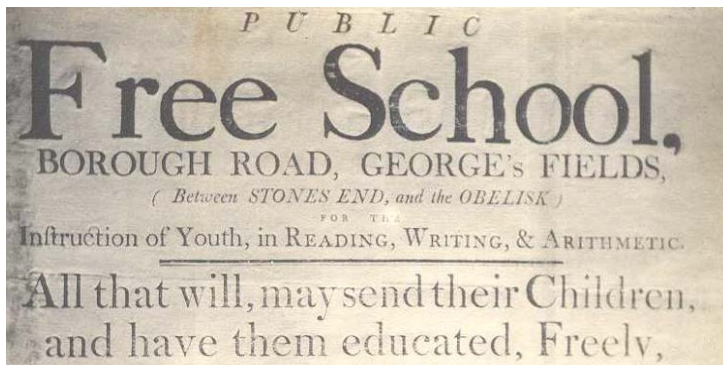


BFSS Archives Info sheet No.1

The British and Foreign School Society

Foundation

The BFSS was built on the ideas and activities of Joseph Lancaster. In 1798, in an insalubrious area of Southwark in London, the 20 year old son of a former soldier now cane-sieve maker, set up a school for the children of the poor in his father's house in Kent Street. Lancaster had had very little formal education, but he had great self-confidence, a magnetic personality and the natural gift of self-advertisement which helped attract donations and bring pupils to his school, in an era and location where most poor parents needed their children to start earning as soon as possible. Numbers of pupils rapidly increased, especially when Lancaster began providing free instruction to those who could not afford to pay, and even free meals.



His success obliged him to rent larger and larger premises, eventually establishing his school in a barn-like building close to Belvedere Place, Borough Rd, Southwark (almost opposite the site of the later Borough Road College, now part of London South Bank University).

Unable to pay for an assistant, Lancaster devised a system whereby older pupils, called monitors, taught the younger ones. This was the beginning of what was to be called the monitorial or Lancasterian system of teaching. What was forced on him by necessity Lancaster turned into a virtue and set about proclaiming the advantages of his monitorial system to the world via pamphlets and public speaking. By 1803 the success of the school in coping with several hundred children simultaneously attracted a wide audience and an enlarged edition of Lancaster's pamphlet *Improvements in Education* provoked much interest.



Lancaster's plans for his system knew no bounds. He set up a variety of enterprises and toured the country, but his financial planning left a lot to be desired and he seriously overstretched himself. By 1808 Lancaster's financial difficulties, together with Anglican attacks on his non-denominational system of teaching, led to the formation of a small committee to raise money to pay off his debts and to put the finances and administration of the school in Borough Road onto a firmer footing. Committee members included Joseph Fox and its treasurer William Allen, a Quaker, philanthropist and supporter of the anti-slavery movement and partner in Robert Owen's New Lanark school for factory children. In 1810 a public meeting was held to attract subscribers and an enlarged committee was formed, including William Wilberforce, James Mill, Henry Brougham and Samuel Whitbread. It called itself **The Committee of the Royal Lancasterian Institution for the Education of the Poor of Every Religious Persuasion**. In 1812 it was surprised to learn that Lancaster, without any reference to his supporters, had opened a boarding school in Tooting using money subscribed for Borough Road school. His debts led to protracted negotiations and in 1813 a formal constitution was drawn up. Then in March

1814 a scandal surrounding Lancaster's conduct brought all past difficulties to a head and he was called before the committee, who had asked Francis Place to investigate. Lancaster however defiantly resigned. Soon after the **Lancasterian Institution** was renamed the **British and Foreign School Society**, all references to Lancaster being dropped from the title while the "foreign" reflected the enthusiasm of Allen and his supporters for developing the activities of the society overseas.

British Schools

The work of the BFSS extended far beyond maintaining the first school in Belvedere Place. With assistance from the BFSS, especially financial help for buildings, thousands of British schools were established throughout the country, hundreds in London alone. Agents were employed to tour areas of the UK promoting the British system. In many places the newly established British school was the first school the community had ever had. Locations for British Schools ranged from Cornwall to Scotland, from inner-city slum areas to the Woburn Estate of the Duke of Bedford, from rural villages to the mines of South Wales and factories of Manchester. Often a British School would begin existence in temporary accommodation, such as the local non-conformist church hall, or even side rooms at railway stations for children of railway employees, prior to enough funds being raised for a new building.

