

## **A Christian and Useful Education Box CE VC Primary School**

He wears a grey scratch wig (as required of the clergy until the 1820s) and a sober suit of black. The ends of his white cravat fall in clerical bands. He is writing a letter:

“Box, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1712.

Sir, This comes late to thank you and the rest of the honourable Society for the favour of your letter in November last...that I might be able to give you the better and more full account of all matters relating to the Poor Children taught in my parish.....”

This is Parson George Millard. He had come to Box in 1707, with its population of five hundred, fired with enthusiasm for the newly formed “Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge”. He saw education as a means of lifting the poorest out of their plight. Poverty was rich men’s opportunity. (His lintel over the church door reminded parishioners that they who came into ‘the House of God’, must on leaving ‘Remember the Poor’). Furthermore, education would also ‘gentle the masses’ and make the country safe from revolution and lawlessness.

First Parson Millard had to secure the necessary finance. An initial gift came from Dame Rachel Speke. Other benefactions followed. The five times a year communion offertory was promised. A Charity Sermon was preached with an eye to attracting fashionable support. The vicar’s ‘Easter dues’ were donated. Then two rooms were set up in church over the vestry, and the school began – fifteen boys and the same number of girls. To teach the alphabet there were ‘horn books’, looking rather like table tennis bats. From this it was straight on to the Book of Common Prayer and the Holy Bible. From success at reading they went on to basic arithmetic, learning to ‘cast accounts’. All were taught spinning and knitting. The Church Catechism and the weekly Collects were learned by heart. The children were provided with clothing – coats, and caps in the “Hazlebury livery”. If we knew the colour of their coat, then we could talk of a ‘bluecoat’ school, or ‘greycoats’, or perhaps even ‘redmaids’, but alas the colour is not known.

And if the children, why not adults? Before long adult literacy and a lending library were featured. When the church was ‘rebuilt’ in 1713, a gallery was added to accommodate the charity children. But best of all – the people learned to sing. This was new. Millard ordered a copy of ‘The Singer’s Guide’. For two hours a day the children were taught the new art of sacred music. When they were ready, they delighted the astonished congregation with their proficiency. An adult church choir was proposed. The first week 160 turned up for practice. Soon the children were in demand far and wide to demonstrate to other churches what music could do. Enough support was generated to build Springfield Cottages as a schoolhouse. Then an investment was laid out in land. Twenty acres and a barn – Bassets and Fogleigh – were on offer as remuneration for a schoolmaster, the Parson himself no longer able to cope without professional help. A table of benefactors can be seen in the school extension. All this was not without opposition. The jealous and the short-sighted considered educating the poorest to be ‘unfitting’. An answer was to hand: ‘Schools of Industry’ with a greater emphasis on practical tasks – in other words, the ‘workhouse’. With help from the widow of Henry Hoar of Stourton, Springfields was built, the school to have the top floor and loft.

At this mistaken move thousand of charity schools throughout the country folded. The poor did not want workhouses. Not Box however; the provision of a separate staircase kept the one from being devoured by the other.

In 1738 George Millard died. The next stage of life of the school was, under George Mullins, with the addition of fee paying boards; 1gn entrance and 20 gns a year plus 1gn for washing! Mullins’s parents had been tenant farmers at Slade’s Farm, so the school lands were an attraction. George proved himself to be an enterprising acquisitive village worthy, eventually owning a great deal of very desirable property.

The school’s third era begins in 1811 when SPCK handed its school work over to the National Society – the great nineteenth century age of church schools. From 1831 government grants aided

the growing demand and an Inspectorate was formed to monitor value for money. By the 1850s Springfield (the school by now used the whole of the building) was in a state of such disrepair that it was a case of 'mend it or end it'. Once again it was the parson who saved the day – this time, Rev Edward Gardiner. The new standards of the 1870 Act were met by a pooling of all available resources – the sale of the land and an amalgamation brought about by closing the school at Springfield and a School at Ditteridge. The model building opened in 1875.

Canon John Ayers