

367 Brentford High Street: Mrs Trimmer's School Room

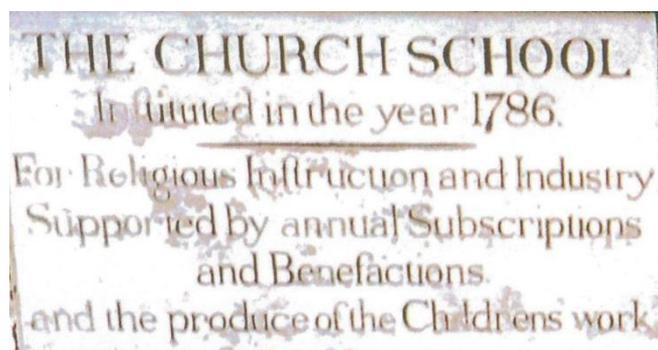
Prepared by Val Bott and James Wisdom, on behalf of the Brentford and Chiswick Local History Society, October 2015.

Summary.

This building may be the only surviving purpose-built Georgian School of Industry in the UK. It was built in 1806, probably with accommodation for the school mistress, and the design of the building is significant in its own right. Its historic value also lies in its links with Sarah Trimmer.

Mrs Trimmer started Sunday Schools in Brentford in 1786 and Schools of Industry in 1787, long before she had a building. Established teachers took "divisions" of children, either on Sundays for religious instruction and education, or during the week for work and education. The George Chapel was also used.

The Girls' School of Industry was financially successful and by 1806 Mrs Trimmer was able to build the schoolroom which brought all these Girls' divisions together under one teacher. It was also used as a Sunday School. The Boys' School of Industry, however, was less successful. Two of Mrs Trimmer's daughters continued her work after her death in 1810.



This inscription on the High Street facade of the Old School room commemorates the year in which Sunday Schools and Schools of Industry for poor children in Brentford were established and advertises the mechanisms for funding them.

Origins

The venture was inspired by the first such Sunday School established in Gloucester by Robert Raikes in 1780 and published in his newspaper in 1783. Raikes visited Brentford in 1787, was highly satisfied with what he saw and presented the children with Bibles¹.

According to Daniel Lysons² the Sunday Schools were instituted by the Rev Charles Sturges, Vicar of Ealing; at that time the part of Brentford east of the Half Acre was known as Old Brentford and formed part of the Parish of St Mary Ealing. A Chapel had been built in Old Brentford in 1766, funded by subscribers; the architect was Joshua Kirby, the King's Clerk of Works at Kew. It was generally known as George Chapel. The subscribers collected the pew

rents and the proceeds of special sermons where a collection was taken, and paid for the curate.

The Vicar may have been the prime mover, but the project would probably not have got off the ground without the support of Mrs Sarah Trimmer. She was Kirby's daughter and in 1762 had married James Trimmer jnr, a prosperous brickmaker in the town. She brought up their large family and oversaw their education; from the early 1780s she was publishing books for children.

Setting up the Sunday Schools

Many accounts of Brentford reported on the needs of the poor. In 1787, in *An Account of the Establishment of the Sunday Schools in Old Brentford* extracted from *The Oeconomy of Charity*,³ Mrs Trimmer set out what had been achieved. Rev Sturges had announced the project from the pulpit, started a subscription list with his own donation to encourage better off parishioners and collecting boxes had been placed at the door of the Chapel. The Vicar had encouraged poorer families to avail themselves of this opportunity, and Mrs Trimmer had visited many of their homes, choosing to go when the husband was at work and she could have a private conversation with the mothers of potential pupils.

The response was substantial, so teachers were found, a number of them being women who already ran weekday schools, and local ladies were asked to help as voluntary assistants. "Rooms were now hired, alphabets printed, books bought and numbered tickets containing the names of the prospective teachers written on slips of paper leaving a space for each child's name to be inserted before the delivery of them", she wrote. Some children had such inadequate clothing that charitable people were asked to provide "bare necessities", while other parents were so keen for their children to join the Sunday Schools that they offered to pay a fee.

Each teacher was allotted 30 pupils at first, but this grew to 50 each. Three or four Sunday schools were started, and were held wherever the teachers taught during the week. A school was also held in the Chapel, as she writes: "Provision of forms &c was made for seating the children in the aisles of the Chapel, and the teachers were allowed to sit in pews where they could overlook their respective scholars." It must have been noisy and crowded as the teachers settled their charges, beginning lessons with a prayer. Some attempt was made to group the children by ability, but they were also concerned to emphasise cleanliness and punctuality as well as learning the alphabet, reading and religious knowledge. There were problems with the girls in particular as many did not even recognise a single letter of the alphabet.

