

# A History of St Gregory's Catholic Schools

## Based on the Headteachers' Log Books

**The First School** The earliest evidence of a Catholic presence in Longton comes from a series of letters about the proposed building of a chapel in the town. The letter below to 'Rev Sir' is probably to Rev. Robert Richmond at Caverswall from Elizabeth Eccles and was written on December 15th 1818. In the letter she mentions the '*pious intention of building a chaple at the Lane Ends.*' We can read that Margaret will send her mite in time for Christmas Day.

In 1820, a piece of ground in Brick House Fields was purchased and the building of the first Catholic Church in Longton commenced. The chapel was completed and opened a year later when sixteen people were present at the single Mass on the first Sunday. For two years there was no resident priest in Longton until the Rev. Edward Daniel was sent to the town in 1822. There was no house for Father Daniel and so he lived in lodgings in a house on Gregory Street where he saved his money for the construction of the lower story of the Boys' School which was opened in Gregory Street in 1834 and enlarged in 1841.

From 1837 to 1859, Father Daniel and Father Massam lived and worked together in Longton. During these years, most of the Catholic children of the area only attended the Sunday School. Mr John Dutton and Mr William Brassington undertook the teaching of the boys, and Miss Jackson, Miss Nolan, Miss Jones and Mrs Jackson instructed the girls.

In 1840, the House of Commons established a Commission to inquire into the state of children employed in the mines and manufactories. Evidence was taken from areas throughout the Potteries and Father Daniel, as someone who supervised and worked with children made the following statement, published in 1843, about the Catholic Sunday School for Boys and Girls in Longton.

**Statement 320. Rev. Edward Daniel, aged 44:-**

*I am the minister of the chapel, and attend this school as an occasional visitor; we have two superintendents, one for each room. The number of children on our books is 300; about 150 in each room. There are about 25 teachers for each room. The system of education is purely scriptural; nothing secular, not even writing; they attend at nine in the morning and remain till half-past ten; again at two till three; on both occasions they attend the worship of the chapel. As far as the children of our school go, I think, taking them as a body, they are morally good. They profit much by the education imparted on Sunday; not many can attend day-schools; indeed very few. This is occasioned by the poverty of their parents; equally with their poverty. I think another cause is, their being taken so early to the works; my opinion is that if they are required to continue in school until a more advanced age, that it would be so much the worse for the parents, but better for themselves as it regards their education. We are supported by public subscriptions and annual sermons; we have no funds in hand; our income, however, is equal to our current expenses. The day-school held in the same room is a private one, with which we have nothing to do.*

*Edward Daniel*

*Two comfortable, good rooms, well-ventilated, lofty and healthy; warmed by stoves.*

The City Education Department's list of schools (1959) reports that St Gregory's R.C. School opened in 1852 as a boys' school only. An Infants' department was added in 1853. The Girls' Department opened in 1857. Father Daniel died in 1856, having seen Catholic instruction firmly established in the town. When the new St Gregory's Church was built in Heathcote Road in 1869, the old church in Griffin Street then became the school. This old building was whitewashed inside and was heated by a stove pot. The school had little in the way of equipment or teaching aids and there were very few books. Much of the learning was 'by rote', that is learning things by heart through frequent repetition. A very large proportion of the children had to go out to work and so were half-timers. The morning session at school had very small numbers and the afternoon session was often overcrowded. The whole school would have been taught in perhaps just two rooms. Without central heating, it would have been a cold and draughty place with small windows set up high, so it would be very difficult to see anything through them but the sky.

## The old church and buildings on Griffin Street

The Elementary Education Act of 1870 set up local school boards to organise education in their area. Not long afterwards, education was made compulsory for every child up to 12 years. Most important of all, attendance officers were appointed to make sure children went to school. This stopped the exploitation of child-workers in the pot banks more effectively than any of the Factory Acts and guaranteed their attendance at school. In 1872 we know from the Head teacher's Log Book that the Boys' School was divided into two departments and each department had its own headmaster and log book. The division of the school was peculiar:



Standards I and III (Second Department)

Standards II, IV, V and VI (First Department)

The system, although disliked by the Inspectors, continued until 1878.

