

Independent Grammar Schools in Northern England in Historical Context

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I Introduction

2015 is the 500th anniversary of the founding of Manchester Grammar School (MGS), the school I attended as a boy in the years 1978-80. In order to mark this occasion this article will offer a brief historical survey of schools like MGS from their medieval origins down to their present-day situation.

Much has been written about the famous public schools of England, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, St Paul's, Winchester and others.¹⁾ Less well known is another group of independent secondary schools – the independent grammar schools – that share some of the characteristics of these schools but also differ in important ways. The most noticeable difference is one of class. Whereas the most well-known public schools – like the ones listed above – are clearly upper-class institutions, the grammar schools that are the subject of this paper traditionally served the needs of the middle classes. The growth of the middle class that accompanied England's industrial revolution inevitably led to a growth in the number and importance of these institutions. This paper aims to present an historical overview of the development of these schools, focusing on the region of the North West of England, especially the city of Manchester and the surrounding counties of Lancashire and Cheshire. Manchester is a useful city to focus on because of its “long-established role as a city of innovations – discursive, institutional and material” (Peck and Ward 2002: 9). The paper draws on some of the official histories that have been commissioned by these schools. Of course, by their very nature such histories will only give a partial account of events and do not shy away

¹⁾ Throughout this paper ‘public school’ is used in the English sense which actually means ‘private’. The term ‘public’ came into use in the 18th Century when these schools opened themselves up to members of the public, i.e. people who lived outside the immediate locality of the school (See Turner 2015).

from championing the importance of their cause. The following quotation taken from a history of Stockport Grammar School published in 1957 can be seen as a good example of the genre.

Such schools, of which Stockport Grammar School is a fair example, have made a far greater contribution to our civilization, as the British people understand the term, than has yet been recognized (Varley 1957: vii)

In spite of this kind of celebration of the school in question, these official histories do provide a valuable wealth of detail about the sometimes long and eventful histories of their subjects. This article will chart the history of this type of school from the earliest pre-modern days up to the growth of state intervention in secondary education in the 20th Century.

II Secondary Education for the Urban Middle Class in England

Before the advent of the industrial revolution and the growth of large cities in the north of England, education had been mostly under the control of the churches, especially the established church, and land-owning rurally-based elites. Educational historian Andy Green has written about how newly-powerful social groups can challenge existing education systems either by creating their own set of new institutions to rival the existing ones, or by gaining political power and using the state to institute a top-down reform of the system. In the case of England, the rise of economic power by the new urban bourgeoisie was only

partially (and belatedly) accompanied by a rise in political power. Electoral reform starting in 1832 gave them increasingly more representation in the House of Commons, but the House of Lords, which remained dominated by the landed aristocracy, was an obstacle until its power was reduced by the 1911 Parliament Act. Lacking political power, but with a growing abundance of economic wealth, the urban middle classes in England therefore adopted a piecemeal strategy of creating their own secondary school system (Green 1990: 69). This is a very important part of the story of the development of secondary education in England and is one reason why the nation ended up “with a system that nobody intended and which, rather than constituting a whole, is merely the sum of its constituent parts” (Green 1990: 70). British governments of the 20th Century struggled to bring some kind of order and national planning to such a dysfunctional system. We are now well into the 21st Century and they are still struggling.

Another feature of the growing English urban middle class is its liberal, individualist ideology. As Green argues, “English liberalism and *laissez-faire* were the crucial factors which gave the distinctive cast to English education development” (Green 1990: 75). The first industrial revolution in England was achieved without a centrally-planned education system. Also, the relatively simple technology that was required to make the first factories profitable meant that state-sponsored technical and scientific education was also not a factor in the early years of industrialization and urbanization (Hobsbawm 1990: 40). The entrepreneurs who designed and financed the first factories, deep mines and railways did not see much need

for state intervention. They adopted the same attitude when planning the schools to teach their sons.

Protestant nonconformity was another feature of the new urban middle class, and something else which distinguished it from the mostly Anglican rural elites. Many business families were Methodist or Presbyterian. A smaller number, like the confectionary entrepreneurs in the Midlands, were Quakers or members of other small nonconformist sects. As official anti-Semitism declined later in the 19th Century, Jewish families were also more accepted into middle class circles. Religious differences between the urban bourgeoisie and the rural elites paralleled political differences.

