

BOX CHARITY SCHOOL
Box School Tercentenary 14.10.08

Like spelling the word 'banana', I know how it starts, but my difficulty is knowing when to stop. The story of this school is a long one. I hope at least that I shall be able to introduce you to three outstanding men: George Millard; George Mullins; Edward Gardiner.

George Millard

So let's at least start at the beginning.

He wears a grey scratch wig, as all clergy, doctors and lawyers must do, and a sober suit of black with buckled breeches, a full skirted coat, and his white cravat falls in clerical bands. He is not old: quite a young man in fact, and he is the keen new Vicar of Box. This is Parson George Millard, who came to the village in 1707 with a bee in his clerical bonnet.

It's a middling size living; the total parish population of 500 is centred on the small village, tucked away in a rather inaccessible valley: (John Speed's map gives the directions for Box as 'turn in at any field gate' from Chapel Plaister on the upper Bath road). But then England, with a whole population of only five and a half million, is a land of small villages, and power is in the hands of a very few – squire's law, parson's creed. And the Bath road is an important one, linking the nation's two largest sea-ports, London and Bristol.

It's a land too that is yearning for stability and security. Those who could remember the war, would tell stories of the Battle of Lansdown, and the skirmishing that took place around Bathford, the casualties buried in the churchyard at neighbouring Ditteridge. They would recall the 50's and the Commonwealth years, when the disgraced Vicar of Box was

ejected from his living, leaving bitter differences behind him. Following on from the 80's, when the countryside had turned out for the Duke of Monmouth and the vengeful Judge Jeffries had come to Doctor's Hill, Dutch King William had taken the throne, and now everything hung on the Protestant Succession and a national church. Parson George Millard's world was always on the edge of violence. The destitute and the under-classes were seen as a constant threat, and the Elizabethan poor-law was quite inadequate to deal with them; three nights in the lock-up and then move them on and tuppence on the Parish Rates. People were afraid of the poor.

But the new young parson had different ideas. In 1699 a band of concerned Christian gentlemen, meeting in a London coffee house, had banded together to write to all Church of England clergy with a plan, proposing the formation of a society to be known as 'The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge'. Prevention is better than cure. We must 'gentle the masses'. There had been no response from John Philips the former Vicar, nor from Andrew Verriard the Rector of Hazelbury, or James Butler the Rector of Ditteridge. None of the Bath clergy had responded either. George Millard would change all that.

The heart of the SPCK plan was simply *education*. Establishing what were to become known as 'charity schools'. George paid up to become a corresponding member. From the Society's how-to-do-it publication *The Christian Schoolmaster* it was clear that such schools would have to be of the highest professional standards, based on local partnership and voluntarism. He began to put things into practice.

First he won the support of Dame Rachel Speke of Hazelbury Manor and the work could begin. In rooms above the vestry 15 girls and 15 boys (the Charity Schools were co-educational from the beginning) were taught first their

letters from horn books – rather like the 'table tennis bats' that one finds in churches to direct visitors looking round. In this way they were taught to read, and their text books were the Authorised version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. They would recite the catechism, and learn some of the Collects by heart. After this, basic arithmetic and how to cast accounts, and the practical skills of spinning and knitting.

But in June 1712 Millard reports that 'the excellent lady of my parish, the great encourager of our school, viz Dame Rachel Speke, is dead.' This left the school in a financially precarious position. But Rachel had left in her will £100 for the teaching of poor children to read. Not one to miss a trick, and to encourage her wealthy relations and other lesser gentry, to follow her lead, Millard had tables of benefactors set up in the church, one of which is now displayed here in the school.

But more money was needed.

The churchwardens agreed that the offertory at communion services, celebrated five times a year, was to support the venture. George himself pledged his Easter dues. Among other tips and wheezes for raising cash was an annual charity sermon, and parishioners who wanted a posh funeral were offered, on payment of a shilling, the use of a black coffin pall; there was an even posher version for 1/6d.

Apart from paying a schoolmaster, where did the money go?

The disincentive to learning was loss of a child's earning capacity, so bonus payments were there to be earned. On mastering the alphabet 2/6d. When able to read a chapter from the Bible and recite the Catechism, 5/- A further 15/- when able to cast accounts. In 1716 Millard reports that, 'since the first erecting of this school A.D.1708, there have been educated in all and dismissed, 34 children.' They went on to trade, to husbandry, to friends, or to family, and on

leaving were given a copy for themselves of the Bible and the Prayer Book. One leaver became a replacement for Millard's own manservant who had died of smallpox, 'a blessing which I look upon more than sufficient to recompense me for all the care and pains I have hitherto bestowed about the education of the poor children of this parish'.

He then casually mentions that not only has he started a similar school in his other parish, Calston, (this was Calston Wellington, near Calne, a parish, he says, of only four families) but was well on the way to setting up a third in another neighbouring parish where the living was vacant.