The children were taken in twos to Church (it is not clear if this is to Ealing or St Lawrence's, New Brentford) and a few that could do so read psalms in the morning service. They returned to school for lessons, then were dismissed for lunch, returning at 2pm for lessons with the curate at the Chapel. In winter there was no afternoon sermon, so there were singing lessons or "psalmody" which she described as "a solemn part of divine service which was never to be practised as a mere amusement". Success was rewarded with praise, the

loan of books and gifts of clothing for girls and small sums towards the purchase of clothing for boys, plus occasional half pence when they repeated their lessons well.

In 1795 Lysons commented that "the Sunday-schools in this parish have been peculiarly efficacious, in consequence of the zealous and persevering attention of Mrs. Trimmer, who resides near the populous hamlet of Old Brentford, and is well known by her many useful treatises tending to increase the comforts and reform the manners of the poor. About sixty boys, and more than a hundred girls, are now educating in the Sunday-schools of this parish, which are conducted upon a plan which affords great encouragement to the meritorious, and seems admirably calculated to excite a spirit of emulation and improvement. "

The Schools of Industry

In 1787 Mrs Trimmer introduced a School of Industry on weekdays to train selected girls and boys with useful skills. She believed this was morally preferable to children learning in employment, where they would be in the company of rough men who swore and would exploit them.

In 1795 Lysons wrote: "A school of industry for girls has been some time established; at present they are forty in number, and are employed in making coarse shirts. A school of industry for boys also has been lately opened; hitherto they have been employed only in combing wool; but it is in contemplation to find them some other occupation, which may prove of more service to them in their future life."

Lysons mentioned that the Queen subscribed £20 a year to support the schools and surviving handbills⁴, printed by Norbury of Brentford, give notice of celebrity sermons in November 1806 and December 1807 with the words of the hymns to be sung by the children of the Sunday Schools and School of Industry in Old Brentford at these events. The fund-raising clearly had to continue.

John Bew⁵, writing in 1807 stated that the School of Industry was situated in the chapel-yard at Old Brentford, where the girls were making coarse shirts and the boys were carding wool. Lysons did not mention a purpose-built school in 1795 but in the second edition of his work, published in 1810, he rewrote the section about the Sunday Schools and the School of Industry. He described the School of Industry as "grafted on the Sunday Schools" and commented that it had "furnished to society many well-principled domestic servants". The chief employment of the girls in the School of Industry was plain needlework for which they were allowed to keep half the money earned from its sale. He added "a new commodious school-room has lately been erected by subscription, to admit an unlimited number of scholars selected from the Sunday Schools". The date of 1806 is confirmed in *The Life of the Revd Andrew Bell*⁶, who promoted the "Madras system". In the spring of that year Sarah Trimmer invited Dr Bell to examine the new building. This is presumably when the plaque was inserted in the High Street wall.

When Sarah's son James gave evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education in 1834, he stated that he had been interested in the subject of education for 48 years, that he was a member of the committee of the National Society for Promoting Religious

Education and that his sisters continued to support the schools in Brentford founded with their mother's help nearly 50 years before. By that time the growing population had access to several local schools, including one for infants.

The School Building

The building is significant as the home of the Schools of Industry, and as they were weekday schools it was built primarily for that purpose, although it was also used by one of the Sunday schools. Although Mrs Trimmer reports her early difficulties in the appendix to *The Oeconomy of Charity*, in time the Schools of Industry for Girls were successful. By 1811 there were 85 attending and over a hundred in 1834. The girls in the School of Industry were provided with green gowns, and in the Sunday schools with brown gowns – this probably explains why the Girls' School of Industry was sometimes known as the Green School.

The School of Industry for Boys had periods of success but was more difficult to run and had failed by about 1807. Families needed the income generated by their sons' working and donors were less likely to make charitable gifts to support training which took the boys away from employers.

The interior of the building shows it was divided into three parts – the accommodation for the mistress, the main hall and a partitioned north end with a store room above. The main hall occupies about two-thirds of the floor plan. At some date the wall on the Chapel side was given a second skin of bricks. As the interior brickwork shows no trace of a door on this wall or the High Street wall, we conclude the main door was at the north end of the building. The building is on a slope, the entry to the first room is level with outside, there is a step down inside the building at the partition, and the rest of the floor is at this level. Today, since the door has been inserted at the High Street end, there are steps down to the street.