If the Anglican Church controlled the major part of education, from elementary schools up to the universities, this was hardly surprising, particularly since the only countervailing force, parliament could rarely muster a majority against the Church. . . The influence of the landed class within the state apparatus, and the persistence of elements of old style patronage there, must have also been one of the factors which blocked the development of the kind of meritocratic linkage between secondary education and state service which existed in European countries, notably in France and Germany (Green 1990: 229).

The result was that 19th Century England never developed a standardized middle-class secondary school to match the *lycée* in France or the *Realschule* in Germany, Secondary schools in England remained financially independent of the State.

Secondary schools were forced to start reforming themselves after the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1853 recommended a greater emphasis on employment and promotion based on merit in the British Civil Service. The growth of professional associations for civil engineers, lawyers, architects and so on also had an effect on the development of examinations as a new tool for evaluating the competence of entrants into the various professions (Green 1990, 287-88). One of the functions of the expanding secondary school system (if it can be called a system) was to prepare boys for these exams. (The professions, with the exception of elementary school teacher, were mostly closed to women until well into the 20th Century).

III The Pre-modern Origins of Independent Grammar Schools

Three grammar schools in the present study were founded during the 15th or 16th Centuries: Manchester Grammar School in 1515; Stockport Grammar School in 1487; and Bury Grammar School in circa 1570. The founders of all three schools were churchmen, reflecting the dominance of the church in educational provision in England at this time. Stockport Grammar School was founded in 1487 by Sir Edmund Shaa who set up a small school in St Mary's Church, Stockport. In his will he provided funds for one priest who would teach Latin grammar to a small number of boys. The term 'Grammar School' originates from this common practice of treating Latin grammar as the most important foundational subject to be taught to future 'gentlemen'. Later the school

was provided with an endowment by the mayor of Stockport and the curriculum was expanded to include Greek, English and arithmetic. The school's historian, Benjamin Varley remarks that "the school carried on a precarious (though useful) existence in poor inadequate buildings for so long that its mere survival is something to wonder at" (Varley 1957: vii). Additional funding was provided by the 'Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths',²⁾ and the school moved to a new larger site. At this point in its history the school had two teachers, the headmaster who taught Latin and Greek and the usher who taught English and arithmetic (the 'three Rs' of reading, writing and arithmetic). There were about 150 pupils who studied from 8:00am till noon and then 2:00 till 5:00pm. Funding provided by Goldsmiths and the mayor allowed for some bursaries. Thus "the son of the husbandman and the son of the lord of the manor, despite the social gulf between them, here sat side by side to acquire impartially the benefits of learning" (Varley 1957: viii).

Manchester Grammar School was founded on 2 July 1515, when Hugh Oldham, the Manchester-born Bishop of Exeter signed an endowment trust deed establishing the 'Manchester Free Grammar School for Lancashire Boys'. A site was purchased in September 1516 and construction took place between April 1517 and August 1518. The original deed promoted "godliness and good learning" and established that any boy showing sufficient academic ability, regardless of background, might attend, free of charge. The school was situated near what was eventually to become Manchester Cathedral, then a collegiate church (Bentley 1990: 14-15). The original foundation provided

a school house in the grounds of Manchester's Parish Church and two graduates (the 'High Master' and the 'usher') to teach Latin, and later Greek, to any children who presented themselves. This unusual term of 'High Master' instead of 'Headmaster' for the head of the school has been preserved down to the present day. The salaries of both the High Master and the usher were paid for by revenues from the endowed lands and the mills that stood upon them. Decisions about how to use these revenues, including decisions relating to the hiring of staff were placed in the hands of 'feoffees', i.e. trustees under feudal law.³⁾ The school was intended to prepare pupils for university and eventually the Church or the legal profession. Typically, pupils stayed for 8 to 10 years before leaving for university. There was often enough money to fund bursaries for pupils due to the custom of more wealthy boys paying fees that were used to subsidize those from less well-off families. In order to prevent favoritism, boys were forbidden from giving presents to the masters.