So what did he do apart from that?

Well in 1712 he began to pull down and rebuild most of the church, because the congregation was outstripping the church's accommodation. He added the north aisle, increasing capacity by a further 100. Then galleries were added (we shall hear more of them later). Box pews were built, lined with green and red baize, with 'butts' to enable worshippers to kneel, and candlesticks for illumination so that services were no longer only on a Sunday afternoon. He provided what was in effect a public reading room or library in church, and set about adult education, or as he puts it, 'in the instructing of such young men and maidens, of the poorer sort, as think themselves too bigg to go to school'. In 1716 'eight or nine overgrown persons' learned to read; in 1717 one of the adult literacy class was aged over 40. One effect of growing literacy that Millard reports was vocal participation in the liturgy – standing up and taking part in the worship.

Before the school leaves the church building however, one thing more: music – singing! Up until now any singing in church had been restricted to the Psalms, and to the parson and a few select performers in the gallery. In 1717 he sends

to SPCK for a copy of John Playford's 'The Singer's Guide'. This was music for Tate and Brady's *New Version* metrical psalms of 1698, which had replaced Sternhold and Hopkins 1562 Psalms (hence 'old' hundredth, or Cambridge 'new'). Laboriously he prepared manuscript books, and then, practicing with them for two hours a day, in little more than a week the children of the charity school had mastered four tunes. That Sunday the congregation was entranced. Everyone wanted to learn to sing. In no time the children had mastered a further 30 tunes. Choir practices were being held three times a week and more than 160 would turn up from the village. The children were even sent up to Marshfield to demonstrate to them what they could do, and here Sunday worship was preceded by, and followed by singing. He gives a lovely account of a competition among the children; when it proved impossible to choose between the thirty best performers, the prize was awarded by lot, and the congregation then took up a collection to share out among the unlucky ones.

So it was that Parson Millard's school flourished and outgrew its premises.

In 1719 Thomas Speke gave land alongside the churchyard, timber was donated, and what is now Springfield Cottages was erected as a proper schoolhouse with 7 rooms and 2 outhouses. The total cost amounted to £107.12.0d.

Four years later two cottages and orchards at Henley were given to the school by Christopher Eyre, whose family was beginning to take an interest.

In 1727 all the various monies accumulated were used to purchase the tract of land that ran from the Brook, through Bassets and Fogleigh, up to the top of Quarry Hill, and a good stone barn – now a house beside the A4 – was constructed. At the cost of £475.19.6d the school now owned a farm worth about £60 a year. This would be the remuneration for a high quality schoolmaster, and the

arrangement worked well for the next 150 years.

But none of this was without opposition.

An anonymously published pamphlet against the charity schools entitled *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices* declared, 'The more a shepherd and ploughman know of the world, the less fitted he'll be to go through the fatigue and hardship of it with cheerfulness and equanimity', the eternal response of the haves to the have nots.

It also upset those of the 'second poor' – those above, but just above the bread line, who saw the very poorest receiving help, and feared that they were being overtaken.

Public opinion as ever had an answer: 'Schools of Industry'. Otherwise known as 'workhouses'.

At first it seemed a good idea. Millard found a new ally in the widow of Henry Hoar of Stourton, and money was raised for the building of Springfields.

It was at this point that hundreds of charity schools folded. Not here in Box though. Although the workhouse was built, it was with with an outside staircase to the extra and completely separate floor that accommodated the school.

In 1738 George Millard died

George Mullins

Now we skip on, and opening our copy of the Bath Chronicle we read the following advertisement:

At Mullins's Boarding Schools

At Box in the County of Wilts.

And if we read on, we discover that, for an entrance fee of one guinea, and fees of twelve guineas a year, both boys and girls are boarded. Boys are taught reading, writing, arithmetic, book-keeping, geometry, gauging, surveying etc. etc., and girls learn, alongside the 3r's, Latin, French, dancing, music, needlework, and if required, drawing.

Isn't it interesting how now the term 'bluecoat school', or 'greycoat', or 'redmaids', has become a mark of distinction! Yet these are the same charity schools which once provided clothing for their destitute children. Whether here at Box it was Blue or grey we don't know, only tantalisingly that they had worn, in compliment to her, the same colour as the livery of Dame Rachel Speke. Now, at the suggestion of SPCK, these same bluecoat schools are taking in the children of local middle class traders as boarders, to be educated alongside the same number of charity children, and the profit from the private fees goes towards the cost of the poor.

The schoolmaster is George Mullins.

He was born in 1728 at Slade's Farm, and at the age of 18 took on the job and Parish Clerk as well. His first duty was to teach the 30 charity children, who were to be admitted in order of application and regardless of age as vacancies occurred, and the rest was all private enterprise.