The difficulties of the staff can be imagined, especially when one reads that 88 boys in Standards I and III were taught by the Headmaster and a pupil teacher in his first year. The other departments had a similar lack of staff. In 1872, two new subjects - singing and drill were added to the curriculum, which consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography and religious instruction. As there was no one to take the singing, the breach was filled by Father Ilsley - afterwards Bishop and later the first Archbishop of Birmingham. Drill was taken by the Pupil Teacher, and consisted of marching and marking time. The Pupil Teacher at this time seemed to cause the Headmaster more problems than did the pupils. He was often late, unprepared for his lessons, and absented himself for long periods without notice. On one occasion the Headmaster reports: - "*Joseph Tompkinson, (Pupil Teacher), inked the face of one of the boys this morning during school time. I punished the boys for trying to ink J.T's face in return instead of telling me of the matter.*" The matter had to be reported to the School Manager who was the curate.

Despite all the problems faced by the teachers, results were quite good. The annual examination was the most important event in the school year, as this was the era of payment by results. The salary of the Headmaster is not stated, but the pupil teacher received 2/- (10 pence) per week. The children had to bring with them every week their school fees, which were 3d a week (1.2 pence). But in 1873 this was raised to 4d a week, except for Standard I, which remained at 3d.

A child had to make a given number of attendances to be eligible to sit for the examination. In 1874 the number of boys on roll was 135, this number varied from about 130 to 145 from 1872 -1878. The number of girls is not known. Not all these pupils were Catholics, as a number of non-Catholics sent their children to St Gregory's, and we find that later generations also attended the school of their grandparents' adoption. There must have been some competition between schools for pupils; in May 1874 we read in the old log book: - '*Mr Walker, Vicar of Edensor has been going through this parish inducing the children to leave these schools. Mr Walker is a very bigoted parson and thank God no type of his order. He tries to impress on the people there is no way to heaven except through Edensor. I have lost this week, through him, two boys whose parents were well satisfied with their progress in every subject.*'

Holidays were short, one week at Christmas and two or three weeks at the Wakes. However, the long terms were broken by many single day or half day holidays. All the notable feast days of the Church were holidays, plus holidays for special occasions such as the Catholic picnic at Rudyard; a visit to town by Professor Overton, a ventriloquist who performed for the school. Holidays were given when a Wild-West show visited town and later when a travelling menagerie came. The school day was long, not finishing until 4.35 p.m.

### The New Building

About the year 1883, the Education Department considered that the school premises in Gregory Street were very poor and ill adapted for teaching purposes. Not only was the building unsuitable,

but there was no playground, no facilities for games and no staff to organise them. Therefore, the primary task of the Managers was to find a suitable site in the parish for a new school.

Through the kind interest and unflagging activity of several gentlemen, a piece of ground, 3,700 yards in extent, in Cemetery Road (now Spring Garden Road) was purchased at 6/- per yard. This site was thought to be: - "sufficiently near the children's homes, removed from the noise of the streets, not hemmed in by other buildings, with a good aspect, sheltered from east winds, no fear from being overlooked, no smoke from factories, plenty of pure air and comparatively cheap." The cost of the ground, which was large enough to permit the building of three departments, was £1,130 14 3d. This however was just the first phase - the Boys' School. The girls and infants continued to remain in obscurity in Gregory Street.