IV Independent Grammar Schools and the Growth of the Urban Middle Classes

The huge social and economic changes brought about by England's industrial revolution forced changes in the pre-modern grammar school system. Some schools, like Manchester Grammar School, were slow to change and almost left it too late. Historian of the school James Bentley notes the decline of enrollments between 1780 and 1800, a period in which the original medieval small town of

2) The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths was originally a medieval guild for the goldsmith trade based in London. The guild founded or endowed several schools and educational institutes including the 'London Technical and Recreational Institute' which later changed its name to Goldsmiths University of London.

3) The term 'feoffee' went out of general use in England with the decline of the feudal system. However, it remained in use, in place of the more usual term 'trustee', in the case of Manchester Grammar School well into the 19th Century.

Manchester was fast being transformed into a large, sprawling city. He puts this decline down to the rise of a new “merchant class increasingly clamouring for an education in modern languages and science, neither of which the Manchester Grammar School was as yet offering” (Bentley 1990: 47).

Historians of Manchester Grammar School, Graham and Pythian, quote a section from E.M. Forster’s novel *The Longest Journey* in which the history of an English independent school is summarized in the following way. In the 17th Century the fictional school was a tiny grammar school in a tiny town.

Till the nineteenth century the grammar school was still composed of day scholars from the neighborhood. Then two things happened. Firstly the school’s property rose in value and it became rich. Secondly for no obvious reason it suddenly emitted a quantity of bishops. . . . The school doubled its numbers. It built new class rooms laboratories and a gymnasium. It coaxed the sons of tradesmen to a new foundation ‘the Commercial School’ built a couple of miles away. . . . Where traditions served it clung to them. Where new departures seemed desirable they were made (Forster 1907).

Graham and Pythian comment that “this is a generally accepted interpretation of the history of dozens of grammar schools in the nineteenth century” (Graham and Pythian 1965: 30). The immediate irony that strikes one from this account is the reliance on feudal origins of wealth and influence, i.e. land and the church, for the necessary funds required to pay for the education of the new urban bourgeoisie.

It is clear from an examination of the history of those grammar schools that were founded in the middle-ages and then were transformed by the social forces unleashed by the industrial revolution that their governors and head teachers always resisted any moves that might incorporate the schools into a system of ‘state-controlled’ or public education.⁴⁾ This trend can be seen at the macro level of intellectual radicalism as well as the micro level of school governance. Andy Green discusses the influence of “the first pioneers of middle-class reform in England” in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, among whom he includes James Watt, Josiah Wedgwood, Joseph Priestly and William Godwin (Green 1990: 244). They had much in common with middle-class radicals in continental Europe, for example opposition to slavery, support for American Independence and the French Revolution. In the field of education reform they shared the continental radicals’ desire to promote rational, enlightened education. However, Green adds that in two respects the English radicals were very different from their continental counterparts. Firstly, Green writes that “the main preoccupation of men like Priestly was clearly not with popular education but with the education of their own and other middle-class children (Green 1990: 145). Secondly, “the English educationalists were not talking about national systems. . . and were certainly not friendly to the idea of state intervention in education” (ibid.). Green adds that “Priestly and Godwin both declared themselves to be against education becoming a function of the state which they believed would lead towards the imposition of uniform beliefs” (ibid.).

4) It is always important to distinguish between the independent grammar schools – that are the subject of this paper – and the state-sponsored grammar schools that were set up as a consequence of the 1944 Education Act, a small number of which still remain.

