. I first became aware of this when we had a visiting teacher from Africa. It was my first experience of a black person, and I think it must have been the same for many of the others. Somewhat wide-eyed, we would stare at her while she was talking to us. There was no prejudice on

our part, rather a childish curiosity. She showed no sign of noticing our interest, but kept talking about God and what did we think of him? I doubt whether any of us gave an eloquent response.

Christine was certainly different. Sitting at the back of the class she would burble away contentedly, never once saying anything that made sense. She was not much fun at games either, and we could only give her very simple things to do. Somehow, we all understood when the teacher announced that Christine was leaving to attend a special school. Current policy is for children with special needs to be integrated into mainstream school, but when I think of Christine I wonder whether they have got it quite right. We were remarkably tolerant, given how cruel children can be, but whether we were unusual, or products of more civilized times, is hard to say.

'Things were different in my day' we are oft heard to say. Maybe we do tend to view our memories through rosy-coloured specs, but current accounts of five-year olds being suspended for misbehaviour, and school-leavers unable to read and write properly, make me wonder whether things really were different in my time. Standing on the mat outside the headmaster's office, awaiting the severest reprimand for even the slightest misdemeanour, seemed to suffice. We can only guess how they would deal with today's problems. Something tells me that Mr Davison, the headmaster, would have known how to make them 'toe the line'.

Reputed to rule with a rod of iron, Mr Davison had taught at Worthington Road for many years, but, by the mid 1950s, was reaching the end of his teaching career. He was still known for his gardening interests and, for some years before the war, a plot of land adjoining the school had been used to train boys in the joys of horticulture. Air raid shelters had been built there during the war.

By the time I joined the school the air raid shelters had disappeared, and a canteen was now in their place, with the rest of the gardening plot being eventually grassed over for a playing field. Things were becoming very modern.

Gardening implements on their shoulders, boys were trooped to the nurseries across the road. At one time this part of Sale would have been covered with nurseries, and row upon row of greenhouses, stemming from the days when Sale was very much a market garden area.

Meanwhile, the girls would be dancing round the maypole. Each holding one of the long ribbons, we skipped in and out, over and under, weaving various patterns on the maypole. The younger boys were included in this activity. When they grew older they were probably quite grateful for their trips across the road. Gardening duties must have taken on a certain appeal.

Demonstrations of maypole dancing were an important feature of the annual sports days, which seems to have been in keeping with a long, English tradition of celebrating Mayday with games and sports and the setting up of the maypole. Nowadays, the tradition has evolved into a bank holiday with various sporting fixtures, although some communities, such as Knutsford, still elect a May Queen. I wonder where all the maypoles went.

Despite all this frivolity, the main emphasis was still learning. On reflection, my generation of schoolchildren was not too far removed from those who were compelled to learn by rote. We were certainly compelled to learn at Worthington Road. There were no extra-curriculum activities and no homework. We were expected to arrive at school, learn our lessons, and then leave at home time. Emphasis was on the three Rs, and no child left Worthington Road without them. Perhaps children of today could learn something from the teaching methods of those times.

Sadly, though, there was one teacher, who shall be nameless, whose teaching methods left a lot to be desired. I am referring, of course, to that old school bogey – the teacher who hated left-handed pupils. My sister, Wendy, four years older than me, was unfortunate in being one of them. She received many a thump in the back for writing with her left hand, and was made to use her right. Naturally, her handwriting would be poor, and so she was slapped with a ruler. She was not alone, and other left-handers suffered the same fate. Happily, this seems to be an aspect of teaching that has disappeared.

I calculate that, at the time, this teacher would have been very close to retirement, and so definitely hailed from that era when schoolchildren, sitting bolt upright at their desk, arms folded, would be made to recite as of one voice. There was no place for any child who was 'different'. Luckily for me, things had changed by the time I went to school, and lucky for the old bogey I was never in her class. Goodness knows how long I would have had to stand outside the headmaster's office!

With different times come new ideas. Mr Davison retired and we got a new headmaster, Mr McKenna, who had been deputy head. From now on, when the school bell was rung in the playground, we would have to line up in class formation and march to our lessons. We were to move round the hall (most classrooms being off the hall) in clockwise fashion, and 'peeled off' as we reached our classroom. Mr McKenna must have been in the army at one time, and he was evidently missing it.(1)

Just to show that some things are always with us, Mr McKenna was obviously concerned about his budget. From now on, when we went for our dinner in the canteen, we would have to decide on the size of our appetite, large, medium or small, and ask for a dinner that corresponded with our hunger.