The new school was solemnly blessed and opened by Bishop Ilsley, one time Curate of Longton, on Wednesday July 24th 1889, the Mayor, Alderman Aynsley being present. In the evening, an address of welcome was read to His Lordship, on this, his first visit to his old flock since his appointment to the See of Birmingham. The Staffordshire Sentinel (24-7-1889) reported that the school 'is a handsome structure fronting the Cemetery Road. It is of substantial construction, and the facing bricks, red in colour are from the Blurton Tileries, whilst the stone dressings are white Hollington. A striking feature from the outside is a tower and dome and over the principal entrance is a sculptured figure representing St Gregory, the patron of the school.' The school at that time consisted of one large assembly room, three classrooms, cloakroom and lavatory and was fitted throughout with 'hot water apparatus'. The rooms were well lit and properly ventilated on Messrs. Kite's system and were floored with wooden blocks. The Mayor, Alderman J. Aynsley, who was received with applause, said it was gratifying to him to see these very splendid schools, which would afford accommodation for the rising generations.

On Thursday, May 5th 1892, another report from the Education Department arrived. It contained the sentence: - *'the Managers are warned that my Lords cannot undertake to continue their recognition of the premises of the Girls' and Infants' Departments.'* A meeting was called by circular for Sunday evening, July 3rd, to consider the question of the building of the new schools. Over £600 was promised during the evening. During the following nine weeks the Children of Mary collected £30 toward a draw of prizes. These prizes were exhibited in Mr Kent's window in Stafford Street and in Messrs Briggs' window in Commerce Street. The Shrovetide Fancy Fair, at which the drawing of prizes took place, was a great success. It was opened by His Worship the Mayor, Alderman Leake, and lasted for two days. The sum of £151 was taken and another £476 was realised from the draw, making a total of £627. Mr Holliday (Mr Cox's successor) was chosen as architect and the contract signed by Messrs H. & R. Inskip for £1,950. The work commenced in the month of March, but was interrupted for a considerable time by a strike. Central heating was installed for the great expense of £272, 92 new desks at a cost of £115, gas fittings for £8 10s plus architects fees etc added to the total cost of £2,535 17s. It is recorded that on Sunday January 7th, 1894, the Bishop sang Pontifical Mass, and two sermons were preached by Rev. Father Donnelly. S.J. The new schools for the Girls and Infants were solemnly blessed and opened by His Lordship the following morning.



The Government Inspector spoke of the "new and excellent premises" in his official report, and Father Stringfellow wrote: -*'you cannot but see for yourselves that the change from the old and gloomy rooms in Gregory Street to these bright and cheerful ones, has had a beneficial effect upon the character and disposition of the children.'* So, by the turn of the century all the pupils were established in Spring Garden Road. The Infants' School consisted of a hall,

two classrooms and a cloakroom. Both Boys' and Girls' Schools had a hall and three classrooms. The hall in each case was used for teaching two or three classes. In 1902, the Staff was increased and trained certificated teachers engaged.

The poor health of the children was the cause of much concern to the teachers towards the end of the century. An epidemic of diphtheria broke out in Longton in 1897. The government inspector sent to investigate such an extensive outbreak concluded that the schools played a major part in the

spread of the disease. On October 13 1897, St Gregory's and all the Longton schools were closed. They were re-opened on January 5th for twelve days, but owing to the rapid spread of the disease again were re-closed until April 18th. During May 1898, the Headmaster of the Boys' School reports: - *'The attendance of Standards V and VI is still defective. Some of the children obtained employment during the time the schools were closed and it is most difficult to get them to leave.'* Later that year, the Sanitary Committee ordered all Longton Schools to be washed with hot lime as a precaution against further disease. It did not help very much because in 1899 the schools were again closed owing to an outbreak of scarlet fever, and then after that was over, closed again due to influenza. Attendance was poor for a long time with sickness, sticky eyes and measles being the main complaints.

