

## **A brief history of 200 years of the National Society**

1. The founding of the National Society in 1811 set in train a new and extraordinary phase in the history of the engagement of the Church of England with education. At a time of great change in our national life Joshua Watson of Hackney persuaded the Archbishop of Canterbury and other leading clergy and laymen of the need for mass education of the poor, as essential both for the church's mission and the life of the nation.
2. They were living through the industrial revolution, with the movement of whole communities into the centres of production – a population shift unseen before, creating massively expanding cities and entirely new communities. For the families that moved to service the new industries the rewards turned out to be few. Poverty and exploitation, disease and death were their lot, and that of their children.
3. The founders knew that the way out of poverty and ignorance was education, not only to train people in basic skills but also to build character. At that time there was strong resistance to the idea that this should be provided by the state, or paid for from taxation. So as with hospitals and healthcare and other forms of social care this had to be provided through voluntary effort.
4. The first meeting of the Society took place on 16 October when the name and purpose of the Society were agreed, and the practical commitments that would drive the Society for the next 50 years adopted. They believed that 'the national religion should be the foundation of national education' and committed themselves to a church school in every parish.
5. Money was raised through public subscription to carry out their aim. Grants were given towards the cost of building a school on condition that the schools demonstrated Church of England foundation and teaching and by 1861 there were around 12,000 schools 'in union' with the NS. This was a phenomenal achievement. It was the invention of mass education. Though fear of social unrest was a major driver, and denominational rivalry spurred it on (for the Free Churches were building their own schools as well), at the heart was a concern that the poor were given resources to better themselves.
6. Building schools on this scale led to a demand for teachers, training for those teachers, a replicable pedagogy, lesson materials and examination apparatus that had to be more or less invented from scratch. And the National Society, along with the Church through its dioceses, developed all these, including a higher education system based on its teacher training colleges, with higher education available for the first time to women. The National Society founded 4 colleges, with the major expansion of teacher training taking place in the dioceses.
7. From the start the founders were clear that education was about character, and that character would be formed by exposure to and participation in the teaching and worship of the Established Church. Religious instruction and attendance at worship were the cornerstones of the education offered to the poor.
8. These convictions set the pattern not only for church schools but for the state funded system that followed. As the century progressed voluntary provision could not meet the demand and the 1870 Education Act laid the foundations of a state system. Religious instruction and worship were written into the Board Schools and successive education legislation has never dislodged the expectation that all pupils would take part unless their parents withdraw them.

9. A succession of Education Acts bore witness to the shifting balance between voluntary schools and state schools until the 1944 Act incorporated church schools within the state system, creating voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools receiving funding from public taxation and subject to all subsequent legislation. Church schools remained an accepted part of the national system but the initiative in all areas of educational practice and curriculum development passed to the local education authorities. The Church's capacity to affect professional practice narrowed to a concern with Religious Education, with the National Society continuing to publish resource materials for schools.

10. In 1998/9 the General Synod debated a full report on Church schools and passed a strongly supportive motion affirming 'that Church schools stand at the heart of the mission to the nation'. Following from the debate the Church Schools Review Group, under the chairmanship of Lord Dearing was formed, funded by the National Society and central Church funds. The remit of the Group was 'to review the achievements of Church of England schools and to make proposals for their future development'.

11. The Way Ahead: Church of England schools in the new millennium was published in 2001 (the Dearing Report) following nearly 2 years work and an interim report offering further opportunity for comment. The main theme of the Report, following the Synod motion, was the central importance of church schools to the mission of the Church not only to children and young people but to the long term well-being of the Church of England.

12. For schools to achieve the Church's mission the schools must be distinctively Christian, in close partnership with worshipping communities, with consequent implications for clergy training. The Report also stressed the crucial importance of Christian teachers and school leaders, with a number of recommendations about their training and support. The Report urged greater recognition of teaching as a Christian vocation and for the Church colleges of Higher Education to secure and enhance their Christian distinctiveness so that there were places where teacher training could take place in that context.

13. The Report supported an ecumenical approach to new schools and looked to the development of stronger links between maintained and independent Anglican schools. A clear message came from the Report: that the role of Church schools was to be less concentrated on the 'domestic' provision and more on the 'general', which is to say that the schools should be seen as a service to the whole community and not solely as a service to the Church.

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