

EDUCATING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Ruth Watts

Birmingham was a leader in educational reform in the late nineteenth century. Opportunities for girls, however, particularly those from the working class, remained limited.



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National schooling did not exist before 1870. At this Quaker-run school, children aged from 3-12 were taught in groups. *Ann Street School, Birmingham* by Alfred H Green, 1855.

In *Birmingham Faces and Places*, 1893 it was proudly boasted that: In regard to matters scholastic the relative positions of the sexes have undergone a complete change within the last twenty years, and now in almost all particulars, the boy and girl student commence an academic course upon an equal footing, and with almost identical opportunities for attaining the same goal. The word 'almost' was crucial. Girls in England rarely had equal opportunities with boys at any level, it neither being considered desirable or necessary. Their education was further dependent on class,

family income and parental aspirations for girls. Reforms were to better their lot educationally but not make them equal.

Social Class and Education

There was no national schooling until 1870 for anyone, but there were endowed public and grammar schools for boys and many more private schools for them than for girls. Middle- and upper-class girls were often taught at home. There were a few excellent schools (including in the Birmingham area), albeit

private and temporary, but many others gave only a superficial, if sometimes showy, education. From the 1860s, female reformers fought for girls to partake in the general advances of schooling and gained reforms. These included the establishment of proprietary schools such as those of the Girls' Public Day School Company (GPDSC later GPDST) schools and other 'high' schools and the first girls' 'public' schools, while some local educational endowments were extended to girls.

A working-class girl usually got, at most, a very limited education, even though elementary schools, mostly run by religious groups and essentially for the working class, had been growing in number since the early nineteenth century. Moves for a national educational system, in which Birmingham reformers such as Joseph Chamberlain were the most radical leaders, led to the 1870 Education Act which enabled locally elected School Boards to provide non-sectarian, rate-funded, education for all to the age of ten and, from 1898, to twelve. Thus all girls and boys received at least a basic education.

Elementary Education for Girls from the 1870s

From 1873 the Liberal-dominated Town Council and School Board built fine new elementary schools, adapted some others and took advantage of local powers to establish compulsory and free education before national legislation in 1880 and 1891 respectively. The Unitarian Chamberlain was the first Chairman of the Board while its first woman member was the Quaker Eliza Sturge. Their religious denominations were the dominant groups in Birmingham's largely Nonconformist Liberal elite, which adhered to ideals of civic and social reform and led the reform of girls' education. The new opportunities for all children helped girls at last, by the end of the century, to equal boys in basic literacy.

In the expanding national elementary system, more subjects were offered, but choices were governed by gendered attitudes. While boys were steered towards technical and scientific subjects, girls had compulsory needlework and could take cookery, laundry, dairy work and hygiene. Birmingham was not keen to comply with the push of girls into housewifery; for example, there was just one kitchen for 230 girls at the otherwise superbly equipped Waverley Road Higher Grade School.



Now the Ikon Gallery, the former Oozells Street Board School offered new educational opportunities.

Exterior of Ikon. Photo Stuart Whipps. Courtesy Ikon/Pelham Communications

Birmingham was one of the few places to use grants from the Science and Art Department to develop higher grade schools like Waverley for highly achieving pupils, and girls responded positively to this chance to study maths and science. Fierce opposition nationally to such an extension of elementary schooling, coupled with fears of the 'pressure' of intellectual work for girls led to the 1902 Education Act which ended both the democratic school boards and higher grade schools.

From 1897, for education beyond the elementary, Birmingham had a Municipal Technical College Day School, but it was male orientated. Pupil teaching, however, gave working-class youngsters a chance to gain a quasi-secondary education while learning to become teachers; in this, girls dominated. From 1890, the School Board set up a day-training college for elementary teachers for women only.

Education for Middle-class Girls from the 1870s

There was a need for teachers, not only in the rapidly growing elementary system, but also in an emergent 'secondary' system, chiefly for the middle classes. In 1876, Edgbaston High School for Girls, a non-sectarian, proprietary school was established, mostly by leading Nonconformist families. The headmistress, Alice Cooper, established a wide, modern curriculum, liberal methods of learning and teaching, games and extra-curricular activities.

King Edward's High School for Girls, established in 1883 as a result of the Charity Commissioners insistence on the King Edward VI Foundation being extended both for boys and, more radically, for girls, had similar features. Opening in New Street (later Congreve Street), this was headed by Edith Creak. Both high schools sent girls to university, although many of their pupils went no further.

A King Edward VI Grammar School for Girls was also established at Aston, taking girls to the age of 17 and headed by Margaret Nimmo. It took fifty percent of its scholars from the public elementary schools and thus opened up new chances for girls although its resources were not, at first, equal to those of the high schools. Nevertheless, Lizzie Salt, a younger daughter in a large family, was one of those who remembered the excitement of learning of her chance of education at a grammar school headed by a woman with a degree.



At Waverley Road Higher Grade School, girls were able to study maths and science.

In fact all three headmistresses had taken the new educational qualifications opening to women, with Creak being one of the first scholars at Newnham College, Cambridge and, in 1880, one of the first women to take a degree at London University. Nimmo took a London degree the following year. All three taught in the earliest GPDSC schools before their Birmingham appointments. Incidentally, they were all daughters of Nonconformist ministers.