Improved physical fitness became a priority of the school and in 1912, playing fields were secured at Longton Hall and Goms Mill. By that time also, more men teachers were employed, and the outdoor



life of the school flourished. However, long before then, as far back as 1903, St Gregory's had made a name for itself. In that year, St Gregory's pupils were invited to compete for a swimming shield which had first been put up for competition in 1889. St Gregory's won the shield on their first entry and held it for the next 25 years, when it was deemed the property of the school. It still has pride of place in the Junior School today. Football and cricket were now added to the timetable, and again, St Gregory's pupils distinguished themselves as the first Longton School to join the North Staffs F.A. The girls did no P.E. or gym. People still believed that strenuous exercise was bad for girls, as well as being 'not quite nice'. Apart from anything

else, the clothes that girls wore made energetic exercise difficult. P.E. for girls was intended to make them move well and gracefully. In the drill that the children were subjected to, the emphasis was mostly on arm movements, with perhaps some jumping on the spot to change the position of the feet. However, with perhaps the whole school on the playground, there would be no room for anything more energetic.

For several long periods from 1903 to 1913, meals were provided free at school for most of the children because of the "distress in the town". This was mostly due to various strikes. The children received free breakfasts, lunches and teas on school days and at the weekends. Tickets for soup were also distributed. In June 1913, the Headmaster of the Boys' School reports that part of the schoolyard disappeared overnight into the marlhole. This happened again in 1914, when 50 square yards disappeared in a landslide.

### Between the Wars

After the First World War, the raising of the school leaving age to 14 necessitated the building of two huts for the extra classes. Thus, the school continued until once again in the 1930's St Gregory's was one of the first schools to be re-organised. Following the publication of the Haddow Report the school consisted of:

1. An Infants' school catering for children up to seven years.
2. A Junior School for boys and girls up to the age of eleven years.
3. A Senior School for boys and girls up to the age of fourteen years.

Providing for the schools was an enormous task, undertaken by Father W. Walsh who was appointed to Longton in 1933. The cost was in the region of £30,000 - an enormous sum of money in the lean thirties. Raising such a vast amount involved the parishioners in many varied fund-raising activities. The biggest of these was the great carnival in the park. 'The Evening Sentinel' for Monday July 27th 1936 gave it a prominent write-up entitled 'The Round of Carnival Revelry' following the carnival which was held on the previous Saturday. There was a picture of "St Gregory's Queen", (Miss K. Garbett) who was elected by her schoolmates. The procession, consisting of the Carnival Queen and her retinue, three more queens (Pottery, North Staffs Jazz Band League and The Cripples Hospital), Fodens' Band, the Longton fire engine, seven jazz bands and six dancing troupes, stretched for half a mile. The entertainment for the afternoon was first class including fancy dress, a baby show,

dancing displays and a boxing tournament. These efforts, as well as bazaars, brought in the greater part of the cost of the rebuilding, but the parish debt was still large at the beginning of the Second World War. When it was no longer possible to continue bazaars or carnivals, those who could still worked on, and a weekly dance held in the Infants' School was a big help. The Infants' School was opened on the feast of St Gregory in 1936. The new Junior and Senior Schools were opened by the Prime Minister of Australia and his wife. The Lord Mayor of Stoke on Trent and many other distinguished persons were present. So in September 1937, the children of the old Boys' and Girls' Schools were finally organised into a Junior Mixed School and a Senior Mixed School. There were 230 children in the Junior School organised into six classes.

### The Second World War

As war with Germany loomed nearer, the government issued in 1938 gas masks to the children. It was probably fun at the time - a morning away from school and a chance to dress up at one of the exhibitions that visited the area, but all too soon it became a reality. Gas masks had to be carried everywhere, even into the classroom where they had to be kept on the desk at all times.

