

9 The Reformation and education

The pioneers of the Reformation saw education as essential to promote a godly society. Their successors developed education for the poor and those who would not normally have access to it as a means of reading the Bible, and as the missionary movements of the 18th and 19th centuries got under way, the benefits of linguistics, literacy and education were brought to many people groups across the world.

Education before the Reformation

During the medieval period, education was largely in the hands of the church to provide priests (in the so-called grammar schools) to conduct church services and boys to sing in the choir (song schools). Schools were initially associated with cathedrals and later chantries, though by the end of the 15th century the network of grammar and song schools had been joined by a number of 'independent' schools. Monasteries were seats of learning although from the 12th century onwards, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge became increasingly prominent. The abolition of the monasteries and chantries during the Reformation meant that many schools associated with them had



Winchester Cathedral. Guildford was originally in the diocese of Winchester which has had boys in the choir since the 11th century. Commons.wikimedia.org

to acquire new sponsors or close, though the resources expropriated from these foundations were sometimes used to support schools, such as the Royal Grammar School in Guildford.

The Reformers and education

Education was regarded as extremely important by the reformers. The shocking lack of education of the priests in England is mentioned in panel 6, and it was clearly essential for those teaching people from the Bible that they read and understand deeply the Scriptures, rather than just follow a set liturgy. Martin Luther himself was a university teacher and one of his first acts as a reformer was to propose that monasteries be turned into schools, while one of his last was to establish a school in Eisleben where he died in 1546. In 1524 he wrote an open letter to local Councillors to remind them that by their authority from God they must promote a godly society and that the provision of proper education benefits the state as well as the church, advocating education for all, rich and poor alike, within the community.

Luther was adamant about the need to have the Bible accessible in the peoples' own language but equally wished to preserve an understanding of the original texts – hence his passion for the classical curriculum. Six years later he published his sermon 'On Keeping Children in School' to drive home the point that while life (and education) without the gospel is meaningless, all youths needed to pursue education in order to become responsible men and women who can govern churches, countries, people and households.

The Royal Grammar School in Guildford



Royal Grammar School, Guildford. Photo T. Gray

The school was established in 1509. Robert Betingham bequeathed lands to the Mayor and approved men of Guildford who were to use the rents issuing from those properties to provide a free grammar school in the town. The trustees petitioned the young King Edward VI for further endowments which were

provided from resources expropriated from the chantries and in 1552 the school acquired the right to style itself Royal Grammar School.

Notable alumni of the school include George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury, his brother Maurice who became Lord Mayor of London, the Cotton boys who became Bishops of Salisbury and Exeter, a Prime Minister of New Zealand and the longest-serving Speaker of the House of Commons. Apt illustrations, perhaps, of Luther's vision of the potency of free classical education.



Statue of Robert Raikes on Victoria Embankment by Thomas Brock. Commons.wikimedia.org

set up a Sunday school in Buckinghamshire for local children, and the prominent evangelical playwright and philanthropist, Hannah More, was instrumental in setting up 12 schools in Somerset by 1800 where reading, the Bible and the catechism were taught to local children. These pioneers made education widely available long before the state took on the responsibility for it.

Worldwide literacy and linguistic work

Following the religious revival of the 18th century, missionaries spread across the globe, and although their primary mission was preaching the gospel, they also engaged in education and medical work. Education often involved linguistic work, writing down a language that has no written structure, before any education can be undertaken. This work continues



A linguist from Wycliffe Bible Translators checks trial orthography (the writing of a language in a script) with the Kisi people of Tanzania. Photo H. Gray

Sunday schools and universal education

The industrial revolution of the 18th century led to the widespread practice of child labour in British factories. A printer, Robert Raikes, felt led to help the children of the poor by teaching them on Sundays. Before the advent of child labour laws, children worked up to 12 hours per day, six days a week, but they were free on Sundays. Raikes began his first Sunday school in 1780. The boys and girls came from some of the poorest homes, and learned the skill of reading using the Bible as a textbook. Nicknamed 'Raikes Ragged Schools', they were looked down on by society, but by 1831 were reaching 25% of the population. Similarly, in 1769 Hannah Ball, a correspondent of John Wesley,

across the world today with most of the languages that have been written down having their linguistic work undertaken by the successors of the first missionaries, giving people access to the rich cultural and educational possibilities of a script for their own language.