The parson of the day was more interested in foxhunting. George did very nicely.

The workhouse never at any time reached full capacity, and gradually the school took over the whole of the building.

In 1766 George bought a mill. In 1791 he acquired more property, including the Wilderness, and the whole family were in on the act, so that when in 1796 he died, his son George junior smoothly stepped into his shoes, along with his daughter Jane, his son Edward, and his son's wife Rachel.

We get a poignant glimpse into the life of the school at this period. When floorboards were being removed at the time Springfield was being converted to flats a number of sheets of writing came to light. These seem to be pages of rough work, corrected by the schoolmaster, and written by one of the boys. They include school exercises, prayers and

collects, and draughts of letters home.

'Dear Aunt' he writes in flowing copperplate. 'It is with pleasure I write these few lines to inform that I am in good Health and I Hope that you and Dear Uncle and all dear friends are the same. Please to send me a new pair of shoes and my new suit of clothes as soon as it is sent to you from my Father and all the things that is sent with it.

Please to give my love to all my friends.

Mr and Mrs Mullins desire their love to you.

From

Your affectionate nephew W H Kidd

Please to send me a new pair of shoes'.

This is then duly censored by the teacher and reduced to:

'Dear Aunt,

It is with pleasure that I write these few lines to inform you that I am in good health and I hope that you, uncle, and my dear friends are the same. Please to send me a new pair of shoes as soon as convenient.

Mr and Mrs Mullins desire their compliments

Was he one of those children who, for another 3 guineas, would remain at school over the vacation, not wanted at home: shades of the young Scrooge.

In 1811 SPCK handed its school work over to the National Society. The government were getting interested in education, and in 1831 the first grant was made, £2000, less than to the royal stables. But if there was government money, then government inspectors must be created. Box was inspected for the first time in 1834 and told that the number of free scholars must rise from 30 to 50. There was now competition – free schools in Bath, a flourishing little school in Ditteridge, and Parson Horlock's daughter was running a little school up at Henley. The school began a long, slow decline.

The Bath Herald ran a column 'The Church Rambler' and eventually it was the turn of Box. Both church and school get a bad press.

'No church that I know calls more loudly for restoration than Box, though it will require great skill to carry out the work.' He describes the galleries as being of self-taught genius and rude simplicity, reached from the outside by commonplace steps via a door let into part of one of the windows. The well-to-do had seats under the tower and in the chancel, and had constructed large hat pegs on the walls beside their seats. The reporter was distracted by the sound of dropping marbles and teachers administering the loud occasional smack. Three little boys made a dash for it after the second lesson.

He then inspected the school, which he declared to be in such a ruinous state that government aid was refused – 'The whole place has the air of mouldering decay', gaps in the plaster, rotting joists, and the outhouses abandoned with a stream running through.

But again Box has a new Vicar – this time it is Rev. Edward Gardiner.

He has arrived in the nick of time.

First most of the school lands were sold, raising £2350, retaining only the strip of land over which a tramway ran down from the quarries to the wharf which itself created a useful income of £20 p.a. The parish of Ditteridge would transfer its school and school money to Box, and the school at Henley would close. The school cottages were retained, and Bladwells of Bath were contracted for a new, single purpose-built school to be constructed on land given by Colonel Northey. Top school architects were engaged, Hicks of Redruth, to design a suit of three schools in one – infants, girls, boys, each with their own entrance and playground.

At the time of the Church Rambler report the walls were already up and the cost almost subscribed. The whole village felt itself to be on the verge of a new revitalised era. 'Were all our parish clergy of such mettle as the vicar of Box, neither attacks from without nor dissensions within need make us tremble' he writes.

The model building was opened in 1875, and this was substantially the same school as it was in 1970 when I came here as deputy head, a class filling every room, and sliding partitions separating the classrooms. The only trace now of the tiered benches is in the shape of the dado, and outside groves on the walls witness generations of children using the stone to sharpen their slate pencils. Happily the outside lavatories are long gone.

For 23 years Edward Gardiner faithfully made his calls into the school that he loved, teaching scripture, maths, and 'Indian clubs'. When his health failed him, he left to convalesce in Italy. The children sent him gifts of socks that they knitted.

George Millard, George Mullins, Edward Gardiner.

But let me leave you with a mystery.

The 1728 workhouse inventory lists first the books – 1 Bible, 1 Common Prayer, 2 Psalms, 2 New Testaments, 1 Whole Duty of Man.

Then: equipment for cooking and brewing, bedding and furniture, enough for 20 persons. 12 spinning wheels. And – chamber pots, 2 pewter, 2 earthenware.

The *mystery* which must challenge any educational historian is this: Who got the pewter pots and who got the earthenware pots, and *why*?

Rev Canon John Ayers. All rights reserved