It was a large burden to place on small children, and much confusion ensued. It also brought to our attention certain details which, hitherto, had gone unnoticed. Did a 'large' dinner mean a larger dinner than we got before things changed? Were the various sizes of dinners calculated according to how many potatoes we received, and what size of dinner would it be if we had a bigger piece of meat pie, but very few vegetables? If we had a 'small' dinner, did this mean we had to have a 'small' pudding? All these things took on a new importance.

Some things never change – playtime, the very stuff of school life. We had games for all occasions, 'ticky', leapfrog, hide-and-seek, skipping ropes, jacks, and, believe it or not, ring o' ring o' roses. Towards the late 1950s, the

hoola-hoop craze swept the land. Many of the girls would bring their hoops to school and show off how well they could gyrate their hips to keep the hoop around their waist. I reached the peak of my performance one day when I managed to last for most of the playtime.

Our pastimes relied heavy on invention and group cooperation. 'Let's play chase, you go first.' 'We'll play hide and seek. Who wants to be "on"?' Or, 'Form a circle for ring o' roses.' This was the girls' playground, and so skipping was high on the list. We would take turns in holding the ends of the ropes, whilst others would line up for their 'go'. A group chorus would count the number of skips, with records being made and broken. We could be very competitive. On missing the skip we would be deemed as 'out', and would have to rejoin at the back of the queue. One can only pause and consider what marvellous preparation this was for later life.

Come rain, come shine, we would be turned outdoors at play time, in sole charge of the 'dinner lady' clutching the school bell. At the first sign of any commotion the bell would be rung in sharp, warning tones. We certainly knew the difference between this and the steady, persistent ring of the 'going-in' bell.

During inclement weather we were able to take cover under a large, canopied shelter in the playground. We must have been hardy beings, though, as a favourite winter pastime was to roll up the snow into the biggest snowball we could make. A veritable army of snowmen would decorate the playground. (Did we have more snow in those days?) Patches of ice would be used as 'slides', with the usual queue forming.

A particular memory is of the headmaster, unusually, ringing the bell during the playtime. We were told to stand still and remain silent for two minutes, in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the world wars. As we were in school it must have been a weekday, and so before Remembrance Day was moved to the nearest Sunday to 11 November.

For my generation, though, war was only something we heard about from grown-ups. We were the post-war 'baby boomers' (a term that came in later), that great population explosion which gave educationalists, and officialdom, a demographic nightmare. Nevertheless, despite large class sizes, we still received a sound education.

Despite priority being given to reading, writing and 'rithmetic, time was made available for other, more artistic, activities. As infants we modelled plasticine on a board, each of us being doled a lump. We played with raffia, fibre obtained from a cultivated palm and normally used for making rugs and baskets. I doubt whether we ever achieved such results but, intended or otherwise, we probably gained a degree of manual dexterity.

On reaching the juniors, we were let loose with the paint. Pots would be mixed with water in jam jars, and we would splodge around on rough cuts of paper. Although this was something like ten years after the Second World War there was still a paper shortage, and I suppose we were lucky to have any paper. At Christmas time we made paper chains and Chinese lanterns, and decorated the classroom with them.

Christmas was time for the annual show held in the school hall when we were privileged to be entertained by members of staff. One memorable ‘turn’ was given by the caretaker, whose name escapes me, who evidently considered himself something of a magician. However, he was obviously unaware that children are the hardest critics of all. He performed the same tricks year after year, and, by the time we had reached the upper juniors, we knew them all. To indicate our knowledge, not to mention our disgust, we shouted out the very secrets of these magical acts. Very soon a general heckling would develop in the hall, but, in keeping with the discipline of the time, this was very quickly stamped on. How cruel children can be, and how ungrateful.

Beside the Christmas show, the school hall was the centre of school activities. Mrs Boyce, one of our favourite teachers, would take us there for our music lessons, which were little more than ‘sing-songs’ really. The hall also doubled as the gym, with apparatus being taken out of a large store and replaced afterwards.

However, probably its most important use was for that annual event – the eleven-plus examination – on which hung our very futures. My mother was later to remark that I had left home that day as if it was just any other day at school. I can still remember waving goodbye as she saw me off at the door. With the blissfulness of childhood, I just did not appreciate what an important milestone this was in my life – and what different times lay ahead.

Notes

1. After the Second World War there was a shortage of teachers, so the government instituted a one-year course for men from the forces to retrain as teachers. (We had one or two in my primary school in Bowdon.) They would not have reached retirement age until the 1970s. So it is very likely that Mr McKenna was ex-Army.

Ashton and Sale History Society
promotes the study of local and family history in the towns of Ashton-on-Mersey and Sale. Many of its members are involved in local family history research projects.