September 4<sup>th</sup> 1939. School did not re-open after the summer break owing to the War and the fact that there were no air-raid shelters provided for the children. The teachers met daily for Air Raid Precaution lectures and discussions. Soon the Staff were working on a rota staffing the Longton Air Raid Control Centre. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, the school was partly re-opened having secured the use of ten Anderson shelters, which gave accommodation for fifty children: -

4 adjacent to the school 2 minutes

2 top of Daisy Bank 3 minutes

4 corner of Gom's Mill 5 minutes

The occupants of these shelters were at work during school hours, so they could be used by the school. The timetable was so organised that the children came to school in shifts, fifty at a time for one hour a day, allowing the Staff to keep in touch with all the children daily. By the middle of November more shelters were acquired and a three-shift day was approved. This system continued until January 29<sup>th</sup> 1940, when the school could be accommodated in its own shelters without having to use any Anderson shelters. When the air-raid warning went, it was... stop work; pick up your gas masks and quickly and quietly into the air-raid shelter... until the all-clear signal went. Luckily, the school suffered no damage during this time.

Evacuees were admitted to the school throughout the war, mainly from the London area. But the Junior School also received children from Colchester, Slough, Derby, Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham. Once a year, there was a special Savings Week to raise funds for the war effort and the children of the school were praised for their magnificent efforts. In the lean war years the Headteacher of the Junior School reported that the children raised huge sums of money:-

1940 Weapons Week £127

1941 Warships Week £153

1942 Wings for Victory Week £1,006

1943 Salute the Soldiers Week £253

1945 Thanksgiving Week £229

With the hardship of rationing during the War, the Schools Meals' Service came into being. School dinners were first provided at the school in February, 1942. Almost all the children began to take milk at school about this time.

The Post-War Period In 1948, the school leaving age was raised to 15 years. More accommodation was required and so two new classrooms were built. (These now form an ideal Nursery block.) In 1950, the present canteen was opened for the children of the three schools. This coincided with the raising of the price of the meals to 6d (2.5 pence). The Senior Schools buildings were totally inadequate by now, but it was not until November 1967 that the over-elevens were able to move into

their beautiful new school in Longton Hall Road - Bishop Bright High School. This was renamed as St Thomas More High School after the re-organisation of Catholic secondary schools in the City in the late 1970's.

In 1971, a sum of £23,000 was spent on additions and improvements to the Infants' school. In July 1972, the first instalment of work upgrading the Junior School began. The demolition of the old Junior building and the old part of the Senior School took place in August 1972, followed by the building of the new block. February 1973, saw the completion of the first phase, which consisted of one classroom, the hall, staffroom, changing rooms and the new toilets. In 1974, the new playing fields and all-weather pitch adjoining the playground were completed. In 1976, a sum of £55,000 was allocated for the second phase of building. After consultation with the Diocesan Schools Commission, the architects, the Managers and the Headteacher; it was agreed that one classroom, a room for the Headteacher, a school office, staff toilets together with a new entrance and foyer, would be built. The old Senior block was modernised and altered to comprise a Science room, Home Economics area, Library, art and Craft area, a stock room, five classrooms and boys' and girls' toilets. This phase was finished in June 1977.

For thirteen years the school operated as an 8-12 years Middle School until 1983 when it reverted back to a Junior School again. The 1980's also saw changes in the curriculum of the school. The school took full advantage of new technological movements in education. Powerful microcomputers were installed in every classroom and the video camera and recorder became a valuable teaching resource. French may have gone from the curriculum of the Junior school, but the computer languages of HTML and Logo provide new challenges. During the 1990s much of the school was re-roofed and new windows were fitted to the older parts of the building. New steel fencing around the playing fields improved security. In 1999, a computer suite was built within the existing building, allowing a whole class to work and learn together using the latest software and machines. Also the Y3 classrooms were linked to the main building with an enclosed corridor, improving safety and access.

For more than 150 years therefore, Catholic education in Longton has had its place in the life of the town and city. The site in Spring Garden Road, chosen over a century ago, is still central, open and uncluttered by other buildings. In spite of increased traffic on the road, it can by comparison with other city schools be termed 'quiet.' From the time of its opening, it has held its own in all branches of education. St Gregory's pupils have distinguished themselves, not only on the sports-field, but in academic achievements as well. They have taken their place in local government, industry and employment, in the forces and many professions.

May the good foundations laid in St Gregory's continue to bear fruit in the years that lie ahead.