Three third-grade schools for girls were also established and a private Church of England College for Girls in 1886. These secondary schools were fee-paying but relatively inexpensive for the middle classes. With their academic curriculum, extra-curricular activities, sport and sensible dress they were revolutionary, but only for a minority of girls.

Mason Science College

There were also emerging opportunities in higher education where Birmingham was among the leaders. For the first time university education was opening up for girls, especially under the London umbrella. In Birmingham, Mason Science College (MSC) was founded in 1880, open to all, including females. This allowed women a chance of higher education especially once through the College they could take the external degrees of London University. King Edward's High, for example, used the excellent facilities and expertise of MSC, to enable girls to win exhibitions or scholarships, usually to Cambridge where, like Oxford, a few women's colleges were established where women could take exams but not gain degrees.

In 1894 MSC took over the Birmingham Day Training College for women teachers and, together with the medical faculty, the University of Birmingham was formed in 1900. It proudly proclaimed that men and women were admitted on equal terms, the first university in England to do so.



Winifred Cullis, a pioneer in her field, was the first woman professor in a medical school. *Professor Winifred Cullis (1875-1956)* by Alice Mary Burton, 1939.

Gender and Birmingham Education 1902-1940

The 1902 Education Act replaced School Boards by Local Education Authorities: education committees of the elected Councils, with responsibility for elementary education. They could also use rates to introduce secondary schooling – education to sixteen – at a more advanced level than elementary schooling and generally perceived to be for the middle classes. The new Birmingham Education Committee soon opened council secondary schools and more were added, but mainly for boys, as city boundaries extended. The system was further skewed by the King Edward VI schools, where again there were more schools for boys.

From 1918 the school-leaving age was raised to fourteen, although for most this meant staying longer in elementary schools rather than moving into a secondary school. Birmingham slipped by the mid-1930s, from being a leader in educational provision to being well below average for urban areas. Nevertheless, there was a steady growth of 'higher elementary' provision and some 'secondary'. Inequalities of class and gender were modified somewhat by a scholarship ladder, although there were fewer scholarships for girls as there were fewer secondary schools or places. Furthermore the cost of uniform and books and the loss of future earnings were often seen as prohibitive, especially for girls and

even those who took up places left prematurely. Opportunities were still heavily dependent upon social class.

Schooling beyond the age of fourteen for either girls or boys was limited. Technical and further education grew but there was more available for boys and men. More, but still only a small number, went to university from the secondary schools, but they were mostly middle- and upper-class males, although more women were training to be teachers in the expanding educational system. The Education Department at the University of Birmingham consistently had more women than men training to be elementary teachers, but secondary training became more gender-balanced in the recession of the 1930s. At the University women mostly entered the Arts Faculty and went into secondary teaching, but a steady stream took medicine and became doctors.

Science, Medicine and Employment

The school curriculum was also gendered and particularly so in science and maths. Scientific and technical subjects grew in importance and offered greater employment opportunities, but girls were increasingly pushed away from the physical sciences into domestic science and hygiene and possibly biology. More secondary school girls did Latin, long the hallmark of a 'gentleman's' education, but they rarely took physical sciences beyond a basic level. Boys, however, took more maths, physics and chemistry, which provided opportunities for prestigious and well-paid jobs.

Birmingham followed national trends, but there were notable exceptions at secondary level. Both the girls' high schools were advanced in encouraging science, although usually biology and physiology rather than physical sciences. Highly qualified science teachers at King Edward's, for example, enabled girls to win exhibitions or scholarships in science, usually to Cambridge. The first six 'Distinguished Old Girls' in the history of the school all took science at university, the first four at Cambridge. They then became pioneers themselves: for example, Ida Smedley, DSc became a university lecturer and was honoured in the USA for her services to science; Winifred Cullis, CBE, DSc, LLD became the first woman professor in a medical school and Hilda Shufflebotham (later Lloyd, then Rose), DBE, LLD, MB, ChB, FRCS, became the first woman medical professor at Birmingham University and the only woman in the twentieth century to be a President of a Royal Medical College, in her case that of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. King Edward's High also used the excellent facilities and expertise at MSC in the 1890s. Girls from Edgbaston High also went there, as did Mary Sturge who subsequently qualified as a doctor in London and became the second woman doctor in Birmingham and physician at the Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women.



Hilda Lloyd became the first woman medical professor at Birmingham University. *Dame Hilda Lloyd (1891-1982), DBE, President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (1949-1952)*, by Anthony Devis.

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The University, the hospitals for women and for children and the Council were all progressive in their appointment of women doctors and nurses. Medicine and health offered new professional employment for women. Courses at the Birmingham Central Technical College also led to pharmacy qualifications, another area where Birmingham had long been a leader in providing opportunities for women.

Employment opportunities for girls did begin to broaden: the growth in retail, clerical and nursing jobs made educational status more attractive. However, legislation to make education more equal for both the working class and girls did not take place until 1944, towards the end of the Second World War. ●

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Further Reading

- Carol Dyhouse, *Students: a Gendered History* (Routledge, 2006).
- Margaret Green, *Birmingham Women* (Tempus Publishing, 2000).
- Mary Hilton & Pam Hirsch (eds.), *Practical Visionaries. Women, Education and Social Progress 1790-1930* (Pearson Education, 2000).
- Ruth Watts, *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History* (Routledge, 2007).