

THE WIDNES SCHOOL BOARD, 1874-1903

BY J. R. HUNT, B.A.

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IN 1870 Forster's Education Act empowered the establishment of local committees or boards to build and regulate board schools in areas in which the National and British Societies and the Roman Catholic Church had not sufficient accommodation in their schools for all children in the locality. The Widnes School Board was set up in accordance with this act in 1874. It held its first meeting in the Board Room, Victoria Road, on 17 November 1874. Its members were Henry Deacon, chairman, Major Cross, vice-chairman, Richard Bradshaw, Rev. J. Clarke, Robert Shaw, Martin Taylor and T. Sutton Timmis. G. H. Danby was appointed clerk, and continued to hold that office for the whole period of the Board's existence.

The first Board was elected for three years, and a new Board was elected at the end of every three years. Henry Deacon was chairman until his death in 1876. Succeeding chairmen were T. Sutton Timmis in 1876, Richard Bradshaw in 1877, Timmis again in 1880, and Henry Wade Deacon in 1892. At the beginning the Board had three committees: School Management, Sites and Building, and Finance. As seven members were found to be too few for the work involved, the number was raised to eleven when the second Board was elected.

When the first Board was formed in 1874, there was not accommodation for all the children who ought to have been in school, and the Board at once took steps to supply the deficiency. In April 1875 the Board opened its first temporary school in the Wesleyan School building in Oakland Street. The accommodation there was for 200 infants. In May of the same year, a second temporary school was opened in Bank Street. This school was a mixed one, and also provided for 200 children. While arranging this temporary accommodation, the Board was engaged in selecting sites for two schools, and, in the same year, 1875, bought the land upon which Warrington Road School and West Bank School were afterwards erected. The first school, Warrington Road, was opened in January 1877, and then followed West Bank School, opened in July 1877. Land was purchased at Simm's Cross, plans for a large school were prepared, and Simm's Cross School was formally opened in November 1878. While waiting for the completion of Simm's Cross School, the Board rented from the Sheffield and Midland Railway Company the Wesleyan School in Suttons Lane to be used as a temporary school.

The Board experienced difficulty in persuading parents to avail

themselves of the newly provided facilities for the education of their children. In January 1876, it was necessary to print 4,000 handbills for distribution to parents. In March 1877, the first school attendance officer was appointed, and two others were appointed later. During the holiday in 1878, the attendance officers made a house-to-house visitation to take a census of children of school age for the Board. In this census, and in many subsequent ones, it was found that well over a thousand children were attending no school at all.

Finance was another difficulty. In the board schools weekly fees were charged: the seniors paid 6d., the juniors 3d. and the infants 2d. These fees were often difficult to collect and numerous prosecutions for their recovery are recorded.

Payment of teachers by results was the rule, and a grant was received from the Committee of Council on Education for every child who passed the annual examination of the inspector of the Board. The balance of the estimated expenditure came from the poor rate collected by the overseers of the poor. A precept was served upon the overseers each year for this amount. That the overseers were sometimes reluctant to pay their share is shown by this minute, dated August 1879:

“Resolved” that the Finance Committee be empowered to take legal proceedings at once against the Overseers of Widnes to compel the payment of £2,181 1s. 6d., the balance due upon the last Precept issued upon them, and due 1st March, 1879.”

Similar resolutions appear fairly frequently in the minutes of the meetings of the Board in the early years.

The Widnes School Board was directly concerned only with its own three board schools, Warrington Road, West Bank and Simm's Cross. But there were the other schools, the voluntary or church schools, and in these schools there were more children than in the board schools. These voluntary schools collected fees, received the government grant for children who passed the inspector's examination, but could claim no share of the rates. They were controlled by the managers and sent no attendance returns to the School Board. Each year, however, during the holidays, the attendance officers made a house-to-house visitation, taking what was virtually a census of the town. From their reports we learn that there were in addition to the board schools, two national schools, St. Mary's, West Bank, and St. Luke's, Farnworth, and three Roman Catholic schools, St. Patrick's, St. Marie's and St. Bede's. The change in the numbers of children attending these schools is an indication of the development of Widnes, and of the gradual shifting of the population. The schools in the West Bank area steadily declined, while those in the north and west of the town steadily increased.

In its early years the Board had to tackle the problems of illiteracy, both among children and also among adults. Towards the end of the first decade of compulsory education this mass illiteracy was yielding to treatment. In the course of this struggle there had grown up a demand for a more advanced type of education. The history

SCHOOL	1879	1889	1899
West Bank	829	1,109	942
Warrington Road	411	620	721
Simm's Cross	648	1,421	1,593
Farnworth National	441	353	366
St. Mary's National	597	671	560
St. Patrick's	769	630	495
St. Marie's	362	910	805
St. Bede's	308	466	451
Private Schools	218	126	49
Attending no school	1,276	1,334	977
Higher Grade	—	—	104
	5,858	7,640	7,063

of the Board's later years is the record of its endeavours to satisfy this demand. In 1893 evening continuation classes were opened in the Simm's Cross, Warrington Road and West Bank Schools. By the end of 1895 evening continuation schools were in operation in St. Patrick's, St. Bede's, Farnworth National, and St. Mary's National Schools. During these years technical instruction had been the responsibility of the Widnes Local Board, and, after 1892, of its successor, the Widnes Corporation. Beginning in 1896 the School Management Committee established classes in languages, mathematics and various branches of science.

The last School Board was elected in 1901. The members were Henry Wade-Deacon, chairman, Rev. James Clarke, vice-chairman, Thomas Dodd, David Lewis, Rev. T. S. Lea, M.A., Frederick Neil, Samuel Quinn, Evan Thomas, John Joseph Williams and Rev. J. Wright Williams. By this time, the work of the Board had become well defined, and the committees were the District Education, the General Purposes, the School Management, the Sites and Building and the Finance Committee. But coming events were casting their shadows before them. The 1902 Education Act was approved by the Association of School Boards. In February 1903, a letter was received from the town clerk of Widnes requesting that a deputation of the School Board be sent to a special meeting of the General Purposes Committee of the Town Council to consider the draft education scheme to be submitted to the Board of Education. In April 1903, the town clerk informed the School Board that the Board of Education had made an order fixing 1 June 1903 as the date on which the act should come into operation for the area of the council of the borough.

The last meeting of the Board was held in May 1903. At the conclusion of the formal business, the chairman reviewed the work of the Board. After votes of thanks, the Widnes School Board handed over the control of the schools to the Widnes Education Committee.