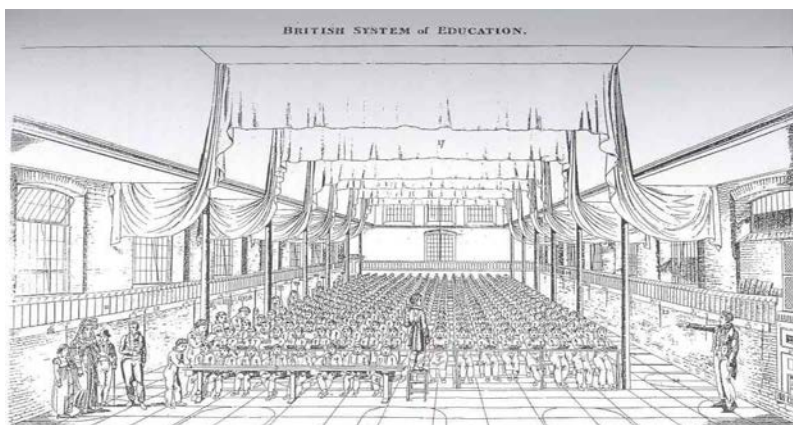


Bethnal Green British School

The nature of the links the British schools had with the BFSS as the parent body varied according to particular local circumstances and were never as direct as those of the practising schools of the teacher training colleges. In most cases the BFSS did not own the actual school building, it having been paid for by local subscribers. Many former British School buildings still survive, sometimes as part of a modern school, but often having been converted to another use. Hitchin British School is now the British Schools Museum [see <http://www.britishschoolsmuseum.co.uk/>] Provision of schools was a major field of activity for the BFSS up to the Education Act of 1870 and the establishment of Board Schools.

Teacher Training

Gradually the monitorial system was replaced by properly trained teachers, although initially training was as little as three months. In 1817 new and more spacious premises were opened in **Borough Road**, almost opposite the site in Belvedere Place which had been used since 1804 by Lancaster and then by the Society for the schools and



training institution. The old buildings had become more and more dilapidated and new accommodation had been desperately needed. An appeal for subscriptions had raised several thousands of pounds, including £1000 donated by Robert Owen of New Lanark. The newly constructed building was large enough to accommodate 500 boys

and 300 girls, as well as the teacher training establishment and storerooms.

Further extensions were built in 1842. In 1890 Borough Road College transferred out of inner-city Southwark to the then green and leafy Isleworth. [see *Borough Road College Info sheet*]. A separate training college was later established for women students at **Stockwell**, London, with its own practising schools for girls and infants. 75 female students were moved there from Borough Road College in 1861. [See *Stockwell Info sheet*]. In 1862 a college was opened at **Bangor** to meet the needs of male applicants from Wales. The nature of its funding gave it a greater degree of independence and Bangor College never figured as centrally in the concerns of the BFSS.

Following the 1870 Education Act and the shift in emphasis of the Society's work from school provision to teacher supply, particularly the contemporary need for more women teachers, a college was established in **Swansea** in 1872, and a further one at **Darlington** in 1876. Distance and lessening dependence on the BFSS for financial assistance led to virtual autonomy in these colleges. [see *Darlington College Info Sheet*]. In 1884 **Saffron Walden College** was opened [see *Saffron Walden Info sheet*]. In 1891 the training of teachers was stated to be the chief activity of the BFSS in its Annual Report.

Overseas Schools

The overseas work of the Society took up a considerable part of the committee's time in the early years. As early as 1809 the BFSS began sending lessons and teaching materials overseas. The founding of the BFSS was contemporary with an increase in missionary activity and the BFSS treasurer William Allen was a campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade. It was in British possessions overseas where the missionary societies and the anti-slave movement were already active, that the BFSS found the most fertile ground for its activities, notably in West Africa and the West Indies. Many of its trained teachers went overseas to teach. On arrival in their new schools around the world these teachers would follow the 'British' or monitorial teaching system and train local people in the system too. Students also came *from* overseas to study at Borough Road College, such as Thomas Jenkins, a former slave from Jamaica who attended BRC before going out to teach in Mauritius and Sierra Leone.



Example of embroidery now in BFSS Archives, sent to the BFSS from the British School in Kingston, Jamaica 1824. By Priscilla Brown, "Slave aged 15"

Europe was receptive too. After the abdication of Napoleon in 1814, many distinguished visitors from the continent visited Borough Road and a Lancasterian Society was opened in Paris and in many other parts of France. Monitorial schools were also established in Belgium, Scandinavia, Spain and Russia, some of them under young masters who had trained at Borough Road College. After the Greek revolt in 1821, the Society made efforts to develop monitorial schools in Greece, and a number of Greek young men attended Borough Road College. Despite opposition from the Church in Catholic countries, and political unrest frustrating BFSS progress in other countries, by the end of the 19th C the BFSS had provided a system, advice, educational supplies and school teachers to over 70 countries. These included the newly emerging nations of Central and South America, (where the work of the former BRC student James Thompson led to the widespread adoption of the monitorial system), North America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, even Greenland and Syria.