The original purpose of the smaller northern room is hard to deduce after the changes to the building, but it could have been a second smaller workroom or classroom, a storage area for chairs, somewhere for the children to leave their outdoor clothes, shelves for books or cupboards to store half finished work, or a collection and despatch area for materials and finished garments. Similarly, the storage area above could have been for materials and stock for the children to work on.

In the open workroom, the girls were learning plain needlework (sewing and knitting). They had a long-term contract from a ready-made warehouse to assemble men's shirts. In the early days they had learnt spinning with a wheel which had been donated. This wheel allowed 13 little children to stand and spin flax simultaneously. This part of the venture soon failed, as it was hard to repair and some parents did not want their children to learn spinning, a skill that was rapidly being replaced by machinery. The younger children were then set to winding cotton or picking rushes for tallow chandlers to turn into rush lights. The windows are set high in the building to illuminate the close needlework and to prevent the children being distracted, or being seen when working. In winter they would have required light (candles or oil lamps) and of course heat, and an air vent in the roof is hardly surprising. It would have been even more necessary if and when gas lighting was provided

(the Brentford Gas Co started in 1820). Timber fillets within the brickwork would have provided fixing points for wainscot and a hanging rail for maps, diagrams, girls' work bags, alphabets or other instructional paraphernalia.

There is evidence which suggests that living accommodation was provided at the High Street end of the building. The chimney stack nearest to the High Street is a double flue, and 19th century photographs show a dormer window on the hipped roof facing the street. The door onto the High Street is only visible in photographs taken after 1913, so we assume that originally the schoolmistress entered her rooms from inside the building and her ground floor room was illuminated by the first window of the range facing the Chapel yard. When the building was re-roofed in the 20th century the dormer went. The second stack is a single flue, serving the hearth for the school room. The 1839 Tithe and later OS maps show an outbuilding at the other end of the building, which may have been a toilet/privy block. As Mrs Trimmer's husband ran the major brick and tile works in Brentford, we surely have to conclude that he provided the materials for the school building (as his family had for the Chapel).

The schoolmistress managed the Girls' School of Industry in the building. Mrs Trimmer also reports relying on a woman from the workhouse, who knew about carding wool, being given a press-bed, a tea kettle and other little comforts to live in the school room and manage the Boys' School of Industry. This School does not seem to have settled after the transition into the new building.

The Chapel was taken over by the Church of England in 1828 and became St George's Church. The school took on the same name and was the fore-runner of the school built at the end of the 19th century in Green Dragon Lane. The school room survived as the church hall for St George's parish but once the church had been declared redundant and the parish merged with St Paul's, it was neglected and for long periods has not been used.

The heritage value of the building

We must not forget how significant the construction of a new school building would have been in a town like Brentford in 1806. A Georgian Industrial day school building is a very rare survival from the early days of providing education for poor children. It may even be unique. The buildings for Schools of Industry which have survived are more likely to be Victorian residential reformatories

The school is also significant because of its connection with a pioneer in children's education and the status her involvement gave it. Mrs Trimmer's promotion of her model of schooling was part of a vigorous public discourse about the education of the poor and the importance of the established Church in their lives. The patronage of the royal family (in whose circle Sarah Trimmer had grown up), her fame as an author, and in particular the widespread use of some of her books by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, gave her a national reputation. In many of her writings are the issues and themes which are still current in the public debate about the nature of technical and vocational education. The subscribers to the private Chapel and then to the school building, were important local people who were involved in Brentford's rapid 18th century industrial expansion and, in their way, responding

to the social problems which were associated with it. In the area of the education of the poor, Mrs Trimmer's work at Brentford was a model which others followed.

¹ Gentleman's Magazine, vol 58, 1788

² Daniel Lysons, *Environs of London Vol 2 Middlesex*, first edition, 1795

³ Sarah Trimmer, *The Oeconomy of Charity*, second edition 1810, Appendix: An Account of the Sunday Schools and School of Industry in Old Brentford

⁴ Chiswick Local Studies Library L B Hounslow

⁵ John Bew *The Ambulator or a Tour Round London within 25 miles*, 1807

⁶ R. Southey, "The Life of the Rev. Andrew Bell", 1844

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