The history of Manchester Grammar School contains a period in the middle of the 19th Century which neatly encapsulates both of the points made by Green. It is closely connected to the great economic, social and political changes going on around the school. After a long period without parliamentary representation, the Great Reform Act of 1832 designated that the fast-growing city of Manchester should be represented by not one, but two Members of Parliament (MPs). One of the first pair of MPs to be elected was Mark Philips, son of a Lancashire merchant and graduate of the University of Glasgow. In many ways he embodied the radicalism of the Manchester of that era, including the campaign against the ‘Corn Laws,’ tariffs that kept bread prices artificially high to the benefit of the land owners and the detriment of those living in the new cities. He was also a very early advocate of publicly funded schooling and one of the founders of the Lancashire Public Schools’ Association. He criticized Manchester Grammar School for being too limited in its intake of pupils and spending too much money on sending a small number of elite boys to Oxford and Cambridge. He added that some of the boys who boarded in the school came from families outside Manchester and therefore were ineligible according to the original terms of the endowment (Watson 2015: 38). In order to head-off this kind of attack the MGS feoffees set up a commercial school in separate buildings in 1833 that provided education for a broader range of pupils. (It was clearly the sort of ‘Commercial School’ mentioned by Forster in his satirical comments about grammar schools quoted above.) Other changes were forced upon the feoffees and the High Masters against their

will. After 1839, they were no longer allowed to provide funds to support old boys at university. Also, boarders were gradually phased out. In addition, after 1849 the lower school was forced to accept boys as young as five (Bentley 1990: 54). Philips and his Whig allies had succeeded in forcing the school to open its doors to more boys and to focus less time and resources on elite university-bound, classically-educated scholars. Historians of the school write about this period as a bleak time with over-crowded, cold classrooms and masters having to cope with teaching ‘urchins’.

One boy’s recollection of an incident of this era displays how appallingly discipline had declined as well as the manners of the boys. A little lady with a basket on her arm containing tripe or some other commodity came into the school and complained to the High Master that one of the boys had offended her. [The High Master] told her to walk down the school and point him out. She did so calling out ‘This is him.’ The boy got out of his seat, took the little lady and her basket under his arm and carried her out of the school, ‘to the great amusement of the whole School and of the masters’. To such a low ebb had Hugh Oldham’s foundation fallen (Bentley 1990: 54-55).

The aim of Philips and his allies was to “render a munificent charity [i.e. Oldham’s endowment] practically available to the working classes of the inhabitants of Manchester and its vicinity” (quoted in Bentley 1990: 53). However, partly due to the prevalence of child labour during the 19th Century in cities like Manchester, most of the pupils at Manchester Grammar School were not from working class families but continued to be “the sons of per-

sons in the middle ranks of life, well-to-do tradesmen, upper clerks, clergymen and lawyers” (Bentley 1990: 68). Thus in the 1860s, when proposals were made to introduce fees for some of the pupils, the argument was made that most of the families who sent boys to the school could afford it. The extra money generated by such fees was needed to move the site of the school building to larger, more pleasant premises and to modernize the curriculum to include modern languages and science. Although fees were introduced in 1867, “the feoffees accepted their obligation to provide 250 foundation scholars with a free education” (Bentley 1990: 68). However the introduction of entrance exams in the same decade meant that only boys who had been properly prepared would have a chance of acceptance. The introduction of exams led to the growth of private preparatory or ‘prep’ schools ensuring the continued middle-class nature of the school intake. Thus only a very limited number of working-class boys could take advantage of the free places at the school.

Even during times of financial hardship, the trustees and the High Masters of MGS did not discuss a recourse to public funding of their school. By the end of the 19th Century money came from three sources, all private: Hugh Oldham’s original endowment, gifts from old boys and other benefactors, and fees. The *laissez faire* philosophy that was so important to the urban middle-classes is clearly on display here. As Andy Green writes, “state intervention . . . was an expedient or a measure of last resort that was offered almost apologetically” by Victorian middle-class reformers (Green 1990: 255). In 19th Century Manchester there were some middle-class radicals like Mark Philips

who had a vision of public-funded education for all classes. But reformers like him were in the minority.

V | The Taunton Report

The most extensive inquiry into secondary education in England was the Schools Inquiry Commission under Lord Taunton that reported in 1868 (MacLure 1965: 89-97). Its task was to study every kind of school between elementary schools and the nine ‘great’ public (i.e. private) schools. The final report ran to 20 volumes. Its survey of endowed schools declared that the majority (nearly 2,200 in number) could not be called ‘grammar schools’ because Latin or Greek were not on the curriculum. This left 705 proper ‘grammar schools’ (including the schools that are the subject of the present article) in England at that time. Lord Taunton wished to impose some order on the chaos of secondary education that the inquiry revealed. His report proposed a new three-tier structure. Schools in the top tier would offer a classical education up to the age of 19, Second tier schools would provide a more modern education up to the age of 16. Finally the third-tier schools would offer just the ‘three Rs’ up to the age of 14. The tiers were deliberately aimed at meeting the educational needs of boys from different sections of the middle class. These proposals were only partially incorporated into the Endowed Schools Act of 1869. Green makes the following point about this first large-scale effort to bring some order to the secondary schools of England.

What was most remarkable about the reforms was the deliberate way in which they perpetuated

and in fact intensified these multiple class differentiations. Far from creating a normative form of middle-class education based on uniform principles of utility, merit and relevance as the French lycée and American high school had at least partially done, they institutionalized the social and cultural fragmentation of the middle class and circumscribed the meritocratic principle to exclude the majority of the population (Green 1990: 191).

Following this Act, the Endowed Schools Commission was set up which had extensive powers over the endowments of individual schools. As a response to this the more wealthy endowed schools set up the Headmasters' Conference, an organisation that soon became the main lobbying group for elite private schools in England (Turner 2015).

VI | The 20th Century

The Second Boer War (1899-1902) shook Victorian England's confidence in itself. Although the armies of the British Empire were eventually victorious, the shocking early setbacks forced upon them by irregular Boer troops fighting with guerilla tactics in the South African veldt showed weakness and complacency not just in the army but in wider government circles. As a result of this war "voices were raised about national efficiency, a more modern leadership and the competence of the nation to survive. It was not long before the public-school elite began to be weighed against the allegedly more vigorous leaders of more modern nations" (Gordon, Aldrich and Dean 1991: 202). In particular competition with Germany, France and the United States

was a matter of great concern. Compared to those three countries, England was slow to expand its secondary education sector. In 1914, out of every 1,000 pupils completing elementary school, only 56 went on to some kind of secondary school (McCulloch 2002: 36). Independent grammar schools as well as the famous public schools came under attack for only accepting boys from elite sections of society.

Some radicals within the newly emerging Trade Union movement advocated the abolition of all private schools as a way of achieving educational equality. They did not succeed in getting this accepted as policy by the Labour Party, but a compromise was reached in the form of the Direct Grant system. The 1944 Education Act set up a system of compulsory secondary education in a new system of modern schools, technical schools and grammar schools. It also allowed for up to half of the places at an independent grammar school to be taken by pupils whose fees would be paid for by the Local Education Authority. Watson notes that in the case of MGS this new system "resulted in a continuous stream of able boys attending the school at the expense of the state . . . on a scale never matched before or since" (Watson 2015: 112). Boys could only get in if they passed the new 'eleven-plus' exam (that all children sat at the age of eleven) as well as the MGS entrance exam.

By the 1960s, the flaws in the three-tier system of secondary education were becoming clear. Many were opposed to the national 'eleven-plus' exam because it sealed the educational fate of a young person at too young an age. Some local authorities began promoting comprehensive schools as the new model. This "presented the direct grant schools with a stark

choice between independence and selection on the one hand and integration and open access on the other” (Gordon, Aldrich and Dean 1991: 209). The High Master of MGS, Peter Mason remarked at this time that “we shall do our best to co-operate with the State system. If we cannot co-operate, we shall have to exist on our own and we must be physically prepared” (Quoted in Watson 2015: 129). The changeover to a comprehensive-school system was a gradual one that started in the mid-1960s and carried on for over a decade. By the end of the process most direct grant schools, such as MGS, had opted for independence instead of accepting open access. A small number of direct grant schools, mostly Roman Catholic, did agree to become comprehensives. Also a small number of education authorities, for example Kingston in London and Trafford in Manchester, refused to adopt the comprehensive system and maintained the three-tier system of the 1944 Act with only minor modifications.

I entered MGS in 1978 at the age of 16. The Direct Grant system was already over although many of my fellow sixth-formers who had entered the school before 1976 were still beneficiaries of it: their school fees (and also their bus passes) were paid for by their Local Education Authority (LEA). The phasing out of the Direct Grant system allowed those already in the system to complete their education with the help of LEA grants. In 1980 (the year I left MGS to enter university) a new ‘Assisted Places’ scheme was introduced by the newly elected Conservative government which was designed to provide free or subsidised places to some pupils at independent schools. MGS applied for places on this scheme equivalent to a quarter of the school’s annual intake (Watson

2015: 146) and by 1987 there were 280 boys on the scheme attending school. However, political uncertainty surrounded the scheme and the opposition Labour Party made it clear it would abolish it when it came to power just as it had abolished the Direct Grant system before it. Labour argued that the scheme was not really helping people in need. Instead they saw it as a middle class subsidy that diverted state money from where it was really needed. Thus it should not have come as a surprise when, following the landslide victory of ‘New Labour’ under Tony Blair in 1997, the Assisted Places scheme was ended. In spite of the clear messages given by Labour in advance of the election, some independent schools were unprepared for this and found that the ending of the scheme placed them in severe financial difficulty. To take one geographical area as an example, three independent schools on the Fylde Coast of Lancashire, King Edwards School, Queen Mary’s School and Arnold School found that there were not enough sufficiently wealthy middle-class families in their region to provide an intake that could pay their own way without state help. The three schools found there was no other option but to merge their schools onto one site, the site of King Edward’s School in Lytham, and sell the land of the other two schools.

By way of contrast, MGS being located in the region’s largest city, was in a much stronger position and was better prepared. In order to continue to allow boys from limited financial backgrounds to attend the school, it put increasing efforts into raising private money to pay for bursaries. By 2013, the High Master, Martin Boulton, himself a former pupil of MGS who attended thanks to the Assisted

Places scheme announced that the school had succeeded in raising enough money to provide 220 bursaries (Watson 2015: 174). At the time of writing (summer 2015) there is no plan by the current Conservative government to bring back the Direct Grant system or the Assisted Places scheme. Independent schools like MGS, therefore, will need to continue to help pupils from less well-off backgrounds with their own privately-raised bursaries.

VII Conclusion: Into the 21st Century

The great changes that took place in the English education system in the 19th and 20th Centuries transformed but did not diminish the role of the independent sector in secondary education. “Throughout the twentieth century, in spite of the reports of commissions and committees and the policies of Labour politicians, both in opposition and in government, public and other fee-paying schools have continued to occupy a central position in English education and society” (Gordon, Aldrich and Dean 1991: 210). More than one-third of candidates achieving three A grades at A level attend independent schools (Cooke and Woodhead 2002). Defenders of independent schools argue that the high academic standards they set force state-maintained schools to raise their game (Ray 2008: 64). The challenge for reformers is how to expand access to these schools without diminishing academic excellence and without draining badly-needed resources from the state sector.

Interviews

- ⊙ Martin Boulton, High Master of Manchester Grammar School. 11th September 2013.
- ⊙ Jim Keefe, Headmaster of Arnold King Edward Queen Mary School (AKS) 9th September 2013.

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Much has been written about the famous public schools of England like Eton, Harrow and Rugby. This paper has as its focus another group of independent secondary schools – the independent grammar schools – that share some of the characteristics of these schools but also differ in important ways. The most noticeable difference is one of class. Whereas the most well-known public schools – like the ones listed above – are clearly upper-class institutions, the grammar schools that are the subject of this paper traditionally served the needs of the middle classes. The growth of the middle class that accompanied England's industrial revolution inevitably led to a growth in the number and importance of these institutions. This paper presents an historical overview of the development of these schools, focusing on the region of the North West of England. It charts the reasons for the failure to create a normative form of middle-class education based on uniform principles of utility, merit and relevance (as the French *lycée* and American high school had at least partially done). Instead, independent schools in England institutionalized the social and cultural fragmentation of the middle class and circumscribed the meritocratic principle to exclude the majority of the population. Defenders of independent schools continue to argue that the high academic standards they are able to set force state-maintained schools to raise their

game. The challenge for reformers is how to expand access to these schools without diminishing academic excellence and without draining badly-needed resources from the state sector.

